

ONLINE POLYLOGUES AND THE SPEECH ACTS OF ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated online polylogues and the speech acts encoded in online discussion forums (ODFs) that occur as part of computer-mediated communication. These ODFs took the form of text-only online polylogues involving multiple participants who engaged in multiple conversations. The data were sourced from a sample of messages drawn from a corpus of 400 messages posted to the three ODFs: Becomingwebhead, EVObasic_internet, and Tesolflashmx. Four of the findings of the study are worth mentioning. First, the three ODFs displayed five types of polylogal thread messages. Second, the polylogal frequencies and the sequential structure displayed by the thread topics varied according to the number of participants who posted messages, the topic discussed, and the intensity of the discussion. Third, the participation framework and the conversation structure followed both (semi)regular and irregular patterns of adjacency pairs. Fourth, some of the speech acts performed by participants in their polylogal discussions included greeting, welcoming, informing, advising, thanking, congratulating, and promising.

Keywords: online discussion forums, online polylogues, thread messages, pragmatics, speech acts

INTRODUCTION

Online discussion forums (ODFs)—also known as online discussion groups—have been a common feature of a computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment for a long time. As implied by their name, the primary purpose of ODFs is to enable users (registered or unregistered) to interact with one another through online discussions. Often such discussions involve topics that are of interest to users, and some discussion topics are short-lived, while others last longer, thereby developing into thread topics. At times, thread topics attract multiple users and end up engendering polylogues or multiparty conversations. Moreover, there are ODFs that are dedicated to educational discussions. Research has been conducted into patterns of interaction and conversational floors occurring in ODFs and in other related CMC contexts (see, for example, Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2012; Herring, 1999; Lorenzo-Dus,

Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, & Bou-Franch, 2011; Lowe, 2016; Marcoccia, 2004; Uthus & Aha, 2013). Other aspects of ODFs such as politeness strategies and advice-giving (Harrison & Barlow, 2009; Liu, 2017), socio-pragmatics (Harting, 2017), repairs (Kleinke, 2008), peer advice (Kouper, 2010), relational work (Locher, Bolander, & Höhn, 2015), and indirect speech acts (Łącka-Badura, 2013) have also been studied.

The current study investigated both online polylogues and the speech acts taking place in three online discussion forums: Becomingwebhead, EVObasic_internet, and Tesolflashmx (see Figure 1).

These ODFs are dedicated to educational discussions. In this regard, the study builds on previous studies such as those mentioned above, but it does so from a dual perspective: by examining the nature of the polylogues happening in ODFs and by exploring the speech acts performed in these ODFs. In particular, the three ODFs on which it focused consisted of text-based online polylogal messages involving

Session Title & Brief Description	Web Addresses
<p><u>Assessing and teaching oral communications skills</u> This discussion group considers teaching and assessment methods to help students improve oral skills both inside and outside of class.</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EV_Teachoralskills/</p>
<p><u>A Basic Workshop for using the Internet in class</u> Tasks and activities help the newcomer experience the Internet while creating class activities and a Web site for posting them.</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EVObasic_internet/</p>
<p><u>Becoming a Webhead</u> Hands-on exploration of Web communication tools, collaboration on projects, and sharing of best online practices</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/becomingwebhead/</p>
<p><u>Creating and using weblogs in ESL/EFL</u> Participants will create and share blogs as they discuss uses and the issues involved</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/esl_efl_blogs/</p>
<p><u>Macromedia Flash MX</u> Online training to create Web pages and online presentations using this authoring tool</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/tesolflashmx/</p>
<p><u>English for Everybody; all gain, no loss?</u> Discussion group on the impact of International English on language teaching contexts. Discussion continues at the Long Beach Convention.</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EV_globalenglish/</p>
<p><u>TESOL Drama Presents: Let's put on a play!</u> A discussion group on why and how to do drama and stage theatre productions with ESL/EFL students</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/EV_drama/</p>
<p><u>Real English Online - Video Webheads</u> Participants learn to make their own video and HotPotatoes activities while exploring video and audio resources online</p>	<p>http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Real_English_Online/</p>

Figure 1. The three Yahoo! ODFs: *Becomingwebhead*, *EVObasic_internet*, and *Tesolflashmx*

multiple participants who assumed multiple roles and engaged in multiple conversations.

FRAMING ISSUES

Theorizing Polylogues

Polylogues (both as a philosophical and as an online text-based concept) as a subject of scholarly discussion and as an area of investigation are no longer new anymore, nor are they still an exclusive area with reference to social interactions occurring in computer-mediated communication (CMC). They have been discussed and investigated fairly extensively at different points since the mid-1980s. Scholars who have provided a philosophical treatment of polylogues include Chen (2010), Sylvan (1985), Lewiński (2014), Lewiński and Aakhus (2014), and Wimmer (2007), while those who have investigated CMC polylogues include, inter alia,

Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014), Bou-Franch et al. (2012), Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004), Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011), and Marcoccia (2004). One of the scholars to have theorized polylogues as a philosophical concept in the mid-1980s is Sylvan (1985), whereas two of the scholars to have recently provided intense debates on polylogues are Chen (2010) and Lewiński (2014). In the area of CMC, there seems to be insufficient evidence that points to the theorization of the concept of polylogue. This is so despite increasing and cutting-edge body of research conducted on polylogues occurring in various digital platforms (e.g., online discussion forums, YouTube, Twitter, and Skype).

Online Polylogues, Participation Framework, and Coherence

It is necessary to define the notion of polylogue

as used in this study. Historically the word polylogue derives from classical Greek words, poly (many) and logos (reason). When used as a compound it entails garrulousness or logorrhea, or a scenario in which everyone is simultaneously talking with no one listening. It can, thus, be interpreted positively or negatively. In the former sense, it means reasonably articulating and reconciling multiple voices; in its latter sense, it implies different voices involving unique features that have no common ground (Chen 2010). In a different but related context, Lewiński and Aakhus (2014) point out that a polylogue consists of many dual encounters, especially multiparty discussions.

As regards ODFs, polylogues—particularly text-based polylogues—refer to online multiparty discussions involving one-to-many, many-to-one, or many-to-many interactions that may entail discussion or message threads. In addition, a thread message is made up of a parent message and its related child messages. The former is a superordinate message, while the latter are subordinate messages (cf. Arendholz, 2013; Choi, Han, & Chung, 2015). Drawing on Uthus and Aha (2013), a thread is a series of messages among users that focuses on a given thematic topic within a conversation encounter. Threaded discussions within ODFs allow for asynchronous (not happening instantly) conversations. As such, they can be archived as log files, and users can retrieve them offline. Most importantly, new discussions can start in two ways: through a statement initiating a conversation or via a schism. A schism is triggered by a conversation splitting into two conversations, especially when certain participants shift from a given message to refocus their attention on each other.

In fact, as Koike and Blyth (2015) point out, asynchronous ODF postings tend to be characterized by disruptiveness in the sequential stream of conversation as registered and unregistered users, including lurkers, can read and post messages at any time long after the original messages have been posted. Thus, asynchronicity within a single multiparty ODF allows several disjointed conversation floors, resulting in polylogical exchanges (see also Rochat, Hauw, Gür, & Seifert, 2018).

Coherence as a salient feature of CMC has been explored in earlier and recent studies by different scholars. One of the earlier studies is

Herring's (1999), while some of the recent studies are those carried out by Bou-Franch et al. (2012), Berglund (2009), Lowe (2016), Marcoccia (2004), Skogs (2015), and Wilson and Djamasbi (2013). From both pragmatic and discourse-analytic perspectives, coherence is the idea of sense-making by participants engaged in a communication encounter (Bou-Franch et al., 2012). In online interactions, coherence is triggered by relations between CMC messages such as elaboration, cause, and explanation. This occurs in the form of reply-to relations characterizing such CMC messages (see Fu, Abbasi, & Chen, 2008). The notion of reply-to relations is similar to the classical initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence common in spoken conversational turn-taking. However, coherence in CMC interactions—including in online interactions occurring in ODFs—does not follow an IRF pattern. Rather, it is characterized by what Herring (1999) calls lack of simultaneous feedback and disrupted turn adjacency. This renders such interactions dysfunctionally incoherent. This resultant interactional incoherence refers more to disrupted or fragmented turn adjacency than to interactional miscommunication. The turn adjacency disjuncture is caused by an archiving system in which messages are logged chronologically and not according to the IRF pattern (also see Arendholz, 2013; Berglund, 2009; Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Fu et al., 2008; Koike & Blyth, 2015; Skogs, 2015).

Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory deals with the types of actions speakers convey through what they say. It has much to do with how to do things with words or with acts people perform in speaking (Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975). Speech acts are conveyed primarily through speech act verbs such as *promise, forgive, wish, declare, complain, warn, congratulate, etc.*, which take, in most cases, the first-person form and use the simple present tense forms. While speech acts are notable for their locution (the actual words uttered), illocution (the force or intention behind the words), and perlocution (the effect of the illocution on the hearer), it is performative speech acts that most often catch the attention of many scholars (see Austin, 1962; Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983; Searle, 1965; Thomas, 1995). The same trend is evident in some pragmatics research on CMC or on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) (see Cicognani & Maher, 1997;

Ekeblad, 1999; Harting, 2017; Herring, 1999; Kleinke, 2008; Kouper, 2010; Locher et al., 2015).

Among studies that have dealt with the speech acts of online conversations or of online discussions are Cicognani's (1998) analysis of speech acts in real-life situations and their actions in virtual-life situations, Cicognani and Maher's (1997) investigation of the speech acts of virtual communities, Harting's (2017) exploring of socio-pragmatics, Kouper's (2010) study of the pragmatics of peer advice interactions in an online community, and Łacka-Badura's (2013) examination of indirect speech acts. Other studies include Scheyder's (2004) comparative study of indirect speech acts in a chat room and a telephone conversation, Sykes' (2005) work on the strength of the connection between synchronous CMC and pragmatic instruction by measuring the effects of three types of synchronous group discussion on the acquisition of the speech act (refusals), and Yang, Newby, and Bill's (2008) quasi-experimental web-based bulletin board study whose primary focus was to promote learners' critical thinking skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Related Online Polylogue Studies

Online text-based polylogues occurring in CMC have attracted a lot of attention since Marcoccia's (2004) study that focused on these types of social interactions. Other studies that have investigated online polylogues include, among others, Bou-Franch and Garcés-Conejos Blitvich (2014), Bou-Franch et al. (2012), Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011), and Perelmutter (2013). All of these studies except one deal with online polylogues.

Of these studies, Marcoccia's (2004) and Bou-Franch et al.'s (2012) have a thematic relevance to the current study. Marcoccia's (2004) focuses on the conversational structure and the participation framework related to online polylogues enacted by newsgroup users. As such, its findings have a direct bearing to the current study. This study investigated messages sent to different French-speaking newsgroups during a two-month stint between June and July 1997. Even though the study does not specify its research design and its sampling techniques, it makes crucial observations in terms of studying online polylogical conversation structure and participation roles. For example, it argues that analyzing a newsgroup's conversation

structure has inherent problems. First, it points out that newsgroups consist of polylogical or dialogal multiparty conversations. Second, it contends that messages are often recorded by default in an unstructured sequence. Third, it maintains that messages are captured in their shortened versions. Fourth, it asserts that users tend to miscomprehend the conversation structure.

In respect of the polylogical participation framework, the study identifies four elements. The first element relates to users' roles, and involves senders, readers, and monitors. The second element is about production format levels, and it entails the enunciator, the transmitter, and the author. The third element has to do with production format constellations that are aligned to several modes of production and to the types of participants (Marcoccia, 2004, pp. 143–144).

Bou-Franch et al.'s (2012) study involved text-based YouTube conversational polylogues. In particular, it examined coherence by focusing on four key discourse features, participation and adjacency, and turn-management and cross-turn cohesion in a corpus of Spanish YouTube polylogical postings. Its data consisted of 300 consecutive postings drawn from the GENTEXT digital corpus. These data were sourced from two YouTube polylogues based on a video topic against abortion. On the one hand, the study analyzed participation and adjacency as problems to coherence. On the other, it analyzed turn-management and cross-turn cohesion as coherence-inducing devices that could be employed to solve potential coherence-related problems.

Some of the observations yielded by the analysis mounted by the study are as follows:

- Participation in both polylogical data sets was massive, unequal, and fluid—three properties that are mostly problematic for coherence.
- These three problematic properties were compensated for by several adjacent turns displayed across postings.
- Polylogues were far from incoherent.
- Turn-management signals and cohesion devices as coherence-inducing mechanisms featured, as the study argues, frequently in the two data sets.

- There was a preference for managing turns through turn-entry/exit devices and cross-turn addressivity signals as opposed to employing such techniques as cross-turn back-channeling and quoting.
- Cross-turn cohesion devices demonstrated that, like in other online environments, YouTubers prominently used their lexical resources.
- Networked interaction patterns did not disrupt coherence, a feature that supported the claim that coherence could be created and sustained despite disrupted turn adjacency (Bou-Franch et al., 2012, pp. 515–516).

Related Studies on the Pragmatics of Online Discussion Groups

Different aspects of the pragmatics occurring in online interactions have been investigated. These include politeness strategies and advice giving (Harrison & Barlow (2009), engendered politeness (Herring, 1994), the pragmatics of naming (Jacobson, 1996), the use of interactional repair strategies (Kleinke, 2008), the pragmatics of peer advice (Kouper, 2010), the speech act of advising (Locher, 2006), and (im)politeness (Liu, 2017; Locher et al., 2015). Of these studies, Kleinke's (2008) and Kouper's (2010) have a thematic resonance with the current study.

For instance, Kleinke's (2008) study investigated interactional repair strategies in an online public message board run by a discussion forum, BBT-Talk. The data for this study consisted of 130 messages posted by 36 different users during nine days in 2006. Each user contributed between one and 28 postings. The study analyzed how users utilized a range of interactional repair strategies in order to negotiate social equilibrium in a given discussion thread. Three of the four questions it addressed were:

- What linguistic techniques of interactional repair do participants in this discussion use in order to negotiate potentially conflictive passages in the discussion?
- How are strategies used throughout the macro structure of the discussion thread from a sequential point of view? Are there any clusters in certain sequences of the interaction?

- Does the polylogal character of the discussion board have an influence on how repair work contributes to the negotiation of equilibrium on the macro level of the entire discussion thread as compared to polylogues in natural face-to-face interaction?

Two of the findings of this study are worth highlighting. First, in relation to the polylogal context of this discussion board, users employed the more complex strategies such as topic loops and scapegoat repairs on the macro level of the discussion thread. Second, users performed interactional repairs on the micro level by employing the following strategies: conversational joking, justification, showing empathy with the hearer or victim, and the use of routine formulae. Third, users utilized a double-bound strategy in which users in one posting explicitly took sides with one user while simultaneously distancing themselves from others (Kleinke, 2008, pp. 96–97).

As mentioned earlier, Kouper's (2010) study examined the pragmatics of peer advice pertaining to an online community forum, LiveJournal.com, a large hosting website with social networking and blogging functionalities. In particular, it focused on the frequency of advice interactions and the strategies and patterns for soliciting and giving advice. The forum, consisting mainly of women, is dedicated to motherhood and child-rearing issues. The data for the study—collected between August and September 2004—consisted of 584 entries with 2,466 comments.

Some of the findings of this study are as follows:

- Soliciting and giving advice made up the greatest portion of social interactions in the online community.
- Advice solicitations were often elaborate stories that performed a variety of functions, in addition to requesting information or directions for further actions.
- Sharing personal experience was a crucial type of advice giving (Kouper, 2010, p. 17).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The current study had four focal areas. First, it focused on the overall format of the web discussion groups. Second, it unpacked the evolving threads—their polylogal frequencies and the sequential structure displayed by the thread topics.

Third, it focused on the participation framework and conversation structure of such web discussion groups (especially how participants contributed to polylogal thread messages at a given time and the kind of patterns they followed in doing so. Last, the study examined and analyzed the types of speech acts participants made as they interacted with each other.

So, on this basis, the study set out to answer the following questions:

1. What is the overall format of the three online discussion groups under study?
2. What polylogal threads emerge from these online discussion groups, what types of topics are posted, and what polylogal frequencies and sequential structure do the thread topics display?
3. What speech acts do participants encode in the three online discussion groups?

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The research methodology for this study is situated in a qualitative research paradigm. The choice of this research paradigm was informed by the types of the data collected, which consisted of text-based online postings. Therefore, the research design suitable for this study was a case study research design (Griffee, 2012; Yin, 2003). As stated by Griffee (2012) and Yin (2003), a case study design requires data to be collected from more than one source, examines phenomena embedded in a given context, and uses theory to reflect on findings. The present study sourced its data from three ODFs. Moreover, three of the crucial features of a case study design are case, context, and boundaries. In this instance, a case can comprise one person/object, or a group of people/objects within a given context as determined by specific boundaries. Similarly, the three ODFs investigated in this study are cases that occurred within given online environments that had their own virtual boundaries.

Data Collection, Sampling, and Procedures

The data for this study were sourced from three ODFs: Becomingwebhead, EVObasic_internet, and Tesolflashmx. These three ODFs are affiliated to Webheads, an online community of English language teachers and learners that was started in 1998. In the three ODFs participants discuss certain

topics and share their ideas or thoughts about these topics within each group synchronously (through a chat room) or asynchronously (through email)(cf. Simpson, 2005; Yilmaz & Stevens, 2012). When the data for this study were collected, four thousand messages had been posted to these three ODFs. Of these 4,000 messages, 2,600 had been posted on Becomingwebhead, 980 messages on EVObasic_internet, and 420 messages on Tesolflashmx.

The three data sets were sampled from the 4,000 messages posted on the three aforesaid ODFs. They consisted of a corpus of 400 messages and were selected through both sampling by themes and quota sampling. The first sampling strategy was employed to collect thematically structured polylogal threads as they appeared in each of the three ODFs, while the second sampling technique was used to collate data weighted according to the postings that were available in each of the three ODFs. This technique sought to sample thread messages according to the proportion of their varied nature in the aforesaid ODFs (cf. Griffee, 2012; Kim, Chern, Feng, Shaw, & Hovy, 2006; Rochat et al., 2018; Yin, 2003). In keeping with this sampling procedure, 260 messages were selected from Becomingwebhead, 98 messages from EVObasic_internet, and 42 messages from Tesolflashmx (see Figure 3). These data were collected over a period of two months from January 2013 to February 2014. All the messages collected were anonymized as were their authors' usernames.

Analytical Framework and Units of Analysis

It is a commonly held view that online polylogues, given their complex multilayered nature, tend to pose analytical and methodological problems to conventional discourse analysis as compared to their face-to-face equivalents. In view of this, the multilayered analytical framework employed in this study drew heavily from both CMC research and conflict and impoliteness studies. It specifically tapped into conversation analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis with respect to participation and adjacency and in terms of turn-taking and cohesion applicable to online and offline contexts (see Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2014; Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Marcoccia, 2004; Uthus & Aha, 2013).

The study had three units or levels of analysis for the data identified above. These were thread polylogues (thread discussion messages), the

individual contributor, and the group. In the first instance, a thread polylogue together with its content and interaction became the focus of analysis. In the second instance, the individual contributor was isolated as the focus of investigation. This entailed both the interaction (the nature of the individual's response and who the response was directed to) and the time at which the response was posted. In the last instance, the group was the subject of analysis, which involved intra- and intergroup interactions. In addition, in the case of the individual and the group contributors, interaction analysis (a method focusing on ways of tracking one person's conversation and the reaction of the other person) and relational control analysis (a method that tracks message sequences to determine the relative patterns of position and control in the relationship) were conducted (cf. De Wever, Schellens, Valcke, & Van Keer, 2006; Holtz, Kronberger, & Wagner, 2012; Marccocia, 2004).

Both content and conversational analyses served as a composite model of analysis for the data used in this study. Content analysis involves identifying units of analysis and counting the number of frequencies at which certain words, items, or units are used within a given context. It is an analytic approach based on coding and quantifying various elements in a given text (including CMC-generated text-based polylogues). Word, category, and conceptual frequency analyses are some of its primary areas of focus. At the most basic level, the main purpose of this analytic method is to locate the nature of the relative patterns within and between sets of data (see Schilling, 2006). Five types of polylogical thread messages in each of the three ODFs were identified, coded, and categorized according to their types (see Figure 1). Two independent raters coded the three sets of data and the interrater reliability in line with Cohen's kappa (κ) was .820. According to Alton (1990) the interrater agreement for Cohen's kappa ranges on a continuum from poor (<0.20), fair (0.21 to 0.40), moderate (0.40 to 0.60), good (0.61 to 0.80), and very good (0.81 to 1.00)(also cf. Chaka, Lephala, & Ngesi, 2017). Thus, the interrater reliability was considered to be very good.

These polylogical thread messages were categorized by raters on the basis of their parent messages and their child messages. As mentioned earlier, parent messages are original messages

posted as superordinate messages, and child messages are secondary messages flowing from parent messages (cf. Arendholz, 2013; Choi, Han, & Chung, 2015; Faria, 2019; Kim et al., 2006).

With reference to conversational analysis, as pointed out above in particular, it studies conversation and focuses on such aspects as talk, conversation structure, adjacency pairs, preference, repairs, floor, turn-taking, and participants (see Levinson, 1987; Norrick, 1991; Sacks, 1994; Schwienhorst, 1998). Similarly, the aspects of the ODFs outlined above were analyzed using these two analytic approaches while taking into account their relevant contextual conversational and pragmatic values.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the nature of the polylogues occurring in ODFs and the speech acts occurring within ODFs as part of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Mostly, these ODFs happened in the form of text-based online polylogical messages involving multiple participants who assumed multiple roles and engaged in multiple conversations (see Beißwenger, 2008; Berglund, 2009; Bou-Franch et al., 2012; González-Lloret, 2011; Kerbrat-Orecchion, 2004; Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011; Marcocchia, 2004; Perelmutter, 2013; Voiskounsky, 1997).

Overall Format of the Three ODFs

The three ODFs under study here operated as hierarchically organized groups open to subscribers interested in particular topics posted on them. The discussions they fielded often took the form of email messages posted to the groups by users and threaded and filed on the respective websites of these ODFs. Users communicated online by logging into the websites, reading the filed messages, and posting new ones. Messages were recorded chronologically (by the default mechanism) following the dates and the times they were posted. For example, on the website screen of *Becomingwebhead*, the following list of items was displayed: sender (of the message), subject (of discussion), date (on which the message was posted), and size (of the message)(see Figure 2). However, both *EVObasic_internet* and *Tesolflashmx* filed their messages according to this sequence: subject# (of discussion), name/email# (of the sender), YahooID# (of the sender), and date# (on which the message was sent)(see Figure 2).

Assignment Week 2	lemannm	lemannm	Mon 2/16/
First message	nabel	queste	Mon 2/16/
Week Three: Assignment One	lemannm	lemannm	Tue 2/17/
Assignment One Week three	ots1161	ots1161	Tue 2/17/
WEEK One Article	erta	leiva2003	Fri 2/20/21
Yahoo! Groups Notification	Request to join becomingwebhead approved		Fri-02/01 2k
becomingwebhead Moderator	Welcome to becomingwebhead		Fri-02/01 2k
becomingwebhead Moderator	File: yahoowelcome letter.htm		Fri-02/01 7k
tesolflashmx@yahoogroups.com	[tesolflashmx] New poll for tesolflashmx		Mon-29/12 4k

Figure 2. Screenshots of Becomingwebhead, EVObasic_Internet, and Tesolflashmx

Since messages were recorded and filed as they were posted by various users (and captured as such by the default system), their dates reflected temporal dynamics of asynchronous interactions; senders were not alphabetically recorded and subjects (topics) were organized hierarchically into sequences. Each ODF had moderators or list managers. In all, these three ODFs were characterized by, among other things, the following salient features: an asynchronicity of communication, a fragmentation of filed message topics, a multiplicity of (sometimes unrelated) threaded messages, a nonalphabetization of senders' names, a temporal and spatial separation between users, and a spontaneous listing of new senders and sometimes of new topics (cf. Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Berglund, 2009; Herring, 1999; Lowe, 2016; Marcoccia, 2004; Skogs, 2015; Wilson & Djasasbi, 2013).

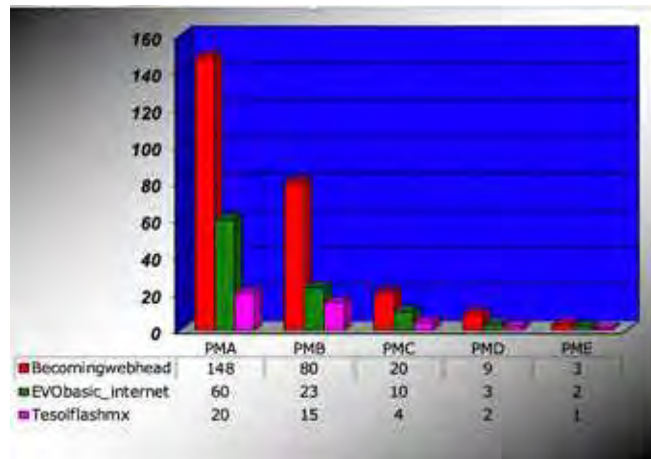
While these features seemed to point to the unsystematic and chaotic nature of the overall structure of these ODFs, the contrary here is also true. That is, these ODFs—as text-based and non-face-to-face mediums—had a format, which, despite reflecting elements of unsystematicity and chaos, nonetheless bore its own order and organization. The point here is that the user could still work out what the discussions on each of these ODFs were all about and what types of thread messages other users had posted. Thus, these

ODFs reflected hybrid tele- and computer-mediated communication mediums (see Herring, 1999, 2016; Holtz et al., 2012; Kleinke, 2008; Marcoccia, 2004).

Types of Polylogues, Types of Messages, and Message Topics

The messages posted to the three ODFs were mainly polylogal thread messages. There were five types of such messages identifiable from the three forums: one-to-many-polylogues, one-to-one-to-many-polylogues, one-to-two-to-many-polylogues, and one-to-three-to-many-polylogues (see Figure 3). The fifth type was a combination of either two-to-one-, two-to-two-, two-to-three-, three-to-one-, or three-to-two-to-many-polylogues. In one-to-many-polylogal interactions one user posted messages to all ODF users at the same time; in one-to-one-to-many-polylogal interactions one user directed messages to a specified user but the same messages were meant for other users of the ODF as well. One-to-two-to-many-polylogues consisted of messages sent by one user to two specified users but which were also meant for the attention of other users. In one-to-three-to-many-polylogues, messages were posted to three specified users but the same messages were accessible to other users as well. Finally, the fifth instance of polylogal messages entailed messages sent by the specified number of senders (here the number of senders involved any of the combinations spelled out above) to the specified number of users (here, too, the

number of users involved any of the combinations spelled out above). These same messages were accessible to the other users rather than just the intended addressees themselves.



Notes: PM = polylogal message; A, B, C, D, and E = 5 types of polylogal thread messages.

Figure 3. The total number of the types of polylogal messages posted on the three online discussion groups, *Becomingwebhead*, *EVObasic_internet*, and *Tesolflashmx*.

Mostly, the polylogal messages posted to the three ODFs came in the form of thread messages or polylogal threaded discussions bearing specific topics. For example, instances of such polylogal thread topics are displayed in Table 1 below. These threads were part of the pre-session discussion threads that took place before an online workshop entitled TESOL EVONLINE, which was open to all subscribers of the three ODFs. There were 18 such thread topics that developed during this period as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Pre-session Polylogal Threads

Level of participation	Replying in Yahoo groups/ Online help
Lurking	Passwording documents
OLE's	Blogging
Virtual language teacher, Bots, etc	Food and recipes
(Self-) Introduction/Welcoming	Andragogy
The student perspective	Verbal/Nonverbal communication
Audioconferencing tools	Teachers' attitudes to ICTs
About Chat	Live events
Humour	Troubleshooting

Further instances of polylogal thread topics fielded in subsequent weeks, particularly in *Becomingwebhead*, are displayed in Tables 2 and 3 below. These thread message topics were compiled and archived on a weekly basis as indicated in these two tables.

As shown in Table 1, the threads fielded here dealt with a variety of topics ranging from Level of participation on the one hand to Troubleshooting on the other hand. The same is true of the other instances of threads represented in Tables 2 and 3. For example, the thread topics in Table 2 ranged from Polish learning and CMC Tools to BaW Statistics, while those in Table 3 ranged from Blogs to On Materials Design. All this points to the tendency for users to deal with multiple—and sometimes unrelated—thread topics. In addition, a new thread topic would emerge and either be sustained (e.g., Blogging) or be abandoned (e.g., Humour, Passwording documents, Dealing with Virus and Hoaxes, Maps, and What's the secret?).

Table 2. A Sample of Polylogal Threads Spanning Week One

Polish learning and CMC Tools	Blogs
Dealing with Virus and Hoaxes	What's the secret?
Yahoo groups management	Cybersticker
About Webheads	Map
New CMC tools to try	BaW StatisticsBaW Statistics

In addition, a new topic would emerge and develop into a thread with the possibility of branching into subthread topics (multiple thread topics; e.g., Audioconferencing, New CMC tools to try, About Webheads, and Mini-Webheads). Or it would develop into completely new stand-alone thread topics (e.g., Drawing Skills and On Materials Design from New CMC tools to try, and Technical Problems from Troubleshooting)(cf. Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Berglund, 2009; Herring, 1999; Lowe, 2016; Marcoccia, 2004; Skogs, 2015; Wilson & Djasmasbi, 2013). This means that, as more participants contributed to a given thread, the thread got longer, and eventually new subthreads with new related or side themes, which sometimes became stand-alone threads on their own, developed within it (see Tables 1, 2, and 3) (cf. Anderson, Beard, & Walther, 2010; González-Lloret, 2011; Marcoccia, 2004).

Table 3. A Sample of Polylogal Threads Spanning Week Two

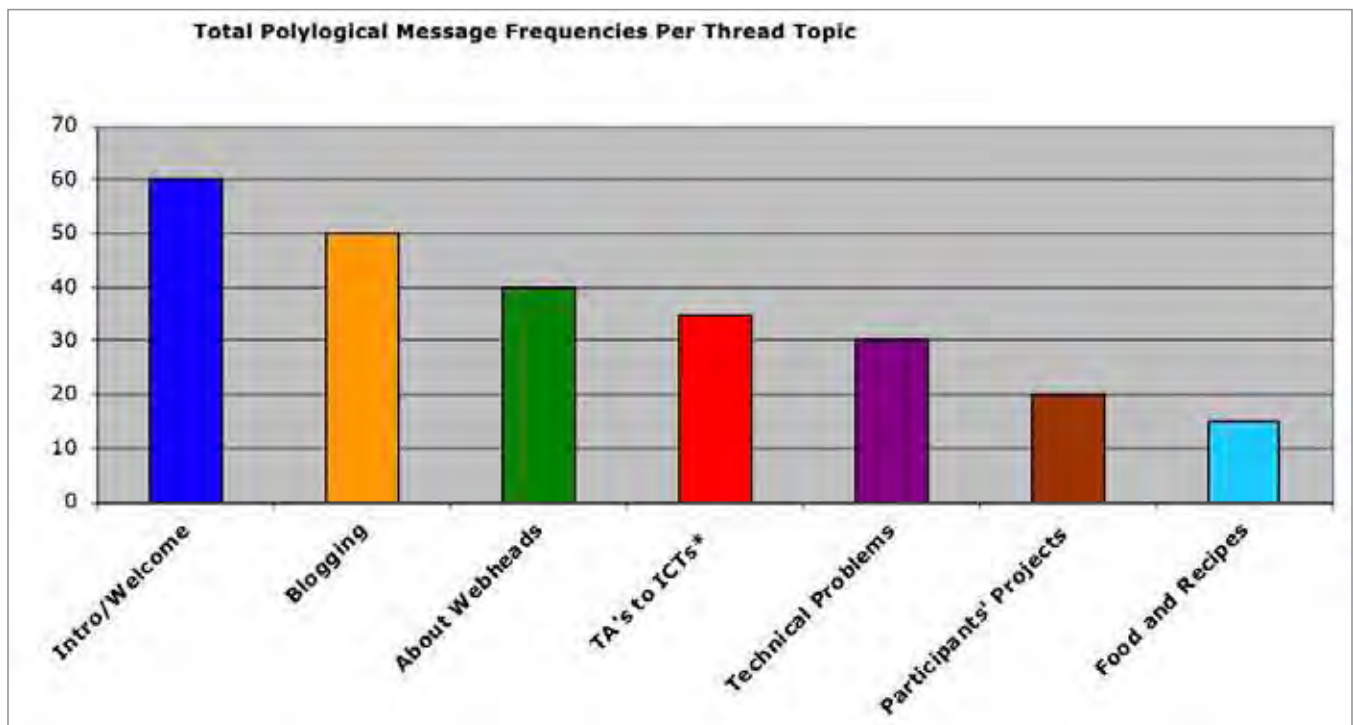
Blogs(cont.)	Online Time Management
Technical Problems	About Different Tools
Moodle	Drawing Skills
Mini-Webheads (cont.)	On BaW
Live Events: Learning Times Alado	Teresa's Article
Web Page Creation	On Materials Design

Polylogal Frequencies and Sequential Structure

The polylogal frequencies and the sequential structure displayed by the thread topics identified above depended largely on what number of participants posted what messages to whom (to the whole group simultaneously or to one, to two, or to three users at a time). They also depended on the time sequence according to which messages were posted to and recorded on the ODFs. The nature of the topics also played a critical role in the polylogal sequential structure—with the topics exciting the participants the most enjoying a pride of place and generating the highest number of responses and thereby polling many threads (cf. Herring, 1999, 2000; González-Lloret, 2011; Marcoccia,

2004; Voiskounsky; 1997). For instance, in the case of the pre-session threads, the threads on Audioconferencing and Live events attracted two messages each, while the threads on Blogging, Food and recipes and Teachers' attitude to ICTs attracted 16, 18, and 19 messages respectively as illustrated in Table 1 above. So, in this block of polylogal thread topics, Blogging, Food and recipes and Teachers' attitude to ICTs polled the highest frequencies of responses. In Table 2 both What's the secret? and Map polled 3 messages apiece, Dealing with Virus and Hoaxes polled 14 messages, About Webheads attracted 18 messages, New CMC tools to try polled 20 messages, and Blogs generated 26 messages. In contrast, in Table 3, Technical Problems attracted 8 thread messages, Mini-Webheads 10, About Different Tools 14, Web Page Creation 22, and Blogs 28.

Overall, out of a sample of 250 individual polylogal messages, Blogging generated 60 messages (24%), About Webheads 50 messages (20%), Web Page Creation 40 messages (16%), CMC Tools 35 messages (14%), About Chat 30 messages (12%), Participants' Projects 20 messages (8%), and (Technical) Problems 15 messages (6%). This represents the overall polylogal frequencies for these thread topics as depicted in Figure 4.



Notes: * = Teachers' attitude to ICTs

Figure 4. The Overall Polylogal Message Frequencies Polled by the Seven Thread Topics

Likewise, the kind of sequential structure followed by the polylogical messages identified above was largely determined by what number of participants posted what messages to whom. Additionally, this sequential structure was influenced by the time sequence according to which these messages were posted to and recorded on the ODFs. Again, the nature of the topics played a pivotal role in the polylogical sequential structure assumed by these messages—with the topics most appealing to the participants polling the highest response patterns. As a result, the three ODFs displayed an irregular polylogical sequential structure in which thread messages sometimes got randomly interrupted and disrupted thematically and temporally.

Participation Framework and Conversation Structure

Turn-taking in the ODFs under study followed both (semi)regular and irregular patterns of adjacency pairs. A regular adjacency pair is one that has a question-answer (QA) sequence or an initiation-response-feedback (IRF) sequence, whereas an irregular turn-taking is one in which the QA or the IRF pattern is not followed or is absent because it is temporally interrupted or disrupted. In real-life, face-to-face interactions, a regular turn-taking pattern entails one person talking at a time and does not allow an unnecessary silence/pause, while an irregular turn-taking involves two or more speakers taking a floor at the same time and allows unmotivated pauses and nonresponses. If a turn-taking pattern is violated, participants correct or repair a given violation accordingly (cf. Anderson et al., 2010; Beißwenger, 2008; Berglund, 2009; Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Herring, 1999; Kleinke, 2008; Lowe, 2016; Marcoccia, 2004; Wilson & Djamasbi, 2013).

In the data under study, there were instances of (semi)regular turn-taking patterns displayed by some of the thread messages. Here, there were initiation patterns and double responses from some of the participants who took temporally different turns on the same topic (e.g., Introduction). These initiation-response patterns engendered initiation-response-response (IRR) adjacency pairs that, in this case, constituted (semi)regular turn-taking patterns. In certain cases, initiators' feedback to ensuing responses would be interrupted by a number of unrelated messages (Bou-Franch et

al., 2012; Kleinke, 2008; Lorenzo-Dus, Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, & Bou-Franch, 2011; Lowe, 2016; Marcoccia, 2004; Wilson & Djamasbi, 2013). For example, in one instance an initiator's message on the topic Introduction was followed by eleven other messages, only one of which was a direct response to the technical problems the initiator had raised in his introduction. So, according to the posting of the messages related to this particular aspect of the thread—the Teachers' attitudes to ICTs discussion thread—the emerging turn-taking followed an IRR-R-F pattern (also see Table 1).

Particularly remarkable in this case is that a regular turn-taking pattern that is a norm for real-life—oral communication—tends to be an exception to the rule in ODFs (cf. Meredith & Stokoe, 2014). Most often in the three ODFs, one message got interrupted by other messages before its corresponding response could be posted. In addition, besides participants having their messages being temporally interrupted by unrelated messages, they also had their floor time being disrupted by such unrelated messages. Moreover, thread messages that were recorded as such from the default mechanism had a temporal fragmentation due to their having been recorded at different times depending on the time zones from which they were posted. This seems to be the case with computer-mediated polylogical interactions that occurred in the three ODFs as their participants came and went at will and as discussion topics competed with one another for sustained thread discussions (cf. Anderson et al., 2010; Beißwenger, 2008; Berglund, 2009; Bou-Franch et al., 2012; Herring, 1999; Marcoccia, 2004; Simpson, 2005).

Furthermore, the aforesaid online polylogical discussions were characterized by linking (explicitly referring to the content of a previous message in one's response) and quoting portions of a previous message in one's response. In the case of the latter, the name and the email address of the person quoted were provided through a default, system-generated pointer line that preceded the quote. And the default system also automatically prefaced each line of the quoted material with an angle bracket (see Berglund, 2009; Herring, 1999; Marcoccia, 2004; Uthus & Aha, 2013). Both the linking and quoting served as turn-tracking devices (see Herring, 1999), especially since in ODFs there are many factors disrupting topics and turn-taking

or floor taking. As in any human interaction, there were participants who initiated and contributed the most to the three ODFs, thereby dominating them. This seemed to be particularly the case with those participants who also acted as moderators in these ODFs. So, unlike other participants, they had a prerogative to initiate, control, direct, dominate, and change topical discussions, and even to hold the floor many times. Finally, there were participants who featured mainly as lurkers or eavesdroppers, casuals, one-timers, and unknowns.

Pragmatics of the Speech Acts of ODFs

It is the pragmatics of speech acts as they apply to the three ODFs under study that is the focus of this section. Speech acts are utterances containing information needed to assert and perform actions. Mostly, they have verbs used to perform such actions. Here, actions performed can include greeting, apologizing, promising, requesting, complaining, forgiving, joking, and so on. So, when a speaker makes an utterance, they engage in three different speech acts: locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary. The first relates to the act of saying something (e.g., “Go away!”); the second refers to the act in saying something such as requesting, greeting, and praising (e.g., “He asked me to tell her to go away”); and the third one is the act of trying to effect a change to the addressee (e.g., “He persuaded her to tell him to go

away”)(see Austin, 1962; Clark, 1996; Grice, 1975; Thomas, 1995). There are both similarities and differences in terms of the conditions necessary for the success or failure of the speech acts performed in real-life, face-to-face communication and those performed in the online communication or in the CMC environment. This relates especially to the degree of relevance and essentialness of such conditions between the two media (cf. Cicognani, 1998; Cicognani & Maher, 1997; Łacka-Badura, 2013; Meredith & Stokoe, 2014). Table 4 highlights seven such conditions between real-life (RL) and virtual-life (VL) situations.

In the data for this study, some of the speech acts performed by participants in their polylogal discussions included: greeting, welcoming, promising, questioning, and requesting. For example, most thread messages expressing the speech act of greeting did so by employing an endearment term such as “Dear ...,” or by using informal openings like “Hello ...” or “Hi... .” Other instances of greeting terms made under this category were references such as, “Hugs,” “Peace,” “Thanks,” “Best wishes,” and “Bfn” (“bye for now”). As an endearment term, “Dear” is part of personal address terms. Mostly, it is used by close or intimate interlocutors. Nevertheless, in the online polylogues under discussion, “Dear” is used intimately by participants who do not necessarily share any closeness. In this regard, this makes the

Table 4. The Seven Conditions Necessary for the Success of the Speech Acts in both RL and VL Situations (Adapted from Cicognani, 1998)

Condition	Speech acts in RL situations	Actions in VL situations
Illocutionary point	Essential for that act to have consequences	Actions must have a purpose and an effect. <i>Essential.</i>
Degree of strength of the illocutionary point	It may change the effect of the act. <i>Variable.</i>	There should be no ambiguity in the action. <i>Not relevant.</i>
Mode of achievement	The authority of the speaker is essential.	The permission and access of the user to make that action are <i>essential.</i>
Propositional content conditions	The commitment of the speaker is essential.	Carrying out the action already demonstrates a commitment by the user. <i>Not relevant.</i>
Preparatory conditions	The conditions in which the speech act is uttered must be favorable to its success.	The user and the software must be ready to perform that action. <i>Essential.</i>
Sincerity conditions	The speech act can be unsuccessful if it is not meant.	The action carried out does not include the intentions of the user, apart from the will to have that action performed. <i>Not relevant.</i>
Degree of strength of sincerity conditions	It may change the performance and the effect of the speech act.	<i>Not relevant.</i>

use of this endearment reference as part of the speech acts of greeting highly situational (Shleykina, 2016) and deictic (cf. Chaka, 2019; Forzani & Leu, 2017). This practice deviates from real-life, face-to-face encounters in which this endearment term is often common among intimates.

Personal address terms (also known as vocatives) such as “Hello,” “Hi,” “Hugs,” “Peace,” and “Thanks,” play an important role in greeting rituals (Shleykina, 2016; cf. Felecan, 2015; Park, Li, & Burger, 2010). Greeting rituals are often formulaic and can be part of small talk or phatic communication. Phatic communication is a nonreferential use of language that is intended to express sociability (emotions, feelings, attitudes, etc.). In this sense, its function is purely social (e.g., to establish social bonds and relationships) and not informative. It is also aimed at getting an addressee’s attention and serves to initiate and sustain conversation (Leech, 1983; Shleykina, 2016) between interlocutors in the shortest possible time. The same seems to be the case with the personal address terms identified above, which are ritualistic and phatic in nature. Moreover, a term like “Hugs” has a performative speech function as it serves to encode the act of hugging. That is, in a VL encounter such as an ODF, a nonperformative speech act verb is used to encode a performative speech act. Likewise, other phatic references such as “Bfn” serve to perform the speech act of bidding goodbye to intended addressees. Here, the act of bidding goodbye is performed by using “Bfn” as an instance of initialism modelled on classical text messaging language (see Chaka, 2015; cf. Chaka & Nkhobo, 2019). Still, other thread messages are used to encode the speech acts of informing, advising, enquiring, and apologizing, while others tend to perform the speech acts of congratulating and thanking (see Cicognani & Maher, 1997; cf. Harting, 2017; Köylü, 2018; Łacka-Badura, 2013).

The other point to highlight here is that in the case of ODFs, verbs that in real life operate as nonperformative speech act verbs (e.g., “open,” “lift,” “move,” “close,” “build,” etc.), tend to function as performative speech act verbs (Cicognani & Maher, 1997; Łacka-Badura, 2013; cf. Kim et al., 2006). Thus, from the current data, verbs in the following VL contexts: “access this file at”; “upload and file”; “please visit the following web page; “post a picture to that folder by clicking

on it and uploading the pic”; “take a look (at): [http://...](#)”; “enter your vote today!”; “click on Post ... click on Send ...”; and “copy and paste,” tend to operate as performative speech act verbs.

CONCLUSION

As pointed out earlier, one of the observations made by Marcoccia (2004) about online polylogal conversations pertaining to ODFs is that they are fraught with problems. This is particularly the case with conversation structures characterizing such ODFs. In this instance, Marcoccia’s (2004) study was one of the first to investigate and analyze online polylogal conversation structures and their related participation roles. Based on this observation, and building on both Cicognani & Maher’s (1997) and Marcoccia’s (2004) studies, the current study examined both online polylogues and the speech acts encoded in the three ODFs as spelled out above.

First, it focused on the overall format of the three ODFs, the types of topics discussed, the nature of messages posted, and the sequential structure of discussion messages. In addition, it identified the major types of polylogues emerging from the three ODFs and the nature of interactions and the sequences characterizing these polylogues. Second, it established the participation framework and the conversation structure of these ODFs. Third, it explored the speech acts occurring within these ODFs. In all, the study mounted a dual analysis of the polylogal conversations of ODFs and of the speech acts emanating from the polylogues of these ODFs as instances of virtual-life environments. It did so by employing a multilayered analytical framework in view of the fact that online polylogues often tend to pose analytical and methodological challenges to standard discourse analysis.

Against the points highlighted in the preceding paragraph, some of the findings of this study are as follows:

- the three ODFs displayed five types of polylogal thread messages;
- the polylogal frequencies and the sequential structure displayed by the thread topics varied according to the messages posted by participants;
- the participation framework and the conversation structure of polylogal messages of these ODFs followed both (semi)regular and irregular patterns of adjacency pairs; and

- some of the speech acts performed by participants in their polylogal discussions included greeting, welcoming, informing, advising, thanking, congratulating, and promising.

IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

There are implications to be drawn from this study. First, online polylogues are characterized by incoherences in both turn-taking and topic development. They are also typified by simultaneous or multiple turns. That is, they have multilogal features (see Ekeblad, 1999; Herring, 1999; Simpson, 2005; Skogs, 2015; Uthus & Aha, 2013). Second, the speech acts of ODFs are context-, medium- and environment-specific. That is, they are situational and deictic as is the case with the speech acts of greeting and in the same way as the concept of literacy as argued by Chaka (2019) and Forzani and Leu (2017). The point here is, there are certain verbs that in real-life (RL) situations operate as just ordinary verbs but which, in the context of ODFs, tend to function as performative speech act verbs (see Cicognani & Maher, 1997; Hassell, 1995; Verschueren, 1980). Thus, while this development does not necessarily signify a conversational and pragmatic revolution, it nonetheless emphasizes the dynamic nature of computer-mediated human communication and the need for further research in this area. Moreover, since the current study employed only a sample of 400 messages as the basis of its investigation, more broad-based studies are necessary to investigate further the nuances of online discussion polylogues and their related speech acts.

The behavior of ODF users varies according to individual ODFs, discussion topics, and the purpose of discussion. So, different ODFs often exhibit their own permutations and idiosyncrasies, which means that more research is needed in this instance in order to investigate the permutations and idiosyncrasies of other ODFs. This is more true today since there are more and sophisticated online communities whose interactions are no longer confined to the synchronicity/asynchronicity of the Internet as the prime enabling technology, but which also occur either synchronously or asynchronously within social media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp. The interactional dynamics

and intricacies posed by digital groups operating within these over-the-top (OTP) applications (see Chaka, Nkhobo, & Lephala, n.d.) require scholarly investigation in terms of their multiparty conversations. Furthermore, future research needs to mount a comparative analysis of ODF polylogal communication and speech acts and of the polylogal communication and speech acts of digital groups using OTP applications.

Last, users' online lives do not simplistically and mechanically mirror users' real-world lives. Therefore, the polylogal trends explored in this study relate solely to users' online messages as determined by the three online platforms. In conclusion, notwithstanding the limitations this study has, it has the potential to be replicated by other researchers in other online environments making use of ODFs.

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