Dissertation: "I thought asking the experts of the board first before turning at the unctuous salesmen." Requesting special field related advice and information on online communities

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1 Introduction

Today individuals can discuss and find information effortlessly online and get peer support and advice on various issues. The focus of my research is the use of the internet as a source of peer support in situations where people need information about a topic or situation related to a specialized field. The main objective of the study is to form a comprehensive picture of how requesting and receiving special field related information function on online discussions about heat pumps in Finland. Heat pumps are devices that can be used for heating and cooling apartments and other spaces. The reason for choosing heat pumps for the topic is its specialization and popularity as a topic of discussion on online communities. I examined how a person in need of information requests information from an online community and what kind of result the request produces.

Sharing information on online communities has been studied earlier in relation to various topics, also heat pumps (Steehouder 2002, Haataja/Perttula 2004, Hyysalo/Juntunen/Freeman 2013, Hyysalo/Juntunen/Martiskainen 2018). However, in several of these studies, the primary object of interest is something other than communication. Although requesting and giving advice has been studied a lot also in the area of computer-mediated communication studies, most of the research deals with health-related topics, and there is a research gap in internet pragmatics of advice-giving related to other topics than health (Morrow 2017: 674, 681). Moreover, pragmatic research on modern online discussion boards has been largely overshadowed by other platforms in research, and a systematic and comprehensive linguistic and especially pragmatic description of discussion boards has remained incomplete (Arendholz 2017: 125, 132 f.). In my research, I fill this gap by combining a community perspective with a detailed empirical analysis that combines discursive and pragmatic examination. Peer help online has mostly been studied from the point of view of the help giver (e. g. Constant/Sproull/Kiesler 1996: 120, Wasko/Faraj 2005, Chu 2009, Fang/Chiu 2009). My research, on the contrary, examines information retrieval and sharing from the perspective of the information requester. My research utilizes data in Finnish language and belonging to the Finnish cultural context, so it also complements research with a Finnish linguistic and cultural perspective.

2 Theoretical background, data and methods

My research is located in the field of specialized communication and online communication, where it represents communication related to the special field through online peer discussions. *Technical communication* is specialized communication, where the purpose is to get the user to act in a certain way and to achieve a certain goal, which can be, for example, assembling, installing or using a product (Walter 1996: 30). In this study, I examine technical communication, which takes place as user peer communication on a voluntary basis. From a

technical communication perspective, discussion boards can help users solve problems that they cannot solve with user documentation (Steehouder 2002: 491).

The data of the dissertation consists of 300 message threads about heat pumps that were manually collected from two Finnish discussion boards, Lampopumput.info (heatpumps.info) and Suomi24.fi (Finland24.fi). The total number of messages examined was more than six thousand (6,078). I chose two platforms that are central to the heat pump-related discussion and are popular, but different in nature. Lampopumput is Finland's largest discussion forum related to heat pumps. Suomi24 instead is a central platform in Finnish online discussions because of its long history and large number of users (e. g. Harju 2018: 59, 70). Lampopumput is a specialized forum for special field enthusiasts and experts, and Suomi24, on the other hand, is a general forum for almost all discussion topics. Lampopumput requires authors to register for the site, while on the Suomi24 forum it is possible to write messages completely anonymously. This offers the opportunity to examine what kind of connection the anonymous participation option has with how users communicate about the topic.

The methodological framework of the study is built on computer-mediated discourse analysis (CDMA) and pragmatics of computer-mediated communication. The subject of the analysis are the texts available online. CDMA can include the analysis of all kinds of online behavior based on empirical, textual observation (Herring 2004: 2). In this study, I use language-focused content analysis as part of CMDA (Herring 2004: 2–5). I use both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The goal is to create an overview of the phenomenon under study using quantitative methods and to deepen the understanding using qualitative methods. Non-randomness of the results was ensured by checking the results using statistical methods.

The classification framework of the data was formed in a dialogue between theory and data. In the first research phase, the opening messages were classified into different discussion themes and according to their communicative goal. The second research phase focused on those message threads (N=195) whose opening message aimed at obtaining information. I analyzed the structure of the messages, the means of expression, such as multimodal means (e. g. emoticons), politeness and humor used in the messages. I also looked at the number and distribution of responses and what kind of connection the various discussion themes and goals and other characteristics of the opening messages had with the number of responses they received. In the third research phase, I examined the entire message threads, whose opening message aimed at getting information. For this purpose, I used a smaller random sample of the data (40 message threads with 764 answers, 382 from both discussion boards). I classified the opening messages according to the directness of the information request, specificity of the problem or question raised in the message, and emotionality of the message. Finally, I looked at what kind of argumentation was used in the reply messages.

3 Findings

Based on the analysis, the main topics of discussion were the purchase process of products and services, installation and use of products, and general technical discussion. Of these, the purchase process of products and services, was the most discussed, and use of devices the second most discussed topic. In the open discussion board, opening messages related to a purchase decision and buying products were clearly more common than on the controlled discussion board. Open discussion board which offers the possibility to write anonymously may offer a lower threshold for discussing issues related to the purchase situation (cf. Savolainen 2001:

76–78). The user pool is also likely more heterogeneous and the forum can be more approachable than the specialized discussion board.

The main goals of the opening messages were getting information, giving information and stimulating discussion. Getting information was the most common goal of opening messages in the data. This is in line with previous studies (e. g. Arendholz 2013, Bakke 2019) which have found that the most common reason for starting a new message thread is to ask questions for information or advice. Opening messages that aimed at obtaining information were divided into requests for advice, factual questions, and requests for opinions, suggestions and experiences. The most common of these was a request for advice, which accounted for a fifth of all messages. Asking for advice and offering information were more common on the controlled discussion board, while expressing an opinion and asking for experiences were more common on the open discussion board.

The basic structural elements of the opening messages were information request, problem description, technical information, evaluation/justification and plan/proposed solution. All of these belong to an informational-expository schema, the transitions of which present and develop a solution to the problem (cf. Herring 1996: 85). In addition to these, the opening messages included interactive structural elements, which include greeting, preface, metacomment, showing activity, appeal to readers, politeness and signature. In my study I found, that opening messages with a greeting, compliment or meta-comment received more responses than on an average. All in all, the authors can use the optional structural elements to show that they respect and value the forum, the message readers, the respondents and their expertise and do not use the forum just as an "answering machine".

Requesting information was most often direct in the opening messages, although it is generally considered as greater threat to face than indirect requests. Expression of feelings was rare in opening messages. If feelings were described, they described frustration and irritation towards, for example, non-functioning technology. The most common multimodal means of communication in the data were emoticons and hyperlinks. Emoticons were used in about every tenth opening messages. Emoticons can strengthen positive speech acts or soften face-threatening speech acts, for example, requests (Derks et al. 2008: 386, Skovholt/Grønning/Kankaanranta 2014: 780). Hyperlinks used to refer to information sources relevant to the topic (cf. Stommel/Paulus/Atkins 2017: 59–61).

The use of humor in the opening messages was mainly reinforcing, i. e. building consensus and being polite. Only a few messages used subversive, questioning humor, and humor attacking other groups was not used at all. Humor types and methods used in reinforcing humor were funny figures of speech, idioms, personification of technology, self-irony and self-deprecation. Humor was often based on shared knowledge or experiences. The basis could be general cultural knowledge, knowledge related to a specialized field, or knowledge related to the discussion board's previous activity. The humor was often linked to the special field, so understanding it required some knowledge of the topic under discussion, and the goals of the humor also arose from the topic of the discussion. Using reinforcing humor shows goodwill and politeness towards the readers of the message, helps to build a common ground and to create a consensus. This is understandable when the goal is to get help or information, in which case giving a pleasant, sympathetic image of oneself is important. Humor was also used to some extent to emphasize one's own point of view. Subversive humor was used to question and criticize things. With the help of humor, a negative or critical message could be conveyed in a more acceptable form. For example, similes and irony were

used as types of subversive humor. On the controlled discussion board, the use of humor in opening messages aimed at obtaining information was more common than on the open discussion board.

Almost 40 % of the answer messages in the data were irrelevant. On the open discussion board, a larger proportion of the answers, even more than half, were irrelevant, while on the controlled forum only 22.5 %. The relevant reply messages were divided into advice, giving general information, sharing one's own experiences, opinions and questions. The most common of these was sharing one's own experiences, and almost as common was giving advice. Almost a third of the relevant answers in both discussion boards were descriptions of the writer's own experiences.

The writers used facts, own experiences, personal beliefs, other people's opinions and emotive appeals to support their claims on the answer messages. Personal beliefs were the most frequently used justification for claims on both discussion boards. The results are in line with previous studies which indicate that in digital communication environments, citizens' own experiences may be more convincing than the research-based justification presented by an expert in many situations, and they are also a very commonly used means of justifying claims in online discussions (Lehti/Kallio 2017, Lehti/Eronen-Valli 2018). On the specialized, controlled discussion board, the writers used more often factual information based on some information source and online information sources to justify the claims when compared to the open discussion board, where other people were used as a source of information more often. This indicates that on a controlled discussion board, people pay more attention to the justification of their claims and thereby also to their own reputation as a provider of reliable information.

A fixed online identity creates a pressure to develop this identity and function as a member of the online community. Membership of the community also brings with it obligations, for example, reciprocity and activity in the community: that you also give something to the community from which you have received help. In the open and anonymous discussions, on the other hand, there is more room for playful and entertaining, but also for sharp critical discussion, when the authors do not have to worry so much about personal sanctions.

4 Conclusion

Search for information online and how practical everyday technological problems are discussed is often a socially complex situation, the mechanisms of which this study sheds light on. My research contributes new information about requesting information and giving advice, and the appropriate form of the message in terms of achieving the goal of the communicator. In terms of digital communication and digital discourse analysis, my research brings new information about the digital discussion cultures and the role of anonymity in them. Compared to previous studies related to the same topics (cf. e. g. Steehouder 2002, Locher 2006, Kouper 2010, Arendholz 2013, Haasio 2015, Hyysalo/Juntunen/Martiskainen 2018), my research is multidimensional in nature: the research includes several perspectives, while previous studies have typically focused on one for examining a narrower perspective. A comparison of open and a controlled discussion boards has not been done before in a similar context. The study succeeds in describing the differences in two different types of data collected from two different sites in relation to many different factors. With my study, I have been able to bring out features and details from the both types of data that previous research has not been able to reach.

The reason for this is the perspective chosen in the study and research methods that have not been applied to same kind of data before.

The research offers both empirical and theoretical contribution to the research of specialized communication, digital discourse and interaction, as well as information acquisition. My research contributes a methodological and analytical framework, which can be used for other types of materials in the future. The results can also be applied to the research of information search and sharing via online communities in other subject areas, especially technical specialized fields, as well through other platforms than discussion boards, taking place in text-based digital interaction. Conducting comparative research, for example, on subjects related more purely to professions, hobbies or everyday life problems could create interesting aspects for further research. Other different types of platforms to which the classification of message types could be applied are, for example, WhatsApp and Facebook groups and Jodel.

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