

Chapter 10

Impacts on Society: Informational and Socio-Emotional Support in Virtual Communities and Online Groups

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the implications of giving and receiving social support in virtual communities and online groups. The chapter first offers a literature review about social support in general, and then delves into specific details about online social support. More specifically, this chapter focuses on informational and socio-emotional support, especially as they pertain to online groups and virtual communities. Three specific examples of online groups and virtual communities studied by the authors are offered, along with research findings and hypotheses. Finally, best practices are outlined for those who are interested in starting and maintaining an online group with the purpose of offering informational and/or socio-emotional support to potential users.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the early research on virtual communities in the 1990s examined if and how virtual communities affected face-to-face communities (Blanchard & Horan, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman & Gulia, 1997). Researchers were not interested in the virtual environment per se, but rather were focused on its effect on the “real world.” From this research, the general consensus was that virtual communities were not going to destroy society, but they were also not an automatic solution to society’s problems. None-

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theless, as information and communication technologies (ICT) and virtual communities have become ubiquitous and adopted by more mainstream society, questions remain. As evident from the media, some discourse in virtual spaces may have detrimental face-to-face consequences. Trolls, anonymous ICT users who taunt group members, have been an issue for decades. The “fappening,” when celebrities’ private pictures were leaked online, made national news. Cyberbullies have become a real issue for high school students. Indeed, a survey conducted by Pew Research Center has found that 88% of teenagers who use social media have seen cruel or mean posts by other people (Lenhart et al., 2011).

But many times online communication can serve as a source of comfort and support, especially for people who are undergoing a stressful event. For example, research has shown that social support can aid with the psychological adjustment of cancer patients (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). In addition, when people in need of social support receive it from their networks, they reported having higher levels of vitality, social functioning, and mental health (Melrose et al., 2015). On other hand, firefighters with low social support levels had higher levels of suicidal ideation when they reported experiencing a lot of stress at their jobs (Carpenter et al., 2015). Thus, supportive online communication can reduce stress and improve mental and physical health outcomes for users. The purpose of this chapter is to review the current literature on virtual informational and socio-emotional support in order to understand one of the positive effects of virtual communications on “real world” outcomes. Therefore, the chapter will discuss virtual communities’ effects on society by focusing on literature and the authors’ research on informational and socio-emotional support in online groups and virtual communities.

This chapter will first review the current literature on informational and socio-emotional support broadly, especially as it relates to health outcomes. Then, it will focus on informational and socio-emotional support as they relate to online interactions. For example, online support can be viewed by everyone in the community, not just the people who are exchanging it. Thus, online informational and socio-emotional support may have a larger effect than face-to-face support. Finally, the authors use data and examples derived from their research program to discuss how online forums have been used by members as a place to find and offer knowledge and comfort to fellow members who are experiencing similar challenges or seeking answers to similar questions. Future research directions are discussed.

BACKGROUND

Social support can come in many forms, but all forms are ultimately aimed at comforting and uplifting others (Finfgeld-Connett, 2005; Langford et al., 1997). People need social support especially when they are under stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Traditionally, social support has been studied within the health care and psychological research fields due to its direct relationship to the outcome of improving one’s mental and physical health. In fact, studies find empirical support for the direct relationship between psychological adjustment and social support of cancer patients (for a review see Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). Lance Armstrong is a popular example of a patient who overcame the stress of his cancer diagnosis with the help of his family and friends. His website, Livestrong, originally was a support system for other cancer survivors. Moreover, on top of aiding in recovery from disease, having a supportive social network can positively affect a person’s overall quality of life (Helgeson, 2003) and well-being (Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013).

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