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Articles

**Online support groups for young women with self-harming behaviours:  
understanding the elaborative functions of the experience**

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**Abstract**

Recent studies show an increase in self-harming behaviour among adolescents and young people, who often require online psychological support. This trend has produced an increase in studies and online psychological interventions. As of today, however, online support groups for self-harmers are still under-examined. Therefore, within a European project, we collected the discussions of four groups for young people with self-harming behaviours and analysed them by using a software for automatic qualitative text analysis. In particular, we focused on the themes discussed, and how these were discursively organized by the members in order to comprehend the psychodynamic functions promoted by each group. Four main themes and three sense vectors emerged. Online support groups with young women who self-harm produce some elaborative functions: the container of anguish, the emotion-regulation and the meaning-making. Clinical implications of online support groups for young people with self-harming behaviours will be discussed.

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**1. Introduction**

The self-harming behaviours, elsewhere also defined as non-suicidal self-injury (Gargiulo et al., 2014) have been defined as the deliberate and self-inflicted damage of body tissue without suicidal intent and for purposes that are not socially or culturally sanctioned; examples are cutting, burning and scratching the skin or hitting (Martorana, 2015; Nock, 2010). In recent

years we have seen an increase of these behaviours, particularly widespread amongst the adolescent and young adult population (Brown & Plener, 2017).

A part of the literature shows that females are more likely to implement the indicated behaviours than males (Bresin & Schoenleber, 2015; Valencia-Agundo et al., 2018), showing a female gender gap above all among clinical samples (Claes & Vandereycken, 2007). Other studies showed gender diversity less evident in prevalence (Sornberger et al., 2012), but linked to aetiology, trajectories and contexts (Whitlock & Rodham, 2013). Significant gender differences have been found with respect to the kind of self-harm (girls mostly resort to cutting), to the injured body parts, to the age of onset (earlier for girls), to the increase in self-harming behaviour and to the suicidal ideation in pre-adolescence (Andover et al., 2010), to the access to the request for help (Heath et al., 2010), as well as to the social dimensions of the phenomenon (boys tend to self-harm in group; Whitlock et al., 2011).

The research has shown that adolescents who self-harm have difficulty in putting their sufferings in words, and consider it as a means of communication that allows them to share the emotions of anger and anguish (Gargiulo, 2020); this would lead families and those who surround them to realize how much they are suffering (Fortune et al., 2008; Moyer & Nelson, 2007). In fact, it has been shown that these adolescents have poor ability to identify, name and express emotions (Gratz, 2007) and report the affective regulation as the most common motivation to injure themselves (Gargiulo et al., 2019; LayeGindhu & Schonert-Reichl, 2005; Madge et al., 2008).

Within a well-known difficulty in expressing emotions through language, in help seeking, as well as in continuing clinical treatments without interruption, young people with self-harming behaviours found online a preferential context of sharing and narrating their suffering (Arshad et al., 2020).

Thus, the showing off of self-harming behaviours is nowadays really common in virtual environments, where the contemporary phenomenon of e-communities dedicated to the theme is spread (Lewis & Seko, 2016). In these websites, the malaise is shared through narratives and images of injured bodies, using the same virtual space as an emotional regulator (Gargiulo & Margherita, 2019; Margherita & Gargiulo, 2018). It should be noted that participants are mostly female (Dyson et al., 2016). Such websites respond to diverse users' needs, like emotion-control, the desire to feel part of a supportive group and to feel less isolated (Lewis & Baker, 2011; Seko et al., 2015), highlighting a list of benefits such as encouraging recovery, emotional self-disclosure and curbing self-harm urges, but also risks that include stigmatization of self-harm, and triggering or reinforcing it (Mitchell et al., 2014; Rodham et al., 2013).

In parallel, also the use of Internet as a source of self-help, for looking for information, answers, to seeking help and people who share the same problems has increased in recent years, particularly among young people. Therefore, several authors started to consider the virtual environments as possible contexts for clinical intervention, highlighting the role of the Internet as the ideal medium for self-expression as it allows anonymity, which is important in difficult or sensitive issues such as self-harm (Hawton et al, 2012; Martorana, 2015).

Probably, as otherwise reported (De Riggi et al., 2018), the Internet has a certain relevance for young people who feel marginalized, as it provides a low risk “venue” for finding others who share their perceived or real differences, and for exchanging information that is difficult to convey in person, or when using one’s real identity (McKenna & Green, 2002). Because self-harm is often intertwined with feelings of shame and secrecy, online services may prove to be particularly useful. With regards to anonymity, findings suggest that interactional confidence is increased due to the aspects of perceived anonymity and control over information disclosure (Galanxhi & Nah, 2007).

Services of counselling and psychotherapy online, in fact, offer several advantages including availability, convenience and accessibility, cost-effectiveness and privacy, which are particularly relevant for those subjects seeking help, but may not be inclined to utilize traditional services (Monaghan & Blaszczynski, 2009). Nowadays, the literature shows the benefits related to online counselling, inviting the researchers to consider opportunities in studying this phenomenon (Baker & Ray, 2011; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013).

In particular, we look at the online support groups. Studies identified some primary factors dynamically operating & significantly affecting positive outcomes in online support groups: exchange of relevant information and knowledge (Buis, 2008); undergoing the psychological impact of writing (Barak & Miron, 2005); providing and receiving emotional support (Coulson et al., 2007); experiencing universally (Bane et al., 2005); developing interpersonal relationships (Ye, 2006); being assisted in making decisions and taking consequent actions (Baeker, 2008); sharing personal experiences (Eichhorn, 2008). Overall, about the efficacy of OSGs, some works have not shown significant effectiveness (Hoybye et al., 2010; van der Houwen et al., 2010), while others have reported potential benefits, like improving a negative emotional state and relieving distress for introverted adolescents (Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013). At last, a recent review has showed some potential risks of peer support for self-harm in non-clinical settings, like triggering self-harm, being re-traumatized by listening to other people’s stories, not having the knowledge or skills to help others, and misunderstandings or disagreements with other peers /group members (Abou Seif et al., 2021).

## 1.1 Aims

In order to create a space where young people could safely and freely meet to talk with their peers about similar experiences they might share, their need to be heard, the fear of being judged, in opposition to physical places, we witness the development of virtual spaces, where conversations are moderated and supervised by a professional. In this sense, the online support group (OSG) is a suitable device. Although OSGs have been empirically examined relatively little, some studies reported evidence regard to their effectiveness in providing emotional relief to adolescents (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006).

We start from the concept of ‘group’ as a cultural context where its members can build meanings and develop practices for the elaboration of experiences. This implies considering the group as a whole entity (Bion, 1961) with its own mental life characterized by conscious and unconscious aspects, by emotions and thoughts, by more archaic levels such as psycho-physical, bodily, somatic and more symbolic levels, such as dreams, myths, narratives.

Thus, considering that self-harming behaviour is a contemporary topic of clinical relevance also in virtual contexts, this work aims to identify the main themes discussed among online support groups of young women with self-harm, and how these themes are organized discursively and elaborated by the groups. This will allow us to comprehend what kind of psychological functions can be promoted by groups with this specific target of patients.

## 2. Materials and Method

From a perspective of cultural and semiotic dynamic psychology (Salvatore & Freda, 2010; Valsiner & Rosa, 2007), in which subjective experience is considered as a continuous process of formation through the mediation of semiotic devices, the narration allows to access to culturally shared meanings (Bruner, 1991) & to activate fields of knowledge and transformation (Corrao, 1985). In this framework we have chosen an explorative qualitative approach capable to investigate the groups’ narrative discussions; this approach allowed us to start from narrative data, and, through a bottom-up method, to identify the main themes.

### 2.1 Participants and Procedures

The participants of the study were selected from a larger group of Italian young people who registered, between 2010 and 2012, on the SIBRIC.it website, Italian portal for information, support and research on self-harming behaviours (<https://www.sibric.it/>). This experience was part of the interventions foreseen within the European Project “Online Self-Harm Support for Youth” (Daphne III Programme UE) aimed at developing safe online environments for young

people who self-harm (YouthNet, 2012). The young people, after registering on the site, requested to be included in on-line support groups, through an email.

All the participants filled an on-line entry questionnaire, including demographic data (age, gender, level of education) and information on their self-injurious behaviours. Subsequently, they underwent a preliminary interview by chat on sibiric.it, in which an expert explained to them what the group experience consisted of, the rules of meetings, and answered any doubts or questions about it. After completion of these steps, all the subjects included in the experience were young subjects of age between 12 and 25, who claimed to have had episodes of self-injurious behaviour, and accepted the rules of group meetings.

The groups were progressively constituted on the basis of the requests received. As soon as a suitable number of members was reached the group experience was started and a new group was formed. Participants in the group experience were 21 in total (aged 13-25, average 20.25), all female, divided into 4 online support groups (Table 1).

The procedures were carried out in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and the ethic issues of the Project were approved by the Daphne III Programme of the European Union. All participants were informed about the study and the analysis of the group experiences, and they all provided informed consent. Due to the sensitivity of the participants, careful precautions were taken to guarantee the safety and well-being of the members of the groups, such as anonymity (therefore it was impossible to trace the identity of participants), and online individual counselling by chat at critical moments or in case of personal difficulties. Given that identifiable information on the participants was not acquired, and parents were often unaware of self-harm practice, it was considered inappropriate to ask for parental consent in the case of minors. Moreover, it was considered contrary to the best interests of the young person, as well as capable of making matters worse.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of groups

Group	Number of Participants	Participant's Gender	Mean Age	Moderator's Gender	Group Compliance	Presences
1	6	Female	21,3	Female	High	56/72
2	5	Female	20,6	Male	High	45/60
3	6	Female	21	Male	Low	35/72
4	4	Female	15,25	Female	Low	12/48

We used the online support groups, based on peer-to-peer support, and sharing of emotions and personal experiences in a chat room, with the moderation of an experienced psychologist. Although some literature highlights those online interactions provide a form of support for isolated adolescents, there is a potential risk to normalize and encourage self-harming behaviour and add potentially lethal behaviours (Whitlock et al., 2006). For this specific reason groups are moderated by a professional figure, a psychologist who have the task to facilitate communication among participants to guarantee a safe environment and protect the well-being of everyone involved in the conversation.

The psychologists with the role of moderator involved in the project were all graduated in clinical psychology, expert in Internet communication, and with an expertise in self-harming behaviours and counselling online. The possibility of a secure environment, such as a support group online or counselling online, allows participants to experience relationships with others and to “be” themselves, without fearing stigma, assessments nor criticisms, all aspects which often accompany social interactions. In so doing, the online support group becomes an occasion to feel less alone, understood, and fosters a positive environment where the subjects are not ashamed to ask for help. The group experience comprised 12 sessions on a weekly basis, about one hour and a half each.

We decided to use online support groups to help young people who self-harm through a protected and non-judgmental virtual environment in which they could “meet” other peers, share emotions and deal with social stigma, a hardly practicable experience because of their difficulties to access local services.

## **2.2 Data analysis**

Within an explorative and qualitative methodology of research, we used a thematic analysis of groups’ discussions. We chose T-Lab (Lancia, 2004, 2008), a qualitative-quantitative software for the automatic analysis of texts, because, through the study of vocabulary (Bolasco, 1999), it identifies the shared themes present in the text under analysis.

The discussions of the group sessions as documents were codified following the variables considered (gender of the group moderator female/ male, and group compliance high/ low) and were merged into a single body of text. The documents analysed were equal in size of textual corpus for the balancing of statistical weight.

First of all, we carried out a preliminary treatment of the text (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Preliminary organization of the text

Lemmatization	The forms of the verbs are brought back to their present infinitive forms, the nouns and adjectives to their singular masculine form, articulated prepositions to their article-less form.
Disambiguos	It is an operation by which ambiguous semantic cases are solved. In particular those cases which deal with homographs whose graphic form is the same but with a different meaning.
Lexicalization	To turn the unit into a string phrase consisting of two or three words that refer to a unitary meaning.
Cleaning the vocabulary	Words words from empty or insignificant, such as the abbreviations techniques, proper names. articles, conjunctions are deleted.

Later, we performed the analysis of the elementary context unit (e.c.u., like sentences or short portions of text), carrying out some thematic clusters. This analysis is based on a statistical study of the co-occurrence of words and the final product synthesizes few significant thematic clusters as a contextual field of meanings (Reinert, 1995). Each cluster consists of a set of e.c.u. and is described through a set of keywords (or lemmas) that, ranked according to the decreasing value of  $\chi^2$ , indicates the typicality of each of them within the cluster. This allows to reflect on the meaning of words by the reference to a number of e.c.u., analysing the words in the context in which they are used.

Finally, we performed the analysis of multiple correspondences which projected the clusters on the factorial plan; this allowed to observe relationships (oppositions and neighbourhoods) between the issues emerged by interpreting the axes that bind them together.

### 3. Results

Four thematic clusters emerged (Table 3). We proceeded with the description of the clusters, starting from the one that is statistically more significant. Each cluster was assigned an interpretative label, presenting the key words that mainly characterize it, based on the value of  $\chi^2$ .

**Table 3.** Description of clusters

Cluster	Lemma that mainly characterize the cluster based on the value of $\chi^2$
1) <i>The concreteness of the wounded body between sensations and emotions</i> (composed of 650 e.c.u. out of 2319, which equals to 28.03%).	to hear (318.591), to see (116.997), people (104.674), mother (50.816), face (31.805), to become (31.292), sense (29.145), fear (28.956), to fight (28.166), guilt (25.157), worse (23.921), body (22.242), disgusting (21.193), injured (20.849), skin (19.294), ashamed (18.962), emptiness (18.962), living (17.988), to scare (17.504), to change (17.023), father (15.499), to hide (14.994), sister (14.994), sick (14.903), sleeve (14.903), crisis (14.797), eye (12.859), view (12.859), need (11.992), arm (11.075), signs (10.771), pain (8.842), calming (8.749), cutting (8.333), anxiety (7.18), anger (6.672), tear (6.338), blood (6.338), loneliness (6.338). The variable present in the cluster is Low Compliance (4.187).
2) <i>Think about the pain: the searching for the meaning of the scar</i> (643 e.c.u. out of 2319, equal to 27.73%).	to understand (315.478), succeed (158.109), problem (143.381), to think (130.009), to search (93.855), parent (40.797), to explain (39.295), to help (24.281), suffer (21.91), I (21.241), to find (20.723), to accept (16.948), comprehend (16.948), disturb (16.255), to control (13.543), cure (11.729), cuts (11.145), professor (10.763), hate (10.608), to learn (10.46), voice (10.367), to destroy (9.949), head (9.457), behaviour (8.941), risk (8.469), study (8.049), to stop (7.99), grow (7.851), depression (7.851), scar (7.417), to recognize (6.852), to cry (6.371), uncover (5.272), contain (5.182). The variables present in this cluster are Male Moderator (18.914) and Low Compliance (5.152).
3) <i>The working group: who are we? Why do we get together?</i> (590 e.c.u. out of 2319, which equals to 25.44%).	group (208.795), chat (78.199), to arrive (76.594), to start (73.536), meeting (70.486), thanks (66.482), to enter (45.399), delay (35.557), to share (33.971), to write (31.697), together (30.291), discuss (30.163), room (27.91), presentation (25.779), to wait (23.037), work (21.275), to ask (19.579), attend (17.935), experience (16.47), to speak (16.096), communication (15.836), moderator (15.836), to reply (15.403), journey (15.271), to read (14.355), staff (14.319), you (13.441), rules (12.587), goals (11.454), join (11.454), pause (11.189), curious (10.324), support (10.324), pc (10.148), space (9.621), name (9.106), website (8.294), absent (7.57), link (5.202), our (5.119), mutual (5.03).
4) <i>The temporality of the group between rhythm and memory</i> (436 e.c.u. out of 2319, equal to 18.80%).	week (724.833), good (494.983), next (313.992), evening (187.024), last (125.211), Wednesday (110.626), time (76.8), dinner (68.588), day (61.737), topic (56.554), Monday (54.557), e-mail (50.739), Tuesday (49.188), video (41.222), forum (39.304), remember (37.715), closed (28.07), to thank (27.945), appointment (25.41), hug (18.943), Christmas (16.037), today (16.001), greeting (12.289), to send (11.455), hour (11.279), receive (9.04), material (8.236), link (8.192), august (7.583), song (7.137), file (7.137), to call (6.786), kiss (5.016).

The first cluster, *the concreteness of the wounded body between sensations and emotions*, urges the theme of corporeity in self-harming behaviours, imbued with senses and pervaded by raw emotions not yet elaborated. In fact, this cultural context incorporates many lemmas referring to the senses, the organs of body perception, and emotions. Furthermore, there are words that refer to significant relationships (*mother, father, sister*), in connection with verbs such as *fighting, hiding* referring to relational dynamics of conflict and withdrawal, which recall scenes of aggressive explosiveness and of hiding commonly observed in young people with self-harm behaviour. Finally, there are references to the symptoms in its aspects of urgency and self-evaluation (*worse, disgusting*), which make us grasp the destructive result of the malaise shared by young people. The presence of the variable “low compliance” in this cluster could be interpreted as the

projection of the symptomatology into the group in a way that can attack the group and destroy the bonds (*absences, abandonments*). However, these findings showed that the online support group allows the sharing of an inner personal experience, as suggested also in literature (Eichhorn, 2008). Therefore, starting from the tightening and the fixity of some themes related to the symptom, the counsellors and the psychotherapists can intercept the atmosphere of a group where there is compliance or not.

Examples of typical narratives are: *“so much so that I felt and did not feel the body that for fear of losing it I had to feel the body and I made the spheres with the big pin, with so much anger, without control, on an ankle or along the leg. it could be a bit of a want to cancel everything... Yes, I agree with you”* (Male Moderator, High Compliance).

*“Sometimes I feel too much, I feel things that I would not want to feel, but I cannot give these things a name, I just want to stop feeling them and the worst thing, I do not know if it's the same for you, it's when people ask you 'how are you?' I never know what to answer, I say well”* (Male Moderator, Low Compliance).

The second cluster, *think about the pain: the searching for the meaning of the scar*, leads to the topic of the search for meaning in self-harming behaviour, as we can see in the many words referring to a mentalizing functioning (*understanding, thinking, explaining*). Probably there is a need for adult figures (*parent, professor*) in order to access to a dimension of psychological care and understanding of the malaise (*to help, to contain*). The ability to intercept and comprehend the seeking for help by young girls may allow to develop patient tailored interventions of counselling and prevention programs. The self-harm symptomatology, still present as shown by some lemmas (*cuts, scar*), seems to be related to a reflexive movement that captures more complex and profound plans (*suffering, hating, depression*), being able to access to the thought of stopping the self-harming behaviour. These findings seem to suggest a group dynamic in which the members could be assisted in making decisions and meaning-making processes, as shown by Barker (2008) as an empowering factor of support groups. The variable “male moderator”, which falls exclusively in this cluster, represents perhaps a specific characteristic of the male conduction of a group, probably more oriented on a thinking and reflective vertex.

*“I think I 've understood it too, I also thought that there are so many aspects that must be accepted and known .. exactly. the appearance of the wolf I understand that for her is self-harm... yes, self-harm is not an aspect, it is a behaviour that once understood may no longer exist”* (Female Moderator, High Compliance).

*“why change the environment? I, for example, try to make new relationships, I try to be myself ... certainly hiding that particular of myself .... the reason why I look for relationships is because, in the environment I'm in now, I'm catalogued. I do not know if you understand me”* (Male Moderator, High Compliance).

The third cluster *the working group: who are we? Why do we get together?* highlights a group dimension that pertains to what we might call “the work group” in reference to the rules and the explicit functioning that the group has set and carried forward. In fact, the terms clarify who the group is composed of (*together, moderator, name, absent*), which space they meet in (*chat, meeting, room*), and what they do (*share, discuss, experience, support*). Thus, in the life of each group, alongside an emotional and primitive dimension, there is always a rational activity typical of what is called “the work group”, which is task-oriented (Bion, 1961). It seems that the need to establish an organizing foundation of experience belongs to all the groups involved. The psychologist explains the rules, taking care of the setting and its estate. The moderator expresses reassurance and gives approval and reassurance, but also does interpretative movements on group functioning by observing the behaviour of the members; these interpretative movements are shared in a group with high compliance, reflecting the fact that it can be said there, because the group is able to receive these deeper reformulations. Numerous references to the modalities and possibilities of communication in group appear, and a group identity, rooted both in discussion and comparison as well as in emotional support, emerges. Therefore, the online group experience allowed to provide and receive emotional support (Coulson et al., 2007), developing interpersonal relationships (Ye, 2006).

*“We can start with introductions... Hello .. First of all, I would like to welcome the newcomers and explain a little how the group works ... Thanks ... This is a support group that will be held every week at this time on the chat room” (Male Moderator, Low Compliance).*

*“You are part of this group and I care that you are okay ... it might be important to talk about why you did not feel like entering a chat, maybe it's something shared with others” (Female Moderator, High Compliance).*

Finally, the cluster called *the temporality of the group between rhythm and memory* aggregates lemmas linked to time carrying different meanings: the chronological deadline of group meetings (*week, Wednesday, hour*), and aspects that preserve the historical memory of the shared group path (*e-mail, video, remember*). The experience of the group becomes a common deposit, where a common language can take place. It is important for the psychologist to tune in with the language of the group. The support group is an opportunity to exchange relevant information and knowledge (Buis, 2008). In addition, we find a series of words that refer to the management of breaks and separations between sessions (*bug, greeting, kiss*), as a hinge mode between meetings.

*“Time to say goodbye, we'll meet next Tuesday! I wish a good week to you all ... a good week and a good work... Bye!” (Female Moderator, High Compliance).*

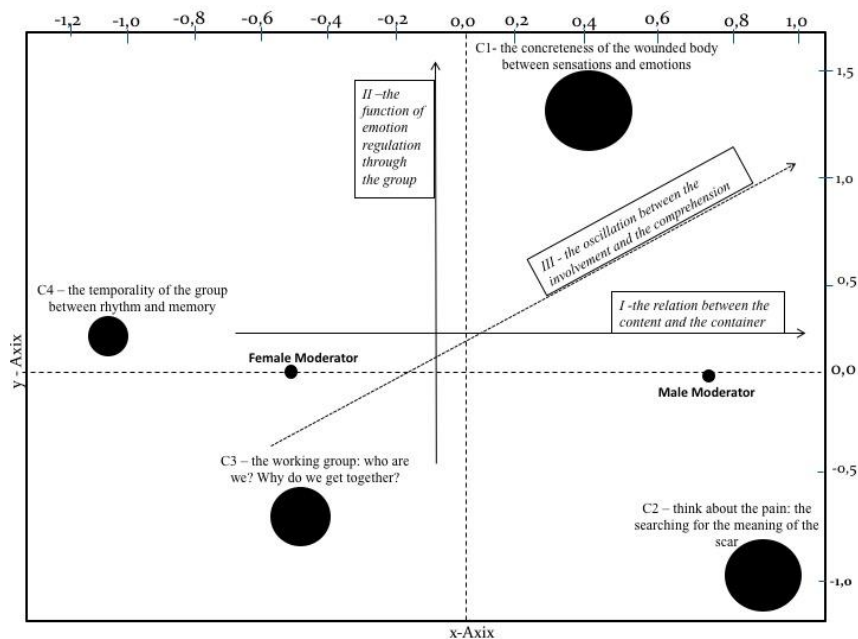
*“I would say that today we have had several reflections, from identity to relationships ... a lot ... I would say that it is enough ... yes .. I will think about it and I will let you know ... I wish you a good week .. I wish you a happy week too... thanks for everything” (Female Moderator, Low Compliance).*

### 3.1 Interpretation using factorial axis

On factor I, we find the horizontal axis named *the relation between the content and the container*. This is organized along a continuum which, as shown in Figure 1, moves from the left side of the graph, where clusters 4 and 3 and the variable *female moderator* are graphically projected, representing a psychic area of spatial and temporal organization of the group setting, towards the right side of the graph, in which there are clusters 1 and 2 and the variable *male moderator*, which constitutes an area where the shared contents are grouped within the process. Therefore, it appears that these psychic dimensions, through this first axis, are related to each other according to a narrative function of connection between contents (emotions and thoughts) and containers (space and time of the group), carried out by the whole group experience. In this sense, the name of the axis quotes the container-contained model developed by Bion (1962), in which one is strictly linked to the other.

On factor II, we find the vertical axis *the function of emotion-regulation through the group*. This sense vector connects the lower part of the graph, consisting of cluster 2, with the top part where cluster 1 is located. In detail, we can interpret the presence of a link between sensory and raw emotional dimensions, expressed graphically by cluster 1, with a conscious function of organizing the thoughts, activities and aims of the working group brought to salience by cluster 2. It is therefore possible to observe that the emotions can be digested and reclaimed, therefore regulated, through the group experience.

Finally, factor III, the transverse axis, is named *the oscillation between involvement and comprehension*. It connects clusters 1 and 3, which represent the area of emotional engagement in the group, sharing affections, experiences, materials, with the clusters 2 and 4, which refer to a temporal and rational organization dimension leading to a level of comprehension and meaning-making of experience. Thus, it is possible to observe a connection between an atmosphere of sensorial and emotional mix of the group, which can generate confusion and regression but also mirroring and identification among the participants, and an atmosphere of understanding and clarification of the contents and containers emerged.

**Figure 1.** Factorial map of clusters

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine online support groups for self-harmers in order to comprehend the psychodynamic functions promoted by the experience of group. The work enabled us to observe that the online support group with young women who self-harm allows the development of some elaborative functions. In particular, it emerged that the members delegate to the group functions in which each one is deficient: the function of container of anguish, of emotion-regulation, as well as of organization of sense and comprehension of confused parts of the self. These represent psychological skills sometimes lost in those who self-harm, therefore the virtual and social experience tended to reinforce and develop, highlighting that self-injurious behaviours are problems that may benefit from Internet based interventions, in line with most relevant literature (Arshad et al., 2020).

Narrating personal experience of self-harm in group provides the possibility of recognizing and labelling the emotions, of activating a process of meaning making, of sharing meanings in a compassionate and non-judgmental space. Thus, the narration activates a transformative movement from the inside to the outside, allowing the development of the function of emotional regulation. It is well known in literature that the motion regulation (Gross, 1998) is one of the main functions that Self-harming behaviour assumes in the psychic economy of the individual (Gratz, 2007), realizing a dynamic that expels the affects in the soma. Our study shows that emotions are projected in the group, moving from the symptom to the group; therefore, the group starts to manage and regulate emotions preventing the need of self-harming act. This

group functions became gradually internalized by each member as individual function able to elaborate future experiences.

The psychologist becomes a facilitator of elaborative functions, recognizing and activating them, and keeps them as a member of the group. In this sense, we can affirm the effectiveness of peer online support groups in the topic of self-harm, which allow not only to improve psychopathological aspects but also to transform resources among the members. Indeed, current research is questioning the role of peers about disclosure self-harm, considering the peers a vital avenue for accessing recovery support and further help, therefore for encouraging professional help-seeking (Gayfer et al., 2020). Furthermore, these online interventions have the potential to meet the growing demand for mental health services, inviting counsellors and psychotherapists to carry on researches and clinical practices on them.

Although a part of the literature highlighted that online support groups might indeed generate no impact on their participants (Eysenbach et al., 2004), there are people who find the group is a relieving vehicle, taking an active part in them. The group allowed young girls to share personal experiences, to exchange information and knowledge, to develop interpersonal relationships providing and receiving emotional support; these findings are in line with recent literature showing that peer support for self-harm promotes improvements in interpersonal skills (Abou Seif et al., 2021). Therefore, facilitator psychologists should be instructed and trained in order to encourage participant's active involvement, searching for a working alliance.

This group experience proved to be stimulating both for the reflections and the dynamics that have emerged, although some moments have been difficult and sometimes frustrating because of repeated attacks on the setting that took place in the form of inconstant presence, delays, sudden drops of line and early departures. The "virtual space of the group" in its spatial and temporal dimensions seems to be invested as a place to draw from and interact with according to its own characteristics. If some have used it as a useful space to deal with their own difficulties, others seem to use this experience in the same impulsive way by which they do harm (Margherita et al., 2021). In some moments a transition also occurred from more intellectual positions to more integrated ones with emotional and personal experiences. Such emotional movements may reflect a greater acceptance/ recognition of one's own difficulties, often a precondition for an effective process of individuation and awareness of one's own difficulties and one's own history of self-harm. Therefore, this kind of social experience, in which everyone could recognize himself through the other (his/her experience, his/her presence, his/her look), helps

people to disclose themselves, in particular disclosing non suicidal self-injury behaviours, despite the fear of negative social reactions (Park et al., 2021).

The study is not free from limitations. First of all, we have not matched the qualitative findings emerged from our study with outcome data about the clinical changes of each member of the group; we will integrate this element in future studies. Another limitation regards the sample and the difficulty to compare the groups according to the gender variable. In further research, we would like to enlarge our investigation on groups of young women with self-harm, studying the group process combined to the meaning-making processes which the experience may bring out. At last, since it is not a longitudinal study, it is not possible to know if any improvements are constant over time.

### **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any potential conflict of interest.

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