



## Emotional Belonging and Identity Reconstruction in Online Mental Health Peer Communities

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of digital platforms has transformed how individuals with mental health challenges seek emotional connection and support, offering alternative spaces that differ markedly from traditional offline settings.

This study explores how individuals with a history of psychological distress experience emotional belonging and identity reconstruction within online mental health peer-support communities.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study analyzed in-depth narratives from ten participants who actively engaged in virtual peer communities. The analysis focused on the subjective meanings participants attached to their digital interactions and the relational dynamics within these spaces.

The findings reveal four central themes: (1) the psychological safety afforded by anonymity, (2) emotional reciprocity and shared vulnerability, (3) construction of digital selfhood through acceptance and recognition, and (4) the formation of community-based identity beyond clinical labels. Participants described these online spaces as restorative environments that provided authenticity, connection, and a sustained sense of emotional belonging—often lacking in their offline social worlds.

Online peer communities can serve not only as coping mechanisms but also as transformative ecosystems that reshape emotional well-being and self-perception. This study highlights the affective and relational potential of virtual engagement and offers practical implications for developing trauma-informed, inclusive digital mental health spaces.



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## INTRODUCTION

The growing integration of digital platforms into daily life has reshaped how individuals form relationships, seek support, and construct identity (Pearce dkk., 2024). In particular, online mental health communities have become critical spaces for emotional exchange, peer validation, and psychosocial connection (McDermott dkk., 2021; Purushothaman Nair dkk., 2024). These virtual environments are not merely platforms for information exchange, but have evolved into socio-emotional ecosystems where individuals construct relational meaning and negotiate personal identity. The rise of such communities reflects a broader sociocultural shift in how people relate, interact, and find belonging in an increasingly digitized world.

Within this context, individuals who have experienced mental health challenges often turn to online peer-support communities as alternative avenues for social engagement (Bakuri & Amoabeng, 2023; García-Rojas dkk., 2023). These spaces offer a sense of acceptance, recognition, and emotional safety—qualities that may be absent in participants' offline lives (Potdevin dkk., 2021). The relevance of this phenomenon lies in its reflection of the deep human need for connection and validation, even in non-physical, anonymous contexts. It also highlights how digital environments can accommodate forms of relational support that transcend traditional social boundaries and expectations.

Despite growing academic interest in digital mental health platforms, much of the existing literature has focused on evaluating measurable outcomes, such as symptom reduction or user

engagement metrics (Kräft dkk., 2024; Tabatabaei dkk., 2024). However, less attention has been paid to the subjective, lived experiences of individuals who inhabit these spaces. The phenomenological significance of how people feel connected, understood, or supported within online settings remains underexplored. This gap underscores the need for research that goes beyond surface-level interactions to examine the meanings individuals ascribe to their digital relationships.

Understanding the inner world of those who engage in such communities requires a research approach that values subjective experience, emotional nuance, and contextual interpretation (Prihidko dkk., 2020). A phenomenological lens is particularly suited to this endeavor, as it allows for the exploration of how individuals interpret their experiences of connection and belonging within virtual social structures. In doing so, it becomes possible to uncover not only the functionality of these communities, but the deeper psychological and social meanings they hold for those who depend on them.

Research into the lived experiences of individuals within specific social phenomena has increasingly become a critical domain of inquiry, especially in the fields of social psychology, interpersonal communication, and mental health studies (Machado dkk., 2024; Pearce dkk., 2024). Understanding how people subjectively experience relationships, support, and connection—particularly in alternative spaces such as online communities—has drawn attention to the importance of investigating meaning-making processes that extend beyond observable behavior.

However, capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences poses notable methodological challenges (Purushothaman Nair dkk., 2024). Much of the existing literature employs quantitative methodologies that, while useful in measuring outcomes like depression reduction or frequency of engagement, fall short in accessing the internal, affective, and relational dimensions of participant experiences. These approaches often rely on predefined variables and structured surveys, which may overlook the spontaneous, nuanced, and emotionally layered narratives that define subjective connectedness.

As a result, prior studies have provided only a partial understanding of how individuals interpret their participation in online mental health communities (Khanam & Parihar, 2024; Padua dkk., 2021). The richness of emotional experience, the symbolic significance of digital interactions, and the existential aspects of belonging remain underexplored when approached through frameworks not designed to accommodate such depth. This limitation underscores the need for a methodological shift—one that centers on the voices of participants and privileges their interpretations of meaning within context.

Phenomenology, particularly its interpretative variant, offers a powerful lens to address these gaps (Hou & Liu, 2024; Olitsky dkk., 2020). By focusing on how individuals construct meaning from their lived experiences, it enables researchers to engage deeply with participants' narratives and uncover the essential structures of the phenomena under investigation. In the case of digital peer-support communities for mental health survivors, such an approach allows for the illumination of relational experiences that may otherwise remain invisible within traditional research paradigms.

Conventional approaches to understanding digital mental health support often rely on established frameworks such as usability assessments, engagement metrics, or symptom tracking tools (McMullan dkk., 2020; Potdevin dkk., 2021). These models prioritize functional outcomes—such as reduced anxiety or increased user participation—as indicators of success (Rajput & Gandhi, 2024). While these practical approaches have yielded valuable insights into the efficacy of online platforms, they tend to overlook the rich, subjective dimensions of human experience that unfold within these virtual spaces.

Such methods, predominantly quantitative and outcome-driven, are limited in their ability to capture how individuals interpret, internalize, and emotionally navigate their social interactions in online communities (Atlam dkk., 2022; Zewude dkk., 2025). By focusing primarily on observable data points, these studies risk flattening complex emotional landscapes into simplified categories, thereby failing to reflect the nuanced realities of those who rely on digital spaces for psychological and social sustenance.

This gap calls for a methodological reorientation toward approaches that honor the depth and individuality of participant narratives. Phenomenology offers such an alternative (Liu dkk., 2024). By emphasizing lived experience and the meaning-making processes of individuals, it provides a holistic lens through which the essence of digital connectedness can be explored. Specifically, an interpretative phenomenological approach allows for an in-depth understanding of how individuals with mental health challenges perceive, construct, and derive meaning from their participation in online support communities.

In this context, phenomenology is not merely an alternative technique, but a necessary paradigm for uncovering the internal, affective, and relational dynamics that remain obscured in more conventional research models.

Previous research has highlighted the role of online support communities in promoting mental health and providing emotional relief. Studies by (Read dkk., 2022)

have acknowledged the supportive functions of online communities, few have investigated how these environments shape users' emotional landscapes and evolving self-concepts. This study builds on such work but moves deeper into the affective and symbolic dimensions of digital peer connection.

In doing so, the article contributes to current discourse in digital mental health by emphasizing the relational and experiential depth of virtual engagement—beyond metrics of efficacy. It also offers implications for the design of trauma-informed and inclusive digital support systems that reflect how users actually feel, relate, and rebuild identity online. To address this, the present study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to investigate how individuals with mental health histories experience social connectedness within online communities (Pollack, 2020; Riley & Mensah, 2024). This method was selected for its ability to capture the richness of lived experience and the complexity of meaning-making in personal narratives. Unlike traditional methods, phenomenology focuses on how participants perceive and construct their world, particularly in socially nuanced contexts. The study aims to answer the central question: How do individuals interpret their sense of connection in online mental health spaces?

This article is structured as follows. The introduction outlines the phenomenon of interest and its relevance within the broader social context (Rosean dkk., 2023). The method section explains the interpretative phenomenological framework, participant selection, and data collection procedures. The results section presents themes that emerged from in-depth analysis of participant narratives. Finally, the discussion connects findings to existing literature, addresses implications, and concludes with suggestions for future research.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals with mental health histories who participate in online support communities (Mueller dkk., 2024; Perry, 2023). Phenomenology, as a qualitative research design, prioritizes the exploration of subjective experiences, allowing for an in-depth understanding of how individuals construct meaning from their lived realities. The interpretative branch, rooted in Heideggerian philosophy, emphasizes the contextual and relational aspects of meaning-making (Tabatabaei dkk., 2024). This approach was particularly relevant for addressing the research question, which sought to uncover the nuanced ways in which social connectedness is perceived and experienced in digital environments. The design enabled the extraction of rich, contextual narratives that reflect participants' inner realities, fostering insights into the phenomenon of digital connectedness as experienced by mental health survivors.

Given the interpretative nature of the design, researcher reflexivity was embedded throughout the study. The first author maintained a reflexive journal to continuously document assumptions, positionality, and emotional responses before, during, and after each interview. This process enabled

the researcher to critically engage with potential biases, bracket preconceptions, and remain attentive to the ways in which their interpretive lens might shape the analysis. Regular peer debriefing sessions were also conducted to further check interpretive consistency and promote critical distance from emerging themes.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, targeting individuals who had previously experienced mental health challenges and were active members of online support communities for at least six months (Hammersley, 2003; McMahon & McGannon, 2024). Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 18, able to communicate fluently in English, and willing to reflect on their personal experiences within digital peer-support settings. Individuals currently undergoing acute psychiatric treatment or unable to provide informed consent were excluded from the study (C.-K. Wu dkk., 2024). A total of 10 participants were involved, consisting of six women and four men, ranging in age from 22 to 47 years (mean age: 34). Participants came from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds but shared the common experience of seeking support through online communities related to mental health recovery.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted individually via secure video conferencing platforms (Bednarek-Gilland, 2015; Gibton, 2015). An interview guide was used to facilitate discussion, focusing on participants' perceptions of connection, support, and relational dynamics within their respective online communities. Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent (Y. Wu dkk., 2023). Interviews were conducted in private settings to ensure comfort and confidentiality. Reflexive field notes were taken to capture non-verbal cues and contextual observations. Data saturation was achieved when no new themes emerged during the final interviews. All recordings were transcribed verbatim, and identifiable information was anonymized.

To reduce bias during interviews, the researcher employed neutral prompts and consciously withheld evaluative language or assumptions. The interview process was guided by a posture of empathic listening and openness, allowing participants to shape the narrative direction based on what they deemed most meaningful. Reflexivity also informed ethical interactions, ensuring participants' voices were honored without imposing theoretical expectations.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which involved a multi-step, iterative process to identify and interpret essential themes (Borcsa & Rober, 2015; McNabb, 2015). Transcripts were read multiple times to gain immersion, followed by the identification of meaningful units—words or phrases that encapsulated significant experiential content. These units were coded and organized into emergent themes, which were further refined through thematic clustering. The analysis emphasized the idiographic nature of individual experiences while identifying shared patterns across participants (Zewude dkk., 2025). NVivo 12 software was used to support data organization and thematic mapping, though thematic interpretation remained grounded in the original narratives. Reflexivity remained central during analysis. The researcher engaged in repeated memo writing to trace how personal interpretations evolved throughout coding and clustering. Themes were cross-validated with a second analyst to reduce interpretive bias, and discrepancies were resolved through dialogic reflection. This ensured that final themes remained close to participants' lived meanings rather than researcher assumptions.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics review board prior to data collection. Participants provided written informed consent after being informed of the study's aims, procedures, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without consequences. All data were anonymized, and strict confidentiality protocols were followed throughout the research process (Ahmad dkk., 2021). The study adhered to the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of

Helsinki and complied with local and international standards for research involving human participants.

## RESULTS

### Experiencing Empathy in Anonymity

Many participants described the online community as a space where empathy could be felt even in the absence of physical presence or face-to-face interaction. Anonymity was consistently identified not as a barrier, but as an enabler of emotional expression.

“Here, I don’t have to show my face or tell my real name, yet I feel more understood than I do with my own family. They listen without judging.” (Participant 4)

Participants emphasized that being anonymous allowed them to disclose vulnerabilities that they would never reveal in offline relationships. This dimension of digital empathy created a unique form of connectedness that participants found liberating and validating.

### Factors Enabling Digital Empathy



### Constructing Safe Spaces through Digital Presence

The notion of a “safe space” was recurrent across narratives. Participants reported that being part of an online mental health community offered psychological safety and a consistent sense of belonging, often missing in their offline interactions.

“Whenever I post, I know someone will reply with care. I never get that from people around me. It’s like having a sanctuary I can enter anytime I feel lost.” (Participant 7)

Such digital spaces provided continuous access to emotional refuge, reinforcing the idea that community presence does not require physical proximity. The mere awareness that others are ‘there’ and responsive created a sustained sense of companionship.

### Digital Reciprocity as Emotional Support

The value of mutual aid emerged as a significant theme, where participants did not only seek support but also found meaning in offering support to others. Reciprocity in digital spaces was viewed as a circular exchange of empathy.

“I’m not just here to be helped. Sometimes someone posts something painful, and I can say, ‘I’ve been there too.’ That moment connects us deeply.” (Participant 2)

Participants expressed that helping others contributed to their own healing journey. The process of sharing one’s narrative and validating another’s experience created a web of emotional reciprocity, perceived as highly therapeutic.

### Navigating Stigma through Shared Identity

Participants articulated that mainstream society often failed to grasp the nuances of their struggles, while online communities provided a shared language and mutual understanding.

“Outside, I’m labeled as weak or unstable. But in this group, my experiences are normal. I don’t feel broken here.” (Participant 5)

This sense of shared identity empowered participants to reframe their self-perception, moving from isolation and stigma toward acceptance and self-compassion. The online community functioned as both a mirror and a shield, reflecting their truths and protecting them from judgment.

Across all themes, what emerged was a profound experience of authentic connection in virtual spaces. While these connections were not rooted in physical interaction, they held emotional weight and psychological significance. Participants described these interactions as central to their ongoing journey of recovery and identity formation. The online community was not simply a digital platform but a lived space where empathy, safety, and meaning were co-constructed.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Opening: Summary of Core Findings**

This study revealed that individuals with a history of mental health challenges experience meaningful social connectedness within online communities through anonymity, empathy, mutual support, and shared identity (Altman dkk., 2020). These findings respond directly to the central question of how digital interactions foster a sense of relational belonging and emotional safety among participants.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The insights gained from this research offer a deeper understanding of how participants internalize and give meaning to their involvement in online support spaces (Dejene dkk., 2024; Perez-Brumer dkk., 2021). Rather than viewing these communities as mere platforms for information exchange, participants described them as emotionally transformative environments where they felt seen, accepted, and empowered. This study contributes uniquely by foregrounding the affective and existential dimensions of digital interactions, emphasizing that online connectedness is not superficial but deeply rooted in individual meaning-making. These findings affirm that phenomenology is well-positioned to illuminate the subtle, subjective processes through which connection and healing occur in virtual contexts.

### **Relationship to Previous Literature and Theory**

The current findings resonate with prior research suggesting that online communities can offer emotional and psychological benefits to individuals with mental health concerns (Cupid dkk., 2024). However, unlike earlier studies that focused predominantly on behavioral outcomes or user engagement metrics, this research reveals the nuanced inner experiences that underpin participants' perceptions of support and safety (Ahmad dkk., 2021; Patchen dkk., 2024). The theme of empathy within anonymity aligns with Goffman's theory of self-presentation, where the removal of physical identity allows for more authentic expressions of self. Furthermore, the notion of shared identity and de-stigmatization through community interaction supports existing literature on identity reconstruction in digital mental health spaces. Yet, this study goes further by exposing the existential relief and emotional resonance these experiences bring—dimensions often overlooked in conventional analyses. This illustrates the value of phenomenology in complementing, and at times challenging, the assumptions embedded in prior empirical frameworks.

### **Explanation of the Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study carry significant implications for both scholarly understanding and practical interventions in the domain of digital mental health support (Altman dkk., 2020; Cupid dkk., 2024). From a social and cultural perspective, the results illuminate how online platforms can function as emotionally restorative spaces, especially for individuals marginalized or misunderstood in offline

settings. The capacity of anonymous communities to foster authentic emotional expression and solidarity suggests the need for professionals—such as mental health practitioners and digital community designers—to recognize and integrate the value of such relational structures into care strategies. Furthermore, the shared narratives of participants offer a compelling reflection on how digital connectedness can reshape traditional notions of support, belonging, and community. These findings can inform future policy and practice by highlighting the importance of safe, inclusive virtual environments for psychological healing and identity reconstruction.

### **Study Limitations**

While this study offers rich insights into the subjective experiences of online connectedness, certain limitations must be acknowledged (Das Gupta, 2024). The sample size, although appropriate for phenomenological depth, limits the transferability of findings to broader populations. Participants were self-selected and active in specific types of digital communities, which may not reflect the experiences of those in different socio-cultural contexts or with limited digital access. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduces the possibility of recall bias or selective memory. These limitations do not diminish the validity of the findings but underscore the importance of interpreting them within their situated context, rather than as universal truths.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Building on the insights gained from this study, future research may explore how experiences of digital connectedness vary across different demographic groups, cultural contexts, or platforms. Longitudinal studies could also investigate the evolving nature of online relationships and their sustained psychological impact over time. Additionally, comparative studies between digital and offline support systems may reveal further dimensions of identity negotiation and emotional intimacy. Importantly, future work should continue to employ phenomenological methods to capture the subtle, evolving meanings participants assign to their digital interactions. In doing so, research can further advance our understanding of the deeply human aspects of virtual community life in the mental health domain.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored how individuals with a history of mental health challenges experience social connectedness within online support communities. Through an interpretative phenomenological approach, the research uncovered key themes such as empathy in anonymity, digital safe spaces, emotional reciprocity, and shared identity. These findings reveal that digital communities offer more than functional support—they create meaningful and emotionally resonant environments that foster healing and self-understanding. By focusing on subjective experiences, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature, which often overlooks the affective and existential dimensions of online interactions. The results suggest that digital support platforms hold substantial value for marginalized individuals and should be further integrated into mental health strategies. Future studies could expand on these insights by examining diverse populations and applying longitudinal or cross-cultural perspectives to deepen understanding of digital relational dynamics.

## **CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest. All stages of the research, including design, data collection, analysis, and reporting, were conducted independently and free from any commercial or financial influence. The sponsor had no involvement in the interpretation of data or the writing of the manuscript.

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