



Virtual Group Dynamics and Social Networks

a.a. 2016-2017

Dr. Andrea Guazzini

*Department of Education and Psychology
and Centre for the Study of Complex Dynamics (CSDC)
University of Florence*

Contacts

e-mail: andrea.guazzini@unifi.it - andrea.guazzini@gmail.com

website: <http://virthulab.complexworld.net/>

Social Networks and Online Communities



- Nowadays we find online community members reporting the kinds of **strong emotional and social bonds associated with local community**, sharing the resources of stories and information, enjoying their time together online and **working toward common goals** (Rheingold 1993; Baym 2000; Haythornthwaite et al. 2000; Kendall 2002).
- We do find community **both useful and applicable in describing open source computing communities** (Moon and Sproull 2002),
- For **communities of practice that manage knowledge sharing** at a distance and through computer technologies (Wenger 1998)
- For the **discovery of epistemic or associational communities** connected by co-citation or reciprocal web linking (Thelwall and Vaughn 2004).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities



Community emerges where the cumulative impact of interactions among individuals adds value above the level of pairwise interactions.

Interactions such as exchange of information and advice, social support, mutual help and provision and receipt of services can have the cumulative impact of creating trust among network members, shared history and language and known expectations about behaviours that support the community in its common goals.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: debates



Each new disruption in the (imagined) ideals of home and town is met with resistance and fear of the further degradation of our daily experiences. Tönnies (1887[1955]) captured the worry about community in his characterization of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society).

- The ***relevance of physical ‘place’ compared to cyber ‘space’ is debated***, as are the merits of offline versus online interaction (Meyrowitz 1985; Erickson 1993; Wellman 2001).
- Particular attention is given to ***how being online affects individual well-being and community***. Being online is described as taking us away from ‘real’ face-to-face interactions, with resulting individual alienation and depression (e.g., Kraut et al. 1998; Nie and Erbring 2000; Putnam 2000; Nie 2001).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: debates



Each new disruption in the (imagined) ideals of home and town is met with resistance and fear of the further degradation of our daily experiences. Tönnies (1887[1955]) captured the worry about community in his characterization of Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society).

- ***Involvement in online communities is seen as taking resources and attention away from local communities***, reducing our civic engagement and thereby impoverishing overall quality of life (Putman 2000; Nie 2001).
- ***Children are spending time online*** chatting with peers instead of family and playing video games instead of engaging in more appropriate physical or social activity, with even so-called 'social' video games leading to declines in attitudes toward and connections with friends (Williams 2006).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: debates

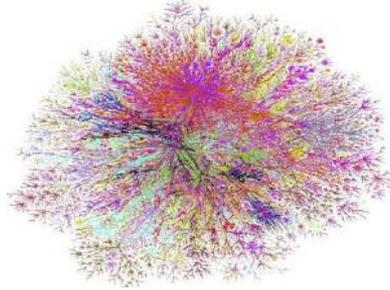


*Each new disruption in the (imagined) ideals of home and town is met with resistance and fear of the further degradation of our daily experiences. Tönnies (1887[1955]) captured the worry about community in his characterization of **Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society)**.*

- Online activity **brings us and our children in contact with undesirable and criminal elements**, pushing pornography and get rich quick schemes and encouraging illegal activities such as computer hacking.
- Such dystopic views are as often matched by utopic views: **online communication is the way to make connections with people of similar interest, freeing us from the constraints of geography** (Sproull and Kiesler 1991);
- **It increases our connectedness to others**, including family (Jones 1995; Kazmer and Haythornthwaite 2001; Howard et al. 2002; Quan-Haase and Wellman 2002);
- **It compensates for dislocations** associated with moving to a new home or going to college (Hampton and Wellman 2002; LaRose et al. 2001).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

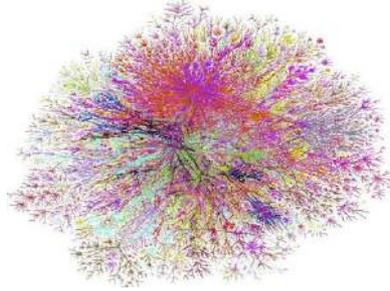
Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities



- Often the Online Communities **are spaces where individuals who would not otherwise know or commune with one other come together** to discuss a common interest or work together for a common purpose (Mickelson 1997; Baym 2000; Kendall 2002; Moon and Sproull 2002).
- These online spaces resemble the '**great good places**' described by Oldenburg (1989), where people gather in non-work, non-home settings (see also Kling 1996).
- Because online communities depend so much on written text, language plays a particularly significant role in determining the actions and responses of members. Not only **does community emerge through the language used**, but it is also reinforces the way language continues to be used (Sproull and Kiesler, 1991).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

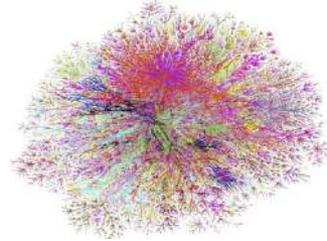
Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities



- As Cherny (1999) describes in depth, **online communities are ‘speech communities’**, defined and emergent from ‘shared rules of speaking and interpretations of speech performance’ (Cherny 1999: 23).
- **‘Rhetorical’ and ‘discourse’ communities are developed**, Clark (1996) and Miller (1984, 1994): for discussion of the way text and conversation merge in the notion of ‘persistent conversation’, see Erickson (1999).
- **Language plays ‘a significant role in marking the community’s boundary’** (Cherny 1999: 23).
- **Newbies need to learn how to use language appropriately** and not knowing how to ‘talk’ online can be a barrier to entry (Bregman and Haythornthwaite, 2003).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities

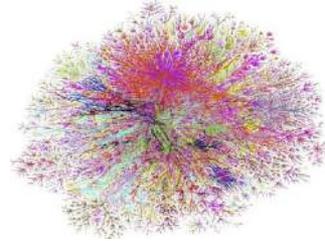


Difference in language use mark some as newbies who do not know the rules and some as disrupters or 'trolls' who, knowing the rules, choose to go against them as a way to upset community actions.

- **As online communities grow**, like offline communities, **they establish rules of behaviour** that establish insider behaviour and also enforce those rules through sanctioning inappropriate behaviours (e.g., see the discussion of transgressor behaviours and conduct control described by McLaughlin et al., 1995).
- Other studies show how **members of predominantly or wholly online endeavours** not only develop strong interpersonal ties, but also **perceive community to exist** (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities

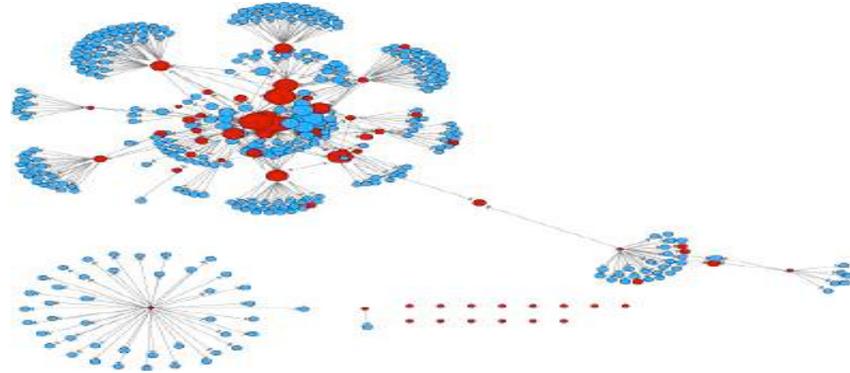


- A separate study showed that **members of this distance programme build a communal history**, grounded in an emergent folklore of the community as they share common experiences and stories (Hearne and Nielsen, 2004; see also Kendall, 2002, for the role of stories in an online community).
- Overall, we find that **members of online environments who stay together for interest, work or learning, display the same kinds of characteristics of community found offline, such as common language, rules of behaviour and their enforcement, support during crises and communal history**. By these means, work, learning, social and recreational groups accomplish their tasks just as in offline settings (Haythornthwaite 2001; Kendall 2002; Moon and Sproull 2002).

While many still argue that such online interaction does not create true community, online participants vigorously extol the virtues of their online experience for providing just those aspects of social support, membership and identity that are the hallmarks of community.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities by network analysis



Social network analysis focuses on what is happening between people, within collectives and across boundaries, in order to find what kind of collective exists.

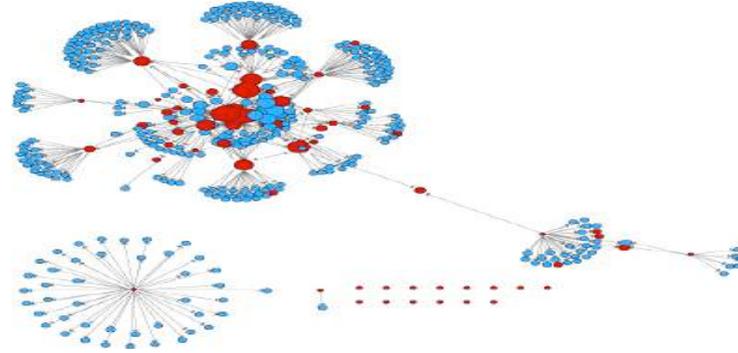
Social network concepts Actors, relations, ties and networks

Interpersonal interactions and relationships can be examined for the way they build network level characteristics such as co-orientation to common goals and purposes and trust in the ability of the network to regulate behaviour.

This opens up the possibility of finding community among co-located or distributed participants, maintained solely offline or online, or maintained through combinations of computer-media and face-to-face communication.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities by network analysis

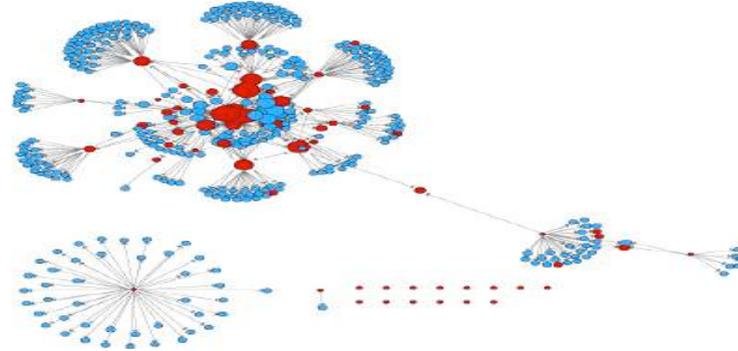


Social network analysts explore what kinds of relations are maintained in any particular network, what kinds of people maintain these relations and how these show the structure of personal or egocentric networks and of whole networks.

A social network perspective differs from other approaches in examining what is exchanged, communicated and shared by pairs of individuals, rather than the aggregated behaviour for a group, community or location.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

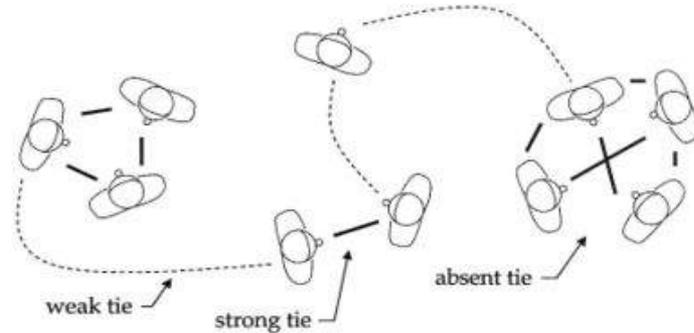
Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities by network analysis



- Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) define community as “...comprised of two attributes: **First, it is a web of affect-laden relationships that encompasses a group of individuals – relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another, rather than simply a chain of one-on-one relationships. To save breath, this attribute will be referred to as bonding. Second, a community requires a measure of commitment to a set of shared values, mores, meanings and a shared historical identity – in short, a culture.**” (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999: 241)
- Wenger (1998) describes a similar list of three dimensions that form the basis of a community of practice: **mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire** (i.e., shared routines, vocabulary and concepts).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Discovering online communities by network analysis



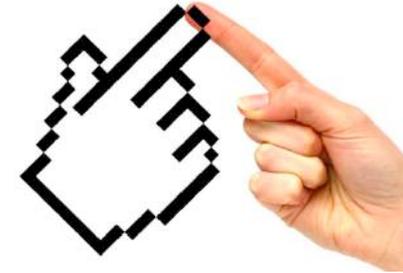
Both the structure of a network and the composition of ties within the network contribute to its perception and designation as a community.

- ***Strong tie behaviours of reciprocal interaction***, shared understanding and mutual influence ***provide the basis on which work can get done, friendships deepen and persist and networks become stable.***
- Because strong ties are associated with frequent communication and a higher motivation to share information, ***actors in networks with many strong ties are likely to have access to the same information at the same time.***
- They are also ***aware of actions within the network and more able to monitor and manage the behaviour of other network members.***
- These outcomes are possible only when sufficient network members are strongly tied.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online/Offline, realities and synergies

What is rarely considered in debates about community is how online and offline may be used to advantage to leverage communities.



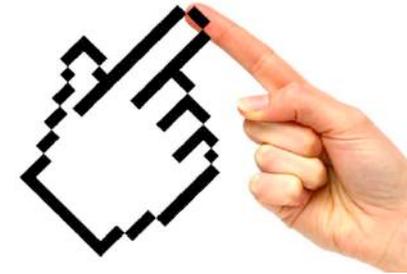
Nowadays, facing the reality of interpersonal ties and communities maintained online becomes necessary as online contact increasingly becomes part of everyday life, integrated into work, home, school and local community (e.g., Kraut et al. 1998, 2002; Kiesler et al. 2000; Wellman 2001; Kendall 2002; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Turow and Kavanaugh 2003).

- ***‘Communities that combine both f2f and CMC systems would be able to bond better and share values more effectively*** than communities that rely upon only one or the other mode of communication’ (Etzioni and Etzioni 1999: 247, italics in original).
- Koku and Wellman (2004) provides an example of how ***the use of on- and offline communication fits with network relationships for scholarly members*** of ‘TechNet’.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online/Offline, realities and synergies

What is rarely considered in debates about community is how online and offline may be used to advantage to leverage communities.



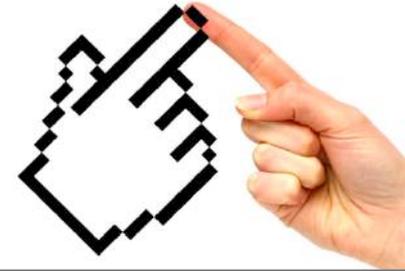
Nowadays, facing the reality of interpersonal ties and communities maintained online becomes necessary as online contact increasingly becomes part of everyday life, integrated into work, home, school and local community (e.g., Kraut et al. 1998, 2002; Kiesler et al. 2000; Wellman 2001; Kendall 2002; Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002; Turow and Kavanaugh 2003).

- Matzat (2004) found that **activity in online discussion groups created visibility for researchers** (although it did not provide egalitarian status for list members).
- **Online interaction** has also been found to **correlate positively with geo-community activity, increasing the relevance and significance of community in individuals' lives** (Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2002).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online/Offline, realities and synergies

What is rarely considered in debates about community is how online and offline may be used to advantage to leverage communities.



Gemeinschaft versus Gesellschaft

Offline versus online, face-to-face versus mediated, strong ties versus weak ties (Haythornthwaite and Nielsen, 2006). This trend goes hand in hand with overly simplistic approaches to identification of community, particularly by outsiders applying the label and by research that examines means of communication one at a time, e.g., looking at face-to-face, email, chat, instant messaging, or blogs only.

These dichotomies and simplifications fail to capture the multiplexity of personal roles, relations, ties and means of communication that form our social environment. Again, a network view, with its emphasis on following interactions rather than means of communication becomes a way of discovering how online and offline interaction are synergistic in maintaining relations and thus of communities.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



- In the last thirty years, numerous studies have shown that **social support plays a vital role in everyday life and contributes to the mental as well as physical well-being of people** (Burlinson et al. 1994; Heany and Israel 1995; Uchino et al. 1996; Albrecht and Goldsmith 2003).
- A lot of attention in this area has been devoted to **how social support may benefit individuals who suffer from a mental or physical disorder** (such as depression, anxiety, obesity, cancer, HIV, etc., see Cohen and Syme [1985]),
- **Go through a period of uncertainty or anxiety caused by a traumatic experience** (Pennebaker and Harber 1993; Leffler and Dembert 1998),
- Or **feel lonely or isolated because of a stigmatized personal characteristic** (such as a deviant sexual preference, an extreme political or religious opinion, a history of imprisonment, etc., see McKenna and Bargh [1998]; Davison et al. [2000]).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



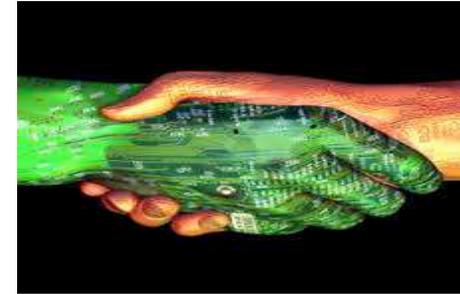
Social Support

Social support consists of a whole range of ways in which people can tacitly or explicitly help one another to improve the quality of their lives (House and Kahn 1985; Thoits 1995; Colvin et al. 2004), and is found to be beneficial for reducing stress, decreasing feelings of loneliness and isolation, getting hold of knowledge and information and learning strategies to cope with the situation people are facing (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Cohen and Wills 1985; Buunk and Hoorens 1992; Thoits 1995).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



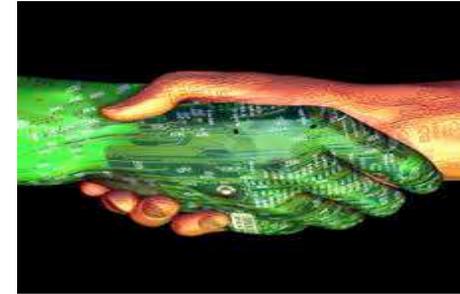
Informational support concerns the exchange of practical information such as tips on new types of medication, relevant addresses of institutes, knowledge about medical or psychological treatments, legal issues, but also stories of firsthand or second-hand experiences by members.

- The primary function of this type of support is *to expand one's knowledge-base* (Reeves 2000).
- This type of support is important because *it gives people more control over the situation and can reduce uncertainty about the self in such a way that better decisions can be made* (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Wright 2002).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



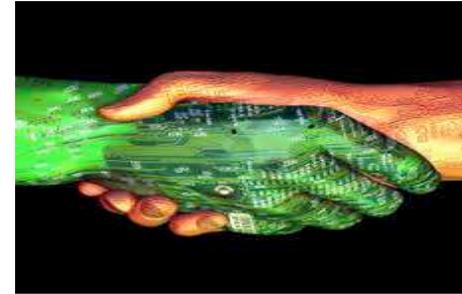
Informational support concerns the exchange of practical information such as tips on new types of medication, relevant addresses of institutes, knowledge about medical or psychological treatments, legal issues, but also stories of firsthand or second-hand experiences by members.

- **Emotional support**, on the other hand, refers to the display of understanding what the other person goes through and involves showing compassion and commitment (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Albrecht and Goldsmith 2003).
- Thus, **in emotional support, empathy plays a vital role**: the ability of knowing what the other feels, feeling what the other feels, and responding to these feelings in an appropriate manner is what makes emotional support possible (Levenson and Ruef 1992: 234).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.

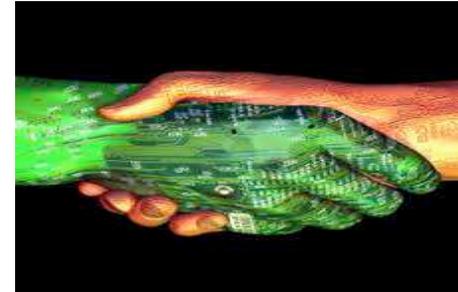


- This more affective form of support is characterized by **comforting and encouraging interactions and can be highly important for the self-esteem of people** (Reeves 2000).
- **Emotional support is found to be especially relevant in situations where people feel they cannot change the situation they are in, but have to adapt to it** (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Wright 2000a).
- **Providing emotional support can also imply giving people the opportunity to tell their story.** Talking about painful or traumatic experiences, or disclosing personal information can have a therapeutic effect (Pennebaker 1997), and therefore to simply offer to listen to someone's story is a form of social support.
- **In particular in times of stress or distress,** it can be comforting to be accompanied by others who are in the same or a similar situation (Davison et al. 2000), because part of the social and emotional problems that people endure stem from feelings of being misunderstood or cut off from society.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



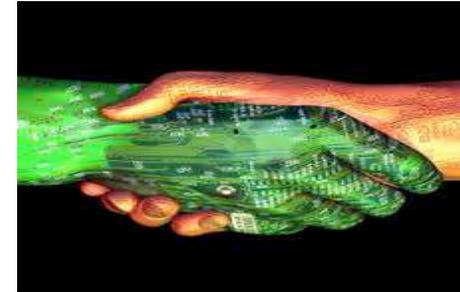
Online Social Support

Social support is a very broad concept that that comprises many qualitatively different kinds of support such as instrumental, informational or emotional assistance (House and Kahn 1985). Online social support groups can take many forms. In its most simple form, such a group is organized around a list of email addresses that can be used to send messages to all the members on the list (sometimes automated by listserver software). In a more centralized form, people can subscribe to an electronic newsletter that contains information about a specific topic. However, the most common form in which people meet each other in order to exchange support online is via so-called bulletin boards or discussion forums.

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Since the Internet has become more and more integrated with everyday life, it is no surprise that much social support is exchanged online. Features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) offer possibilities for social support in a manner that would be less easy or even impossible in a face-to-face context.



Online Social Support

Online social support can be defined as the ‘communication between recipients and providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other or the relationship and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one’s life experience’ (Albrecht and Adelman 1987: 19).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Emotional Vs Informational support



Informational support concerns the exchange of practical information such as tips on new types of medication, relevant addresses of institutes, knowledge about medical or psychological treatments, legal issues, but also stories of firsthand or second-hand experiences by members.

- The primary ***function of this type of support is to expand one's knowledge-base*** (Reeves 2000).
- This type of support is important because it ***gives people more control over the situation and can reduce uncertainty*** about the self in such a way that better decisions can be made (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Wright 2002).

Emotional support, on the other hand, refers to the display of understanding what the other person goes through and involves showing compassion and commitment (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Albrecht and Goldsmith 2003).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Emotional Vs Informational support



- Thus, ***in emotional support, empathy plays a vital role***: the ability of knowing what the other feels, feeling what the other feels, and responding to these feelings in an appropriate manner is what makes emotional support possible (Levenson and Ruef 1992: 234).
- ***This more affective form of support is characterized by comforting and encouraging interactions and can be highly important for the self-esteem of people*** (Reeves 2000).
- Emotional support is found to be ***especially relevant in situations where people feel they cannot change the situation they are in***, but have to adapt to it (Albrecht and Adelman 1987; Wright 2000a).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Support outcomes



Both Informational and Emotional social support can contribute to the well-being of individuals.

- **Social support is important for people who find themselves confronted with distress**, (inter)personal problems or unwanted life situations (Wills 1985; Taylor et al. 1986; House et al. 1988; Pennebaker and Harber 1993; Thoits 1995; Wright and Bell 2003).
- Research has shown that **social support can reduce stress** (e.g., Dean and Lin 1977; Cohen and Wills 1985; Buunk and Hoorens 1992; Thoits 1995),
- **Decrease depression** (Cohen and Wills 1985),

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Support outcomes



Both Informational and Emotional social support can contribute to the well-being of individuals.

- ***Increase self-esteem*** (Metts and Manns 1996),
- ***Increase internal control*** (Sullivan and Reardon 1985), and help people to more effectively cope with the situation (Sullivan and Reardon 1985; Kohn 1996).
- People ***who receive social support take better care of themselves than people who are socially isolated,***
- and ***social support is positively correlated to an improved immune system, a reduced risk of particular illnesses*** (Cohen 1988), and ***longer life expectations*** (Cohen 1988; House et al. 1988).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Support outcomes



Both Informational and Emotional social support can contribute to the well-being of individuals.

There are generally two hypotheses of how social support may benefit the receiver.

The first one posits that ***social support has a direct effect on well-being***. This means that

- interpersonal contacts and being part of a larger social network have a straightforward effect on the welfare of others ***because it gives individuals the perception that they are appreciated by the community***.
- Supportive interactions can contribute to general well-being ***because they clarify one's role in the community and provide a sense of predictability and stability in one's life situation*** (Cohen and Wills 1985; Thoits 1995; Wright 2000a).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Support outcomes



Both Informational and Emotional social support can contribute to the well-being of individuals.

There are generally two hypotheses of how social support may benefit the receiver.

The second hypothesis posits that ***social support does not necessarily have a direct effect on well-being, but can mitigate the effect of stressful situations.***

- In other words, ***social support can buffer the negative effects of stress and uncertainty*** that may arise from a multitude of causes, thereby ***reducing their impact on the physical and mental well-being of individuals*** (Dean and Lin 1977; Cohen and Wills 1985; House and Kahn 1985; Thoits 1995).

Increasingly, both of these functions are met online

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Why social support via the Internet?



Given that the Internet has become integrated in everyday life (Bargh and McKenna 2004) and the communication of social support is an important part of interpersonal interaction, it is not surprising that much support is provided and received online.

Nevertheless, interacting via the Internet has a number of characteristics that makes it fundamentally different from face-to-face communication (Rice and Gattiker 2001).

The features of CMC can affect how people compose messages (Bordia 1997; Kiesler et al. 1984; Hancock and Dunham 2001), how they acquire and maintain relationships (Walther et al. 1994; Lea and Spears 1995; Parks and Floyd 1996; McKenna et al. 2002), and how groups are organized and structured (Hiltz and Turoff 1978; Fulk et al. 1996; Postmes et al. 1998; Spears, Lea, and Postmes 2001).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). Oxford handbook of internet psychology. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Anonymous participation



CMC gives communicators the opportunity to remain anonymous if they wish to do so (Sproull and Kiesler 1991; Bordia 1997; Rice and Gattiker 2001). In most forums or chat rooms, people do not have to reveal their name or other personal information, and visitors are free to make use of pseudonyms or nicknames (Finn 1999).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Anonymous participation



- Not only do people not have to disclose their names, but ***the absence of cues that reveal information about one's identity*** (such as gender, age, appearance) is believed to ***enhance feelings of anonymity*** (Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Wallace 1999).
- The reduction of these cues can ***cause de-individuation*** (Sproull and Kiesler 1986), which is a state in which people lose their individuality because 'group members do not feel they stand out as individuals' and ***individuals act as if they are 'submerged in the group'*** (Postmes et al., 1998)
- As stated by McKenna and Bargh (2000) ***when an individual posts an article in a newsgroup or enters a chat room full of strangers, he or she may well feel that his or her actions will be submerged in the hundreds (or thousands) of other actions*** taking place there. (2000: 60)

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Anonymous participation

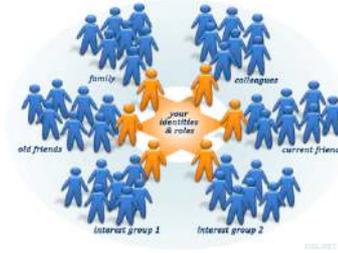


- This **perception of anonymity can have some consequences** for the way people express themselves, and could partly be the explanation why **online groups are characterized by such high levels of self-disclosure** (Rheingold 1993; Parks and Floyd 1996; Wallace 1999; Wright 2000b; Joinson 2001; Swickert et al. 2002).
- ‘Under the protective cloak of anonymity **users can express the way they truly feel and think**’ (McKenna and Bargh 2000: 62).
- Joinson (2001) found that people disclose more information about themselves in CMC compared to FtF interactions. A possible explanation for this is that the **anonymity causes a reduction of public self-awareness and lowered feelings of accountability** (Joinson 2001).
- **The anonymity can provide the freedom to express oneself with less shame and without the feeling that one’s privacy is violated**, and affords people the means and power to ask intimate or potentially embarrassing questions they would not as easily ask in an offline context (Braithwaite et al. 1999; Wallace 1999).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Communities of perceived similar others



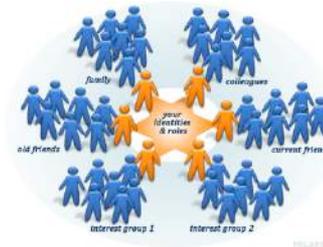
In online social support groups, people tend to meet others who find themselves in a similar situation, are faced by the same mental or physical deficiency, have gone through a similar traumatic experience, or at least share an interest in the topic of the group. So, in these groups people are among others who are to a certain extent alike.

- This perceived similarity, in combination with the ease of access to a large number of individuals that online communication affords, can **provide a sense of universality and communality in online support communities** that is not likely to be found offline (Madara 1997; Braithwaite et al. 1999; Wright 2000b; Preece and Ghazati 2001; Wright and Bell 2003).
- People who find themselves in a similar situation **tend to be more empathic and show more understanding**: ‘the more similar we are the less we have to go outside of ourselves to gather cues and the more we can respond as we ourselves would naturally to the circumstances’ (Hodger and Wegner 1997 in Preece and Ghazati 2001).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Communities of perceived similar others



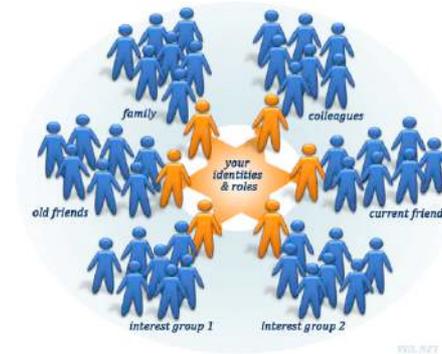
In online social support groups, people tend to meet others who find themselves in a similar situation, are faced by the same mental or physical deficiency, have gone through a similar traumatic experience, or at least share an interest in the topic of the group. So, in these groups people are among others who are to a certain extent alike.

- As a consequence, research shows that in online support groups there is **relatively little suspicion, and interactions are characterized by containing a low level of negative emotional remarks and a high level of emphatic communication** (Finn 1999; Wallace 1999; Preece and Ghazati 2001).
- Finding similar others can be an important motivation for joining an online community **because perceived similarity, and the feeling that one is part of a larger group, is part of the basic need to belong**, which can be especially relevant for people who are lonely or isolated in their offline environment because they feel unique (Brewer 1991; Deaux 1993; McKenna and Bargh 1998).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Communities of perceived similar others



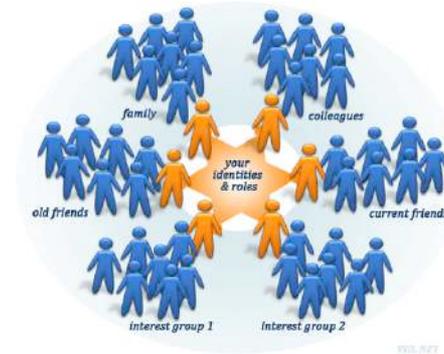
The perceived similarity of other members of the online social group can even be increased by the anonymity of the online interactions.

- The absence of cues that give away information about the personal identity of the individuals who partake in the group **can increase the attention to what binds the group together** (i.e., a common interest or goal) and thereby engender strong feelings of ‘groupiness’ or cohesion (Postmes et al. 1998; Lea et al. 2001; Postmes et al. 2001; Tanis and Postmes, 2007).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Communities of perceived similar others

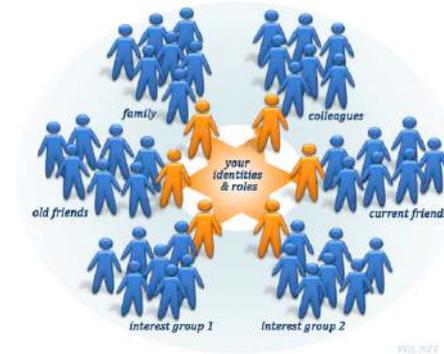


- Based on the Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects, or SIDE model (Spears and Lea 1992; Reicher et al. 1995) it can be argued that in online support communities where people recognize themselves and the others as sharing similarities on the basis of the situation they are facing, ***the absence of cues that might draw the attention to potential differences*** (such as age, gender, appearance, etc.) ***may even increase perceptions of similarity.***
- So, the ***less one knows about idiosyncratic characteristics of others in the group*** (i.e. the more anonymous the individual group members are), ***the less attention can be drawn to the (possible) interpersonal differences, and the more to the similarity*** based on the shared group membership (cf. Sassenberg and Postmes 2002).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.

Social Networks and Online Communities: Online Social support groups

Communities of perceived similar others



The perceived similarity of other members of the online social group can even be increased by the anonymity of the online interactions.

- As a consequence, for online support groups that focus on a specific topic of concern, ***the inability to individuate its members may result in more perceived similarity*** (Sassenberg and Postmes 2002),
- ***More interpersonal trust*** (Tanis and Postmes 2005)
- and a ***stronger focus on the social norms of the group*** (Postmes et al. 2001).
- These groups can therefore have a ***vital function in learning people how to cope with the situation they are facing*** (Davison et al. 2000),
- And membership of groups like this can ***become an important part of one's self concept and self-definition*** (Bargh and McKenna 2004).

Reference: Joinson, A. (2007). *Oxford handbook of internet psychology*. Oxford University Press.