

## Chapter 2

# Online Personal Narratives: Comments Sections as Support Groups in Knowledge-Sharing Platforms

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this chapter is to explore personal narratives and conversational stories of self-declared victims of abuse in the comments section of a knowledge-sharing platform, such as YouTube. The aim is to analyze the resemblance between the interaction and exchange of narratives in comments sections, on the one hand, and narrative group psychotherapy and self-help support groups, on the other. While previous research on storytelling mostly addresses professionally guided or produced narratives, this approach extends the production of these narratives to online communicative contexts. Firstly, the chapter looks at the theoretical tenets of storytelling. Secondly, a sociolinguistic, narratology-oriented approach is used to exemplify this practice. This part of the chapter discusses how the interaction among commentators and the exchange of personal narratives meet the core principles of self-help support groups and group psychotherapy.*

### INTRODUCTION

Sharing personal experiences and stories online stands out as a conversational outcome in the comments sections of *knowledge-sharing platforms* (KSPs) such as YouTube (Iyanga-Mambo, 2020). People tend to turn to KSPs to acquire information on an issue of interest or for entertainment. Unintentionally, the integration of the comments section in KSPs does not allow only to post one's personal reaction, but also leads to multi-party conversations (Marcoccia, 2004; Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2010; Lorenzo-Dus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, & Bou-Franch, 2011), to the extent of producing online *communities of practice* (Pihlaja, 2012; Iyanga-Mambo, 2020). These communities are created by means of various communicative strategies, as for example interpersonal self-disclosure through *storytelling* or *experience-sharing* (Iyanga-Mambo, 2020). The practice of storytelling has always been part of humankind, in multiple co-

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existing and continuously adaptive formats. The format of stories can depend on situated, cultural criteria along with historical periods and media. Society is constantly exposed to narratives via books, films, series, music clips or songs, advertisements, images, videogames, etc. In essence, telling stories – (non) fictional, personal or of others – becomes a natural element which appears imperceptibly in everyday life. In the same way, storytelling can be incorporated deliberately in professional contexts, for instance in the fields of education, politics or psychology. The use of storytelling in the field of psychology constitutes the main research object of this chapter. Narrating one's personal experience(s) of traumatic episodes or sensitive conditions and situations can serve as a therapeutic activity which, professionally speaking, is referred to as *narrative therapy*. In combination with the approach of individuals collectively working on a shared aim or concern, as support groups (SGs) do, narrative therapy has evolved into *narrative group psychotherapy*. Even though this term denotes a professionally-monitored practice, this chapter aspires to show how, in online settings such as the comments sections, the voluntary sharing of personal narratives (PNs) and the development of multi-party interaction partially mirror self-help support groups which perform narrative therapy and group psychotherapy. Despite the extensive literature regarding storytelling, as well as new media, there is still a need for literature which reveals its most avant-garde trends in social media. Likewise, there is in fact a lack of research related to the addition of spontaneous narratives in conversations in these settings. Therefore, considering the research paucity of this topic, this chapter is developed with a view to answer three main questions which are the foci here:

**Question One:** How do online narrators characterize their (conversational) personal narratives?

**Question Two:** What functions do these narratives play in response to knowledge-sharing videos and to other comments? How and for what purpose do the comment responses to these narratives arise?

**Question Three:** How do narrators engage in interaction with other commentators? And how does this interaction in the comments section of the KSP inadvertently resemble the functioning of self-help support groups and narrative group psychotherapy?

To respond to these questions, this chapter firstly pursues the exploration of naturally-produced narratives by online commentators who openly declare themselves victims of abuse and share their personal experience on a KSP such as YouTube. In this interactional environment, reciprocity arises without prior planning, which makes this platform an ideal candidate for research on naturally-occurring communicative data and for the analysis of conversational phenomena. For the exploration of the narrations, the objectives are:

**Objective One:** Identifying and understanding the structure, content and components of narratives and how events and feelings are presented

**Objective Two:** Identifying and understanding the function of these narratives and why and how they are shared in online conversation

**Objective Three:** Exploring the interaction among commentators and the development of the distinctive features of communication in relation to self-help support groups and narrative group psychotherapy

This chapter then elaborates on (conversational) personal narratives by adopting an interactional sociolinguistic approach with insights into how *self-help support groups* function in conjunction with *narrative group psychotherapy*. Furthermore, the chapter consists of five subsequent parts: a *background*, which deals with storytelling, support groups and narrative therapy and knowledge-sharing platforms;

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