

A Peer Support Community on Social Media: A Counter Narrative to Cyberbullying

HEIDI STEVENSON

Independent Educational Consultant

heidi@heidistevenson.com

CARRIE DAVENPORT-KELLOGG

University of the Pacific

cadkellogg@gmail.com

As students are increasingly engaged in online and blended learning, and spending more time online outside of school, it is especially important to understand how they use social media. The question becomes, can the same social media resources used for peer cyberbullying serve as a medium for support? This intrinsic case study focuses on an anonymous voluntary peer support system created and facilitated by a high school student using Facebook as a major component. Data include Facebook posts and handwritten notes and four one-on-one interviews with the creator of the support system addressing the research questions, “What are the experiences of the creator and facilitator of the peer support group?” and “What role, if any, did a Facebook page play in providing peer support?” Results explore how this group transcended cliques and provided organic peer support, as well as the role that hyperpersonal communication and the facilitator’s ownership played in its success. Implications and future research are discussed.

Keywords: Peer support, Facebook™, Social Media

INTRODUCTION

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic teens have significantly increased their use of online and blended learning for school (Dhawan, 2020). In addition to engagement in online or blended learning Monday-Friday, nearly 95% of US teens reported owning or having access to smartphones, and 45% say that they are online constantly (Pew Research Center, 2018). Ninety percent of teens responded that they have used social media, with 75% having at least one active social media profile, and 51% reported daily social networking service (SNS) use (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018). Almost 30% of teens stated they checked social media hourly (Tankovska, 2021), and until recently Facebook was the most popular SNS, but now is used by about 51% of teens (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The advancements in smartphones, digital cameras and social media allow personal information (real or falsified) to be shared instantly on Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram or other SNSs for all to see. Viewing this information on a screen provides physical distance, which may encourage teens to act more maliciously than they would if they were face-to-face (FTF) (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010), and this cruel behavior contributes to 30% of teens reporting being cyberbullied (CDC, 2021).

Cyberbullying is when forms of technology, such as text messages, email and social media are used as vehicles for harassment (CDC, 2021). Of the 743 teens surveyed, 24% identified social media as being mostly negative, bullying (27%) and harming relationships (17%) were cited as the most unfavorable effects (Pew Research Center, 2018). The prevalence of bullying has long been a reality for teens (Koo, 2007), but the advent of email, SNSs and texting makes the act of bullying easier and more convenient by eliminating the need for live contact between victim and aggressor (CDC, 2021), allowing bullying to happen anytime and anywhere. Kessel-Schneider et al., (2012) found that 47% of depressive symptoms in students were directly related to being bullied and/or cyberbullied.

The impact of cyberbullying is complicated by the fact that the adolescent self is still fluid and molds to different situations and influences (Harter et al., 1996). Adolescence is a time of developing self-identity, and the problems or questions that arise may not be easily discussed with adults (Clarke, 2003). Peer support systems, however, can offer a venue to seek solace from contemporaries who are coping with similar dilemmas (Masuda, et al., 2013; O'Higgins, et al., 2019; Parikh, et al., 2018). This raises the overarching question, "Can the same technology used for cyberbullying also be harnessed to provide peer support?"

LITERATURE REVIEW

Among US teens 40% reported that social media has had a positive impact because it helps them keep in touch and interact with others, and 45% stated it had neither a positive or negative effect (Pew Research Center, 2018). Twenty-four percent of teens viewed SNS as mostly negative, with one 15-year-old survey respondent stating, “People can say whatever they want with anonymity [on an SNS] and I think that has a negative impact” (Pew Research Center, 2018, Teens have mixed views section, para. 5). Fifty-eight percent of parents also believed SNS has an adverse effect on children, and felt that teen SNS use has increased by 63% during quarantining for COVID-19 (Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago, 2020).

Rising SNS use not only increases teens exposure to cyberbullying but is also positively correlated with higher levels of depression (e.g., Banjanin et al., 2015; Boers, et al., 2019) and anxiety (Boers, et al., 2020). This increased association of depression with greater SNS use does not, however, correspond with gains in screen time alone (Boers, et al., 2019). For example, teens who play video games do not experience deleterious effects on mental health (Slater, 2007; Boers, et al., 2019). A study from Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago (2020) stated, “we need more research to explore how social media engagement may be associated with positive outcomes: increase in self-esteem, perceived social support, and safe identity experimentation” (The social and psychological threats of social media section, para. 6). To this end the present study questions if there are ways in which SNS can be used as a medium of peer support.

Peer support has been used for a plethora of groups with a variety of issues, such as disability, depression and illness (Kramer, et al., 2017; Lattie, et al., 2017; O’Higgins, et al., 2019). The way in which one may interact in a peer support group, however, has dramatically changed since the creation of the Internet and, subsequently, by SNSs such as Facebook. Now, peer support groups do not just meet in the traditional FTF manner, but can convene online, anytime 24-hours-a-day with up-to-date notices of activities and even include peer-to-peer support for individuals who may find it easier to identify with others online (Naslund, et al., 2016; O’Higgins, et al., 2019; Parikh, et al., 2018).

This manner of interaction can be identified as hyperpersonal communication. The hyperpersonal model was first discussed in 1996 by Joseph Walther. This model is based on the premise that communication over text-based technology, or computer-mediated communication (CMC), can exceed the intimacy of communication that happens FTF (Walther, 1996). According to Walther and colleagues (2011), “there are four components of the hyperpersonal model: selective self-presentation, idealization, channel

management, and feedback” (p.2). The first component, selective self-presentation, states that one may be communicating with another who they may or may not know offline. Since the individuals communicating cannot see or hear each other, they can present themselves in the best way possible, which one cannot necessarily do in FTF communication. The second component is idealization; this is when one presents favorable characteristics and plays down unwanted characteristics. The third component is channel management; this is when one is able to communicate with others by editing themselves in the CMC media. The final component is feedback; this seems to play on all three other components. The individuals communicating react to feedback they receive from others and base further communication on that feedback (Walther, et al., 2011).

The biggest difference between hyperpersonal CMC versus the typical FTF communication is that one can self-edit. Self-editing and “impression management” can alter the way in which a communicator presents oneself and, therefore, how their communication is perceived (Moreno & Uhls, 2019). Hyperpersonal communication goes hand-in-hand with the idea of sharing your best self with those on the Internet. This type of communication allows for those who are typically shy to be able to communicate with others (Hammick & Lee, 2014). Furthermore, the individuals who use SNSs to communicate can take time to think through and present themselves to others in a way in which they want to be seen. According to Tosun (2012),

People may find it difficult to express some aspects of their ‘true self’ during their face-to-face communication, especially if those aspects conflict with social norms and expectations. Those aspects of one’s self can be more easily expressed through Internet communication due to the characteristics of Internet technologies, such as the ability of hiding physical appearance. (p. 1511)

Facebook was previously the most popular SNSs being used by the majority of the teen population, and currently used by 51% of teens (Pew Research Center, 2018). For the purpose of this study, we will focus on how US suburban teens used a particular Facebook page for peer support.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study applies the theoretical framework of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 2006). According to Wenger (2006), “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” Wenger

(1998) mentions the following three traits that qualify as a CoP: 1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise, and 3) a shared repertoire.

Mutual engagement is defined by being involved in the same activities and/or group. The members of the group will interact with each other, not necessarily the same way all the time, but will have interactions within the community. Wenger (1998) presents the example of a family as a community. The activities may be having dinner together, taking family vacations or taking part in chores together. The family functions as a community through mutual engagement.

Joint enterprise can be defined as the members aiming for the same goal. The members may or may not be acting the same way in order to achieve the same goal, but they will all be working toward a mutual goal. The goal does not have to be stated. For example, the family will not have a stated goal of “being a family” but will continue working together to maintain the family relationship. Joint enterprise can also have differences. Although the family may have arguments or disagreements, the members will find a way to work through them.

Shared repertoire is the commonalities that become part of a community. The people or members of a community begin to use the same language, gestures, routines, stories, symbols, etc., that become adopted by the community members. It does not have to be stated, but just becomes part of the group. An example of a spelling test and spitballs was given by Wenger (1998) as a shared repertoire. Although the two seem very different, it is noticed that they would be part of the same community.

METHODS

The researchers investigated two questions, “What are the experiences of the creator and facilitator of the *To Whom It May Concern* (TWIMC) support group?” and “What role, if any, did the TWIMC Facebook page play in providing peer support?” This intrinsic case study focuses on the experiences of a high school senior (pseudonym Kellie) over the course of her senior year at which time she facilitated an on-campus and online anonymous support group for students at Edwards High School (pseudonym). For the purpose of this study, an intrinsic case study was conducted. The definition of which is a study that allows the researcher to understand a particular case better (Stake, 1994; 2005). The use of the intrinsic “case study concentrates on experiential knowledge of the case and the close attention to the influence of its social, political, and other contexts” (Stake, 2005, p. 444).

The demographics of this 2,500-student high school are roughly half White; about a third Latinx; followed by, almost equal populations of Black and Asian students. Please note these students did not know Kellie’s identity

as the facilitator of the peer support group, with the pseudonym “To Whom It May Concern” (TWIMC). The number of students who were impacted is unclear as the researchers did not have access to the number of how many students received the notes, there were 1008 Facebook friends for the TWIMC page, but it is unknown the exact number of Edwards students.

TWIMC was an informal project turned peer support group started and managed by a high school senior named Kellie (pseudonym). She began it as an anonymous random act of kindness and mechanism to cope with her experience of being a victim of sexual abuse. It consisted of two components; one on-campus and the other virtually through Facebook. First, the on-campus component at Edwards High School (described later) included the distribution of kind hand written notes and the collection of anonymous notes from students to TWIMC in a specially designated locker. Next, there was a virtual component that consisted of Facebook posts and instant messages from Edwards High students to TWIMC. Kellie’s identity as the facilitator of TWIMC was unknown and anonymous to the students until the end of the school year, so the Edwards High students did not know who was distributing and collecting notes, nor to whom they were addressing their Facebook instant messages and posts. Her motivation to create TWIMC was to offer random acts of kindness and it evolved to include increased involvement in TWIMC as a support group.

The theory of CoP provides a lens to better understand how the shared travails of adolescence are addressed through anonymous notes and Facebook posts, and how TWIMC participants assisted and encouraged each other in navigating these difficulties through regular participation in the support group.

Data Sources

The data sources consist of four ethnographic interviews, Facebook posts and collected and distributed handwritten paper notes. Four one-on-one interviews, ranging from 30 minutes to an hour and a half, were conducted with, Kellie, the facilitator of a peer support community called TWIMC.

Interviews

The first interview (see Appendix A) collected demographic data regarding Kellie. The purpose was to gather information on her background to establish rapport for future, more sensitive conversations. This interview included inquiries about her family, where she grew up, where she attended school and positive and negative experiences at school (details about the participant will follow). The second interview (see Appendix B) included follow-up questions regarding the first interview responses. The interview discussed Kellie’s creation and focus of the TWIMC peer support project.

The third interview (see Appendix C) centered on Kellie's perceptions of the peer support project. It addressed how she felt it affected the other students at school, how it changed her life and what she felt about the success of the project. The fourth interview (see Appendix D) addressed how Kellie felt about the newspaper covering a story about TWIMC (but they did not know her identity). Also discussed were details regarding the process of coordinating revealing Kellie's identity to the student body via the yearbook at the end of the school year.

Facebook Posts

In the TWIMC peer support group, students used the instant message function in Facebook to contact Kellie (whose identity they did not know) with issues they would like to anonymously post on the Facebook page for the whole group to see. Through instant messaging their identity was revealed to her, but Kellie was able to post their issues anonymously to the other Facebook group members. When group members responded to posts on Facebook their identity was known to all. The data analyzed in this study consisted of posts and responses on the group's Facebook page only and not the instant messages themselves.

Handwritten Paper Notes

Another component of the peer support system included the distribution and collection of paper notes. First, Kellie anonymously distributed handwritten notes with kind messages (e.g., "You are Loved") into lockers and other locations on campus without students seeing her (Kellie worked with a few school staff members to come into the school after hours). The second use was the collection of notes from students via a TWIMC-designated physical locker on campus in which students could leave completely anonymous notes for TWIMC. This option was added because through sending Facebook instant messages to TWIMC, students automatically revealed their identity to the facilitator, but these same students did not know who was receiving or replying to their TWIMC-directed instant messages.

Data Analysis

The interviews with Kellie were transcribed and then subjected to Constant Comparative Analysis to identify common themes and patterns by repeated reviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The common codes collected from the interviews were also compared with the Facebook posts and anonymous notes from the locker to support or refute the themes presented below.

RESULTS

After analyzing data from the four interviews with Kellie, paper notes and Facebook posts, four major themes emerged. The themes include the ways in which the Facebook page seemed to facilitate transcending social cliques, grew support out of the interactions on Facebook, included hyper-personal communication and showed the influence of the creator/facilitator on the experience of the involved youth.

Transcending Cliques

A clique is a friendship group that often exerts control over its members (Teaching Tolerance, n.d.). Although the groups have a variety of names such as populars, jocks, floaters, brains, emos, loners (Gordon & Dworzeczka, 2018), and the names have evolved throughout time (Eckert, 1989; Milner, 2004), the types of groups that appear on high school campuses across the world are very similar. The importance of belonging to a clique is particularly pertinent to high school students because as they distance themselves from family to identify with their individualism, they begin to focus on their school friendships (Shochet, et al., 2006). Furthermore, the sense of connectedness with activities that provide a support system creates higher engagement and sense of self-worth (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Oosterhoff et al., 2017).

One of the benefits of this study's peer support group is that it allowed the students of Kellie's high school to transcend the typical school cliques. Instead of using Facebook for negative purposes like cyberbullying or gossiping, Kellie was able to moderate the Facebook page to serve as a way for students to connect and support each other. As Kellie stated, her goal was to:

bring people so much more together, because high school is, I mean when I was in high school and just hearing people always say, like, 'this is a scary place, I don't feel safe at school, I don't want to be at school, I don't, I, you know, I don't feel safe at home or at school' and like, by the time, the end of my senior year, I was like school is my home, my friends are my family, you know and I just wanted, I want that experience for others.

Kellie moderated the site as a CoP to keep it neutral and free of judgment. Moreover, the Facebook page made people more aware of others' problems. Kellie discussed overhearing conversations among students, "We saw this on TWIMC last night, like, are you okay? Could this have been

you?” Even without knowing who was behind the posts, students became more concerned about people, and as characteristic of a CoP, grew together by supporting those around them as opposed to engaging in cyberbullying.

Organic/Peer Developed Support

Kellie created the peer-developed support group, TWIMC, in response to her own experiences, and the group grew organically into what seemed like a CoP through the use of the TWIMC Facebook page. Not only were the students involved in peer support through this CoP, but it was also self-governed by the students who were members of the TWIMC community. That said, it was ultimately Kellie’s decisions and authority that deleted or blocked content to keep TWIMC a safe space, and this is discussed in relationship to CoPs.

Edwards High students shared a great deal of personal information and Kellie did her best to create a community of respect. Students sent her notes (see Figures 1 and 2 below) notes such as the following and she did her best to facilitate a safe place for students to share.

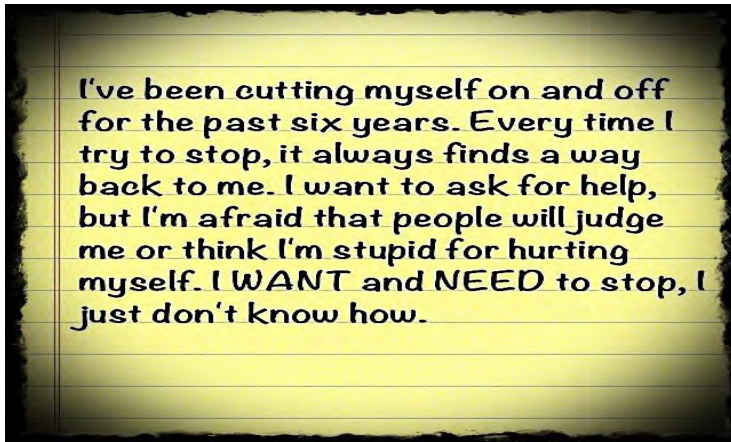


Figure 1. Student note (cutting confession).

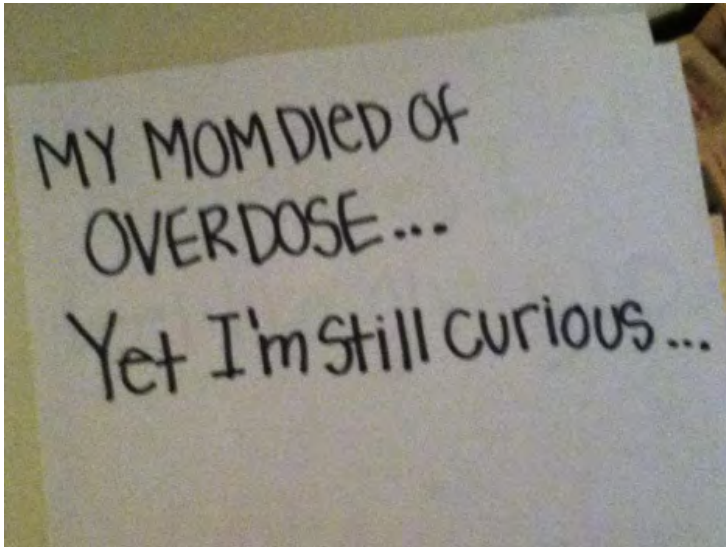


Figure 2. Student note (drug use).

An illustrative example of when Kellie had to take action to maintain a safe space includes an instance in which a student shared that she was gay and asked the TWIMC Facebook community if she should come out (see figure 3 below).



Figure 3. Student note (Coming out).

Both negative and positive comments were posted on the Facebook page in reaction to this secret. Kellie recalled,

The one extremely conservative kid at school decides to comment on it. (laughs) And we're like, I'm like, okay ... I'm sitting and watching this whole thing go down. And I'm just like, 'Oh my god! Like, this is like bloodbath.' It's one person fighting off a bunch of our friends that are, and it's getting ugly, and like violent, and just like swear words everywhere. And I'm just like, 'Oh my god! (laughs) Like, I can't handle this.' Like, it was, it was bad. And so, I went through and I deleted his comments

When Kellie deleted the negative comments being made, however, the member who posted them was upset and continued to make comments, "oh, like, you guys are supposed to be unbiased... and you can't, you won't let me share my opinion with you." His reaction to Kellie's mediation led Kellie to block him from the site. She wanted to make sure that TWIMC was "a judgment-free place." She stated, "You know, we don't care what religion you are, which, you know, sexuality, like, it doesn't matter."

After the girl's request to take down the picture from Facebook because she did not "like the responses it's getting," Kellie gained the girl's permission to repost the picture and helped protect the anonymous girl from the negative comments regarding her secret. Kellie made sure that the male student that began making disparaging remarks was blocked from posting anything else negative on TWIMC's Facebook page:

And then I just made, I think I made it to where people couldn't comment on it or something like that, because I know I blocked that one particular student who had started it. Just because it was, I didn't block him as friends, I just blocked him from commenting on things, just because that wasn't the first time that he had said rude or negative things and that wasn't, like, it, like To Whom It May Concern was a place of like, safety to be able to, especially that particular project, to have people submit secrets anonymously and then have other people support them, rather than to tear them down.

TWIMC quickly developed its own rules and practices as is typical of a CoP. Interestingly enough, they were not discussed, but seemed to be decided upon by the community collaboratively to provide peer support. Kellie had described the space as a "judgment free" place where the students could share, chat online and support one another. In general, TWIMC followed

these unwritten rules by sharing their secrets, liking statuses, talking to Kellie through personal messages and leaving supportive comments on one another's posts. This type of CoP-like interactions on social media is not what has been found through the extensive cyberbullying research. In its positive use of technology and social media, TWIMC has become its own unique case.

TWIMC enabled the students of Edwards High to, as Kellie pointed out, "have faith in humanity." By utilizing Facebook as a space to meet, online spaces could be a new medium of support systems. Not only are they conveniently accessible 24-hours a day, but they can be easily created and developed for more specific needs of all members. Kellie was able to let the students know that they were not alone in their experiences, fears, hopes, dreams and wishes; and this all took place over the course of one school year. The use of peer support that is organically founded could be beneficial for all high school students. Thus, the seeming CoP created by TWIMC served not only Kellie, but many other students as they shared their secrets and gained support from their peers.

Hyperpersonal Communication

The current generation's use of technology like text messages, instant messages and social media is affecting the type of relationships that youth have with each other. Teens are more open with one another and share more personal information online than ever before; this is different from the youth of past generations (Rains et al., 2019). One of the causes of this type of intimacy is hyperpersonal communication, which is defined by the level of comfort that is offered to a person through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) (Walther, 1996). With the absence of FTF communication, people are much more willing to share personal information and be more open about themselves (Walther, 1996) which provides additional opportunities to create an effective CoP.

The best example of hyperpersonal communication in TWIMC occurred when the facilitator prompted the community to share, "a wish, a hope, a dream, a secret, something that scares you." The students began sending messages through the private message feature on Facebook for the facilitator to post on the site for all to see. The students knew their identity was safe from the larger group but that it was exposed to the facilitator of the Facebook page, and Kellie reflected on this by saying,

I think with Facebook you get a little, definitely deeper and more personal, because they were, I mean, kids at my school were more willing to just like, open up to anonymous Facebook then you know ... It was just like, I know who you are,

but you don't know who I am, and I just feel like that it's so weird that they were just so willing to just like open up and be like 'I need someone to talk to.'

In this age of technology, social media and CMCs are extremely common mediums for teenagers to voice their vulnerability, provide support and on occasion create CoPs. The concept of hyperpersonal communication suggests that through CMCs, people feel more comfortable sharing information than they do through FTF conversations (Rains et al., 2019; Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2011). In addition to this openness through CMC use, people also have control over the identity that they create, what they reveal to others and how they chose to self-edit their persona (Walther, 1996; Walther et al., 2011).

Although the locker was not a form of FTF communication, nor a CMC, there is a comfort level offered for those participating in a form of communication that does not require self-disclosure (Cigelske, 2018; Jiang, et al., 2011). The TWIMC locker was located among the other student lockers. The fear of being seen by others at the locker, and it only being available for limited hours of operation means it may not have provided the perceived anonymity that the Facebook page provided. Through the Facebook page, however, students were not completely anonymous because Kellie received their posts (with their names) via the messaging function. Regardless of this lack of anonymity to the organizer, through the process of sharing via messaging they realized their goal of peer support which sustained the evolution of what appeared to be a CoP. In the case of the TWIMC locker, anonymity and access was not ensured due to its location and availability, and therefore was trumped by the use of CMCs and the 24-hour access of hyperpersonal communication offered by the project's Facebook page.

Facilitator's Ownership

The facilitator, Kellie, was able to use this support group as a way of dealing with her own problems. It was a way for her to feel empowered and ensure that others were not alone while navigating their own difficulties. "My life was pretty much falling apart, I decided to do this ... I just put that into making other people feel better, because I felt like crap." Her empathy for the ways that others would feel by going through similar experiences benefited the project. She took pride in the fact that she was helping others and was encouraged by the response of her peers.

Kellie was able, through the creation and facilitation of TWIMC, to come to terms with her own experiences and use the project as a form of self-coping mechanism. She expressed that coping was easier for her with TWIMC, "I don't know, it was like a way to escape, basically." She went

on to say, “Giving people happy little encouragements was like an easier, like a wall, or (laughter) I don’t really know how to...um... rather than to be like, sit and sulk about my own problems.” TWIMC served as a distraction from her own issues and inspired her to focus on assisting others in feeling supported. This provided an avenue to cope with the disease she felt regarding the sexual abuse in her family, not feeling supported by her parents, and then believing that she was responsible for her parents’ divorce.

There are two modes that aid in coping with a stressful experience: approach and avoidance (Priebe, et al., 2013). The approach strategy is described as an active coping strategy (Clarke, 2006; O’Malley, 2017), in which a person is able to gain some type of control over the stressor or is able to change the stressful situation (Hofman & Hay, 2018; Priebe, et al., 2013). Furthermore, the approach strategy can include “emotional regulation” (Priebe, et al., 2013, p. 71) that allows for one to change the way they feel about the stressful situation (Hofman & Hay, 2018). The avoidance strategy is a more passive act, in which one would try to avoid the stressor.

The method that Kellie implemented through her note writing is defined as a type of stressor controllability, or in other words, an active coping method (Amat et al., 2005; Clarke, 2006). Kellie was able to use the approach method to build her resilience and address some of her negative experiences (Thompson, et al., 2018), and provide support by distributing uplifting notes to others. She was able to use the notes as a way of dealing with her own problems.

By employing the approach method, Kellie exhibited stressor controllability when delivering her anonymous notes to students, in which she actively completed her good deeds or random acts of kindness (RAK). Baskerville and colleagues (2000) define a RAK as “something one does for an unknown other that they hope will benefit that individual” (p. 294). Tolman (2006) added that the RAK should be a “generous gesture” (p. 133) and that one should not be expecting anything in return from the other person. Kellie provided RAKs by delivering notes that were from an anonymous source, leaving the expectation of anything in return virtually impossible. Plus, TWIMC played a huge role in supporting its members.

TWIMC made a particular impact on a student when a boy shared his story after receiving a note from TWIMC that read “You have a heart of gold.” Kellie said,

This kid posted a picture of him and his like, and his TWIMC and it was like ‘You have a heart of gold’ or something like that...he wrote on there, like he has a history of heart problems and...he’s not like expected to live past 25 or something like that ... And just by chance in his random locker he gets the [hand written note]

that says, ‘You have a heart of gold’ and I mean there were people commenting on our Facebook wall saying that you give me hope for humanity.

He posted his picture, sharing how depressed he had been before getting his note and how it helped to raise his hopes. Kellie felt that this handwritten paper note for this particular student made others in her school more aware of how the positivity that she was trying to spread could be so beneficial to those in need and how social media can be used for support as opposed to just cyberbullying.

Kellie’s ownership played a role in whether or not TWIMC could be classified as a CoP. Even though all three components of Wenger’s (1998) CoP, 1) mutual engagement, 2) a joint enterprise, and 3) a shared repertoire, were present in all aspects of TWIMC, without the participation and leadership of Kellie, the TWIMC Facebook group and community were virtually nonexistent. Since the community quit evolving and continuing without Kellie, it cannot be properly identified as a CoP. It does seem, however, that it was a valuable resource of community support for both Kellie and the students of Edwards High. TWIMC represents how SNSs go beyond cyberbullying and offer a major source of support for high school students when moderated appropriately.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

The facilitator mentioned how it felt like the TWIMC project was “kinda like a suicide hotline, but not.” Today’s youth are more engaged in online and blended learning, and are more comfortable sharing with each other online. That sense of hyperpersonal anonymity or protection from being behind a screen makes them more willing to share. Policy makers, educators and parents should take note of this trend. In an increasingly technological world, there needs to be an awareness of the positive utility that Facebook and other social media sites have to offer students peer support, which speaks to the necessity of future research.

After analysis of this case, the researchers developed five recommendations for future studies. First, this case study was conducted only from the perspective of Kellie, and though she gave great insight into the TWIMC project, a study of the participants of the project would be beneficial. A study of the members’ perspectives, benefits and feelings about the TWIMC project would add to scholarly research in the following two ways: it would provide research into online support groups, especially from teens’ perspectives and it would offer additional insight into hyperpersonal relationships. Furthermore, one could investigate how this support group was beneficial to

those who were feeling bullied or cyberbullied. The majority of studies in both cases look at the issue quantitatively and do not consider the positive uses of Facebook for victims of such problems (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019; Li, 2005; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010).

The second recommendation for future studies would be investigating if the online TWIMC support group is reproducible. Without Kellie's involvement at Edwards High School and the TWIMC Facebook page, the project did not continue. Kellie's motivation for the project only existed until her identity was revealed. The TWIMC project was unique and virtually impossible to recreate because it was student-created, facilitated and governed; but how could school staff create a safe space like this for students at their schools? Would this project work at any other school? Would it be effective at different grade levels? Would it work with an anonymous adult facilitator as opposed to a peer? Does the project have the ability to function for a longer period of time (beyond an academic school year)? All of these questions would fill a gap in the research on peer support groups and teen use of Facebook as a medium for support.

Third, from this case study emerged insights into peer support groups for teens. The TWIMC case was an illustrative example of the comfort level that youth feel through online or digital spaces. The increased comfort they receive from the hyperpersonal communication should direct researchers in the recreation of peer support. How can online spaces be used to aid in the creation of peer support systems? Furthermore, can peer support happen in the same way as FTF peer support groups? Which one would be more beneficial to the participants?

Fourth, in relation to digital spaces, how are they breaking down or transcending cliques? This case study demonstrated how it was possible for a large student body (2,500 students) to turn to one site to share and discuss incredibly personal revelations, would this same phenomena happen in other areas? Would it persist with co-workers? Would it be effective with students of different ages (i.e. middle school or college students)? Furthermore, how are digital spaces having an impact on daily school activities and teens' lives?

Lastly, this case study investigates the program as a whole, including the on-campus activities (such as the handwritten paper notes) in conjunction with the use of Facebook. Another possible study would be to compare the use of the project if it were only an on-campus entity versus a Facebook-only support group. Is there one medium that would benefit the members more than the other, or is it necessary to use both to prevent bullying and provide support?

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has required teens to engage in increased on-line and blended learning (Dhawan, 2020) though bullying has long been a reality for teens (Koo, 2007), knowing that 14% of teens are being cyberbullied in a year (CDC, 2017) and 47% of depressive symptoms in teens are directly related to being bullied and/or cyberbullied (Kessel-Schneider et al., 2012), it seems imperative to investigate counter-narratives to cyberbullying. With 90% of adolescents having used at least one SNS (American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2018) this study shows that SNSs seem primed to offer peer support. It appears that a peer-developed, organically-grown support system that transcends cliques and supports inclusivity like TWIMC can provide a much-needed counternarrative to cyberbullying.

References

- Amat, J., Baratta, M. V., Paul, E. Bland, S. T., Watkins, L. R. & Maier, S. F. (2005). Medial prefrontal cortex determines how stressor controllability affects behavior and dorsal raphe nucleus. *Nature Neuroscience* 8(3), 365-371. doi: 10.1038/nn1399.
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry. (2018). *Social Media and Teens*. https://www.aacap.org/AACAP/Families_and_Youth/Facts_for_Families/FFF-Guide/Social-Media-and-Teens-100.aspx
- Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago. (2020, September 1). *Parenting teens in the age of social media*. <https://www.luriechildrens.org/en/blog/social-media-parenting-statistics/>
- Banjanin, N., Banjanin, N., Dimitrijevic, I. & Pantic, I. (2015). Relationships between internet use and depression: focus on physiological mood oscillations, social networking and online addictive behavior. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 43, 308-312. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.013>.
- Baskerville, K., Johnson, K., Monk-Turner, E., Slone, Q., Standley, H., Stansbury, S., Williams, M. & Young, J. (2000). Reactions to Random Acts of Kindness. *Social Science Journal*, 37(2), 293.
- Boers, E., Afzali, M.H., Newton, N., Conrod, P. (2019). Association of Screen Time and Depression in Adolescence. *JAMA Pediatrics*. 173(9):853–859. doi:10.1001/jama-pediatrics.2019.1759
- Boers, E., Afzali, M.H., Conrod, P. (2020) Temporal Associations of Screen Time and Anxiety Symptoms Among Adolescents. *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry*. 65(3):206-208. doi:10.1177/07067437198854
- Center for Disease Control. (2019). *#StopBullying*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/stop-bullying/index.html>.
- Center for Disease Control. (2017). *Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS)*. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/data/yrbs/index.htm>
- Cigelske, T. (2018). *The highest form of like: Snapchat, college students and hyperpersonal communication*. [Master's theses, Marquette University]. Raynor Memorial Libraries.

- Clarke, A. T. (2006). Coping with interpersonal stress and psychosocial health among children and adolescents: a meta-analysis. *Journal Of Youth & Adolescence*, 35(1), 10-23. doi:10.1007/s10964-005-9001-x.
- Clarke, B. (2003). The angst, anguish and ambitions of the teenage years. *International Journal of Advertising & Marketing to Children*. 4(3), 27-33.
- Dhawan, S. (2020). Online Learning: a panacea in the time of COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*. 49(1), 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018>.
- Eckert, P. (1989). *Jocks and burnouts: Social categories and identity in the high school*. Teachers College Press.
- Facebook. (2013). "Key Facts." Retrieved from <http://newsroom.fb.com/Key-Facts>.
- Facebook. (2013). "About." Retrieve from <https://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>.
- Glaser, B. G. & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research*. Piscataway, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Gordon, R.A., & Dworzecka, A. (2018). *Modern high school peer crowd hierarchy* [Infographic]. https://today.uic.edu/uic-study-details-how-todays-high-school-cliques-compare-to-yesterdays/pyramid_4_a
- Hammick, J. K. & Lee, M. N. (2014). Do shy people feel less communication apprehension online? The effects of virtual reality on the relationship between personality characteristics and communication outcomes. *Computers in Human Behavior*. 33, 302-310. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.01.046>
- Harter, S., Marold, D. B., Whitesell, N. R. & Cobbs, G. (1996). A model of the effects of perceived parent and peer support on adolescent false self. *Child Development*. 67(2), 360-374
- Hinduja, S. & Patchin, J. W. (2019). Connecting adolescent suicide to the severity of bullying and cyberbullying. *Journal of School Violence*. 18(3), 333-346. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2018.1492417>
- Hofman, S. G. & Hay, A. C. (2018). Rethinking avoidance: toward a balanced approach to avoidance in treating anxiety disorders. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 55, 14-21. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2018.03.004>
- Jiang L. C., Bazarova, N. N. & Hancock J.T. (2011) The disclosure–intimacy link in computer-mediated communication: an attributional extension of the hyperpersonal model. *Human Communication Research*, 37(1), 58-77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2010.01393.x>
- Kessel-Schneider, S., O'Donnell, L., Stueve, A. & Coulter, R. (2012). Cyberbullying, school bullying and psychological distress: A regional census of high school students. *American Journal of Public Health*. 102(1), 171-177.
- Koo, H. (2007). A timeline of the evolution of school bullying in differing social contexts. *Asia Pacific Education Review*. 8(1), 107-116.
- Kramer, J. M., Ryan, C. T., Moore, R. & Schwartz, A. (2017). Feasibility of electronic peer mentoring for transition-age youth and young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities: Project teens making environment and activity modifications. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*. doi.org/10.1111/jar.12346
- Lattie, E. G., Ho, J., Sargent, E., Tomasino, K. N., Smith, J.D., Hendricks Brown, C., & Mohr, D. C. (2017). Teens engaged in collaborative health: The feasibility and acceptability of an online skill-building intervention for adolescents at risk for depression. *Internet Interventions*, (8), 15-26. doi.org/10.1016/j.invent.2017.02.003.
- Li, Q. (2005). Cyberbullying in schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International*. 27, 1-14. doi: 10.1177/01430343060xxxxx.

- Masuda, J. R., Anderson, S., Letourneau, N., Sloan Morgan, V. & Stewart, M. (2013). Reconciling preferences and constraints in online peer support for youth with asthma and allergies. *Health Promotion Practice*, 14(5), 741-750.
- McNeely, C., & Falci, C. (2004). School connectedness and the transition into and out of health-risk behavior among adolescents: A Comparison of Social Belonging and Teacher Support. *Journal of School Health*, 74(7), 284-292.
- Milner, M., Jr. (2004). *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption*. Routledge, New York.
- Moreno, M. A. & Uhls, Y. T. (2019). Applying an affordances approach and a developmental lens to approach adolescent social media use. *Digital Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2055207619826678>
- Naslund, J.A., Aschbrenner, K.A., Marsch L.A. & Bartels, S.J. (2016). The future of mental health care: peer-to-peer support and social media. *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 25(2), 113-122. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045796015001067>
- Parikh, S. V., Taubman, D. S., Antoun, C., Cranford, J., Ewell Foster, C., Grambeau, M., Hunter, J., Jester, J., Konz, K., Meyer, T., Salazar, S. & Greden, J. F. (2018). The michigan peer-to-peer depression awareness program: School-based prevention to address depression among teens. *Psychiatric Services*, 69(4), 487-491. doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.20170010.
- Patchin, J. W. & Hinduja, S. (2010). Cyberbullying and self-esteem. *Journal of Social Health*. 80(12), 614-621.
- Pew Research Center, (2018, May), "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018"
- Priebe, G., Mitchell, K. J., & Finkelhor, D. (2013). To tell or not to tell? Youth's responses to unwanted Internet experiences. *Cyberpsychology*, 7(1), 71-84. [doi:10.5817/CP2013-1-6](https://doi.org/10.5817/CP2013-1-6).
- O'Higgins, S., Stinson, J., Ahola Kohut, S., Caes, L., Heary, C. & McGuire, B. E. (2019). Lending an ear: ipeer2peer plus teens taking charge online self-management to empower adolescents with arthritis in Ireland: protocol for a pilot randomised controlled trial. *BMJ Open*, 9(12), [dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-027952](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-027952).
- O'Malley, E. E. (2017). *The right approach to success: Approach and avoidance motivation in anticipatory self-control*. (Publication No. 10607392) [Doctoral dissertation, University of New York at Albany]. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- Oosterhoff, B., Kaplow, J.B., Wray-Lake, L. Gallagher, K. (2017). Activity-specific pathways among duration of organized activity involvement, social support, and adolescent well-being: Findings from a nationally representative sample. *Journal of Adolescence*. 60, 83-93. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2017.07.012>
- Rains, S.A., Akers, C., Pavlich, C. A., Tsetsi, E. & Appelbaum, M. (2019). Examining the quality of social support messages produced face-to-face and in computer-mediated communication: The effects of hyperpersonal communication, *Communication Monographs*, 86(3), 271-291, DOI: 10.1080/03637751.2019.1595076
- Shochet, I. M., Dadds, M. R., Ham, D., & Montague, R. (2006). School connectedness is an underemphasized parameter in adolescent mental health: results of a community prediction study. *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology*, 35(2), 170-179.
- Slater, M.D. (2007). Reinforcing spirals: the mutual influence of media selectivity and media effects and their impact on individual behavior and social identity. *Communication Theory*. 17(3):281-303. [doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00296.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2007.00296.x)

- Stake, R. E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In Denzin, N. K. & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research*, (pp. 443-466). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Stake, R. E. (1994). Case study: Composition and performance. *Council for Research in Music Education*. 122, 31-44.
- Tankovska, H. (2021, January 28). *Frequency of social media use among teenagers in the United States as of April 2018* [Data set]. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/945341/frequency-social-media-use-teenagers-usa/>
- Teaching Tolerance. (n.d.). *Cliques in Schools*. <https://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources/lessons/cliques-in-schools>
- Thompson, N. J., Fiorillo, D., Rothbaum, B. O., Ressler, K. J., & Michopoulos, V. (2018). Coping strategies as mediators in relation to resilience and posttraumatic stress disorder. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 225, 153-159. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2017.08.049>.
- Tolman, E. (2009). Creating opportunities for interaction and critical reflection in the interpersonal communication course: completing random acts of kindness. *Communication Teacher*, 23(3), 132-136. doi:10.1080/17404620902990499.
- Tosun, L. P. (2012). Motives for facebook use and expressing "true self" on the internet. *Computers in Human Behavior*. 28(4), 1510-1517.
- Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-Mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*. 23(1), 3-43.
- Walther, J. B., Liang, Y. J., DeAndrea, D. C., Tong, S.T., Carr, C.T., Spottswood, E. L. & Amichai-Hamburger, Y. (2011). The effect of feedback on identity shift in computer-mediated communication. *Media Psychology*. 14(1), 1-26. doi:10.1080/152132269.2010.547832.
- Wenger, E. (2006). Communities of practice, a brief introduction. Retrieved from <http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>.

APPENDIX A

Interview 1 Protocol: Background Interview

This opening interview is designed to identify the participant of this research study. The questions are posed to get the basic background information about the subject, including the basic demographics, school history and family information.

Step #1–Welcome

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today.

Questions:

1. I would like to talk to you today to discuss you. This will include both personal information and school background. We can start with you telling me a little about yourself. (name, age, occupation, etc)
2. Tell me about your family (parents, siblings, etc.).
3. Where did you attend school? (Elementary, Middle/Junior High, High School)
4. Can you tell me about the TWIMC project (may need to prompt for both on campus, locker, notes and Facebook page).
5. What caused you to want to do this? (First time you thought about it, how did you get it started, etc.)
6. Tell me how this played out over your senior year?
7. Is there anything that you would like to add about your experiences that we have not discussed already?
8. Do you have any questions about the study?

APPENDIX B

Interview 2 Protocol: To Whom It May Concern Interview

This second interview is designed to discuss the creation of the TWIMC project. This interview will focus on the creation and development of both the on campus project and the Facebook page as well.

Step #1--Welcome

Hello. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me again.

Questions:

Today I would like to talk to you about the TWIMC project. We will be focusing the creation and functions of the project.

1. Explain how this happened during the course of a day?
2. Can you tell me about some of the events or things you did on campus?
3. Can you tell me about some successes you had while doing this project?
4. Can you tell me about some challenges you had while doing this project?
5. Can you describe the goal of this project when you began? Did you meet your goal?
6. Please explain how you completed this without your identity being compromised? Did you have help?
7. Was there ever a time that you had to deal with false identities? (fake notes)
8. Is there anything that you would like to add that we have not covered today?

APPENDIX C

Interview 3 Protocol: To Whom It May Concern Interview

This interview is designed to further discuss the TWIMC project at Kellie's school. This interview will focus more on her perspectives of what impact the project had during her senior year.

Step #1–Welcome

Hello again. Thank you for taking that time to meet with me today.

Questions:

Today I would like to talk about the TWIMC project, but I will be asking questions that are focused more on your perceptions of the project.

1. Can you explain how you feel this affected people on your campus? And the Facebook page?
2. What role did you see this playing in people's lives? Can you explain how this is different from then to now?
3. Do you feel that this is something that would be beneficial on your college campus? Or was specifically high school focused?
4. Can you explain how this changed the way you felt about yourself? (Did it have an impact on your home or school life)?
5. Can you tell me about any positive or negative feedback you received from people on campus?
6. Please tell me about how you feel the on campus project was compared to the Facebook page.
7. Please tell me how you finally identified yourself to the others on campus and the Facebook site.
8. Do you feel this changed people's perspectives of the project?
9. Do you have anything else you would like to add that we have not already discussed?

APPENDIX D

Interview 4 Protocol: To Whom It May Concern Interview (Part 2) and Wrap-Up

This interview will be to complete any other closing questions or anything that may still need to be discussed after the first three interviews.

Step #1–Welcome

Questions:

1. How did you feel about the newspaper printing the article without your permission?
2. How did the journalist approach the article? Did they become your friend on Facebook?
3. Did you tell your yearbook teacher first about your identity?
4. Do you remember when you first revealed your identity?
5. Did teachers have access to the Facebook page?
6. Can you tell me what some of your banners said?
7. Can you give me examples of other messages you posted around campus?
8. Tell me how you handled the situation of the student coming out on Facebook?
9. Can you tell me how you responded to the person that was claiming to be TWIMC?
10. Did TWIMC cause you to interact with the school psychologist? Is that how the relationship was established?
11. You mentioned this was a way of escape? Can you explain that?
12. How did you feel about your parents wanting to drug test you?
13. Can you remember some of the comments and posts that stood out to you on the Facebook page?
14. How did students from other high schools find out about TWIMC?
15. Did you ever overhear anything negative about TWIMC?
16. Did you notice if there was a change in the school community one they were involved in the Facebook page?
17. Can you tell me how you handled referrals to the school psychologist?
18. Tell me about some of you statuses of the day.
19. Can you tell me some of the things you wrote on the notes?
20. Do you think you would have done anything differently?
21. Did your goal change over the time you were doing the project?
22. How comfortable do you feel with the use of Facebook as a way of supporting others?
23. Would you consider yourself an introvert or an extrovert?
24. How would your friends describe you and your interactions with other people?