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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# Locating Computer-Mediated Social Support within Online Communication Environments

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Social support encompasses the comfort, assistance, and reassurance that people experience as a function of social relationships. Social support enables people to cope with a multitude of personal, physical, social, or mental stressors and experience important physical and psychological benefits (i.e., Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Cunningham & Barbee, 2000). To date, the communication of social support has been predominantly studied as an activity that unfolds in face-to-face (FtF) interaction. Although FtF communication is an important source of social support, this focus neglects the fact that social interaction unfolds in a variety of communication modalities and mediated discourse may even be preferred or required in some circumstances (Walther & Parks, 2002). In this chapter, we consider computer-mediated communication (CMC) as a means of seeking and receiving social support.

Computer-mediated communication refers to interaction between two or more people that is enabled by the use of computer technology. Whereas FtF communication requires temporal or spatial proximity, CMC enables people to exchange messages asynchronously and across great physical distances using the Internet and mediating technology. For these reasons, CMC can be a powerful tool for the communication of social support. Research on mediated social support has examined online support groups (e.g., Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickinson, 2000; Hilding, Fridlund, & Segesten, 1995; Winzelberg, 1997; Wright, 2000, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003) and has compared CMC to FtF communication experiences (e.g., Adams, Roch, & Ayman, 2005; Burgoon, Bonito, Ramirez, Dunbar, Kam, & Fischer, 2002; O'Sullivan, 2000; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, Slovacek, & Tidwell, 2001). Our goal is to build upon this work by considering how features of CMC environments, in general, shape the communication of social support within a variety of specific CMC contexts.

In this chapter, we propose to examine how different modes of CMC provide fundamentally different contexts for social support. Both social support (Burleson, 1994; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Xu & Burleson, 2001) and CMC are multifaceted phenomena. We advance a conceptual framework that appreciates the nuances in both social support and CMC and illustrates how they map onto each

other. To this end, we begin by describing types of social support. Next, we discuss several dimensions that shape mediated interactions. Then, we consider some issues that emerge when social support is situated within six distinct CMC environments.

### Explicating Social Support

Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994, p. xviii) claimed that "social support should be studied as communication because it is ultimately conveyed through messages directed by one individual to another in the context of a relationship that is created and sustained through interaction." With the emergence of a communication perspective on social support, researchers began to appreciate the centrality of messages exchanged between people, the dynamics of interaction, and the relational consequences of support episodes (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). The types of social support recognized in previous research range from sharing thoughts (Hilding et al., 1995, p. 225) to promoting healthy habits (Callaghan & Morrissey, 1993); not surprisingly, messages with different content often lead to divergent support experiences (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Burleson & Samter, 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Hale, Tighe, & Mongeau, 1997). In the paragraphs that follow, we describe a variety of ways in which people communicate social support.

*Emotional support* encompasses messages that address a target's emotional state. Kohn (1996) described this type of support as any effort at ventilating, managing, or suppressing an emotional reaction to an incident. Other research has conceptualized emotional support as openly disclosed, genuine feelings of caring (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) explicitly recognized the centrality of care, concern, and acceptance in their conceptualization of emotional support. Likewise, Albrecht and Adelman (1987) suggested that emotional support should convey understanding for what a person is feeling. In general, then, emotional support involves promoting a positive affective experience for a distressed individual.

Whereas emotional support addresses the sentiments of distressed individuals, *informational support* focuses on advising distressed people (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Cobb (1976, p. 300) conceptualized this construct as information leading a person to believe that he or she is "a member of a network of mutual obligation." Informational support is often operationalized as attempts to provide people with practical information that will help remedy their problems. Although informational support might not directly provide a solution, its content should enable a distressed individual to become a self-sufficient problem solver.

Although emotional and informational support have received the most research attention (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), other types of support merit mention. For example, Xu and Burleson's (2001) typology of social support also includes esteem, tangible, and network support. Providers of *esteem support* reaffirm people's identities and remind the targets of support that they are valuable and worthwhile.

*Tangible support* involves giving practical, material aid, which allows distressed people to concentrate on more troubling aspects of their lives. *Network support* expands a distressed individual's supportive options by either initiating new social contacts or providing novel support resources (Xu & Burleson, 2001).

*Person-centered messages* have also been examined in the context of social support (Burleson, 1982). Person-centeredness is the extent to which a message "reflects an awareness of and adaptation to the affective, subjective, and relational aspects of communication contexts" (Burleson, 1987, p. 305). Highly person-centered messages recognize people's feelings, often by employing evaluatively neutral messages to help them articulate, elaborate, and understand their emotions or the situation (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). These messages are sophisticated utterances because they acknowledge several different factors, including the distressed person, the social situation, the process of communication, and people's emotional and cognitive states. Prior research suggests that highly person-centered messages result in more effective social support than messages low in person-centeredness (e.g., Burleson, 2008, 2009; Holmstrom, Burleson, & Jones, 2005; Jones, 2004, 2005).

Social support is also conveyed by messages that help people change their appraisals of stressful situations. *Cognitive reappraisal* involves facilitating an individual's expression, elaboration, and clarification of distress-relevant thoughts and feelings. Effective cognitive reappraisal is demanding; it requires that participants engage in a detailed conversation about a stressful situation, focus on distressing thoughts and feelings, and create a personal narrative by assembling, clarifying, and processing thoughts and feelings associated with an event (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). When people work through a difficult experience in this manner, they are able to reframe traumatic events and achieve physical and psychological relief (Pennebaker, 1992, 1997).

This brief review highlights the variety of interpersonal messages that convey social support. Some forms of support are largely instrumental, such as providing people with tangible aid or connecting them with someone else who can provide help. Other forms of support—bolstering a person's identity, attending to emotions, and offering person-centered messages—are more personal and potentially face-threatening to the support recipient. Person-centered messages and cognitive reappraisal are types of support that may be especially taxing, given the attention and time they require to implement. This conceptualization of support messages as varied in form and function provides the foundation for our thinking about computer-mediated social support.

### Explicating Computer-Mediated Communication

At its inception, scholars treated CMC as a singular modality that was only applicable for impersonal, task-oriented communication (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986; Parks & Floyd, 1996). In reality, CMC unfolds in a variety of contexts, such

as online support groups, public discussion boards, chat rooms, mediated social networks, instant messaging, and virtual worlds. Moreover, CMC venues can be characterized in terms of a diverse set of underlying features (Sundar, 2008). These features determine not only the structure of a CMC venue, but also the normative communication practices that occur therein. The following paragraphs describe eight dimensions on which CMC venues can vary: synchronicity, anonymity, customization, processual interactivity, degree of social presence, number of users, homophily of users, and source perceptions. Although not exhaustive, these dimensions highlight characteristics of CMC environments that may be especially relevant to understanding people's experience of computer-mediated social support.

*Synchronicity* refers to the degree to which the exchange of messages is immediate rather than delayed. CMC environments are synchronous when communication occurs in real time with immediate feedback. For example, chat rooms, instant messaging programs, and virtual communities all enable people to synchronously communicate with others. In these contexts, the pacing of a conversation mirrors the response time of an FtF interaction. On the other hand, public discussion boards, and social networking sites are all environments in which time elapses between the posting of a message and its reply. The level of synchronicity not only helps define mediated venues, but it also influences the communication that occurs therein.

CMC environments also differ in the level of *anonymity* they offer. Anonymity represents the level of personal, individuating information transmitted by a given channel. Public discussion boards represent an especially anonymous mode of online communication in which users interact with relatively unknown others. On the other hand, instant messenger conversations, wherein users often disclose detailed information about themselves with people they know, are a CMC context with low anonymity. Certain CMC venues allow users to input personal content; however, other venues do not possess such capabilities. Thus, mediated locales fall along a continuum of anonymity as determined by the norms and features of a specific environment.

*Customization* is a third dimension on which mediated locales differ. In the domain of CMC, customization is the degree to which a mediated environment "modifies itself according to specific user input or user navigation and then provides information that is tailored to the user as a unique individual" (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006, p. 112). In other words, users of customizable sites have the ability to manipulate the sites to match their individual needs and preferences. Some researchers have posited that customization promotes involvement with information, thereby encouraging in-depth processing of message content (cf. Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Consistent with this reasoning, Kalyanaraman and Sundar (2006) observed that high levels of customization on political websites resulted in more positive impressions of featured candidates. To the extent that

these findings generalize across contexts, customization should influence communicative exchanges in different CMC contexts.

CMC venues also vary in the degree to which they allow *processual interactivity*. Stromer-Galley (2004, p. 392) defined this type of interactivity as "interaction that occurs between two or more people communicating with each other, in which subsequent messages consist of responses to prior messages in a contingent fashion" (see also Bucy, 2004). Processual interactivity can have beneficial social effects, such as increased gregariousness and civic participation (Bucy, 2004; Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005). On the other hand, extreme interactivity can be detrimental, resulting in fragmentation, individualization, a lack of shared experiences, and selfishness (Bucy, 2004). Given the consequences it has for CMC, processual interactivity is a meaningful index of differences between CMC environments.

A channel's *degree of social presence* is another factor with the potential to influence communication outcomes (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Presence occurs when a mediated interaction does not seem mediated (Lombard & Ditton, 1997); channels high in social presence provide a salient impression of other interactants, whereas channels low in social presence transmit only superficial impressions of other communicators. Mediated contexts that enable people to communicate in real time, in shared spaces, through a variety of media, typically yield high levels of social presence, whereas those that limit fluid interaction between communicators yield correspondingly limited social presence. In turn, the degree of social presence promoted by a CMC infrastructure affects the quality of mediated communicative exchanges.

Different CMC venues also attract and allow different numbers of users. In turn, the number of users interacting within a given mediated environment can influence the communication experience. The vast number of interpersonal contacts available online has been touted as an important advantage of CMC, relative to FtF communication (Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; Wright, 2000). In particular, a greater number of contributors increases the amount of resources and opinions transmitted in a given venue. In addition, having a larger pool of potential interactants increases the prevalence of weak tie networks, which involve frequent communication coupled with nonintimate interpersonal bonds (Granovetter, 1973). Because CMC venues vary in the number of users who participate in exchanges, the *number of users* in a CMC venue is an important feature that distinguishes online communication environments.

CMC venues also vary in the extent to which perceptions of *homophily*, or feelings of similarity, develop among users (Wright, 2000, 2002). Users of CMC sometimes come to see fellow participants as similar to themselves, based on their shared interests and time spent conversing via CMC. In turn, these perceptions can promote satisfaction with online communication and heighten perceptions of emotional support (Cline, 1999; Wright, 2000). After sufficient interaction and disclosure, some people even believe members of online groups are more similar

to them than their offline acquaintances (Wright, 2000). In this manner, perceptions of homophily are an important element of mediated venues of interpersonal communication.

The ease with which people can create meaningful contributions to mediated discourse generates different *source perceptions* in online venues. Sundar and Nass (2000) distinguished conceptions of source as it pertains to the mediated world by enumerating several different types of CMC source. For example, a message's creator reflects traditional notions of a source. In addition, CMC channels represent technological sources. Receivers of mediated content can even perceive themselves to be sources in light of their ability to browse and select content for consumption (see also Reeves & Nass, 1996). Thus, the perceived source of information obtained through CMC constitutes a final dimension that captures variation among environments for online interaction.

In this section, we elaborated upon underlying dimensions that distinguish various CMC contexts. Specifically, we identified synchronicity, anonymity, customization, interactivity, social presence, number of users, homophily of users, and source perceptions as characteristics that can influence communication experiences with particular online venues. Although this list does not encompass the full range of dimensions that characterize technology-enabled communication experiences (see Sundar, 2008), these dimensions capture variation in CMC venues that can influence the provision of mediated social support. With this foundation in place, the following section examines the qualities of five CMC environments and discusses how those features shape the type of social support communication likely to unfold within each context.

### Social Support within Five CMC Contexts

Thus far in this chapter, we have described different forms of supportive communication and considered ways in which CMC environments vary. In this section, we draw upon these features to describe five different CMC contexts that provide venues for computer-mediated social support. Specifically, we discuss CMC support groups, public discussion boards, chat rooms, instant messaging, and virtual worlds to demonstrate how the unique qualities of particular contexts give rise to particular types of supportive communication.

#### Online Support Groups

Mediated support groups, which represent the most widely studied venue of CMC social support, are electronic venues in which people post topical threads regarding the issues associated with different stressors. CMC support groups are novel contexts because users frequently disclose their most private feelings and thoughts to a group of relative strangers. For example, Davison et al. (2000) documented the existence of online support groups helping people deal with ailments like multiple sclerosis, diabetes, chronic fatigue syndrome, and depression. Once posted,

topical threads exist on the discussion board to be viewed or replied to by any member of the support group. In fact, one study showed that 36% of caregivers found advice or support from other people in online support groups (Madden & Fox, 2006). Thus, online support groups represent an important venue of social support with tangible benefits for many people.

Online support groups, in general, share several features that shape the communication occurring therein. For example, online support groups typically involve asynchronous communication, but processual interactivity develops overtime through connected posts and responses. Although people often share detailed personal information, CMC support group contributors are typically anonymous. And, based on the shared experiences that bring people to the online support group, members develop perceptions of homophily; in fact, people sometimes perceive fellow members of CMC support groups to be more similar to them than their offline counterparts (Wright, 2000). These features distinguish the discourse of online support groups from what occurs in other CMC venues.

The relative anonymity of online support groups, compared to FtF contexts, is a key force shaping supportive communication in this venue. As Galagher, Sproull, and Kiesler (1998, p. 497) maintained:

Confidentiality regarding the face-to-face group's proceedings may be expected, but one's physical presence and the possibility of encountering others in one's community create a risk of unwanted public exposure. Furthermore, these groups often exert social pressure on members to participate actively and to disclose their thoughts and feelings. Small size, local geography, and social pressure make these groups less private, less anonymous, and more conformist than are electronic social support groups.

Shielded by the anonymity that characterizes online support groups, participants can seek and provide forms of social support that require emotional openness and private disclosure. Accordingly, online social groups should be especially conducive to emotional support, esteem support, and person-centered messages.

The perceived similarity among contributors to online support groups should also affect people's support experience. Attitude and behavioral homophily are positively correlated with satisfaction and perceived emotional support in both CMC and FtF situations (Cline, 1999; Wright, 2000). Moreover, Wright (2000, p. 47) argued that communication partners in online support groups gain credibility from the "perception that the provider of support has been through similar circumstances, has had similar problems and engaged in similar behaviors, and has similar attitudes and beliefs about the conditions he or she is facing." The identification of common situations, emotions, or stressors provides members of online support groups with a sense of similarity that can lead to important communicative and supportive benefits. As in the case of anonymity, feelings of homophily facilitate the expression of sensitive forms of support, including emotional and esteem support and person-centered messages. In this manner, feelings of homo-

phily could contribute to the sensitive, supportive interactions documented in online support contexts (i.e., Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999).

#### *Public Discussion Boards*

Whereas CMC support groups are essentially private venues, public discussion boards are, by definition, open environments available to any Internet user interested in commenting on a specific issue. Public discussion boards are dedicated to everything from sports teams and television shows to types of cuisine and hobbies. Members voluntarily post correspondence organized into threads. Although the members of these groups are predominantly strangers, a common topical interest unites the members and provides a focal point for conversation.

Discussion boards often exist as asynchronous public and impersonal gathering places, but they can develop into familiar, even intimate, communities through continued posting and interaction. These venues contain high levels of processual interactivity because users are responsive to each other's comments. In addition, the members of public discussion boards consist of anonymous users who interact based on a common topical interest. The number of individuals who post on a specific topic can vary widely, but discussion boards are typically defined by a large and unrestricted number of users. And, although the topical focus of a discussion board represents the venue's *de facto* purpose, participants can post information about a broad variety of topics; in this sense, individual participants are typically the perceived source of information shared within public discussion boards.

The anonymity of online discussion boards can facilitate supportiveness through the development of weak tie networks. Unlike committed relationships, Adelman, Parks, and Albrecht (1987) asserted that weak tie networks are effective at providing access to diverse information and encouraging disclosure of sensitive information because people are not concerned that the information will reach closer relationship partners. In fact, weak tie associations can promote more positive support interactions than family ties because expressions of support are not based on obligations or expectations (Nussbaum, 1994). The benefits of weak ties are magnified in discussion boards when people reveal more personal information than they normally would in parallel FtF settings (Wright, 2000). Because of their ability to access information and promote interpersonal comfort, weak tie networks encourage informational support, as well as sensitive forms of support, such as emotional support and person-centered messages.

The number of members who participate in public discussion boards also affects the quality of support people derive. A large discussion board membership increases the likelihood that an individual will find someone who can provide useful information or direct them to relevant resources (Turner et al., 2001; Wright, 2000). In fact, Walther and Boyd (2001) highlighted continuous access to large stores of information as a major benefit of turning to CMC for social sup-

port. Accordingly, informational and network support are heightened in public discussion boards, especially those with large, active memberships.

With the advent of discussion boards, on which anyone can post a message, users possess an increased opportunity to be an initiator of wide-spread electronic discourse. Besides themselves, other users, professional writers, and even robotic computer systems can all be sources of electronic content. Interestingly, Sundar and Nass (2000) reported that users liked content more, perceived it was higher quality, and believed it was more representative when they thought other users produced the content, rather than when they were told it was developed by editors or a computer. Accordingly, people could be attracted to the support offered in public discussion boards, regardless of its precise form, simply because it was produced by fellow users. These findings suggest that the actual users and their contributions to a public discussion board could be important features that contribute to the perceived quality of social support.

#### *Chat Rooms*

Like public discussion boards, chat rooms are virtual public spaces dedicated to providing an open forum for topical or social discussion. Chat rooms are dedicated to a large variety of topics ranging from places for singles to meet, to venues for fans of specific musical genres, to settings for the enactment of virtual book clubs. Once inside a chat room, people type comments into a textbox and send them to the room's inhabitants. Every contributor's comments are visible to everyone else in a common chat window that refreshes as new comments are generated. Users are free to come and go as they please, venturing into several chat rooms until they encounter one in which they are comfortable and desire to interact.

Chat rooms maintain rather high levels of processual interactivity, which stems from the fact that they enable synchronous interaction. In fact, chat room discussions resemble the rate of message exchange experienced in FtF discussions. Like the other venues discussed thus far in this chapter, chat room participants typically maintain their anonymity. These main features of chat rooms—*anonymity, processual interactivity, and synchronicity*—shape the social support that occurs within them.

As previously discussed, the anonymity that characterizes chat rooms allows people to feel comfortable disclosing stressful thoughts and feelings (see also McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002). In general, CMC reduces self-presentational anxiety, social risk, and face threat (Caplan, 2003), and the Internet's anonymity enables people to reach high levels of disclosure without anxiety or fear (Anolli, Villani, & Riva, 2005). In this manner, the anonymity of chat rooms enables forms of social support that could be face-threatening in FtF situations. In particular, emotional support, esteem support, and person-centered messages are likely to occur in chat rooms.



The high levels of processual interactivity and synchronicity that define chat rooms should also benefit the social support process by drawing people into mediated conversations. The constant disclosure, feedback, and openness that constitute a chatroom creates a welcoming environment for conversation that facilitates the expression of a person's inner feelings (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; Caplan & Turner, 2007). In fact, Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that CMC interactants produced a higher proportion of self-disclosures than did strangers interacting FtF. The ability to obtain immediate responses may also facilitate informational and network support, because people can request immediate help and provide feedback that helps support providers tailor their advice to the user's specific needs. In combination, then, processual interactivity and synchronous communication allow involving conversational forms of support, such as cognitive reappraisal or person-centered messages, as well as instrumental assistance in the form of informational and network support.

#### *Instant Messaging*

Instant messaging (IM) is strictly text-based communication that allows users to send and receive short messages via specialized chat programs. Besides conversing, IMers are able to create short profiles and informative "away messages," as well as browse other people's profiles. People from younger age groups are even more likely to use instant messaging programs than email (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Thus, IM is a widely used CMC context, which is likely to become more popular in the future.

Unlike the other forms of CMC discussed in this chapter, IM exchanges are dyadic, private conversations that commonly occur between people with a prior relationship. In fact, researchers have determined that people's IM networks are relatively modest, with 66% of people regularly IMing only between one and five people (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). IM interactions are typically characterized by a lack of anonymity, synchronous information exchange, and high processual interactivity. The rapid message exchange and prior knowledge of IM interactants also yields high levels of social presence. Processual interactivity and social presence are the features of this CMC venue that are especially relevant to the communication of social support.

IMing is an ideal example of processual interactivity; however, there is still some debate as to whether this form of interactivity benefits or curtails relationship development. Some scholars have touted processual interactivity as enhancing sociability (Bucy, 2004; Shah et al., 2005), whereas others contend that interactivity is socially debilitating because it promotes fragmentation and individualization (Bucy, 2004). Because of the debate surrounding interactivity, it is not clear whether it is a benefit or detriment to the social support process. Certainly, individuation and selfishness are incompatible with notions of emotional and esteem social support; however, civic participation seems to promote network support. Interactivity could also be intrinsically supportive, because just maintain-

ing a conversation with a distressed person could generate esteem or network support and confirm that the distressed person is worthy of another's attention.

Although the degree of social presence in IM conversations is high relative to other CMC environments, IM provides a less immediate form of interaction relative to FtF discussions. O'Sullivan (2000) argued that CMC exerts a "buffer effect," such that it reduces the face threats that are present within difficult FtF interactions. Consistent with this reasoning, O'Sullivan (2000) found that people prefer mediated channels when they are concerned with their self-presentation and when they believe that ambiguity would favor their comments. Thus, the engagement facilitated by IM, coupled with this buffering quality, may provide unique support benefits to individuals uncomfortable with FtF communication about stressful experiences.

In particular, men could prefer the reduced social presence and perceived security of IM when seeking and expressing support. Although men believe they are more skilled supporters, women are more comfortable and more effective in support situations (Hale et al., 1997; Kunkel & Burleson, 1999; Sarason, Sarason, Hacker, & Basham, 1985). For men, then, IM might provide a place where they can synchronously express feelings that they cannot articulate FtF. Shiu and Lenhart (2004) found that males (29%) are more likely than females (19%) to IM someone who is in the same location, despite the fact that men and women are otherwise equivalent users of IM (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). More generally, we expect that IM conversations allow people to provide esteem or emotional support, as well as sensitive person-centered messages, in a manner that capitalizes on both the heightened social presence relative to other CMC venues, and the decreased social presence relative to FtF encounters.

#### *Virtual Worlds*

Virtual worlds, such as Secondlife or Habbo Hotel, represent a unique segment of the online landscape. In these environments, people manipulate avatars, traverse virtual terrain, and synchronously interact with other users. The goal of virtual worlds is to provide an alternate form of reality that accurately mirrors FtF life in many respects. Besides social pursuits, many virtual worlds contain a commercial component whereby users are able to purchase and sell virtual commodities to other users through the exchange of actual currency. Secondlife, perhaps the largest and most publicized of the virtual worlds, boasts an international membership of several million individuals. As the site's homepage declares, it is "a vast digital continent, teeming with people, entertainment, experiences and opportunity."

Because of their multimodal capabilities, interactants can create a variety of social interactions in virtual worlds. In these contexts, people can interact with others through synchronous chat, video, audio, or other asynchronous means. Furthermore, people possess the capability to manipulate their avatar's appearance, their behavior, and their virtual surroundings to suit their needs, personali-

ties, or goals. Accordingly, virtual worlds have very high levels of customization relative to other mediated contexts. Moreover, the potential for rapid conversational exchange, processual interactivity, and the ability to control avatars enable people to create a strong sense of social presence. The interpersonal, social, and psychological benefits inherent in virtual worlds make them a useful resource for many people.

The high levels of customization in virtual worlds can facilitate selective self-presentation. The ability to strategically edit physical features is especially pronounced in virtual worlds, where people interact using a customized avatar. Some scholars have proclaimed that without visual information, message senders can selectively present themselves by masking or editing undesirable and uncontrollable cues while simultaneously magnifying preferred cues (Walther, 1996, 1997). As Walther (1996, p. 20) asserted, "such social evaluations as one is able to garner are not impeded by messy hair, lack of makeup, or normal imperfections, much less more pronounced physical distracters or disabilities." For example, enhanced selective self-presentation should facilitate the production of some types of support, perhaps particularly those types of support that are difficult to provide FtF, such as emotional support, person-centered messages, or cognitive reappraisal. People can customize both their virtual appearance and support statements to correspond with support goals. Thus, virtual world's customization embodies the benefits of selective presentation.

Virtual world's levels of social presence, which are greater than those of most CMC venues yet smaller than FtF interaction, can afford people great flexibility in editing supportive statements and managing cognitive resources. Because CMC requires people to type their responses before sending them, communicators are able to distance themselves from their thoughts to revise or abandon unfavorable messages. "The channel itself facilitates goal-enhancing messages by allowing sources far greater control over message construction than is available in FtF settings" (Walther & Parks, 2002, p. 541). Communicators can also exploit virtual worlds' social presence to redirect cognitive resources to where they can be applied most effectively (Burgoon & Walther, 1990; Walther, 1996, 1997). Some theorists have even argued that CMC users can reallocate unused cognitive resources towards message construction (Walther, 2006). If people can direct more cognitive resources to verbal message production, they should be able to thoroughly combine the contextual, emotional, and personal aspects of these messages to create person-centered messages. As Walther (1996, p.33) imparted, "CMC affords opportunities, however, to communicate as desired; an impulse that seems to be inherently human yet may be more easily enacted via technology."

In this section of the chapter, we discussed the types of social support enabled by the features of five different venues for CMC: CMC support groups, public discussion boards, chat rooms, IM, and virtual worlds. Rather than yielding identical communication outcomes, each of these venues possesses distinct features

that shape the communication experiences and social support messages that transpire. In some cases, the anonymity of participants in a CMC environment was linked to the more personal communication required by esteem support, emotional support, and person-centered messages. In other venues, synchrony and processual interactivity make possible forms of support, like cognitive reappraisal, that rely on an ongoing exchange of messages between communicators. Likewise, the number of users, homophily of users, and source perceptions were argued to affect the prevalence of different forms of support. This discussion reveals how the array of CMC environments vary in ways that have consequences for computer-mediated social support.

### Closing Thoughts

McLuhan (1964) claimed that "the medium is the message" in that the meanings attached to any symbols are driven by qualities of the channel through which messages are communicated. Relatedly, Meyrowitz (1985) asserted that different media have the ability to drastically shape people's social relations. Whereas these two scholars imply that the media, rather than the content they carry, should be the focus of study, we highlight how qualities of both communication channels and support messages affect experiences of computer-mediated social support. Like others before us, we assume that a communication channel strongly influences the form of the messages it conveys (e.g., Pingree, Wiemann, & Hawkins, 1988). In particular, we have argued that variations in the features that characterize CMC venues influence the social support processes that unfold within them. In addition, our analysis illustrated how characteristics of support messages themselves determine whether they are likely to occur within specific online environments. In this way, we propose that it is the interplay between features of support messages and characteristics of CMC venues that determines the experience of computer mediated social support.

Our approach in this chapter also emphasized differences between CMC contexts, rather than the issues that surround CMC, in general. Walther (1992, p. 82) cautioned against generalizing findings across different online channels, and he advocated a focus on "the theoretical underpinnings regarding communication functions in any context" against which "differences due to channel attributes will become more precise, interesting, and may possibly be employed with greater discretion and utility." To this end, we identified dimensions that capture variation among CMC environments, and we used these underlying features to clarify the kinds of social support likely to occur in different contexts. Thus, we recognize differences between specific CMC venues, while aligning those differences in terms of underlying and theoretically important dimensions.

Just as CMC needs to be examined in ways that attend to underlying similarities and nuanced differences, so must social support be appreciated as a multifaceted phenomenon that takes many forms. In this chapter, we emphasized different types

of support that are conveyed through communication; some of these are defined by the type of help provided (e.g., information vs. attention to emotion) and others (e.g., cognitive reappraisal) are better understood as a communication process. Social support can also be conveyed implicitly by a person's membership in a social network or via a sense of community with similar others. As we look forward to future research on computer-mediated social support, we anticipate that the most theoretically and practically important insight will come from research that considers the variety of ways in which social relationships can be supportive.

Davison et al. (2000, p. 210) asserted that "the social connections enabled by the advent of the Internet constitute a new forum of social support that has unknown, and largely unstudied potential." Computer-mediated communication coexists with face-to-face interaction as the prominent modes for giving and receiving social support. Given its prevalence and impact, research is needed to shed light on the experience of computer-mediated social support. The approach in this chapter provides a framework for undertaking that research in ways that attend to the complexities of both computer-mediated communication and social support.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Personal Relationships and Computer-Mediated Support Groups

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The Internet has become a widely used resource for obtaining social support within interpersonal relationships (Walther & Boyd, 2002), particularly in the context of health concerns (Neuhauser & Kreps, 2003; Wright & Bell, 2003). One popular way in which the Internet facilitates social support is through access to computer-mediated support groups: individuals interacting in groups using the Internet and the World Wide Web to exchange social support. Websites such as Yahoo! Groups, WebMD, and the American Cancer Society, for example, offer numerous asynchronous and real-time discussion forums where individuals concerned with a specific issue share information and offer emotional assistance. An estimated 90 million Americans have participated in some type of computer-mediated support group and that 1 in 4 people seeking information about disease join such groups (Horrigan & Rainie, 2002; Levy & Strombeck, 2002).

Although the Internet provides many options for individuals seeking to supplement or replace traditional (face-to-face) sources of social support (see High & Solomon, Chapter 7, in this volume), including the maintenance of supportive relationships among people who know one another from face-to-face contexts (such as family members and friends), computer-mediated support groups provide a unique portal for the development of new supportive relationships online (e.g., individuals who "meet" in online support groups) which may augment or replace traditional sources of social support. This phenomenon has attracted the attention of social scientists and medical researchers who are interested in the benefits of computer-mediated social support groups for people with health concerns and other stressful life experiences, including important outcomes such as reduced stress and increased coping skills (Johnson, Wright, Craig, Gilchrist, Lane, & Haigh, 2008; King & Moreggi, 1998; Preece & Ghazati, 2001; Rains & Young, 2009; Wright, 2000; Wright, Rains, & Banas, 2010).

This chapter explores interpersonal issues related to the giving and receiving of social support within computer-mediated support groups. Towards that end, the chapter explores the link between social support and health outcomes, relational dilemmas surrounding the provision of social support, and advantages and disadvantages of online support groups/communities. In addition, it focuses on several theoretical frameworks that have been useful in past research in terms of understanding the nature of computer-mediated social support, and suggestions