Author's response to reviews

Title: A qualitative investigation of the impact of peer to peer online support for women living with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Editor,

Thank you very much for the opportunity to revise and resubmit our manuscript titled “A qualitative investigation of the impact of peer to peer online support for women living with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome”. We found the comments from both reviewers very helpful and have addressed each of them in our revised manuscript. In order to facilitate your review of our changes we have included below each of the points made by the reviewers and our response and summary of the changes made within the manuscript.

**Reviewer 1: Jodie Avery**

The aim of this study was to consider the experiences of women living with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome who access and participate in an online support group discussion forum dedicated to issues surrounding this condition.

**Minor Essential Revisions:**

**Abstract:**
I would have liked to have seen the number of participants specified in the abstract.

**Response:**
The abstract has been amended to include the number of participants.

**Background:**
Well written summary of the current state of knowledge.

**Methods:**
A description of the interview schedule and how this was developed should be included in the methodological description of this paper.

**Response:**
We have revised the manuscript to include a summary of the questions used to elicit the data presented in this study (see Box 1). Furthermore, we have clarified the fact that these questions were derived from previous literature. In addition, we have clarified that the moderators also endorsed the questions that were used.

Additionally, no comment as to whether the sample size was adequate to answer this question is included. It may be that 50 women was too large and no mention of theoretical saturation was made.

**Response:**
We have clarified in the manuscript that theoretical saturation had indeed occurred from the data generated by the sample.

**Results:**
It seemed after reading the results that one major theme that emerged from the positive aspects of using an OSG should have been that of "Empowerment". For example, the women were given confidence to better interact with health professionals, they were given information to make better informed choices. This is elucidated in the literature, but there is little mention of it here.

**Response:**
We have in fact substantially revised the introduction to include empowerment as our overall theoretical framework. Indeed, in our earlier drafts this was present but we removed it due to concerns over word count, but have since reintroduced it and amended the introduction and results accordingly. We very much agree with this comment and acknowledge that it enhances the overall quality of the manuscript and are delighted to see this reintroduced.

**Discussion:**
The limitations of the study should be included here.

**Response:**
Our apologies, this was a format issue and we have included the discussion of limitations in the discussion section and not the conclusion section as was previously the case.
Another limitation of this study is that the women included were already proactive about their health, and this is why they joined the forum. They were already “help seekers” in some form and this may bias results.

Response:
We agree that this is a potential important limitation and have included a short summary statement of this issue in the ‘limitations’ section in the discussion.

The number of participants in this study is totally adequate for a qualitative study, particularly if theoretical saturation is achieved. It would be better to verify the results of this study using a larger sample and quantitative methods, with questions informed by the results of this study. Additionally a different recruitment source of women with PCOS could be used such as members of a support group not based on online activities, thus non users could be included.

Response:
We have also included at the end of the limitations section, our thoughts with regards future research and have noted the need for large scale, quantitative work that can build upon the findings of the present study. We very much endorse the comments made by the reviewer and regard this as a most appropriate suggestion going forward.

Conclusion:
Are there any further implications of this research and what advice to policy makers do you have?

Response:
We have revised the manuscript in order to develop the implications of our findings and more importantly how health professionals may respond to this increasingly popular patient activity. In addition, we have noted the potential for online support groups to support those other than the patient but who may still be affected by PCOS (e.g. partners and family).

Reviewer 2: Jeong Yeob Han

Major Compulsory Revisions:
One of the major drawbacks of this paper is that it does not utilize any theory or theorizing – the purpose seems purely descriptive. The front section of the study would benefit from provision of the overall theoretical framework of the study and more literature reviews on both online forums and computer-mediated communication. Some allusion to theory and background research would significantly enhance the credibility and value of this piece.

Response:
We have reworked the section in the introduction concerning online support groups and included more literature in this as well as including empowerment as the overarching framework. This was indeed in our earlier drafts but for the sake of brevity we removed it. This was our error and we are very happy to include it again and we agree with the reviewer that its absence is as a major weakness. We believe now that by including empowerment as the theoretical framework the manuscript has a solid foundation and helps us interpret our findings.

The literature review seems to be outdated since much relevant research is available even in early 2010. This is especially true for the health-related online support group and its potential benefits. Please expand it and include more recent literature around the topic discussed in the manuscript.

Response:
We have developed this section and included a range of more recent references to reflect current issues within the literature.

P. 6. Analysis section. It would be helpful for authors to provide more information regarding the thematic analysis (how it is conducted, how it is different from quantitative content analysis, including the advantage and disadvantage etc.) and also the initial result of an inductive analysis, which eventually
leads to your selection of final themes. That way, readers could see what themes have been emerged (and not emerged) and also what themes are more (vs. less) popular.

**Response:**
We have revised and developed the analysis section of our manuscript and provided further information about how thematic analysis is conducted. However, quantifying the presence of themes is not consistent with the thematic approach and as such we are not in a position to say which themes were “more (vs. less) popular”. Rather, a theme is included if it has some significance in terms of the research question and need not necessarily reflect frequency. We hope we have addressed all other concerns about this section.

The result section is overall poorly written compared to other section of the manuscript. I think the major issue is that it is not tied to previous literature even though all five themes have been well studied and established from past studies.

**Response:**
Our discussion has been revised to consider the findings in light of the previous literature, i.e. empowerment. Convention dictates that we should not discuss the findings in the results section but in the following discussion section and we hope this remains acceptable. The important issue, we feel, is that the results are discussed and interpreted in light of the existent literature and we feel this is now much more clearly the case.

Another issue is that it focuses too much on describing example texts but the authors’ interpretation and analysis is minimally conducted.

**Response:**
As we carried out the research based on an essentialist research epistemology, we sought to analyse our data at the semantic, explicit level, and thus did not seek to analyse themes at the latent level which is more fitting for a constructivist paradigm. Nonetheless, we agree that the write up of the analysis could be improved. We have therefore re-engaged with the data and themes and have revised the results section, where appropriate. We thank you for this comment and prompt to re-examine our write up.

**Minor Essential Revisions:**
P. 5. The authors argue that “it was not possible to randomly select which users the emails would be sent to,” but it can be done easily as long as the authors have a list of email addresses (for example, simple random sampling). Additional clarification is needed to justify your approach.

**Response:**
We agree that had we been given a list of email addresses then random sampling would have been possible. However, for confidentiality reasons we were not allowed to have access to email addresses and when discussed with the moderators (i.e. email list owners) it was made clear that they would not be in a position to undertake random sampling on our behalf. We therefore had to proceed with the study using whatever access the moderators would allow.

We have amended the text to make this point clearer.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Neil Coulson & Sarah Holbrey