

Chapter 5

Do Virtual Communities Have an Effect on the Social Network of Cancer Patients? Empirical Insights from Germany

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents the results of a study that investigates the determinants and effects of virtual communities on the development of social relationships within the social network of cancer patients. Influencing factors on the formation of virtual relationships and their effect in the form of social assistance are researched. Following an explorative approach, it is examined whether online communities meet their theoretical potential to provide an environment where social relationships can be established that help cancer patients to cope with their situation. The study shows that virtual relationships for patients are established in VCs and play an important role in meeting patients' social needs. Important determinants for the formation of virtual relationships within virtual communities for patients are general internet usage intensity (active posting vs. lurking) and the perceived disadvantages of CMC. We also found that virtual relationships have a strong effect on virtual support of patients; more than 61% of the variance of perceived social assistance of cancer patients was explained by cancer-related VCs. Emotional support and information exchange delivered through these virtual relationships may help patients to better cope with their illness. Deduced from these results, recommendations for patients using online communities and providers administering online communities are outlined.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-866-8.ch005

INTRODUCTION

This research was triggered by the situation of cancer patients in Germany. This situation is negatively influenced by two key components: lacking support from the public healthcare system and problems regarding the societal interaction and acceptance of cancer patients. This proves especially problematic as, to achieve an adequate medical support of cancer patients, it is important to serve both their informational as well as their emotional needs. To meet these needs the social support that patients receive through their social network plays a central role (Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo & Stern, 2004). This support positively affects the process of adjusting to the new situation, the well-being of the patients and their attitude in coping with the disease. But the existing social relationships of a cancer patient are not always able to fulfill the task of providing the necessary support (Holland & Holahan, 2003). In many cases social relationships break apart under the burden of the disease. New relationships have to be established to cover the need for social interaction. Besides real-world self-help groups, cancer-related virtual communities have the potential to offer an environment where these relationships can be established.

This study analyzes the role that cancer-related virtual communities play in supporting the development of social relationships in the social network of cancer patients. Furthermore, the role of social relationships that emerged through the use of online communities is examined.

FORMULATION OF RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Background: Web-Based Services for Cancer Patients

According to a 2002 W3B study, German-language websites related to healthcare are a growing segment (Fittkau & Maaß, 2002). In 2003, 24% of

the adult population in Germany consulted the internet to find health-related information (Spadaro, 2003). In addition to pure informational websites, numerous offerings exist that enable their users to interact with each other by means such as mailing lists, newsgroups or chat rooms (Bader, 2000). A study conducted by Daum and Krcmar shows that interaction services are becoming more popular on cancer-related websites: In 2001 they found that most German cancer-related websites are purely informational, whereas in 2002 they discovered that more and more websites support interaction services: 18% of the websites offer a bulletin board or an online forum and chat functionalities are included in 5% of the websites (Daum & Krcmar, 2002). These numbers show the growing importance of health-related online offerings in general and cancer-related online interaction services in the German internet in specific. All the more important becomes the question whether these offerings meet their theoretical potential to support their users in coping with their situation.

Online Communities and Virtual Relationships

Before looking at previous studies investigating the potential of online communities to establish social relationships there, it is important to define the two key concepts used in this research: Online communities and virtual relationships. As there is no common agreement on one specific definition of online communities, for the purpose of this study they are defined using some of the key aspects that are repeatedly mentioned (Doering, 2000; Rheingold, 2000):

- Meeting and interaction of people
- connected by a specific interest
- by means of a technical platform
- where they have the chance to establish social relationships.

Social relationships are characterized by a repeated interaction between two persons whereas

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