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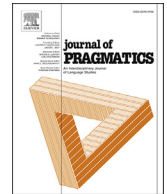
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# Responses to advice-seeking on Reddit that do not give advice

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## ABSTRACT

Previous studies have observed that asynchronous online interaction relies on sequence organization in the same way as spoken interaction, but that its sequential implicativeness might sometimes become looser. This means that advice-seeking may be followed by something other than advice, without it being treated as problematic. This study investigates such instances on Reddit, utilizing the Conversation Analytic concepts of affiliative stance and action alignment. The analysis led to two major observations. First, based on the affiliative stance, there are three ways of reacting to an advice-seeking post: accepting, negotiating, and denying the validity of the advice-seeking. Second, most responses that did not align with the action did align with the overall activity or another action made relevant by the preceding message. Based on the analysis, this article offers a system for classifying responses to advice-seeking that do not give advice.

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## 1. Introduction

Human interaction is built around sequentiality – sequences of action and adjacency pairs, in which one action provides a slot for another action of a certain type. The connection between the first and the second part of an action pair is typically tight, and deviance from the pattern needs to be accounted for. After a digression, one is expected to return to the main line and provide the missing second pair part (Schegloff, 2007). This well-functioning structure is best demonstrated in dyadic spoken interaction, but several studies of online interaction have shown that in written multi-party interaction also, discussants rely on paired actions, though the requirement for adjacency becomes somewhat looser (for an overview, see Meredith, 2019). In general, questions are responded to with answers, and requests for advice with advice. On the other hand, already the earliest interactional studies of online interaction noted that “[v]iolations of sequential coherence are the rule rather than the exception in CMC” (Herring, 1999). This article investigates one perceived type of violation of sequential coherence in online forums by looking into responses to explicit requests for advice that do not align with the request, i.e. do not give advice.

The process of seeking and providing advice online is complex and has been the object of extensive scholarly research. This study complements this line of work by looking at a phenomenon that is yet to be described – not giving advice when it is requested. The main emphasis is on actions and their (non-)alignment. One prevailing observation in interactional studies of seeking for and providing advice online is that even though advice-seeking posts are responded to with advice, problem-tellings that do not explicitly ask for help are also repeatedly responded to with advice (Vayreda and Antaki, 2009; Stommel and Koole, 2010). Asymmetry between the first and second pair parts of an adjacency pair appears to be a common feature in online forum discussions, and one post may receive several different types of responses. What remains to be

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observed more closely is the relationship between them and the advice-seeking post and the extent to which the responses that do not fulfill the expectations of the first pair part of an adjacency pair are a source of incoherence.

This study draws on the structural concepts of Conversation Analysis (CA) to build a better understanding of the anatomy of actions and their relations in online interaction. The object of the analysis is a sequence (cf. Schegloff, 2007) which consists of the advice-seeking post, the comment responding to it, and a possible post-expansion. The objective of this analysis is to answer the following questions: 1) What is the function of responses that do not provide advice? and 2) What type of (affective) stance do these responses display towards the advice-seeking? The article begins with an overview of previous research on advice-seeking (Section 2), and subsequently introduces the research data and method (Section 3). This is followed by analysis sections on accepting (Section 4.1), denying (Section 4.2), and negotiating (Section 4.3) the validity of the advice-seeking.

## 2. Previous studies

### 2.1. Adjacency pairs in online interaction

CA has been applied to online interaction since the late 1990s, and it has now been established that different forms of interaction can be analyzed using the same methodology as is used to analyze spoken conversation, taking into account the affordances of a given platform or medium (see Meredith, 2019). For example, Antaki et al. (2005) and Vayreda and Antaki (2009) have taken the position that a written contribution in a forum can be taken to correspond to a turn-at-talk in spoken interaction. The current study also applies this view and considers the posts and messages in Reddit to consist of actions and to form sequences of actions, such as adjacency pairs.

An early study of IRC chats by Herring (1999) pointed out that the main sources of structural incoherence in online interaction is caused by a lack of simultaneous feedback and disrupted adjacency, i.e., the phenomenon that associated messages, such as first and second pair parts of an adjacency pair, are not located adjacently. However, Herring did not imply that this would make the interaction incomprehensible. She showed how several user adaptations could remedy the structural incoherence, as well as how incoherence can be used as a creative source of playfulness. Disrupted adjacency can cause misunderstandings (Garcia and Jacobs, 1999), and several studies have focused on how sequential coherence is maintained through, for example, addressing (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009; Licoppe and Morel, 2012), quoting (Gibson, 2009; Honeycutt and Herring, 2009), lexical repetition, and substitution (Berglund, 2009; Woerner et al., 2007).

In asynchronous written interactions such as emails or forums like Reddit, posts can be long and contain several first pair parts (Stommel and Koole, 2010). In these cases, the lack of a second pair part is not necessarily treated as a noticeable absence. The poster can also relax the requirements of a second pair part by finishing with a statement that suggests that the post should not be understood as, for example, a request for advice, but as a telling (Stommel and Koole, 2010). It has also been observed that ignoring the main action of the post entirely in a reply can be treated as unproblematic (Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014). Thus, a connection exists between first and second pair parts in asynchronous online interaction, but on terms that are different from those in synchronous face-to-face discussion.

### 2.2. Seeking and giving advice

Seeking and offering advice are common online activities, encompassing professional advice-giving sites that resemble advice columns in magazines (see Locher, 2006, 2013), support groups, and helpline chats provided by institutions, as well as discussion boards designed for peer support. Advice-seeking online has attracted scholarly interest, particularly within pragmatics (for an overview, see, e.g., Locher, 2013; Morrow, 2017; Arendholz, 2017). In this overview I will focus on observations that pertain to the structural and interactional aspects of seeking and giving advice. Advice is commonly defined as suggestions and recommendations for future actions, and can be either solicited or unsolicited (see, e.g., Lindholm, 2019), that is, it can be requested or volunteered.

Advice-giving can be described as an endeavor to solve a problem together with the advice-seeker. It has been observed that when people introduce a problem that they face, their interlocutors typically attempt to help solve it by offering advice (Feng and MacGeorge, 2010). Requests for advice are generally described as either indirect (e.g., indicated by the telling of a problem) or direct (e.g., questions, statements of uncertainty, and appeals for help) (Locher, 2006). A typical request for advice contains a problem description (Locher, 2006), which has also been used as the distinguishing factor between information-seeking and advice-seeking (Plnick, 2001). While the problem description can sometimes function as an implicit request (Locher, 2006: 233; Heritage and Sefi, 1992), on its own it does not always imply that advice is sought. Jefferson and Lee (1981) argue that whereas discussing one's problems may solicit advice, it may also be a troubles-telling, for which a display of empathy is expected, and providing advice in a situation of this type may induce tension. Advice-giving can also be more or less direct or indirect. Direct advice orients toward future action, and can, for example, take the form of imperatives, modal verbs of necessity, and overt recommendations (Heritage and Sefi, 1992; Locher, 2006). Indirect advice can be expressed as interrogatives, declaratives, and non-agentive statements, and in certain contexts, such as counseling, also as knowledge statements and factual generalizations (Locher, 2006; Kinell and Maynard, 1996).

Conversation Analytic and CA-inspired studies of online advice have mainly concentrated on online support groups (see Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014), neglecting large general-purpose forums such as Reddit. Several studies have analyzed how

advice is requested and given (Veen et al., 2010; Vayreda and Antaki, 2009; Morrow, 2006; Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003; Stommel and Koole, 2010; Snejder and Te Molder, 2005), and have found that in online support groups, seeking and giving advice indirectly is common (Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014). Morrow (2006) found that a problem message typically contains a request for advice and that this may vary in form. Vayreda and Antaki (2009), on the other hand, observed that in their data, the problem message ended with a general help question that did not contain an actual request for advice and thus provided a more open space for subsequent comments. Stommel and Koole (2010) also observed a similar tendency to reduce the sequential implicativeness of the request for advice at the end of the message.

In online support forums, problem messages are typically followed by advice, even when advice is not straightforwardly requested (e.g., Morrow, 2006; Vayreda and Antaki, 2009; Stommel and Koole, 2010). The advice-giving is typically justified by some kind of personal experience of the advice-giver (Morrow, 2006), and a personal story can function as indirect advice (Veen et al., 2010). Advice can come in many forms in online support forums, but the response to advice-seeking does not necessarily contain advice at all, as in the single case analyzed by Stommel and Lamerichs (2014), which they took as evidence of the sequential implications of the first post being weak. The current study continues from this by investigating the range of actions in responding to advice-seeking when advice is not given, and the implications of this with regards to the sequential implications of online interaction.

### 3. Data and method

#### 3.1. Data

##### 3.1.1. Reddit and subreddits

The data consisted of 16 advice-seeking Reddit posts and their comments. Reddit is a social news aggregation, rating, and discussion website, which according to Wired magazine,<sup>1</sup> had approximately 330 000 users in 2018. Reddit is organized into areas referred to as subreddits, which are groups that concentrate on a theme or a mutual interest. Each subreddit has its own set of rules and volunteer moderators, which assure that the rules are not violated and that inappropriate messages are removed.

Discussions are launched by creating a post, which may receive comments (responses) from other users. Together the post and the comments create a threaded tree-like structure, in which each response begins a new branch. This makes following the sequences of messages simple, because unlike some other forums or comment boards, the relationship between a message and its response is visually detectable. Each message can have an unlimited number of responses. In this paper, I refer to the responses to original posts as Level 2 comments. Level 3 comments are thus replies to Level 2 comments, and so on. The focus of this study was on Level 2 comments. Example 1 displays four comments that form such a chain on Levels 2–5.<sup>2</sup>

#### Example 1

Level 2	A	She wasn't "acting like a bitch". She was making a smart life choice. You should follow her example of smart life choices and get some help with your drug problems.
Level 3	OP	Um, I don't have a drug "problem".
Level 4	A	Troll problem, then?
Level 5	OP	Seems that way

The data were drawn from a sample based on four different subreddits. Half of the advice-seeking posts were extracted from a wider set of data, in which all the posts were collected from one subreddit during a given timeframe. These data originate from a subreddit called r/childfree, which provides "[d]iscussion and links of interest to childless individuals. 'Childfree' refers to those who do not have and do not ever want children (whether biological, adopted, or otherwise)." The eight posts seeking advice were selected for this data analysis, and to expand the data collection, eight additional discussions were taken from other corpora as well as directly from Reddit. Two posts were from another subreddit, r/cats, which is a place for "[p]ictures, videos, articles and questions featuring and about cats". The six last instances occur in two subreddits that are intended for those requesting general advice, r/advice (5 posts) and r/askwomenadvice (1 post).

##### 3.1.2. Advice-seekings and responses

The collection criterion for advice-seeking posts was that a post needed to contain a problem description as well as an explicit, direct request for advice (see Section 2.1). The troubles-tellings and problem presentations that occur in the data vary in length, but they are more often long than short (see also Kouper, 2010). The explicit requests for advice are similarly versatile. They are typically located at the end or near the end of the post, and several can occur within one post. All the instances contain a request for advice, and four instances consist of more than one request (e.g., a specific question and a statement that any advice will be appreciated). Nine of the instances are more general requests for advice in the form of

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wired.com/story/reddit-redesign/>.

<sup>2</sup> The usernames of the posters are removed for anonymity. OP refers to the original poster (i.e. the advice-seeker) and A to the first presented commenter in a given discussion (see Section 3.1.3).

questions (*What are your thoughts?*) or statements (*I don't know what to do...*). One question explicitly requests advice on a specific situation (*Anyone have any advice on how to convince my husband that being the patriarch of a family doesn't mean squat?*), and the remaining cases are either polar questions (*Am I setting myself up for a bad future?*) or *wh*-questions that inquire about a specific matter (*How do I deal with baby fever?*). The advice-seeking posts that comprised the collected data were not interpreted solely in terms of their form but primarily through the next-turn proof procedure that is applied in CA (Sacks et al., 1974), that is, they received advice-giving as their responses. There were also contextual reasons for interpreting these posts as advice-seeking. For example, six of the 16 cases originated from subreddits that featured the word *advice* in their name (r/advice, r/askwomenadvice) and descriptions.

The analyzed data consisted of 16 advice-seeking posts and 508 Level 2 messages responding to them. When all levels were included (Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, etc.), the collected data contained 16 posts and 2269 messages. The aim of the data collection was to gather at least 500 Level 2 messages, and thus it continued until the number of Level 2 messages was over 500. When discussions are long, Reddit makes visible only a set of messages, and the rest can be viewed by clicking an 'n more messages' option (e.g., '274 more messages'). In these cases, only the readily visible messages were selected for the data, to keep the number of responses to one post manageable and to obtain a wider range of different discussions. This means that the actual number of Level 2 responses to these 16 posts was greater than the analyzed 508 because three of the conversations were considerably long and had a total of over 1100, 1100, and 2700 messages. The actual size of the message trees varied from 14 to 2700 messages. It is also possible that the trees grew after data collection because all these conversations remain online, although they are not necessarily active.

Many of the advice-seeking posts are rather provocative and seem to involve a moral dilemma more often than, for example, advice-seeking posts in online support groups (see, e.g., Stommel and Lamerichs, 2014), which may be due to the posting culture of big online forums such as Reddit. The provocative nature of the posts, as well as the fact that anyone and not just a specific group of peers may reply to them, influences the range of responses a post can receive.

### 3.1.3. Data display and ethics

The use of data from publicly available forums such as Reddit raises some ethical concerns. This is especially true in linguistically oriented qualitative analysis, in which excerpts of the data are usually published (e.g., Willis 2019). The research community has not yet reached a consensus on the use of online data in analysis and reporting results (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), but often, researchers utilize an approach that is based on a localized, case-by-case approach, which takes into consideration aspects such as whether the community is public or private, or how sensitive the topic is (see e.g. Hine, 2005; Whiteman, 2012). These data have been collected from publicly visible subreddits, which is why I consider them to be available for considerate use as research data.

Some ethical concerns arose during data collection. The first was the lack of consent from the participants. Other ethical concerns included protecting the privacy of the participants' online identity, preventing the searchability of the data, and protecting the private information that the participants had shared. Briggs et al. (2002) note that online users share more personal information in their search for health advice to obtain more personalized advice, and this needs to be considered, even though the advice-seeking posts are anonymous. My decision was not to include the full advice-seeking posts in this article, though they have been taken into consideration in the analysis. Short excerpts will be shown for clarity, but the overall focus will be on the responses that are shown in full.

Reddit users are anonymous, but they need to create an account with a username to submit a post or comment. Even though Reddit is a public, open discussion platform, to protect the informants' online identity, I have not included the usernames in the example excerpts. Instead, I refer to the advice-seeker as an OP (original poster), and the commenters as A, B, C, etc. This letter marking is used to separate the different commenters within the given discussion, which means that A in one example may not be the same writer as A in another example.

## 3.2. Method

### 3.2.1. Conversation analysis

This study is interactionally oriented and draws on Conversation Analysis, which is a method for micro-analysis of conversation and is used to analyze the details of interaction in relation to social action and to investigate orderliness in interaction. The analysis is conducted from an emic perspective, from the point of view of the interactants and how they interpret the previous turn, or in this case, the message. The interpretation does not, though, align with the CA principle of next-turn proof procedure (Sacks et al., 1974) solely but also utilizes other information in making judgments about the action a turn or an utterance performs, which is why the method of this study should be described as CA informed.

Although CA was developed to examine social action in spoken interaction, it has also been successfully implemented in investigations of different types of (written) online settings (for an overview, see Giles et al., 2015; Giles et al., 2017; Paulus et al., 2016; Meredith, 2019). The approach, sometimes referred to as Digital Conversation Analysis, emphasizes the use of Conversation Analytic tools in different online channels with the understanding of the affordances of the particular channel without equating them directly with spoken conversation. The particularities of online forums include asynchronous tempo, the prevalence of long turns (posts and comments), and the likelihood of several actions being completed in one message, even though writers can mark some actions as more prominent and response-worthy over others (Stommel and Koole, 2010).

The data analysis began with a pre-analysis of the whole data in terms of whether the response provides advice. The form of the actual advice-giving varied, which was considered when coding the data. The advice-givings either provided direct instructions on what an OP should do, or consisted of indirect advice, i.e., assertions that can be seen as offering a way in which to see and think about the problem and thus orienting to solving it. In the present study, advice-giving is considered to cover both direct and indirect advice. Of the collected 508 responses to advice-seeking, the majority (344 cases) provided direct advice (67.7%). Of the remaining responses, 83 (16.3%) consisted of indirect advice (cf. [Morrow, 2006](#); [Kouper, 2010](#)), and 81 (15.9%) were messages that gave no advice.

After the pre-analysis, each case of non-advice was analyzed according to its form and the action that it performed within the activity of the advice-seeking discussion. Previous studies have reported that non-advising responses offer either information or empathy ([Varayda and Antaki, 2009](#)). In the current study, a more varied group of actions was detected, which tended to become stacked under certain types of advice-seeking posts. These are described more closely in Section 4 showing how their usage differs in terms of alignment and affiliation.

It should be noted, however, that in CA, the interpretation of what a turn does – or a message in this case – is determined from the interactants’ orientation to it, according to the next-turn proof procedure ([Sacks et al., 1974](#)). This also applies to phenomena such as action alignment and affiliation, which turned out to be important in the study at hand. This analysis applied the next-turn proof procedure when possible, but the realities of online interaction, the fact that the OP only rarely comes back to respond to the messages replying to their post, makes it difficult to follow this principle by the letter. One solution to this would be to gather data only from instances when the OP does respond, but this might distort the full picture, as it may be that OPs typically respond to specific kinds of replies. Here I often turned to linguistic information on action formation and ascription (e.g. that an interrogative is typically used for requesting information) (see [Levinson, 2013](#)) to understand what a Level 2 message did in relation to the original post.

3.2.2. Alignment and affiliation

The analytical concepts that became relevant during the analysis were the alignment and affiliative stance of the response message. The affiliative stance displayed by the response message in particular differentiated the responses so that they could be divided into three groups in terms of how justified readers considered the advice-seeking to be. I have labeled these three types *Accepting*, *Negotiating*, and *Denying the validity of advice-seeking* ([Table 1](#)).

**Table 1**  
Alignment and affiliation in responses that accept, negotiate or deny the validity of advice-seeking.

Alignment	Affiliation		
	Affiliative/Neutral	Affiliative/Disaffiliative	Disaffiliative
Aligning with the activity	Accepting		Denying
Aligning with another activity	Accepting		Denying
Non-aligning	Accepting		Denying
Aligning + Disaligning		Negotiating	
Disaligning + Disaligning		Negotiating	

Alignment refers to the structural symmetry of actions ([Stivers, 2008](#); [Stivers et al., 2011](#)). An aligning response is one that “cooperate[s] by facilitating the proposed activity or sequence; accepting the presuppositions and terms of the proposed action or activity; and matching the formal design preference of the turn” ([Stivers et al., 2011](#)). Thus, a non-aligning turn does the opposite. A prime example of an aligning response would be straightforward advice offered in response to advice-seeking. However, as the present analysis demonstrates, a response may align with the overall activity without producing the requested action ([Table 1](#)). I will differentiate between non-aligning and disaligning when necessary. By non-aligning I mean any response that does not align with the proposed action or activity (e.g., merely displaying empathy as a response to advice-seeking), i.e. passively rejecting or bypassing the action to which it is responding. By disaligning, on the other hand, I mean a non-aligning action that actively rejects the action to which it is responding (e.g., accusing someone of looking for attention as a response to advice-seeking).

Affiliation, on the other hand, refers to actions that are used to display the participant’s support for the affective stance that their interlocutor expresses ([Stivers, 2008](#)). Responses are maximally affiliative when “they match the prior speaker’s<sup>3</sup> evaluative stance, display empathy and/or cooperate with the preference of the prior action” ([Stivers et al., 2011](#)), whereas disaffiliative responses lack these qualities. Unlike alignment, which is an omnipresent feature of responsive actions, affiliation is not relevant in every response. In this analysis, a message was coded as affiliative, when it clearly displayed a positive stance towards the OP or their situation (e.g. *Dude, I’m so sorry*), and disaffiliative, when there was either an explicit or implicit

<sup>3</sup> “Writer’s” or “commentor’s” in the case of written online discussion.



negative evaluation of the OP or their situation (e.g., *dude ur an asshole*). Some messages were also coded as neutral, which refers to a response in which an affiliative stance is not relevant.

In the present study, I analyzed the non-advising responses in terms of how the action(s) of the message related to the advice-seeking to which they were responding. I also classified the affective stance of each non-advising response as either affiliative, disaffiliative, or neutral. The analysis resulted in three groups, which differed from each other in terms of the position taken to the validity of the advice-seeking. Validity here refers to being 'solvable' or 'advice worthy'. Responses that *accepted the validity* of the advice-seeking were always either affiliative or neutral, and responses that *denied the validity* of the advice-seeking were disaffiliative. Responses that *negotiated the validity* could be either affiliative or disaffiliative, but they differed from the others in terms of alignment: they displayed the relationship with two activities in the same message (Table 1).

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1. Accepting the validity of the advice-seeking

Responses that do not produce the requested second pair part of the advice-seeking, i.e., advice, may nonetheless accept the validity of the advice-seeking. The interlocutor accepts the advice-seeker's grounds for seeking advice and posting the advice-seeking on the forum. When this occurs, the affective stance towards the post and the advice-seeker is always either *affiliative* or *neutral* (Table 1). In terms of acceptance, these cases are unmarked: they are only recognized as accepting because the interlocutor does not display non-acceptance. This does not, however, necessarily mean that the interlocutor agrees with everything on the advice-seeking post, though in the examples presented below there is no overt disagreement.

All the examples in this section consist of replies to the same post, in which the OP asks for advice regarding a situation related to their brother's funeral. They<sup>4</sup> state that their brother, who had died recently, had always hated religion, and would not have wanted a Christian funeral, but that their mother claimed that the brother had converted before dying, and wanted a Catholic ceremony for him. The OP is asking for Redditors' thoughts on the issue. This is one of the lengthiest discussions in the data, with over 1100 comments, and most of the replies are types of advice. Of the 171 Level 2 comments collected, only 16 do something else than advise. None of these 16 messages are disaffiliative or disaligning towards the post, i.e., displaying a negative stance towards it (see examples in Section 4.2) or rejecting it as an action (see examples in Section 4.3). Instead, they may *align with the overall activity*, *align with another activity* or be *non-aligning* in a topically coherent manner (Table 1).

#### 4.1.1. Aligning with the overall activity

A response that does not provide advice request for advice performs an action that does not align with the request for advice. Nevertheless, it may align with the ongoing activity. The activity of advice-seeking implies that there is a problem to be solved (see Section 2.1), and a response that aligns with the activity takes part or displays interest in solving the problem. Requesting and providing advice are actions that are part of the activity of problem-solving, but indeed need not be the only actions. In the current data, orienting to problem-solving may be achieved through requests for information and clarifications concerning the situation at hand, thus treating the problem description as requiring elaboration.<sup>5</sup> Messages such as this could be considered a step towards advice-giving, although in most cases, they are not responded to and advice is not given. Example 2 contains a request for clarification (Level 2), which receives a response from the OP (Level 3) and finally leads to advising (Level 6).

#### Example 2

Level 2	A	Did your brother speak to her about his funeral/burial preferences before he passed?
Level 3	OP	This is exactly what I am beating myself up about. Mother is a retired Hospice nurse. I know he put his affairs in order, but the end came suddenly (in a week's time) after over 3 years of fighting. To the best of my knowledge, the last time we discussed it in the middle/late September, he was still very against religion. His sudden decline started a week and a half ago. I did not ask about religion in the 3 times I saw him since then... the night before he died he was incoherent, the first night after the decline was the same, and the one night he came out of the semi-coma was spent in talking about love and laughter and memories.
Level 4	A	Have you asked your mom if they had a discussion about it? Would she admit it?
Level 5	OP	You have a great point. I started to, but this has been a serious sore point in the last 8 years since she suddenly went poof from "meh" about religion to <b>OMG. GOD. JESUS. GOD. ANGELS. OMG</b> after moving from California to Oregon where her sister lived. Then 2 years later, Brother and his cancer situ occurred... and it has been all about the invisible sky wizard. Who, despite all of her newfound way not to have to actually deal with the situation and blame others that they did not pray (prey?) enough, he still died
Level 6	A	I'm so sorry. I can't imagine what you're going through. I would suggest having a calm sit down talk with your mom, telling her about your feelings about what your brother really wanted. But honestly, at the end of the day, he is no longer here. Funerals aren't for the dead, they are for the living. If having the big catholic funeral helps your mom find closure, I don't think your brother would mind.

<sup>4</sup> The OP is referred to with the gender neutral *they* if they have not disclosed their gender in the post.

<sup>5</sup> In addition, implicit advice could be considered as aligning with the activity of problem-solving rather than the action of requesting advice, as implicit advice poses an assertion that can be interpreted as orienting to problem-solving. As opposed to these cases, however, they appear to more often be received as advice and do not treat the original post as unfinished.

In their Level 2 message, A inquires about OP's knowledge of their deceased brother's preferences for burial. The question itself can only retrospectively be determined as leading towards advice-giving, but in itself, it can be regarded as implying an orientation towards problem-solving. As the issue in the original post, or at least one of the issues, is whose burial preferences should be followed, the question concerning the brother's wishes may be relevant to solving the problem. After receiving a lengthy response (Level 3) in which the OP explains why they do not know the brother's wishes, A poses another clarification question (Level 4) on whether the mother might have discussed this with her son and whether she would admit it, taking into consideration the position already established by the OP that the mother would have the ceremony regardless of her children's wishes. The OP's response (Level 5), which explains why they have not been able to conduct this conversation, is followed by explicit advice (*I would suggest*) (Level 6). This differs from the advice given in Level 2 in that it displays more sensitivity to the OP's situation by making use of the information gathered during the exchange. Retrospectively, the Level 2 clarification question and the exchange followed by it could be interpreted as an insertion sequence (Schegloff, 2007: 97–114), which does not necessarily mean that the discussion was leading to advising all along. While the OP's responses might as well have prompted the advice, A's first request for clarification (Level 2) displayed orientation towards the activity of problem-solving.

#### 4.1.2. Aligning with another action

Whether or not a reply that aligns with an activity eventually leads to advising, the reply is nonetheless tied to the original action of requesting advice. Forum posts may contain one or several actions, and writers can point out which is the main action (Stommel and Koole, 2010). Although in this case, the request for advice is rather clearly the main action (see 2.2), this does not prevent the commenters from responding to some other relevant action, such as troubles-telling, to which a display of empathy is relevant. The constant pull between troubles-telling and advice-seeking (Jefferson and Lee, 1981) has also been observed in earlier studies of online support and advising (e.g., Vayreda and Antaki, 2009; Stommel and Koole, 2010).

In this case, the original post contains a rather lengthy story. As stories take part in several types of actions (Mandelbaum, 2013), they can also receive various responses. Stories can be used to complain, for example (Drew, 1998; Mandelbaum, 1991; Monzoni and Drew, 2009; Schegloff, 2005). In this discussion, some respondents addressed the complainable of the story, which was the OP's mother and her actions. Example 3 presents an evaluation of the complainable.

#### Example 3

Level 2 B Sounds like your mother was super overbearing with religion.  
Seems she cares more about her religion than the respect to the brother.  
I hope someone offers this person great info.

In spoken conversation complaints frequently occur in sequences, which begin with an implicit mention of the complainable, after which the participants co-construct and escalate their series of complaints. It is not uncommon for the recipient to produce the actual complaint after the complainer has hinted that there is something to complain about (Drew and Walker, 2009.). In a forum discussion, a stepwise co-construction of a topic into a complaint is not very likely, as an attentive interlocutor is never guaranteed. Instead, in these data, the commenters produce second-party complaints on behalf of an OP to show affiliation. In this case, even though the OP does not explicitly complain about his mother, the mother is the antagonist of the story and thus her behavior is a possible complainable. The mother's religion is introduced as the problem source in the original post and several messages following it, and B evaluates the mother and the impact of her conviction critically. As an action, instead of aligning with the advice-seeking, the comment aligns with the possible complaint in the post. The comment ends with a wishing that the mother would be informed, which contributes to the interpretation that the commenter is making this evaluation to offer the OP support.

#### 4.1.3. Non-aligning

Non-aligning comments that emerge from the topic are, controversially, often referred to as off-topic, even though they could be better defined as off-action. They are not second pair parts or other types of fitted responses to the post, nor do they display an affective stance towards it. Instead, they use the topic of the post as a springboard to initiate a new action. Examples 4 and 5 display cases in which the Level 2 message is on-topic but off-action.

#### Example 4

Level 2 C Not particularly constructive, but what sprung to mind as I read your post was a re-enactment of the funeral scene from Captain Fantastic

#### Example 5

Level 2 D antigone

C's comment in Example 4, which involves noticing the resemblance of the OP's situation and a Captain Fantastic comic, is marked as misplaced (cf. Schegloff and Sacks, 1973) by *[n]ot particularly constructive* and *what sprung to mind as I read your post*. By marking their comment as misplaced, B orients to the normative expectation of providing the OP with something that



would be constructive for solving his problem, that is, a response that would align with advice-seeking. This type of orientation is not reflected by D in Example 5, whose comment serves a similar purpose. Containing only one word, *antigone*, it refers to Sophocles' tragedy of Antigone, in which the heroine seeks the right to bury her brother. Resembling the preceding comment, this is a noticing that only has a topical connection to the post. Even though the commenter occasionally displays an orientation to the normative structure of adjacency pairs set by the post, these messages are neither treated as disruptive nor reacted to in any particular manner. They are rare but generally sufficiently common to be an essential part of this type of online discussion's anatomy, i.e., even though most responses align to the action trajectory, other types of comments are not contested or treated as deviant. One possible reason for this might be that previous responses have already given the necessary advice, which allows others to have a more 'unstructured' discussion on the topic. In addition, these comments derail the discussion without treating the topic or the action of the original post as invalid in any way.

Thus far, we have observed that messages that do not align with the request for advice as an action can nevertheless align with the activity or another action, or they can be non-aligning. In the previous cases, however, they were not fitted second pair parts to the main action, they displayed either neutral or affiliative stance towards the post. Let us now turn to the discussions in which the validity of the advice-seeking is somehow problematized.

#### 4.2. Denying the validity of the advice-seeking

In the previous section, the advice-seeking post was treated as non-problematic, and the advice-seeker was depicted as an honest person with a genuine problem to be solved. In the following examples, the advice-seeking is considered morally objectionable and thus, non-answerable. This can be depicted by two types of responses: Replies that are action-wise similar to those in the previous section, i.e. they do not provide advice, are called here *Basic cases*. Replies that appear to be giving advice, though the advice is not genuine, are called *Special cases*. What all these replies have in common is that they display a disaffiliative stance towards the advice-seeking (see Table 1).

##### 4.2.1. Basic cases

Advice-seeking tends not to be valid if it is not morally sound; a person cannot usually be advised on an issue that the advice-giver does not agree with. The non-advising responses made when the validity of the advice-seeking is denied are similar in alignment to the cases in which the validity of the advice-seeking is accepted: they align with the activity, with another action, or are non-aligning, but topically coherent. All the examples in this section constitute replies to the same post involving the OP asking whether he should tell his girlfriend that he has made her sister pregnant. The post contains the story of how this transpired. Everyone in the family knows that the sister is pregnant from "a one-night stand", but they do not know that the father is her sister's boyfriend, and his girlfriend's enthusiasm about the baby is driving the OP insane. The explicit request for advice is a polar question "Should I tell my girlfriend it was me who got her sister pregnant?" in the headline and a wh-question "What do I do?" in the post. The post received more than 2700 comments of which 865 were included in the data. Of these, only 48 were Level 2 comments, which means that the responses managed to generate lively branches of discussion. Fifteen of the responses, which comprised nearly a third, did not involve giving advice. Overall, in this discussion, regardless of whether the participants offer advice, they adopt a predominantly negative stance towards the morality of the poster's behavior.

In Example 6, similarly to Example 2, A displays orientation to the activity of problem-solving without providing advice.

##### Example 6

Level 2    A    Dude. As soon as she has a really bad day she's going to expect something from you.  
Guaranteed. Raising a child isn't the easiest thing to do especially if it's your first.

Unlike Example 2, Example 6 features A providing extra information instead of requesting it. They state that the child's mother is going to expect something from the OP even though, as the OP has explained, they have made a deal that the father will not be involved, thus articulating that there is a problem in the premises of the advice-seeking that needs to be considered when solving the problem. Merely providing this information leaves open the course of action that the OP should take. Furthermore, the stance of the reply is not neutral. The lack of empathy towards the OP's problem by addressing him as *dude*, the overt display of certainty with *Guaranteed*, and the raising a problem in the premises of the advice-seeking without explicating it or even hinting at a solution, all serve as evidence of a disaffiliative stance towards the OP and his advice-seeking.

Example 7 is a case in which the reply aligns with another action in the original post, the troubles-telling, and an evaluation of it.

##### Example 7

Level 2    B    Jesus fuck dude. I don't even know what to tell you. Except that you're in a world of shit. But you probably already knew that

Although providing an evaluation after troubles-telling is an aligning action, this is not the preferred response: troubles-telling should receive a display of empathy. Stating that someone is in such deep trouble that there is nothing to say, and not

offering empathy or support, is highly disaffiliative, even more so than the previous example, which at least implied that the problem is solvable. Stating that one does not know what to say might be considered an account of not providing advice, i.e., not knowing what should be done, but here the adverb *even* adds the nuance that this is not a problem for which one can or should be giving advice. In this discussion, this is a reoccurring means of protesting against the OP's conduct and advice-seeking. Furthermore, the poster beginning this message with *Jesus fuck dude* immediately reveals the stance taken in the message.

Yet another way to express that the post is morally questionable is through a non-aligning disaffiliative message. Example 8 consists of a repair initiator, *huh*, to mark “ritualized disbelief” (Heritage, 1984 on *oh*; Wilkinson and Kitzinger, 2006: 168–171), followed by a question that is directed to other discussants.

#### Example 8

Level 2    C    Huh  
Does getting drunk really make people cheat on their SOs like this?

When C posts a message that is not directed at the OP, they are treating the OP's post as a topic to be discussed but refraining from treating the OP as a valid discussant. The particle *huh*, which can function as a repair initiation but seems here to be used to topicalize and display affect, implies astonishment and most likely a somewhat negative stance towards the post. The question regarding whether getting drunk makes people cheat on their significant others may be genuine or rhetorical, but it nevertheless pursues a conversation that deals with the morality of the OP's behavior, pointing to the original post with the demonstrative *like this*.

#### 4.2.2. Special cases

In the previous cases, the advice-seeking post and the OP are explicitly judged as morally dubious. However, the judgment in the next set of cases is implicit, consisting of instances that resemble second pair parts to advice-seeking but are not genuine. They are examples of mock advice and mock accounts of not being able to respond and resemble the previous cases in that they display a negative stance towards the advice-seeking by ridiculing the post. While offering false advice can also constitute internet trolling (Hardaker, 2013; Donath, 1999), there is no reason to believe that these messages are meant to be deceitful. A more accurate description would be that they serve as a protest against the original post.

**Example 9.** contains mock advice that responds to the same post as the responses in Examples 6–8, that is, to the poster who had made his girlfriend's sister pregnant. This particular post received many responses that looked like advice, such as a recommendation that he should impregnate either his girlfriend, his girlfriend's mother, or both. While there is no factual dissonance, the inherent moral problems with this type of advice, combined with the fact that the incident in the original post was already provocative, give reason to believe that this type of advice is insincere. For example, the following example features D advising (I think you should) the OP to tell his girlfriend only after he has had sex with the girlfriend's mother as well (Level 2).

#### Example 9

Level 2    D    **I think you should wait to tell her until you've boned the mum too. You're fucked either way so worth a shot**  
Level 3    E    What if the GF has more sisters. Which one should he go after first ?  
Level 4    D    Whoever's easier to get drunk by the looks of it  
Level 3    OP    To be fair their mum is hot  
Level 4    F    Troll confirmed  
Level 4    G    Sounds like you are thinking about going for the Trifecta.

E participates in the mockery begun by D, by suggesting that the girlfriend might have more than one sister (Level 3). The exchange between D and E displays the carnivalizing potential of mockery, which involves participants who may co-construct non-factual scenarios and exclude the person who is being mocked. However, in this case, the OP replies to D in his Level 3 message by informing that the mother is hot, i.e., ‘sexually attractive’. He thus tries to reclaim his position as a valid participant by taking part in the carnivalization of the topic and his post. He accomplishes this with varying success. In the following message (Level 4), F accuses the OP of being a troll, an insincere poster whose purpose is to waste everyone's time and effort (Hardaker, 2013). In contrast, another poster, G, continues the playful discussion by introducing trifecta (Level 4). At this point, his contradictory reactions to the OP reveal the two-folded nature of mocking actions: they can be used to both carnivalize and protest, and while carnivalization can be co-constructed, the protest is lodged against someone or something. Example 10 is a case of a mock account for not being able to respond and originates from a different discussion. In her post, the OP writes to childfree-subreddit to ask for advice on how to deal with her baby fever as a childfree person, that is, someone who does not want children. She receives 18 responses, five of which do not offer advice. Although this advice-seeking is generally treated as validated, one response type occurs four times: the commenter states that they cannot relate or offer a response because they are genuinely childfree.

## Example 10

Level 1	OP	Realistically I don't want children. But my hormones are surging and everyone around me is popping them out like Pez dispensers. How do I deal with baby fever? Should I just borrow one for a couple hours?
Level 2	A	<b>Can't relate due to never wanting kids ever</b>
Level 3	OP	I'd rather eat my own foot then deal with a dirty diaper so I understand.
Level 3	B	Same

As a second pair part of the adjacency pair, this reply is an account of not being able to offer advice, that is, a dispreferred response. These types of accounts do not typically occur on online discussion boards because the post is not directed at a particular person but at a community and responding is always voluntary. Members of the forum are not accountable for not responding if the post is not particularly directed at them, or any post, as 'ignoring' can always be accounted for with not having seen the message (Antaki et al., 2005). This means that the account is used as a tool for protesting. This appears as an aligning action and a second pair part that disaffiliates strongly with advice-seeking and problem-solving. By stating that they cannot relate to the OP's situation because people who do not want children do not have baby fever, A also manages to define for whom this subreddit is intended, and criticizes the OP for seeking advice in the wrong place. The OP also shows she understands that baby fever is not something that is normally discussed in a childfree-subreddit forum. She begins her post by assuring her readers that she does not want children and blames her condition on her hormones (Level 1). She also reacts to the protest by validating it and displays an upgraded negative stance towards caring for a baby (Level 3). In this manner, the OP maintains her belonging to the group of childfree people despite posting a transgressive post.

Original posters typically orient carefully to their accountability in their posts, as can be seen in Example 10, at the same time utilizing the features provided by the medium. They post their message trusting that it is a permitted action based on the type and nature of the forum and that no norms are breached by, for example, skipping the opening routines that are typical of face-to-face conversation. They can trust that their audience is ready and engaged. Thus, posting their thoughts on a forum is already accounted for through the choice of the platform (Antaki et al., 2005). The examples in this section show how the accountability of the original poster is also carefully monitored by the commenters and the poster is held accountable for the original post: whether it is in the right place or performing the right action, and whether the chosen audience is suitable.

The non-advising replies that reject the validity of advice-seeking resemble those that accept it in that they are used to perform similar types of actions, the greatest difference being that the rejecting replies display a distinctly negative stance towards the original post. Among the rejecting replies, the mock responses form a peculiar group. They utilize the form of an aligning response even though, as actions, they seem to be either non-aligning or even disaligning.<sup>6</sup> In addition to displaying the advice-seeking as problematic and thus rejecting it, they evoke discourse on who is an eligible discussion partner and forum member, which might be one reason that the OPs replied to the mockings, trying to defend their place as valid participants. Finally, in the responses presented in the final section, the advice-seeking post is seen as problematic due to an inner contradiction rather than a moral restriction.

#### 4.3. Negotiating the validity of the advice-seeking

The examples in this section are described as 'negotiating the validity of advice-seeking' because the discussants do not directly accept or reject the request for advice. They acknowledge that the OP has a problem, but the problem is not necessarily the one for which they are seeking advice (similar cases have been described in online support groups by Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003; Sneijder and Te Molder, 2005). This is due to a contradiction in the original post; a contradiction that does not concern moral issues – as in asking for advice in a situation that is unacceptable – but can instead be attributed to contradicting action trajectories in which aligning with one automatically leads to disaligning with another (Table 1). The stance in these examples can be either affiliative or disaffiliative, but not neutral.

All the examples in this section consist of replies to the same post, in which the OP seeks advice regarding her flat bottom. She introduces herself as a 22-year-old woman who has a *flat ass* and because of this, has always been rejected by men. Her boyfriend has recently left her, and she is asking for dating advice: *How should I approach guys? Should I find a way to hide the fact that I have a really flat ass? How should I expect them to react when they first notice my ass?* This post received 28 Level 2 comments. Of these, 23 offered advice, which suggests that the OP is oriented to as someone who needs advice. These advising comments, as well as the five non-aligning responses, communicate that advice-seeking is unnecessary. While a few advice-givers instruct the OP to do exercises for her bottom, most comments recommend that she change her attitude.

Two types of recurring tendencies arise in this type of discussion: denying the problem and volunteering advice. It may appear counterintuitive that advice offered as a response to advice-seeking is unsolicited, but in these cases, the commenters make an extra effort to express that the advice given is not what was requested and that the commenter is giving the advice on different grounds. They deny the grounds for requesting advice, either explicitly or implicitly, while also suggesting a solution to another problem. It is debatable whether volunteered advice falls within the scope of this study. It could be argued

<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that in Table 1 responses that deny the validity of advice-seeking are all depicted as non-aligning. This reflects the Basic cases, but due to their complexity, the Special cases are omitted from the table.

that it is not a second pair part to the original advice-seeking action, but since it is genuine advice, it is omitted from the analysis at hand. The contradiction that causes the need to deny the existence of the problem is due to another action in the original post, a self-deprecation, to which an unmitigated disagreement is an aligning response (Pomerantz, 1984). In disagreeing with self-deprecation, one is also denying the grounds for seeking advice for this particular problem. The literature refers to the phenomenon of complying with one preference structure and causing conflict with another as ‘cross-cutting preferences’ (Pomerantz, 1978).

In Example 11, the commenter produces an aligning, preferred response to the self-deprecation with a compliment. During this discussion, the OP posts a comment that is presumably accompanied by a link to her picture, which reveals that she is Asian, and this gives others the opportunity to judge her appearance. Her comment can be interpreted as fishing for compliments, which it succeeds in doing, but many of them appear in Level 2 posts, that is, as responses to the original advice-seeking.

#### Example 11

- Level 2    A    You're really pretty! It's also not the most conventional for asian girls (i am chinese) to have logs of curves curves and many are quite slim. I think alot of people would desire to have a body like yours! I hope you will find someone who loves you for who you are
- Level 3    OP    Thank you! You're really sweet  
And I am Chinese too! :P

In addition to complimenting the OP as being pretty, the poster offers two reasons for denying the grounds of the advice-seeking: The OP's body is typical of that of an Asian woman, and many people would love a slim body such as hers. The commenter also portrays him or herself as an expert on the topic of Asian body types and self-identifies as Asian in brackets, thus justifying the right to comment on the slimness of Asian girls. The comment ends by expressing the hope that she finds someone who loves her as she is, which displays an interpretation of what the OP's “real problem” is. Even though the comment disaligns with the post, it displays an affective stance towards the OP. It is interesting that the OP reacts (Level 3) to the post as a compliment and not as a commentary on her advice-seeking. The fact that throughout the discussion, she accepts compliments and rejects (volunteered) advice possibly reinforces the interpretation by some discussants that she is merely fishing for attention.

The Level 2 message in Example 12 shows disalignment with both advice-seeking and self-deprecation by explicitly highlighting the contradiction between them. This is an assessing action, which could be described as a second party complaint or accusation (*I think you are looking for attention*).

#### Example 12

- Level 2    A    I think you're looking for attention. I looked at your post history and it's all about having a small ass and then sharing the pictures and then getting hit on by internet dudes to make you feel better. If you had body dysmorphia or any mental issue with your body you wouldn't be model posing and posting the pictures for attention all over reddit. Also, the way you dress your body and then snap pictures of it tells me you don't really hate it, you just came here for attention.  
-someone with body issues.
- Level 3    B    Who are you to judge? This person has a reddit for only a couple days and it all is about her body image...so maybe she came on reddit for support. Im sorry you have body issues as well, but you do not get to judge another person just because you think your issues are worse/real. Be kind.

A second-party complaint about the post is both a meta-comment on the post itself and stance-taking towards the OP's situation and the need for advice. Several accounts for the accusation are also provided, and the writer's epistemic authority is indicated by the signature *someone with body issues*, which identifies the commenter as someone qualified to judge whether or not the OP's body issues are real. As opposed to the previous comment, the stance displayed here towards the OP and her post is distinguishably negative. In this instance, the accusation is questioned by another commenter who participates in the discussion (Level 3), but the OP does not participate herself. The general gist of this discussion is not to completely deny that the OP has a problem but a questioning of the nature of her problem, which she has claimed to be her flat bottom, which prevents her from dating. Overtly negative comments towards the OP are not supported.

Online posters can deny the grounds of a problem in two ways: implicitly, as in Example 11, and explicitly, as in Example 12. Example 11 appears to be preferred when an underlying problem is collectively suspect. Even so, the wellbeing of the OP is at stake, which is why the advice-seeking is not entirely dismissed, even though the original request is treated as unanswerable. This differs from rejecting the validity of the advice-seeking in that evaluating a story negatively does not lead to a situation in which the requested advice cannot be offered, but may lead to the advice-seeking being treated as non-advice-worthy. In cases in which the validity of the advice-seeking is negotiated, the advice that would be given would be on different grounds than those originally requested. This means that rather than rejecting the request entirely, the scope is modified.

## 5. Conclusions

This study investigated the curious but narrow phenomenon of replies to advice-seeking that do not give advice. It was primarily a study on the advice-seeking sequence with relation to actions and activities. The objective of this analysis was to answer the following questions: 1) What is the function of responses that do not provide advice? and 2) What type of

(affective) stance do these responses display towards the advice-seeking? The analysis revealed that these responses performed several different actions, such as inquiries, displays of empathy, and challenges, that are structurally or topically aligning with the original request for advice: they aligned with the advice-seeking activity or with another action in the original post, or they were non-aligning with the activity but topically coherent. Only in the cases where there was an inner contradiction in the advice-seeking post, the responses were disaligning (i.e. actively rejecting the action to which they were responding). In terms of stance, the responses were either affiliative, neutral, or disaffiliative.

The analysis detected three types of responses to an advice-seeking post: When the validity of the advice-seeking was accepted, the affective stance was either affiliative or neutral, and when the (moral) validity was not accepted, it was disaffiliative. In the cases where the post was seen as somehow contradictory, the validity of the post was under negotiation and the affective stance was either affiliative or disaffiliative. Interestingly, even though these responses do not give advice, they all take a stand towards the ‘advisability’ of the problem displayed in the post. Responses that accept the validity of the advice-seeking treat the request for advice as answerable, unlike the responses that deny and negotiate the validity. Responses that deny the validity orient to the post as morally objectionable and thus contradictory in that they are seeking advice on a matter that is not advice worthy. Finally, in cases where the validity is negotiated, the contradiction is within the post and its actions: it is displayed as impossible to provide advice on the grounds of the original request.

This study also sought to find out, whether not providing the response that the original post is seeking is a source of incoherence on online forums. Within this data, it can be confirmed that it is not. The non-answering responses to advice-seeking systematically align with different aspects of the original post while at the same time communicating what is generally acceptable and what type of advice-seeking is worthy of a response. On the other hand, only a small part of the phenomenon was addressed by examining the Level 2 responses to the original post. Though they have the closest relationship with the post and are the best indicators of how the original action has been received, there are also a lot of interesting things happening in the ensuing messages. Online discussions, especially ones in large open forums like Reddit, tend to branch into several different discussions that only vaguely touch upon the original topic, and sometimes even heated debates. Future studies that observe more closely what happens in the third message and the messages following it, will likely expand our understanding of what the consequences of different types of replies are, how these branches develop and how accountability, topicality, and coherence are managed in them.

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