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**Depression, the Internet, and Ethnography:
A Study of Online Support Forums and the Methodology
Used.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a
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Michael Andrew Hawkey

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Abstract

Depression is one of the more common forms of mental illness experienced by people around the world. It is an illness which affects both men and women alike and does not target specific ages or nationalities. Depression is also an illness many suffer in solitude, often unable to pinpoint what exactly is wrong, rather identifying it as a “darkness” or sense of “numbness”.

As we move into an age of growing technological changes, the Internet has become host to many forms of communities. These communities can be both modified versions of their offline original or whole new communities that did not exist to any great degree before the introduction of the internet. One such new form of online community are those designed for the support of peoples with depression and other mood disorders.

Because of this growth in online communities and anthropology’s tradition of researching and understanding different groups of people, it is only appropriate that, as a discipline, it also moves online alongside these new communities. To do this, traditional field methods need to be reassessed and new potential problems and ethical dilemmas resolved.

As online depression communities and internet ethnography are both relatively new fields of study, this thesis will examine the elements of both the online depression communities being studied, and the methods used in researching them.

The reason I chose to research this topic is because, although depression as a subject has been covered many times before, and online community research is growing, there have been few studies undertaken on the two combined. In undertaking such research, this study will be of use for both academia and the public mental health sector. Academically, it provides us with an additional study venturing into online

research and how to apply our tools within it. For the mental health sector, it provides an account as to how and why people with mental health issues deal with their problems, or at least begin to deal with them. This is important, as in the mental health sector many people with a mental illness may not reach out for help until in dire need. With the growth of online communities people may join earlier in their suffering and this knowledge could be of use for departments of mental health.

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Table of Contents

Title page	i
Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Figures	vii
Glossary of Terms and Acronyms	viii
Chapters	
1 Depression	1
A historical overview	2
Participant experiences and definitions	6
Medical definitions	12
Treatments	16
Summary	20
2 Aims, Methodology and Internet Ethnography	22
Aims	23
Methodology: Grounded theory	24
Positioning in the field	25
Place	25
Time	29
Live History	30
Ethical Issues	32
Entering the field	40
Summary	49

3	Sites and Participants	50
	Site Overview	51
	Community Laws	57
	My Sites and Participants	58
	Summary	65
4	Online Forums for Depression	67
	Why do People Use the Forums?	68
	Friendships and Social Networks	70
	Life Without the Forum?	72
	Disadvantages of the Forums	73
	Online/ Offline Relationship	77
	Are They Real Communities?	79
	Culture?	81
	Time Spent Online	84
	Summary	85
5	Language and the Internet	87
	Forms of Speech	89
	The Internets Family Tree	92
	Online Linguistics	95
	Summary	104
6	Conclusion	106
Appendices		
	Appendix One: Information sheet	115
	Appendix Two: Participants consent form	117
	Appendix Three: Interview schedule	118

Bibliography

Bibliography	119
Chapter Image Description and Bibliography	123

Figures

Figure 1. The cycle of depression	16
Figure 2. Interrelated circle of cognitive therapy	19

Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Avatar: In online circumstances, an avatar is a picture used on forums to individualise oneself and identify others by visually.

Bump: A term used when one moves their post up in the list on forums.

Caps: Shortened term for caps lock on a keyboard. Often used in context to tell someone to turn off caps lock as it indicates shouting online.

Cookies: Small information files held by websites on ones computer.

Cutting: The literal action of cutting oneself as a form of relief/escape from pain.

Dead site: An internet site which still exists on search engines, but no longer is in operation.

Emoticons: Icon emotion images used to express emotion.

Flame war: An online argument/ heated discussion.

Forum: An online website where people can have discussions.

Hits: The number of times a website has been viewed.

IP (Internet Protocol): The protocol used to route a data packet from its source to its destination.

LOL: Internet acronym meaning laughing out loud, or lots of laughs.

Lurker: Someone who looks through forums without identifying themselves.

Moderator: Someone who ensures forums operate smoothly.

PM: Private message system used on forums.

Post: To write a message on a forum.

Signature: In an online context, an identifying statement/image at the bottom of ones post.

Spam: An online term for unwanted advertising.

Text Chat: A form of internet language which mixes both phonics and numerals into normal text to produce a faster form of typing/communicating online.