Exploring the relationship between receiving and offering online social support: A dual social support model

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the taxonomy of social support and the transactional model of stress and coping, we proposed a dual social support model to study online social support exchange behaviors. Our model predicts that receiving problem-focused and emotion-focused support from others enhances coping resources; in turn, these coping resources are the primary drivers of the willingness to offer support to others. We empirically tested the proposed dual social support model using data collected from 212 users of online support communities. The results indicate that the problem- and emotion-focused mechanisms simultaneously, yet differentially, determine the willingness to offer support.

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1. Introduction

In addition to allowing commerce, entertainment, and social networking, the introduction of the Internet and the Web has allowed virtual social support groups to take place virtually. *Social support* comprises aid and assistance (including, among other things, informational and emotional support) that are exchanged via social relationships and interpersonal transactions. An online support group is an area within cyberspace where individuals exchange social support to manage their problems or stressful situations. There are online support groups for people addressing cancer, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, weight loss, etc. Social support helps people to effectively manage stresses [24] and to mitigate the impact of a negative life event [53]. Indeed, the Internet/Web is being used increasingly for online support groups or communities [47]. These positive social network forces are worthy of both encouragement and concern because recent studies indicate that online support or self-help groups act as both primary and supplemental sources of social support [6,47,97].

The biggest challenge in fostering a virtual community is the supply of information, namely, the willingness of members to share information with others [19,20]. As with any other virtual community, the success of online support communities depends largely on intensive interaction among members, including seeking support and offering support to each other. Offering support to others is especially highly valued because support seekers may stop visiting a site if their requests receive no corresponding responses from others in that group. As an outcome, online social support functions break down when members stop providing feedback to others' questions. Therefore, understanding the factors that drive individuals to offer support to others is critical. In addition, online support groups are formed by individuals who are in similar situations or have correlating experiences. The basic interaction mechanism is that the more experienced individuals or experts offer expressive or instrumental information to those who have less or no experience in managing the situation. However, those experienced individuals may leave the online support group, or experts may not be available. Therefore, the sustainability of an online support group relies on some support seekers turning themselves into support providers. This requirement elicits an interesting question: "*does having received support from others in the past positively increase an individual's willingness to provide support to others?*"

Social support can be classified into two types: action-facilitating and nurturant. *Action-facilitating support* is assistance that helps stressed individuals to solve or eliminate the problem causing the distress, while *nurturant support* encompasses comfort or consolation without direct efforts to solve the distressing problem [30]. Following the first question, if receiving support

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from others in an online support community does increase one's willingness to offer support to others, we want to further understand "*how do different types of received support lead to the willingness to provide support?*"

Guided by the two questions above, the purpose of this study is therefore to explore whether online social support can indirectly promote the willingness to provide support. We addressed the first question from the perspective of the norm of reciprocity. To answer the second question, we drew upon the transactional model of stress and coping [21,50] and proposed possible mediators between receiving and offering support. We hypothesized that receiving online social support enhances individuals' resources for coping with stress (personal coping resources), which in turn positively promotes the willingness to provide support to others. We also predicted that the willingness to offer support is primarily driven by two types of mechanisms: problem-focused and emotion-focused. The problem-focused mechanism first transfers the effect of action-facilitating support to self-efficacy and then to willingness to offer support. The emotion-focused mechanism first relates nurturant support to community identification and then to willingness to offer support.

By clarifying the above issues, this study contributes to online social support research in two ways. First, we demonstrate that the receiving of support does indeed lead to a willingness to offer support, which explains the sustainability of online communities. Second, by applying the transactional model of stress and coping, we further illustrate how the distinct effect of each type of support received can promote the willingness to offer support. The organization of this paper is as follows: the next section reviews the literature relevant to social support and the transactional model of stress and coping. In this section, we also develop a dual social support model and propose relevant research hypotheses. We describe the research methodology and present the results of the data analyses in the third section. In Section 4, we discuss the research findings, the theoretical contributions, the implications of our findings, and the limitations of the study. We summarize our conclusions in the fifth section.

2. Literature review and hypothesis development

2.1. Social support

There is no universally accepted definition of social support. Shumaker and Brownell [82] defined it as "an exchange of resources between at least two individuals perceived by the provider or recipient to be intended to enhance the wellbeing of the recipient" (p. 31). Social support can be broadly defined as any process through which social relationships might promote health and wellbeing [23]. Social support groups have the characteristics of small groups and of the social supporters and are formed by individuals experiencing similar situations. There are various face-to-face social support groups offering discussions and support with a special focus on cancer, HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, and other health issues. In a social support group, members share experiences, information and emotional support. Social support has been identified as an important buffer of mental health [21,24].

Furthermore, it is one of the most well-documented psychological factors influencing physical health outcomes [88].

Although there is no universally accepted definition of social support, there is a consensus: social support is a multi-dimensional construct. Based on prior studies, Cutrona and Russel [28] identified five major dimensions of social support. Esteem support refers to expressions of regard for one's skill, abilities and intrinsic value. Emotional support refers to expressions of caring, concern, empathy and sympathy. Network support is the presence of companions with whom to engage in shared social activities. Tangible support includes offers to provide needed goods and services. Informational support is the provision of advice, factual input, and feedback on actions. As shown in Table 1, Cutrona et al. viewed esteem support and emotional support as two distinct dimensions, while Cohen and Wills [24] considered them to be interchangeable and used the label "esteem support" to represent them both. Network support is analogous to Cohen and Wills' [24] concept of social companionship, while tangible support can be mapped to Cohen and Wills' instrumental support. Table 1 maps and compares the various taxonomies of social support.

Cutrona and Suhr [30] classified these types of social support into two broad categories: action-facilitating support and nurturant support. These authors included both informational support and tangible aid in the action-facilitating support category, while emotional support and network support fall into the nurturant support category. Esteem support may serve either an action-facilitating or a nurturant function [30]. Goldsmith [41] endorsed this classification and indicated that informational support and tangible support facilitate individuals' efforts to solve a problem or change a stressful situation (problem-focused coping) and thus should be grouped into action-facilitating support. Emotional support and network support facilitate individuals' efforts to manage the emotional distress that is associated with the situation (emotion-focused coping) and thus should be grouped into nurturant support. Esteem support has two components: reassuring a person of his or her competence and reassuring a person of his or her intrinsic worth. The former component (cognitive esteem support) may facilitate problem-focused coping [30] and thus can be grouped into action-facilitating support. The latter component (affective esteem support) may facilitate emotion-focused coping by lessening the intensity of negative emotions engendered by stressful events [30] and thus can be grouped into nurturant support.

Studies of online social support exchanges exist in the literature (see Table 2). However, although these studies focus on the characteristics of online social support, it is not yet known if action-facilitating support and nurturant support enhance individuals' personal coping resources and, subsequently, promote a willingness to provide support in the context of online support groups.

2.2. Transactional model of stress and coping

A fundamental proposition of the transactional model of stress and coping is that stress is a product of a transaction between the individual and the environment. Stress arises from the appraisal that particular environmental demands are about to tax or exceed

Table 1
Mapping between the taxonomies of social support.

Cobb [21]	House [45]	Cohen and Wills [24]	Cutrona and Russell [28]	Cutrona and Suhr [30]	Reber [72]
	Informational	Informational	Informational	Action-facilitating support	Informational
	Instrumental	Instrumental	Tangible		Tangible
Belonging	Emotional	Social companionship	Network	Nurturant support	
Emotional		Esteem	Emotional		Emotional
Esteem	Appraisal		Esteem		Appraisal