How do the discussion forums of non 12-step alcohol online support groups influence users’ understandings of problem drinking?

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Introduction
This poster reports on interviews carried out with current/former users of alcohol online support groups (AOSGs) that do not follow a 12-step programme. It highlights some of the most important ways in which participating in the discussion forums of these groups impacts on beliefs held by users about problem drinking. The research is part of a wider PhD study.

Background
Research has shown that individuals’ beliefs about an illness or problem can profoundly affect what they decide to do about it and so can impact on its clinical and/or other outcomes. (Baines & Wittkowski, 2013, Hagger & Orbell, 2003). With increasing numbers of individuals going online for their information and support, this research explores whether and how AOSG discussion forums contribute to the process of developing beliefs about problem drinking.

Method
Twenty-five current or former users of AOSGs were interviewed between late October 2017 and February 2018. They were self-selected from five non 12-step groups which varied in location, size and approach to problem drinking and its treatment. These groups, aimed at adults with alcohol issues, had given permission for information about the study to be made available to their members. Semi-structured interviews were carried out via Skype, phone, email or in person, as determined by the interviewee’s preference. The recordings were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and NVivo 11.

Findings
Respondents were pre-dominantly female, in their fifties, highly educated and high functioning problem drinkers.

Prior influences:
People arrived at the group already holding beliefs about problem drinking derived from exposure to many sources of information e.g., family, peer group, adverts, media. This for most included a stereotypical picture or ‘representation’ of the problem drinker as an extremely heavy, compulsive drinker whose life is profoundly affected who has lost everything – an image with which they did not identify.

Usage patterns:
The majority of users either found the group inadvertently whilst googling for something related to treatment (e.g., ‘alcohol help’, ‘alternative treatments’) or heard about their group accidentally via other media e.g., radio, newspapers and then followed it up online. Very few were directly referred. Once there they used the forums for information to a greater or lesser degree partly depending on their level of interest, past experience (they might be very knowledgeable already) and the site itself (the function of providing information about problem drinking is more important in some sites than others). With time, as their questions got answered, information seeking became less important.

Common ways in which the forums impacted on their representation of problem drinking:

• Strategies: for dealing with specific difficult situations, for example, attending a wedding or party and remaining abstinent. These strategies were usually based on users’ experience of what has or has not worked.

“...They talk about, ‘Wow, this happened and I was able to cope with it this way’. That gives a dimension to it, a much more human dimension. It’s something that you can use in your daily life, as opposed to just [book theory].”

(Marianne, Group C)

Conclusion
The discussion forums of AOSGs impacted on individuals’ representations in a variety of ways. These included providing detailed information about how to handle a problem and how to handle difficult situations. They also created a sense of being no longer alone or unique and that ‘recovery’ however envisaged, could be achieved.

Conflict of interest
No conflict of interest.

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References

