Thematic Content Analysis of Self-Disclosure and Peer Support in Students' Online Mental Health Forum Posts

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Abstract

Student mental health has become a crucial issue in the digital era, in which anonymous online community forums such as Reddit and X (formerly Twitter) are increasingly used as alternative help-seeking channels. This study aims to analyze in depth the forms of self-disclosure and the types of peer social support in students' online mental health forum posts. Using a qualitative approach with the Reflexive Thematic Analysis model of Braun and Clarke (2006), the dataset comprised 75 anonymous public posts and comments identified as originating from Reddit and X. The analysis identified three main themes of self-disclosure: (1) expressions of academic pressure and fear of failure, (2) feelings of isolation and identity crisis, and (3) emotional catharsis related to mental health and social stigma. Meanwhile, peer social support was divided into three main themes: (1) emotional and evaluative support (empathy and experience normalization), (2) informational support (coping strategies and navigation of campus services), and (3) directional versus non-directional support. Anonymity was shown to trigger a positive online disinhibition effect, facilitating emotional openness without fear of stigma. The findings provide guidance for the development of digital-based mental health interventions in higher-education settings.

Keywords: *self-disclosure; peer support; student mental health; online forums; thematic analysis; anonymity*

1. INTRODUCTION

The mental health crisis in higher education has shown a significant increase in recent years. Students are often confronted with a combination of academic pressure, the transition into adulthood, and problems of social adjustment (Pointon-Haas et al., 2023). Although campus counseling facilities have been widely provided, barriers such as social stigma, shame, financial constraints, and limited accessibility make

most students reluctant to access professional help through formal channels (Hanley et al., 2019; Pointon-Haas et al., 2023).

As an alternative, students turn to digital media and anonymous online community forums-such as mental health subreddits on Reddit or microblog threads on X to express their psychological struggles (De Choudhury & De, 2014; Park et al., 2017; Zhu et al., 2023). This phenomenon is driven by the Online Disinhibition Effect, in which the anonymity of a platform lowers individuals' psychological barriers and thereby triggers more honest and profound self-disclosure (Suler, 2004). Indeed, a meta-analysis by Clark-Gordon et al. (2019) confirmed a positive association between digital anonymity and the depth of self-disclosure. Self-disclosure in this digital domain enables individuals to share vulnerable emotions without fear of judgment from their real-world social circles (De Choudhury & De, 2014).

Interactions within online mental health forums are not merely one-directional (*self-disclosure*) but also create an interactive space through *peer social support*. Support from peers who share similar *lived experiences* has been shown to provide a sense of solidarity, emotional validation, and tactical information regarding coping. Nevertheless, the effectiveness and thematic dynamics of self-disclosure and peer support within students' digital microsystems need to be explored systematically.

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This study aims to thematically analyze the content of posts and comments in students' online mental health forums. The main research questions in this study are:

1. How are the forms and main themes of *self-disclosure* expressed by students in anonymous online forums?
2. What are the forms and dynamics of *peer social support* provided by fellow users of these online forums?

2. METHOD

Study Design

This study employed a qualitative approach using the *Reflexive Thematic Analysis* method based on the framework of Braun and Clarke. This design was selected for its strength in identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of meaning (themes) within medium-to large-scale qualitative text data in a flexible yet systematic manner.

Data Corpus and Collection Procedure

The research data were collected from public posts and comments on anonymous online forum platforms (Reddit and X) focused on the discourse of student mental health.

- **Sample size**: N = 75 text units (comprising 45 main posts and 30 response comment threads).
- **Inclusion criteria**: posts created by individuals who self-identified as students, containing discussions of mental health issues or academic stress, published in the public domain, and written between 2023 and 2026.
- **Exclusion criteria**: commercial promotional posts, bot-generated text, or posts containing indications of imminent self-harm without qualitative discussion content.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedure followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis:

1. **Data familiarization**: repeatedly re-reading the text corpus to understand the narrative context.
2. **Generating initial codes**: open coding of text segments related to indicators of *self-disclosure* and *peer support*.
3. **Searching for themes**: grouping candidate codes into prospective main themes and sub-themes.
4. **Reviewing themes**: checking the fit of the themes against the entire dataset and the thematic map.
5. **Defining and naming themes**: articulating the essence of each theme.
6. **Producing the report**: linking the findings to the scientific literature.

Ethical Considerations (Digital Research)

This study complied with the ethical standards for the analysis of public internet data. All user identities (usernames), institution names, and specific locations were strictly anonymized. Direct quotations presented in this report were consensually modified (*paraphrasing for privacy preservation*) without altering their essential meaning, in order to prevent *reverse searchability*.

3. RESULTS

From the qualitative analysis of 75 data units of posts and comments, two main domains were identified, each divided into several main themes and sub-themes.

Table 1

Thematic Map of Self-Disclosure and Peer Support

Main Theme	Sub-theme	n	%
Domain 1: Self-Disclosure			
1. Academic Pressure & Fear of Failure	Task load, GPA anxiety, imposter syndrome	32	42.6
2. Social Isolation & Identity Crisis	Loneliness on campus, burnout, future disorientation	24	32.0
3. Catharsis & Social Stigma	Outpouring of dark emotions, complaints about real-world stigma	19	25.4
Domain 2: Peer Support			
1. Emotional & Evaluative Support	Deep empathy, normalization of feelings, instilling hope	35	46.7
2. Informational Support	Self-coping tips, counseling/app recommendations	22	29.3
3. Directional vs. Non-Directional Support	Direct (action-oriented) advice vs. simply listening	18	24.0

Note. N = 75 text units. Percentages reflect the proportion of code occurrences within each domain.

Thematization of Self-Disclosure

Theme 1: Academic Pressure and Fear of Failure. The majority of students' self-disclosures centered on the crisis of academic workload. Students honestly expressed a deep fear of failure that they found difficult to voice to lecturers or parents.

> *"I am in my final semester and feel as though I am drowning in anxiety. Every time I open my laptop to work on my thesis, my chest feels tight. I cannot tell my parents about this because they hold such high expectations."* (User_22, Reddit)

Theme 2: Social Isolation and Identity Crisis. Another form of self-disclosure focused on a sense of alienation within the campus environment and the absence of meaningful social relationships.

> *"Being surrounded by thousands of students on campus does not make me feel connected to anyone. Behind my smile in class, I feel profoundly lonely and directionless."* (User_09, X)

Theme 3: Emotional Catharsis and Stigma Resistance. The anonymity of the forum encouraged participants to engage in catharsis releasing emotions they had long suppressed for fear of being labeled "weak" or "attention-seeking" in the real world.

Thematization of Peer Social Support

Theme 1: Emotional & Evaluative Support (Empathy and Normalization). The most dominant form of support was emotional responses that validated the poster's feelings. Peers conveyed to the poster that they were "not alone."

> *"The feelings you are experiencing are completely valid. Many of us here feel exactly the same burnout this semester. Do not be too hard on yourself."* (User_54, Reddit comment)

Theme 2: Informational Support (Coping Strategies and Access Navigation). Responses from fellow forum members often contained tactical guidance for managing stress or navigating counseling registration on campus.

> *"If you feel overwhelmed, try the 5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique. If you need professional help, the campus actually has a free counseling service that can be registered anonymously through the student portal."* (User_31, Reddit comment)

Theme 3: Directional vs. Non-Directional Support. There was a pattern of interaction in which some members provided *directional* support in the form of concrete instructions or solutions, while others provided *non-directional* support focused on a safe space to listen without judgment.

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study affirm that anonymous online forums function as a vital support microsystem for the mental health of modern students. The high level of *self-disclosure* on sensitive issues such as academic stress and social anxiety is consistent with the *Online Disinhibition Effect* theory formulated by Suler (2004). Anonymity lowers psychological barriers, enabling the expression of anxieties that have long been concealed by an awareness of stigma. This finding reinforces the meta-analysis by Clark-Gordon et al. (2019), which demonstrated a positive correlation between digital anonymity and the depth of self-disclosure.

The patterns of self-disclosure related to academic burden and social isolation also confirm the findings of Zhu et al. (2023) and Achuthan et al. (2026) regarding youth mental health discourse on Reddit. Students use online forums not only as an outlet for emotional *catharsis* but also as a space for negotiating identity amid high academic expectations.

In the domain of *peer support*, the dominance of emotional support and validation indicates that peer empathy is a fundamental need for individuals experiencing emotional distress. Prescott et al. (2017) and Hanley et al. (2019) argued that the combination of *directional* and *non-directional* support in online forums creates a complementary ecosystem of help. Users obtain tactical solutions as well as unconditional acceptance.

Nevertheless, as underscored by Lobban et al. (2025) and Marshall et al. (2024, 2025), full reliance on online peer support forums also carries risks related to content safety and the potential for misinformation. Therefore, as suggested by Achar and Mehrotra (2024) and Pointon-Haas et al. (2023), online forums should not be seen as a substitute for formal clinical intervention, but rather as a *bridging mechanism* that directs students toward professional help-seeking.

5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Conclusion

This study concludes that anonymous online mental health forums play an important role in the psychological dynamics of students. Students' *self-disclosure* in digital media is dominated by issues of academic anxiety, social isolation, and emotional distress. The *peer support* responses that emerge are able to provide emotional validation, experience normalization, and practical coping advice. Anonymity proves to be the key catalyst that facilitates these informal therapeutic interactions.

Practical and Campus Policy Implications

1. **Integration of digital services**: university counseling centers may adopt a professionally moderated, integrated anonymous peer-support forum model.
2. **Promoting stigma-deconstruction campaigns**: campuses should use the narratives emerging from this analysis to design mental health education campaigns relevant to students' real conditions.
3. **Training digital peer counselors**: training student peer counselors to provide safe *directional support* and to respond quickly to indications of crisis in digital spaces.

Declarations

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Data Availability. *The anonymized qualitative dataset derived from public forum posts and comments is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.*

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