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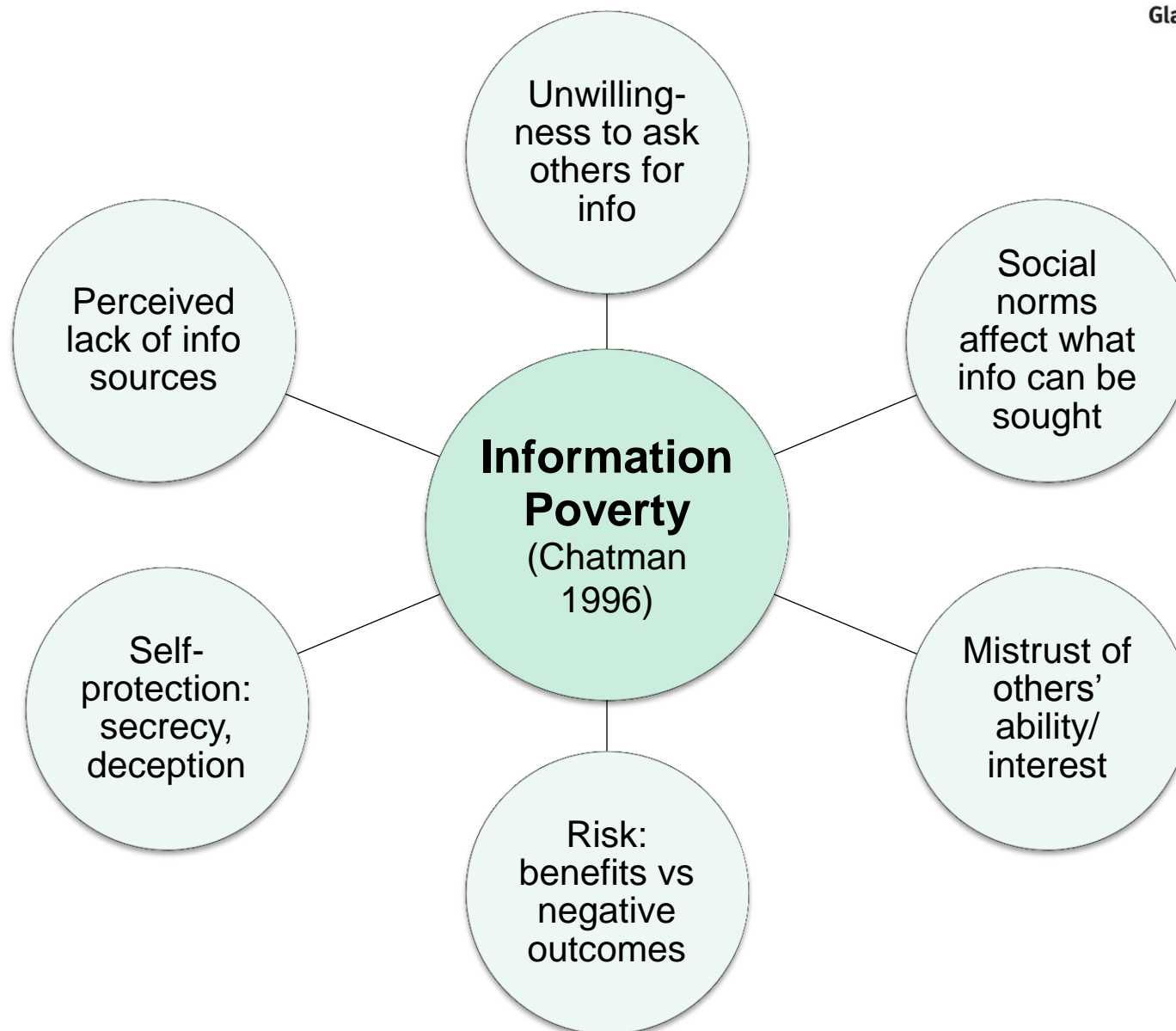
Escaping Information Poverty through Internet Newsgroups

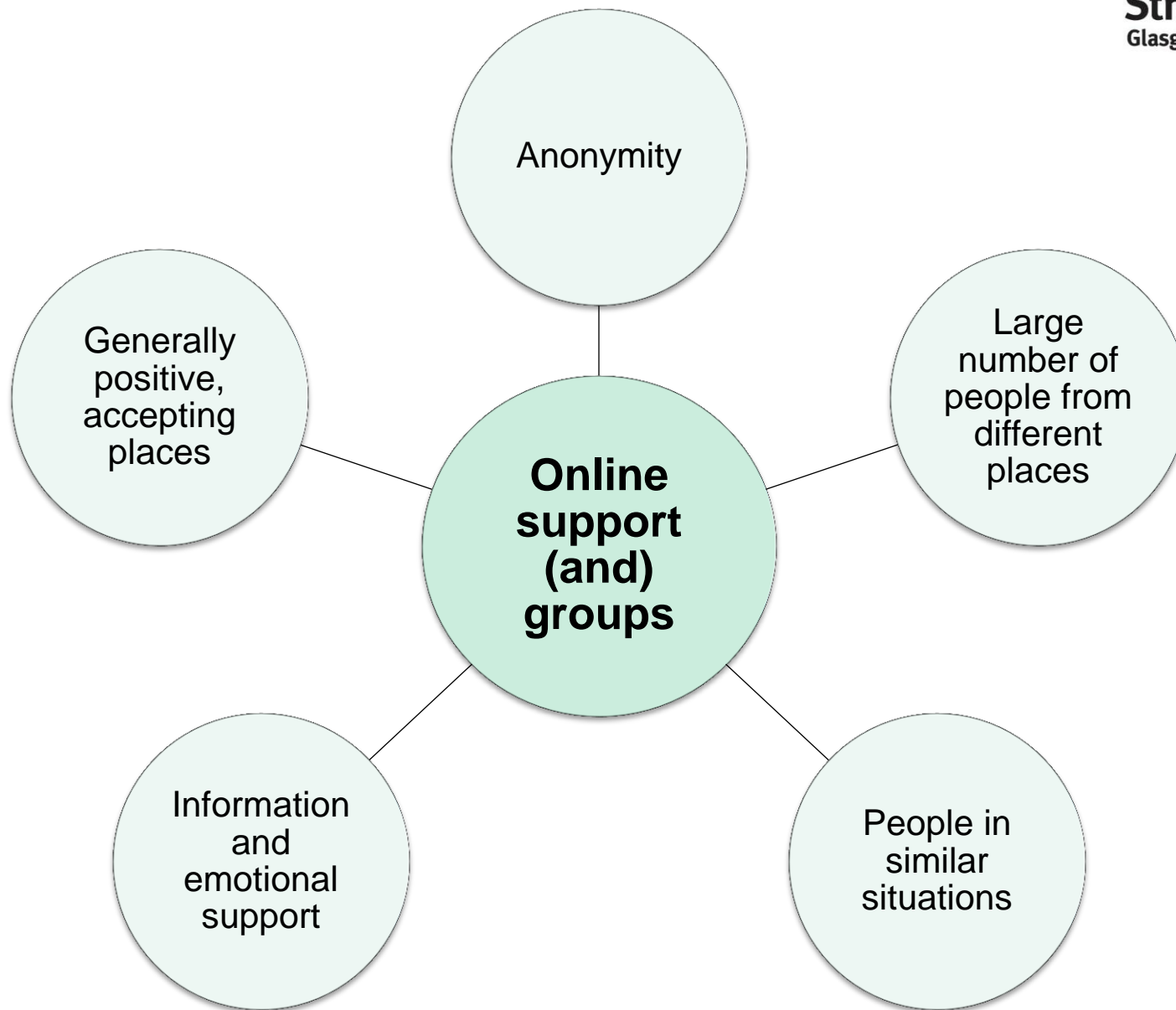
Laura Hasler and Ian Ruthven

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Outline

- Context
 - Information poverty, online support (and) groups
 - Our study and aims
- Data collection and coding for analysis
- Findings
- Conclusions





Our study

- Project: how information poverty manifests on the internet, via information sought and offered in news/discussion groups
- 3 research questions:
 - **What** information needs cause people to turn to the Internet?
 - **Who** are these information needs hidden from?
 - **Why** can these needs only be expressed online?
- Qualitative content analysis of 114 relevant posts from Usenet and other discussion groups, under 3 broad headings
- Overall contributions:
 - Gain insights into use of Internet groups as only source of help
 - Consider the theory of Information Poverty in a new setting

Data collection

- Posts from across Usenet and other discussion groups
- Google Groups: search groups and identify potential information poverty posts using key phrases
- Start with simple, explicit indicator of information poverty:
 - *I cannot tell anyone*
- Include semantic variants - other communication verbs, other (groups of) people:
 - *I cannot talk to my parents, I cannot ask my doctor*
- Include grammatical variants:
 - *could never, will not, can't, wont, wouldn't, etc.*
- Incorporate other relevant formulations/variations found

Data collection (2)

- Capture less explicit posts suggesting general lack of resources:
 - *don't know where to turn; nowhere else to go*
- Ethical considerations - potentially sensitive topics, 'private' messages:
 - Posts from groups >100 members
 - Anonymization by removal or replacement with meta information: [NAME], [ORGANISATION], [GROUP], etc.
- Sample for diversity
- Current analysis based on 114 posts

Coding approach

Both theory-informed and grounded codes, starting by predefining 3 broad top-level codes for our 3 RQs:

Topic-InfoNeed:

I tend to throw up my food after I eat a lot... I did where a size 14 now wear a size 10. I still think I am fat. I want to stop, but I dont know how... Please tell me what I can do... I know this is so bad for me but how can I stop???

Hidden From:

I can't tell anyone my secret; I cant tell my mom what I am doing

Why Online:

i cant talk to my family cause I dont want them to feel disappointed with me again. i cant let them down again after the support they have given me over the last couple of years.

Coding approach (2)

- Finer-grained sub-codes developed under each top-level code, based on the data
 - e.g. health resources, sexuality, friends, family, lack of understanding
- Themes/topics coded within each post
- Coding not restricted to specific syntactic units or number of instances
- 25 posts to initially develop coding approach

Findings: Topic

Topic-InfoNeed	No. (%)
Health-Condition	60 (52.6)
Relationships	25 (21.9)
Legal or illegal issues	6 (5.3)
Abuse	6 (5.3)
Grief-Death	6 (5.3)
Health-Resource	5 (4.4)
Substance use/abuse	5 (4.4)
Pregnancy	5 (4.4)
Sex	4 (3.5)
Sexuality	4 (3.5)
Harassment	4 (3.5)

- Information and support sought on topics crucial to posters' lives
- People hide needs that make them seem less able to cope than others (cf. Chatman 1996)
- Some topics are related to marginalised identities, often linked to Internet support
- Information sought to help self and others (family, friends)
- Needs expressed through self-disclosure/descriptions, specific requests and questions

Topic

Health-Condition - wide range of mental/physical health issues; Different aspects: treatment, symptoms, medication, hiding behaviour, general coping

Relationships - issues with parents, partners, potential partners, friends; Relating to break ups, trust, divorce, finding friends/partner

Legal or illegal issues - social security, shoplifting custody/alimony: info needs on specific points of law, general reassurance.

Grief-Death - death of a loved one; feeling that something is wrong because they can't get over it: *I feel so stupid, that I still feel this way 15 years later, but it doesn't seem to get any better*

Sexuality - a need for general support/advice due to feeling lost: *I feel really alone and scared of who I think I might be... I don't know what to do*

Findings: Hidden From

Hidden-From	No. (%)	Info needs hidden
Parents	44 (38.6)	All topics; most often health conditions, relationships, grief-death, sexuality, abuse, pregnancy, sex, harassment
Family	28 (24.6)	Health conditions, health resources, relationships, grief-death
Everyone	23 (20.2)	Pregnancy, relationships, abuse, health conditions, sex
Friends	17 (14.9)	Substance use/abuse, grief-death, relationships, health conditions
Health/Social care professionals	15 (13.2)	Health conditions, substance use/abuse; also pregnancy, legal or illegal issues, relationships
Partner	5 (4.2)	Pregnancy, substance use/abuse
Unspecified	11 (9.6)	Legal or illegal issues, health conditions, substance use/abuse, grief-death

Hidden From

Partner - information needs around support during pregnancy; poster's own unacceptable views, partner unsupportive of emotional side

Unspecified - generic expressions of not knowing where to go for help with a particular issue; posters do not seem to have any sources of support at all:

I just don't know where to turn now. Sometimes I think that maybe it would be better just to leave this earth!

- Posters often hide information needs from those closest to them and will not approach 'outsiders' (cf. Chatman 1996)
- Posters may not mention all sources, but mentioning the ones they do may suggest these are potentially the most useful

Findings: Why Online

Why-Online	No. (%)
Lack of understanding or support	36 (31.6)
Don't know where else to go	32 (28.1)
Seeking similar experiences	23 (20.2)
Other sources unhelpful/exhausted	21 (18.4)
Negative reaction	20 (17.5)
Negative effect	20 (17.5)
Additional source	18 (15.8)
Intermediate step	13 (11.4)
Unspecified	11 (9.6)

Related to **information poverty**:

- Perceived lack of sources
- Hiding needs due to potential negative consequences (risk)
- Mistrust of others' ability to give useful/relevant information
- Not an absolute situation → spectrum (selected new info)

Related to **online support**:

- Seeking others in similar situations
- **But** embarrassment, anonymity not often specified as reasons

Why Online

Lack of understanding or support - a perceived or actual lack of support :

Cant talk to my mum coz she'll just say Im being a drama queen, She doesnt understand (health condition)

Don't know where else to go - most common with unspecified sources (almost all):

I am totally new to this. I've never posted anything. But..I don't know where to turn (legal or illegal issues)

Seeking similar experiences - linked to Lack of understanding/ support (almost 1/2):

My fiancée says I can talk to him about it, but he has never been in the situation..so he really cannot be there totally (abuse)

Why Online

Other sources unhelpful/exhausted - sources tried in past and no longer any use:

I've called the police and they won't do anything because he doesn't abuse me (relationships, substance use and abuse)

Negative reaction of others - disappointment, causing fights, ruining relationships, often a more 'physical' reaction:

I cant tell anybody that cos... I will be locked up again in a mental place (health condition)

Negative effect on others - to protect others rather than themselves:

I cannot talk to my wife, she has major post partum depression to deal with (substance use and abuse)

Why Online

Additional source - other sources (health/social care profs, friends, partners) are effective, but posters still feel the need to talk in the newsgroup; suggests a spectrum of information poverty:

Friends can only do so much. Then at night. They go home. And again I'm left with emptiness (relationships)

Intermediate step - group used to find information on how to talk to others, usually health/social care professionals, parents, friends:

i would just like to talk to someone, group, counsellor etc, i just dont know where to start (grief/death)

Unspecified

I read how you and other people always say "tell your friends, parents, counsulors at school" but I CANT I just cant, please trust me on this one I cant tell anybody, please, believe me (health condition)

Conclusions

- Newsgroups and discussion groups do provide a means of expression for those who feel they have no local support available
- Gained insights into how and why people use these groups for issues crucial to their everyday lives
- Findings so far:
 - Topics/info needs: health conditions, relationships
 - Hidden from: parents, family, 'everyone'
 - Why online: lack of support or understanding, don't know where else to go
- Provides support for most aspects of information poverty in a new setting and relates to other work on online support groups

Thank you

Questions?