

Discovering the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of an Irish online support group throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

When masses of people become aware of life changing events panic can set in for many and support is required. In the early months of 2020 the Covid-19 began and the virus spread around the world in a rapid time. Many people sought out support so that they could feel better and adapt their lives to the new form of daily living. These are the realities of what occurred throughout the world in 2020 and were observed within the online Facebook group entitled the Irish Self Isolation Support group. This paper seeks to establish the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of an Irish online support group throughout the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. The members of the group are all adults and come from all over Ireland. In all, there are nearly 3,442 members of the group and the members came from 32 different counties. By learning from the experiences of this online support group other online support groups can plan to improve their practices to help others around the world when times of unprecedented global challenges occur and peoples' daily lives are suddenly altered. The results of this study from the research within the Facebook group show that although the majority of participants in the group were very positive and supportive of all other group members throughout the early years of the pandemic they also became disinterested in supporting others online once vaccines became available to the general public in most developed countries. However, some friendships were made throughout the pandemic within the group and remain to this day.

Keywords: social support, Irish online support group, Covid-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 struck the world in 2020 it shocked the world's population and made many people panic and think and act irrationally as a result. People excessively purchased groceries to stock up their homes as the reality of lockdowns became apparent across the world (Leung, et al., 2021). Governments were not prepared for the eventuality that all of a sudden people would not work normally in their work places and children would not attend school. It became clear that people needed some form of support but as the virus was said to transfer from person to person via the simple act of breathing this support was best utilised in an online space (Wilson, Corbett, and Tovey, 2020).

Once the Irish self isolation support group was formed thousands of people joined the online group on Facebook. From there the remit of providing people with positivity and support was put into place. This paper looks at how the participants in that group sought support throughout the Covid-19 pandemic and then how their needs altered as time went on.

The leadership of the group made it clear from the beginning that the group was there to provide positive support to all members of the group. Initially, the group was a closed group on Facebook and then when the number of new members waned it was turned into a private group to facilitate the privacy of group members.

The creator of the group was well aware of the global issues that Covid-19 was creating. For many weeks before the formation of the group he had been following the news stories on television and online about how the virus was spreading throughout Asia. When the virus eventually hit mainland Europe he decided to start the online group to help provide positivity and support for all that were forced to self isolate, choose to stay away from crowds, or just required support from others in an unusual time for the world.

The group quickly became a popular online group for those seeking support from the Covid-19 pandemic. At the height of the pandemic there was 3,442 members in the group and the members came from 32 different counties. Early on and due to the rapid growth of members the group leader (who is also the author of this paper) knew he needed other leaders in the group to support the masses of people that were joining daily. With that in mind he contacted three people that he already knew from real life that were competent leaders of people. These three people became group administrators and had a greater degree of responsibility assigned to them in

running the online group other than the ordinary group members. All group leaders were residing in Galway, Ireland where the group was created from.

One of these administrators was a multi award winning charity executive who had led many projects featuring many people throughout the previous years. Another was a highly experienced post primary teacher and sports coach who had played at the highest level of elite adult sport in Ireland. The final member of the administration team had worked in a management capacity in one of the biggest restaurant franchises in Ireland for many years and was a skilled Facebook group leader, as they were an administrator for other popular online groups also.

METHODS

In order to understand the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of the Irish Self Isolation Support group, the leader had to study the media and understand the facts of the Covid-19 pandemic. From there he deduced the best sources of information to choose to share with the online group and to communicate to the group to always seek out good and reputable sources of information for themselves and other group members to feel adequately supported.

Initially, the leader offered a small group of members to meet from a safe and socially distanced area outside for some exercises as all of the gymnasiums and official team and exercise groups were closing down around Ireland. However, this was abruptly cancelled when a full lockdown hit Ireland.

From there, the leaders of the group shared third-party information about the virus and helpful tips on how to adapt their lives to the new way of living around the Covid-19 virus.

The leader of the group asked several other group members to provide support by way of sharing their expertise with the group members. He did this by texting those he knew from real life before the group had begun. Skills such as book reviews, storytelling, singing, teaching, mindfulness, and poetry reading were offered to the group's members.

Daily distractions from the inconsistency of a new way of living were employed so to get people communicating about topics that were interesting and entertaining without being directly linked to the overall news updates on the virus.

Another tactic that was employed by the leader was to introduce humour into the group to lighten the already tense atmosphere that was building regarding the pandemic online (Loomba, et al; 2021).

Once the leader found that the group members were self-reporting unwelcome posts within the group that was lacking positivity and were unsupportive to the majority he began to ask group members about their needs within the group. He did this to provide a better and more sustainable way of providing good quality posting within the group. This was done utilising Facebook surveys.

Finally, the leader asked the group if they wanted to meet once the vaccines have been administered to the vast majority in the group's hosting city of Galway, and the rest of the country of Ireland.

The group was created on the 12th of March, 2020. When people joined the group they would see in the group's introduction that it was a space for online social support of those that are either interested, worried, or seeking support whilst deciding to or being forced to self-isolate as a result of the Covid-19 (Corona Virus) around the world. The group said it was extending the traditional Irish welcome ('céadmíle fáilte' in the Irish language) to all who wished to join. It communicated that all were welcome whether they were seeking support, were in unofficial or official quarantine, or were just wanting to meet new people around Ireland. It was made known from the beginning to the group that everyone is welcome to the online space so long as they were supportive, positive, and open to discussing and sharing information, not just about the virus, but about all ups and downs in life.

The group declared that it rejected negativity, bullying, and any other form of misguided information. It made a point to mention that spamming and people trying to post stuff and seek followers on their page or business offers were also unwelcome. It welcomed those that felt they could help and give good supportive digital material to the group members. It clarified who the group creator was and that all correspondence ought to be sent to that person's direct message for them to decide on any digital material being used to support others in the group. From there, he let it be known that he would decide on specific people and posts in the 'events' area of the group.

The group was described as a space to inform and support people and that it would be as upbeat as possible given the nature of the issues that everyone had to face. It invited people to post, share, like, and comment within the groups to respect everyone's individual opinions and know that everyone should be there to support themselves and others.

There were rules outlined in the group which was made known to all new members in the group. These stated that being part of this group required mutual trust.

It said that authentic and expressive discussions were welcome in the group but to be aware that they may also be sensitive to sharing or being viewed by others. Members were also asked to be kind and courteous and treat everyone with respect. It acknowledged that healthy debates are natural, but kindness was required. The group strictly said that there were to be no promotions or spam and that self-promotion and irrelevant links were not

allowed. Also, no hate speech or bullying was permitted, and degrading comments about things such as race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender, or identity would not be tolerated.

The researcher used both quantitative and qualitative methods to research the group. By asking a series of survey questions with multiple-choice answers he was able to deduce some data from the group members. The resulting comments which featured postings, shares, and likes represented the qualitative discussion regarding the members' reactions to the topics being posted.

RESULTS

The results from the Irish Self Isolation Support group which aimed to discover the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of an international online support group throughout the Covid-19 pandemic were that:

On the opening day of the group on the 12th of March, 2020 the group members were asked how can self-isolation benefit a person. This was a multiple-choice question with three options given to answer. They were 'self love', 'empathy', or 'self love and empathy'. In all 124 people voted on this. From those that partook in this survey, 90% (n=112) of participants chose 'self love and empathy' as their answer whereas 4% (n=5) chose 'self love', and 6% (n=7) chose 'empathy'.

As a result of this survey conversation occurred in the group. Comments included 'My doctor told me yesterday not to go outside as I am immune compromised.' and 'I am after having double pneumonia last year.' and questions such as 'Is it true that we are heading towards complete lockdown in the next two days, does anybody know?'.

There were also observations by group members on what self-isolation was for them and how it would affect people in general, such as 'In normal conditions, self-isolation doesn't have any benefit to us because our nature like human beings is a social one. But in emergency cases like this particular one with Covid-19 the benefits are obvious' and 'There are no benefits to self-isolation. It causes loneliness and depression. However, that being said in this case the only benefit is health.' Other comments of note stated that 'We need to be responsible for ourselves and care for the most vulnerable' and that 'It's been more useful to have social networking now than ever. I'm glad we have that. My granddaughter would be lonely without FaceTime with her friends as all the usual play dates aren't happening and finally, 'One can find a lot about themselves in isolation. Hidden talents. Resolve inner conflict. There are a lot of positives in self-isolation.'

In the opening week of the group, many people posted supportive comments, memes, images, videos, and links to the group. However, many were religious. As a result, some members of the group took offense to this due to them coming from a different religious belief. As a result, the author posted a survey to allow all members to become aware of all of the members' religious beliefs and to understand their reason for posting what they were posting.

From there, he surveyed the group to feel free to express what their religious belief was (if any) to provide support for others. The results from 212 respondents showed that 46% (n=98) were Roman Catholic. Of the remaining group respondents 10% (n=21) reported being atheists, 5% (n=11) said they did not have a religion, 3% (n=6) were Christian and 3% were pagan (n=6). There was 1% (n=2) each for Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of Ireland, and Presbyterians. Also, a further 25% (n= 53) said they were 'not bothered' by religious belief. The remaining percentages (4%, n=9) did not want to state their religious belief.

In response, there were various comments in the group. Those that proved to be most popular and received ten 'likes' each stated that 'I'm a Baptist minister, and I am not at all bothered by anyone posting their thoughts and prayers for me, regardless of their religion (or non-religion). I fully appreciate their thoughtfulness and concern. That's what this group is all about, supporting each other the best way we can. And I will be happy to pray for anyone who wants it. Just let me know so stay safe and sane, everyone!' and 'It does not matter what religion we are as we are here to support each other. I have no problem with my Catholic/ Muslim friends posting prayers and quotes if its helping them. Whatever works.'

On the 21st of March 2020, the group creator surveyed the members of the group about how self-isolation was affecting them. There were 377 votes to this survey. There were a variety of answers to the survey with over half (52%, n=196) stating that they accepted the things they cannot change. A further 14% (n=53) said they were learning new things, 9% (n=34) felt they had too much time to themselves and it was irritating them, 6% (n=23) said they missed hanging out with their friends. Almost one-twentieth (4%, n=15) choose that they were happy as their family were nice to be around, and a further 4% (n=15) were happily busy. There were 2% (n=8) who were heartbroken and another 2% (n=8) who were bored. The remaining percentages were spread out over a variety of both positive and negative choices in response to being asked how self-isolation was affecting them. Comments on this survey stated thankfulness for the group and the support that it was providing them and others in the group. One such woman commented that 'I am actually thanking God for this site and social media which allows me to be in touch with many and stay safe and take good care all.' A man posted that 'I'm terrified and trying to cope. I am diabetic with 2 amputations so far, 2 sepsis, and other co-morbidities. I also suffer from mental health problems. In response, a woman posted 'That is a lot to be coping with at the best of times, I imagine, never mind with this kind of crisis. There seem to be so many folks with vulnerabilities who are

speaking out about them at the moment, which is good for public awareness, I think. All of this makes the arguments in favour of social distancing and staying home so very clear. Will be keeping you in my thoughts and sending wishes for wellness and safety through this challenging time.' Another poster said 'Stay in touch with family and friends. Everyone feels lonely and helpless at times, reach out to others, if we help each other it is the best way to deal with this journey'. Another noted that it is good to 'Get into a routine, listen to music or whatever you enjoy, read, sing, exercise, eat healthily, pray, talk to people, stay safe and try and help someone every day. Spread love, and encourage young people to understand why we must stay apart to help others. Share a smile if you can'.

Almost two years after the creation of the group on the 21st of January 2022, the then Taoiseach of Ireland Micháel Martin announced that there was final end to almost all Covid-19 restrictions and that people ought to return to normal (Horgan-Jones, McQuinn, and Clarke, 2022). After 22 months of experiencing lockdowns and abnormal working and social living, the group dynamic had changed. By the 11th of February, 2021 90% of the Irish adult population was fully vaccinated (Gov.ie, 2023) and so from there many people in the group did not continue to partake in the supportive discussion.

On the 10th of March 2021, the author announced that the group would soon be a year old. In order to compare the feelings of the group he surveyed the group again on how self-isolation can help a person. He felt this would be interesting, given most of the group had now been through a series of lockdowns and had experienced the effects of Covid-19, and had been forced to isolate for some days. To this new survey, there were 47 responses to this question. One response noted that 'This group has been a lifeline for so many so thank you for the foresight to set it up and helping us stay connected, and make new friends'. Others stated that 'Wow...a year. My God. Fair play to you for setting up the group. Wonderful foresight and generosity by you. Thank you.', and 'Well done!!! Thank you for having the insight to set this group up. I can't believe it's a year.'. Another stated 'Thank you for starting this page...it's been of great comfort and assistance to many people' and 'One year, who'd have thought it, lesson learned, time passes no matter what you're up to, it passes at its own pace, so however I feel I need to accept that and own it. Thank you for starting this group it's nice to be part of something that's full of positivity, love, and best wishes to all.' And 'I have not been a member for too long but oh how I love all the words of encouragement even if we do not know each other I feel as though we do. So glad that you recovered. There is hope at the end of each day and as we press on and keep each other in our prayers we can carry on with the help of our Lord!' There were no negative messages to this survey.

On the 21st of September 2021 the group leader went on a live video with the title 'The So-Called Endemic is on the way on October 22nd, 2021' (BBC (2021)). He asked if people were ready for it and how does it make them feel. Also, he requested if people wanted an organised night out to socialise together, to meet one another or to have a get-together in real life. As a result, there were a lot of positive comments.

On June 17th, 2022 the group leader again posted in the group to see if people wanted to meet others in the group as he would organise a social gathering. There were only two people interested from the thousands in the group.

Once such comment stated that 'Thank you. I met the lovely x (name of group member) at the Mary Coughlan concert. Thanks to you. Some day soon maybe a few of us could meet up. X' and another responded by saying 'Yes meet up with wonderful people and make new friends.' Another wrote 'Because of this group I have a cuppa live on messenger every 2 week and we can chat for a hour!'. Other opinions were 'I have mixed feelings about opening up - I won't be queuing up for anywhere.' I do think across the globe we are all now a little more kind, caring to each other and have compassion too'.

DISCUSSION

The 3,342 members of the Irish Isolation Support group expressed their feelings well throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author was confident that he discovered the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of the online support group throughout the duration the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As 90% (n=112) of participants choose 'self love and empathy' as to how self-isolation could benefit a person it was clear that the intentions of the group members were to help not only themselves but the needs of other people throughout the pandemic's duration. This voiced their initial needs and willingness to be open to other people's feelings too. Although there was an acknowledgment that self-isolation can cause negative effects to them such as loneliness, boredom, and a lack of motivation the respondents did show that their reason for doing it was for their good and the good of others too.

It was also apparent that the opening weeks of the first lockdown irritated a lot of people within the group. While many people were posting supportive posts and messages to others they were also expressing their religious beliefs throughout many of these messages and this made many other members became agitated and sometimes angry with references to certain religious figures not being what they joined the group for. Direct messages of complaint were given to the moderators and flagging of posts within the group became popular among ordinary members who felt these posts should not be allowed. However, once a survey was conducted

giving everyone their say on religious beliefs and stating that there needed to be a respectful posting acknowledging that not every other person in the group was interested in religious posting this calmed the group members. Even after this posting some members continued to post supportive posts with religious phrases, words, and images yet there were no further complaints to the moderators or posts flagged for the attention of moderators regarding religious opinions again within the group.

When the respondents of the group were asked after only a few weeks of the first lockdown how self-isolation was affecting them 74% (n=2547) stated that it was a positive experience for them with a variety of answers including that they accepted it as they could not change it, that they were learning new things, that they were happy as their family was nice to be around, and a further 4% (n=15) who were happily busy.

When the same question was asked to group members a year later, there were only 47 responses to the same question in comparison to the 124 responses a year before. This showed that members had lost interest in being locked down and a willingness to express their views about having to self-isolate. However, it was clear that those that did respond felt supported by the group as it gave them comfort and assistance throughout a series of lockdowns. Notably, there were no negative responses to this question.

When the group leader went on a live video within the group and asked viewers to comment on their opinions about there being an end to the pandemic in September of 2021 and how this made them feel people they were generally positive and they were happy to commit to a night of public celebration in the coming time. Yet by the following June, only two people were interested in meeting up. This again showed that people's willingness to speak about the pandemic had decreased towards the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022 and signaled that despite them offering positive support online to others within the group throughout the first two years of the group they were not interested in general to make real-life friends with a member of the group. Despite this, there were a couple of real-life friendships mentioned in the comments proving that it is possible for online support groups such as this to allow people to become real-life friends.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a huge life event for many within the Irish Isolation Support group and they expressed their need for connection with others within the group, and their postings of funny memes, and willingness to participate in quizzes and games within the group were appreciated in their willingness to participate in the group lessened substantially in early 2022. This was due to a couple of factors. Firstly, the former Irish prime minister Micháel Martin allowed many services and public life to be opened up to people again and also owing to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of that year (United Nations, 2022). Once these two things occurred by the end of Spring the group's interaction decreased substantially.

Overall people expressed their needs within the first two years of the pandemic to the leaders of the group either by way of private messages or through responding to surveys within the group. They supported others within the group and used the group as a way to help others too. This was primarily shown when members wanted a Christmas buddy scheme to help those alone for Christmas 2020 when there was great support by group members when there was a call within the group to help elderly people with their grocery shopping in the early months of 2020.

In conclusion, this paper successfully discovered the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of an Irish online support group throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first two years of the group members of the group appreciated and gave online support to one another. Their needs throughout the time were clear as they wanted to support, online conversation, education, and competition through the form of quizzes and shared posting and entertainment to lighten the mood by way of posting funny jokes and stories.

However, in general, the group members were not interested in deepening online interactions and forming short-term or long-term friendships in real life. Although this study was an excellent window into the perceived social support, needs, and friendships of Irish people throughout the first two years of the Covid-19 pandemic it did not include many offline interactions of people, and in general postings within the group did not illustrate people body language or tone of voice when expressing their opinions.

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