

PROS AND CONS OF ONLINE SOCIAL SUPPORT EXCHANGE ON SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES: A USER'S PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT. The article dissects the subject of online social support exchange on social networking sites, or SNS (mostly Facebook and Instagram) through the eyes of the platforms' active users. Drawing on 20 semistructured in-depth interviews with SNS users from Ukraine, it discusses both the benefits of support exchange in the online realm, such as speed, resilience, unobtrusiveness, and its drawbacks, such as depersonalization, 'ghosting,' and privacy concerns. The text also explores the sentiments towards some of the main digital instruments of exchanging support on SNS, in particular posts and various forms of "likes," as well as the perceived effectiveness of online social support in general. Additionally, it provides some context on how the phenomenon has been impacted by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Keywords: online social support, social networking sites, paralinguistic digital affordances, social support effectiveness.

Introduction

The exchange of social support – a term encompassing all forms of help obtained by an individual from their interpersonal network (Li et al., 2015: 106) – is preeminent in our daily lives. The availability of social support (especially its perceived availability (Dai et al., 2021: 1)) is integral to our functioning as part of a social group (Cobb, 1976). In recent decades, social networking sites, such

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as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, have emerged as the largest communication platform in human history, serving billions of users around the globe daily (Mohsin, 2022). This, in turn, made them one of the primary modern media for receiving and providing social support. Consequently, terms such as ‘online social support’ (Nick et al., 2018) and ‘computer-mediated social support’ have gained currency in academic discourse (Mikal et al., 2013).

On social networking sites (also known colloquially as social networks), communication takes a variety of forms, as does social support exchange. Most obviously, SNS offer functionality that emulates pre-existing, non-digital communication media – private messages and public comments provide an alternative to corresponding in writing that used to require the services of a post office, and audio messages and calls substitute landline and cell phone communication. This trend arguably culminates in video calls, which can be seen as a simulacrum of face-to-face interaction. SNS also provide a surrogate for phatic communication through so-called paralinguistic digital affordances or PDAs (Carr et al., 2016: 387). PDAs comprise various non-verbal signals that can be exchanged via the user interface (or UI) of SNS – the most prominent among them is the ‘Like’ button and its many evolutions.

This abundance of options provided by social networking services creates a rich and novel vocabulary of social support signals as well as the potential for a practically infinite number of strategies for attaining and offering support in an online setting. As the role of social networking sites in our lives continues to increase (since recently, driven also by massive disruptions in the physical world, such as infectious disease pandemics or wars), many people find the ability to negotiate the evolving functionality of these new tools essential to maintaining their social life.

In light of the above, it is relevant to investigate the views and perceptions of SNS users on exchanging social support online in a systematic manner. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to explore the positive and negative aspects of online social support exchange as formulated by SNS users, the main ways in which they utilize principal SNS functionalities in supportive scenarios and, ultimately, how they compare the SNS social support experience as a whole to exchanging social support offline, specifically from the perspective of perceived effectiveness. To achieve this goal, 20 semi-structured in-depth interviews with active SNS users were conducted throughout the winter of 2022–2023. The analysis of their reflections forms the bulk of the article. Hopefully, it presents a helpful snapshot of the current user opinions on online social support, which will inform further discussions and serve as a starting point for more narrow-focused and in-depth investigations of perceived strengths and weaknesses of digital social support affordances.

Method and sample

The study employs qualitative methodology, namely semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted with 20 people over slightly more than two months (December 2022–February 2023). The interviews lasted from just under an hour to over an hour and a half and were primarily conducted via audio and videoconferencing software. All the conversations were recorded to ensure a faithful and accurate analysis of the statements. The respondents had been informed of their rights to data privacy and confidentiality before the interview began.

The resulting convenience sample consists of people aged 22 to 40 ($M = 30,2$), all originally from Ukraine, but a minority living outside of Ukraine at the time of the interview, either temporarily or permanently, having relocated either pre- or post-full-scale Russian invasion of 2022. The majority of the sample (70%) is female. The list of respondents correlated to the codes used to identify quotes throughout the text can be found in Annexe 1. Those who frequently posted personal content to their accounts (at least weekly) were preferred for inclusion in the sample, but overall, the minimum qualification for participation was spending at least an hour daily on social networking sites on average.

The sample is also heterogeneous in terms of the intensity of daily SNS usage as reported by the participants, as well as their preferences towards specific SNS platforms and motivations for using them. The size of the users' networks of online ties within the sample is also a differentiating factor, varying from a few hundred (corresponding to an almost complete overlap with the offline network) to a few thousand. A few had experience using social media instruments and engagement metrics professionally.

Social networking sites: definition and adoption in Ukraine

According to a classic definition (which was also shared with study participants at the beginning of their interviews, along with examples), social networking sites are web-based systems that allow users to create public or semi-public profiles and articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection within a given system as well as view the connections made by others (Boyd & Ellison, 2007: 211). Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok are by far the most popular platforms that fall under that definition, each having over a billion monthly users (Dixon, 2023). These big three have a commanding presence in Ukraine, boasting over 10 million users each, according to a local communications

агенсу (Дослідження Facebook та Instagram, 2023). Mirroring global trends, the Ukrainian audiences of Instagram and TikTok are distinctly younger on average than that of Facebook; the latter's users are concentrated in the 30–40-year range, while Instagram is most popular among twenty-somethings. TikTok's audience skews even younger: nearly half of its Ukrainian user base is under 25. In nearly all age categories, female Instagram and Facebook users outnumber male ones (Сомова, 2022). It is safe to assume that, by now, most internet users are deeply familiar with how SNS work. For this reason, and in the interest of saving space, detailed explanations of the general nature of digital communication affordances, such as posts, direct messages, and 'likes,' are omitted from this text.

Benefits of SNS as a medium for social support exchange

The respondents were unanimous in calling social networking sites their source of finding social support. However, the extent of using them for this purpose varied ('I receive support [on SNS], probably, once every two weeks... at most.' [2]; 'It seems that every time I use social networks, I get social support in one form or another.' [17]). Notably, many acknowledged that they often acted unconsciously, receiving or providing support online without realizing it [17].

Collectively, the respondents indicated having exchanged all the traditionally differentiated types of social support on SNS (Hayes et al., 2016: 6), including emotional support ('When I am touched by something, I leave a comment to show that I care.' [1]), informational support ('I love sharing useful information... if I find out that there is a place in Lviv that is conducting free HIV tests... I am going to [tell others about it].' [19]), instrumental support ('When I was launching a new project, I asked people to subscribe [to it], to share information.' [20]) appraisal support ('I think any 'story' expresses an overt or covert desire to be told that you look cool, to get 'likes.'" [12]), and network support ('Sometimes, I publish something to check that my reaction to some event is adequate.' [9]).

By far, the most frequently mentioned advantage of using online social networks for social support was their ability to collapse the distance between people and enable users to communicate across borders and continents seamlessly: 'I live in Canada... [SNS] allow me to keep in touch with my parents... with my friends who are scattered all over the world.' [17]. By making the distance factor irrelevant, SNS have greatly expanded the reach of social support messages. 'Now, during the war, when we are all in different cities, with different electricity outage schedules, we can remain connected only due to the online [services]. I would

not manage in this time of war without [them].’ [8]. As one respondent who first moved to Kyiv and more recently relocated to Germany pointed out, SNS allow her to remain in touch with her friends while moving around [9].

In addition to helping retain friends, social networks radically expand people’s capabilities for making new ones. ‘The majority of my acquaintances in Kyiv come from social networks... Thanks to them, I found my first new friends [after moving to] the city...’ [9]. The same respondent also told how after she had moved abroad, she was able to find a “new best friend” by replying to a post in a Ukraine-themed Facebook group: ‘[The path] to two dozen new acquaintances started from a single comment on Facebook.’ [9]. She also described occupation-based Facebook groups as a source of finding new friends through the exchange of informational support: ‘Groups for comms people, for SMM people, I was getting responses to my questions there, also answering other’s questions myself, and this way I made friends [with other group members].’ [9].

As one respondent observed, ‘Despite putting people into ‘bubbles’², social networks also let you transcend your offline ‘bubble.’ [12]. This has significant implications for the provision of social support. Since the usage of social networks has become highly prevalent in some regions, the availability of highly specific, niche types of social support has the potential to expand dramatically. A respondent made this argument using the context of Reddit, which is a news aggregation and discussion website (Anderson, 2015) and not fully a social network, but the point applies in the SNS context, too: ‘You can find a particular subreddit... for people suffering from some sort of a [rare] disease and find the specific support that you would not get by just... going onto the streets’ [5]. ‘Offline, I probably would not be able to talk to people with such different views, in such a safe environment.’ [6].

The online social networking ecosystem also significantly expedites the delivery of support: ‘On social networks, you can quickly reach out to people who you think might provide you with support.’ [3]. Obviously, there are many ways to communicate online in essentially or literally real time using private messages or audio calls, but posts can accumulate support quickly as well, owing to the fact that nowadays, the majority of SNS users, especially in the age cohort of this research, spend upwards of one hour daily on average on the platforms (Buchholz, 2022). ‘I can engage, like, 20% of my friends with a post in my feed, while meeting or calling this many people would take longer.’ [2]. ‘You can receive support from 15 people [at a time].’ [10]. The speediness is also promoted by the fact that SNS bias towards showing recent posts: according to one estimate, an average Facebook post garners 75% of its lifetime impressions

² Slang for “opinion echo chamber”

(times it is shown to other users) within the first two and a half hours since publication (Papeman, 2022).

What is more, there is no practical limit on the audience size for any given support request shared on SNS since the digital environment does not impose meaningful structural constraints on the dissemination of information ('The transaction cost is massively decreased... It is a game-changer.' [16]). This constitutes another fundamental shift in social support dynamics.

The near-zero marginal cost of gaining attention on SNS is combined with the radical democratization of interaction vectors: 'I do not follow this closely, but I am certain that... my Tweets are being read by our Western partners [and] I have been retweeted by 'Ukrayinska Pravda,' 'Focus'3 and the like... it is a unique thing.' [11]. This occurred because, for most of their existence, general-purpose social networking sites have been devoid of hierarchies, and all of their users enjoyed essentially identical privileges and functionality within a site. This has had an equalizing effect on online communication, if only among the people who could afford regular access to the Internet. Interestingly, multiple high-profile departures from this trend have taken place recently, such as Twitter's "Blue" subscription (Beykpour & Gupta, 2021), "Snapchat Plus" (New Features For Snapchat+, 2022), and "Meta Verified" (Roth, 2023). Still, they occurred only many years into the lifecycles of the respective services.

Hence, SNS can be credited with fostering a culture of significantly lowered barriers in terms of whom one can contact for support: 'Nowadays, you can reach opinion leaders directly, as opposed to [the pre-SNS era].' [8]. One respondent related a story of how, in the first weeks of the full-scale Russian invasion, she was able to directly request and obtain instrumental support from the so-called "bloggers" – people with a significant online following (in this case, around 10-40 thousand users): 'I started reaching out to [medium-sized] bloggers... At the start of the invasion, everyone was very active, the bloggers actually responded to me and shared the information, the fundraisers... without asking additional questions... [even though] we didn't know each other.' [8]. 'On social networks, you can get through to almost anyone if you are persistent enough... you can even communicate with services... like Pryvatbank⁴, and you will get a response because [other] people are also seeing [the request].' [20].

Along with wide reach, SNS also provide a host of metrics for analysing the performance of the posts using aggregate data about user behaviour and demographics: '[On our organization's page], we can immediately see statistics about the reach of the post, the response to it.' [11]. This information may be used to help improve the effectiveness of support requests.

³ Names of mainstream Ukrainian news outlets

⁴ Ukraine's largest bank.

The massive spike in activity from Ukrainian users during the initial stages of last year's Russian invasion was a stark reminder of the resilience of SNS as a communication channel. Their digital-only nature allows them to withstand real-life crises – up to a point, at least: 'Before power outages, I was in regular contact with my friends in Kyiv... these days, it is less frequent, because electricity is not always available, and you have to save the charge.' [2]. This fact was widely appreciated during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the context of armed aggression demonstrated the point even more compellingly: 'When Covid and then the war started, it has become very difficult to do offline activities, [and SNS] were a good solution.' [20]. In 2022, the speed factor of online social support exchange proved unambiguously vital:

[In the early days of the invasion], there was a big desire to do something, but no way to do anything. So, since I had the time, I was monitoring social networks for requests like delivering medicine to Brovary⁵ and then writing to volunteer groups or people I knew who could do it... this way, I actually helped with medicine deliveries within Kyiv a few times [8].

Another recollection from that time pertained to an instant messenger but captured the power of social networks too: 'Many group chats sprang up on Telegram with volunteers... you could find anyone there – a designer, a communicator, a courier.' [8].

Importantly, along with many ways to broaden the audience of a given post, social networks also provide a wide array of tools that can limit its exposure to other users. Facebook offers the ability to set the posts to be seen only by 'friends' or 'friends and their friends' with a couple of clicks. Instagram has the 'Close friends' feature, which allows users to easily limit the reach of Instagram "stories" to a circle of the most trusted accounts (Newton, 2018). More granular controls for customizing the posts' audience also exist. However, multiple people mentioned that setting up audience limits for posts is onerous: 'Frankly, it is too burdensome... it requires effort.' [9]. As one respondent explained, the 'Close friends' function on Instagram (described earlier) is useful, but one has to continuously monitor the membership of those lists, adding or removing people over time. 'These lists change over time; you have to remember who is in them; someone I might've added three years ago may no longer be relevant to me, and this creates additional mental load.' [10].

By default, most of the privacy-enabling controls are not applied, however, which led to many people having detailed representations of themselves online, accessible even by those beyond people's friend groups. As one interviewee explained, this is useful because it allows her to form a general impression of

⁵ A city in the Kyiv metropolitan area.

another person before contacting them for the first time, be it online or offline: 'It is important for me before opening a conversation... to see the person's representation on the social network.' [1].

The respondents also praised the asynchronous nature of SNS communication. When reaching out to someone online, generally, there is no expectation of getting a response right away (in contrast to the synchronous or real-time nature of offline communication). This affords social support providers the time to better plan their response: 'You have time to think. You can write something, delete, start over.' [6]; 'You can answer more thoughtfully.' [4]; '...[T]ake a pause at any moment without the need to explain yourself.' [12]. It also saves time for those who reach out for support. One respondent said that she can post an appeal for support whenever it is convenient for her and move on with other tasks while it passively collects responses: 'It is like a box of chocolates that you can open whenever you need.' [13]. Another respondent echoed this opinion: 'I like that on Facebook, for example, I can post a few lines in the evening when I feel sad and see the reactions and comments by the morning.' [6]. People tend to log into SNS when they have spare time, so it is reasonable to assume that they will generally be more amenable to responding to requests they will encounter. The response might even become quite predictable: 'I know that if I upload a new profile picture, I will receive at least one hundred and twenty 'likes,' and that is pleasant.' [1].

The on-demand nature of social support on SNS dovetails with its another pertinent characteristic: unobtrusiveness. This is most strongly manifested in public posts. Their audience is, in essence, open-ended, and users typically do not feel obliged to respond to a given post or even read it unless they are mentioned or tagged in it (since, if it is not a "story," the author cannot know who saw their post). Therefore, when appealing for support through a public feed, a user is seen as appealing to no one in particular, and this lessens the others' burden to respond, leaving it as just an option – ideally, for those who are best placed to offer support. One respondent told the following story:

I haven't talked to my university groupmate in ten years, ever since we graduated... but we were friends on Facebook, and [recently] I noticed that she had started posting some sad and depressive things. I wrote to her, we talked very openly right from the start, she visited me the next day, and we have kept in touch since... it was a cool experience, all of a sudden, [it seemed] like ten years haven't passed [6].

It is implausible that the respondent's ex-classmate would have reached out to her directly, given they were not in regular contact, but the Facebook posts allowed her to communicate her need for support, if possibly unintentionally, and find someone who was ready and willing to address it.

Other respondents also commented on the unobtrusiveness factor: 'I wouldn't call this person on the phone, but on SNS, I [was able] to receive support from him [in a comment].' [9]. Another respondent verbalized the aspect of choice: 'Any communication about a problem [online] can be ignored because there are a lot of problems... I can categorize people into close or not close... and problems into the ones to which I can provide support and those I cannot.' [4].

An SNS user can also utilize public updates on their profile page to establish a basic level of awareness about their life or current situation, which is helpful when reaching out to someone directly about social support:

With a post, I can inform my circle [of SNS friends about something] without writing to each of them directly and hope that in a future interaction [with a member of this circle], I won't have to begin from scratch... I can communicate with the assumption that this knowledge is already the basis [of our interaction] [4].

This detail was poignantly illustrated by a respondent who recounted one of the Russian rocket strikes on residential buildings:

This was after the Dnipro attack⁶... I have a lot of acquaintances from Dnipro... and I was hesitant. Should I write to them right away or wait... the explosion was very loud, and people even multiple kilometres from the epicentre could be in distress... [but] when I saw that the person posted an Instagram 'story,' I knew that she must be okay since she was able to post, so I checked in with her [12].

SNS are also distinguished by the fact that they maintain a record of most of the user's activity, which is, in most cases, permanent by default. Posts, which are not in the 'story' format, comments, and the bulk of private messages all lack an expiration date, and unless their author deletes them, they will always be accessible (until the company running the service remains operational). Some services actively surface past content to users (Kosoff, 2015). '[Social support exchanges] remain in the history of the social network... and this way, we can return to those messages... and remember certain emotions associated with... receiving those messages... So, we can, in a way, relive the support.' [4]. 'As a forgetful person, I appreciate the ability [to re-read messages] a lot... it is a great option for reflection.' [18].

⁶ Reference to the Kh-29 Russian rocket strike on January 14th, 2023, which killed 46 people.

The ability to edit posts after publication was also mentioned in a positive light: 'Correction is possible... one can change the picture or text itself, add an update.' [11]. Meanwhile, the inability to do so was presented as inconvenient: 'Twitter for a long time hasn't had such functionality, and I frequently had to delete my Tweets [because I wanted to adjust the phrasing].' [18].

The fact that the bandwidth for online communication is much higher compared to offline was also cited: 'Social networks provide the opportunity to exchange large volumes of information... that would be impossible to exchange verbally.' [16]. Indeed, doing so is much easier and faster on SNS, which mainly influences informational support. Social networks also support a vibrant gamut of information formats: '[Social support on SNS] is more diverse' since users can enhance their text interactions with 'other types of content, such as songs, memes, and so on.' [8]. 'This makes it interesting... adds fun.' [19].

Supportive functionalities of SNS

Private messaging was repeatedly called the main channel of exchanging support in the context of social networking sites. 'Most of the receiving and the giving of support happens in private communication.' [15]. Many cited this as the main reason to switch from SNS to instant messengers, as their primary online communication platform and, consequently, the medium for exchanging social support: 'My support needs are mostly served via messengers.' [16]. Privacy allows people to be franker and discuss sensitive issues, in addition to the aforementioned benefits of asynchrony. 'Private messages... are mostly about emotional support.' [20]. 'I reach out through private messages if I can help [someone] with some concrete action.' [13]. The default is the text message, which may be upgraded to other formats depending on the required intensity of support: '[Provision of support] usually starts with [text] messages, later it may grow into audio or video calls if there is a need for something more substantial.' [16].

Views on private audio messages were divided. 'I am sending [them] very often... they bring people a little bit closer [than text messages]' [7]. 'Audio messages are the worst idea ever.' [19]. 'I am ambivalent... on the one hand, it is an opportunity for a more real communication; on the other, they are [harder to access and reply to]... [especially] if the message is five minutes long and contains five different thoughts.' [19].

Public posts on personal pages were described as decisive in mobilizing social support from a broad group of contacts. Their publication also often catalysed conversations in private messages [8]. Temporary posts, namely the

Instagram 'stories,' were often the favourite format of publication: 'Stories' are convenient, and the experiences you describe in them will vanish after 24 hours.' [8], while a post is considered a more substantial piece of communication that requires more effort: 'With 'stories,' you don't have to think too much, [contrary to] the posts... I prefer to do everything quickly.' [19]. Also, the stories format has been significantly enhanced with new features: 'You can create a poll, an answer field. [This way,] it is easier for people to interact.' [19]. Not everyone shared this positive view, though: 'I am not a fan of 'stories' because they disappear.' [6]; 'If you've seen a 'story,' you have to react to it somehow. I am worried people will see that I'd viewed their 'story' but didn't react in any way...' [1]. Using posts to provide support was also mentioned, but much less frequently: 'I can think of isolated cases... where I would write a post of appreciation or a post that brought attention to some topic... I do this very rarely.' [12].

The users also occasionally mentioned posting to specialized discussion groups. '[When I have some accounting question], I don't throw it to my followers; I go to a private group where a ton of excellent accountants hang out.' [11]. Sometimes, due to their "blanket" nature, the posts were seen as an undesirable method for gathering support: 'When I ask for something in a post, people reply with a lot of stuff that isn't relevant, but you have to go through it and thank them, and this takes a long time...' [1].

Comments were generally not favoured as an instrument of providing social support. They were described as the strongest form of public supportive reaction to a post: 'If I feel that I can provide some support to a person, I do not simply 'like' [a post], but also leave a comment, because I know from experience that mere reactions, without words... are a bit different.' [12]. From this stems its more selective usage: 'I don't think I am going to post a comment under a post from someone I don't know' [7]. 'I will write a comment if something has really touched me, and I want to express support... [and only] if I am close to this person.' [8]. Multiple respondents were uncomfortable with such a public way of exchanging support: 'If something I wrote may potentially get seen by many people, I prefer not to do it... I will say what I want to say in private.' [16]. However, one respondent preferred comments to private messages: 'I am not good at keeping up communication in private messages... so I seek interaction in the feed.' [6].

The interviews showed that paralinguistic digital affordances, mentioned at the beginning of this article, are a major avenue for providing signals of social support. Almost all the participants in the study said they perceived "likes" and other reactions to the content on SNS as a way to demonstrate support. However, they clearly considered PDAs one of the weaker expressions of

support on SNS, in contrast to private messages and comments. 'I prefer to use words instead of reactions.' [18]. 'I've never paid attention to [the reactions].' [3].

Yet, many respondents said that they did follow the reactions to what they posted and found them important. 'You get] 20–40 'likes,' and life feels better for some time.' [2]. '[T]hese small things do contribute to the mood.' [8]. The ease of PDAs was mentioned time and again: "This is an easy way... to stay in the lives of people I care about." [10]. One respondent said of the reactions to private messages: "This is a super function; when you don't want to reply, you can just hit 'like.'" [15]. Another respondent said that when she encounters a person in need of support but lacks the mental capacity to post a comment or write a text, she uses "hearts" [9]. The unobtrusiveness of the default reactions was singled out: "[Since Instagram added 'likes' in 'stories,'] you don't have to send a clunky emoji [here referring to the set of six 'quick' emoji reactions]... you simply press 'like,' which is less intrusive for the other person." [16]. However, there is also a flipside: 'It depends on how many subscribers the person has, but your 'like' might not even get noticed.' [14]. Additionally, since these reactions are so lightweight and generally not associated with a deep, emotional response, some scenarios might not be appropriate for their usage: 'If a person [is posting about] a bereavement, I am not going to react with an emoji, because it doesn't adequately convey the level of empathy.' [14].

Today's social networks have no shortage of different types of quick reactions, and the users clearly take this into account: 'I pay attention to the number of 'likes,' who left which type of reaction.' [9], "...What the proportion of different reactions is." [6]. The respondents acknowledged that they attached somewhat different meanings to different reaction options, such as "Like," "Love," and "Care" (which exist on Facebook): "'Likes' do not feel like something special anymore... ['Liking' posts] is like brushing teeth in the morning." [6]. 'When your message receives a 'heart' instead of a soulless 'like,' that is already a sign of caring.' [12]. "'Care' is like a figurative pat on the shoulder." [6]. Stronger reactions are reserved for friends, while weaker ones are used more or less indiscriminately: "I use 'Celebrate' on LinkedIn only for those whom I know... but I can give 'Support' to anyone." [20].

Additionally, the supportive potential of a reaction may differ substantially based on the sender. 'When I get 'likes' from people from my village, I am, like, 'Okay'... because I am not sure they understood what I had written about, but when it is [from] someone from the expert environment, then it is [more meaningful].' [9]. Taking into account the author of a reaction is important also because their conceptualizations of the reactions and strategies for deploying them will likely diverge in some way. 'Some people are very passive online...

and in their case, even a simple 'like' is... something major... for others, a 'heart' is a standard reaction.' [12].

On their part, the respondents also voiced a broad spectrum of supportive motivations that underlie pressing the 'heart' or 'thumbs up' against others' content. 'To keep in touch... to demonstrate that I exist in your life, I am interested in it, if you want to start a dialogue, I am there...' [10]. 'To express admiration at [the content of a post]' [4], 'to express agreement with the thought being expressed' [5], 'to help amplify [the message], make it more visible.' [3]. Another interviewee said that she had "anxiety" about comments that were not "closed," i.e., did not get any interaction from her, so she felt compelled to at least "like" all the comments she received if she did not have anything other to respond with [6].

The latter anecdote hints at the important fact that not all use cases for PDAs are of supportive variety: many respondents mentioned that they "liked" posts to save them for later reference or merely indicate that they have read them ('I try to 'like' only the things I would potentially want to return to later.' [14]). A desire to indicate to the SNS recommendation engine that a particular post should be promoted more was also mentioned several times among motivations for giving "likes," but whether or not this act is intended as supportive towards the poster depends on the situation. The main aim is to create a positive feedback loop that leads to more people engaging with the post, but this may be done not so much for the benefit of the poster but rather for their audience. Taken together, these scenarios highlight yet another significant way in which the non-verbal nature of PDAs engenders ambiguity in communication. In this regard, one respondent provided a great hypothetical example:

For instance, one of my acquaintances publishes an angry post about how he is fed up with feminists or whatever... and someone may leave an 'angry' emoji under his post because he is also fed up and wants to express solidarity. But I am going to leave an 'angry' emoji because I am a feminist, and this post has offended me [19].

This nexus of factors is likely why the respondents generally resisted the idea that a set of rules for using PDAs could exist and be consistently applied: 'I wouldn't say that I have criteria, a dictionary of emojis... I act according to the situation, according to the person... to my mood... it is all very subjective.' [14].

This section does not contain an exhaustive list of the SNS functionalities, merely those that recurred through multiple interviews. Other affordances, such as events that exist on Facebook [1] and reposts ('I like it a lot when any of my content gets reposted. It means that someone shares my values.' [20])

were also mentioned, but only intermittently. The respondents usually did not conceptualize their social networking experience as going through a sequence of various SNS functions but rather saw it through the lens of goals and motivations, which possibly made the discussion of this chapter's topic (which did not refer to a predetermined list of functions) less fruitful than it could have been otherwise.

Effectiveness of social support on SNS compared to traditional support

The majority of the people interviewed did not compare favourably the experience of exchanging social support online to the experience of exchanging social support offline. One respondent called it a 'mere echo' [18] of the face-to-face experience and said that he primarily sought offline support interactions. The latter were also predominantly described as 'more authentic' [5] and 'more sincere' [9]. '[When you are offline,] you are constantly reading the other person's state through non-verbal clues, and that is impossible online... even video does not substitute it.' [7]. In an offline setting, one can judge by 'body language, facial expressions, whether the person is being genuine in their willingness to help' [5]. 'You have much more non-verbal information which helps determine whether the goal of the [supportive] communication was achieved.' [12]. Also, 'in offline interactions, all of your attention is focused on the other person... while online, many things can distract you.' [16].

Consequently, many people rated offline social support as more effective vis-à-vis SNS support. One respondent compared the effectiveness of offline and online social support the following way: 'You need to gather support for one hour online [whereas] offline ten minutes would suffice.' [9]. 'Offline, the amount of support exchanged [per unit of time] is higher.' [3]. The respondents also put an emphasis on its completely different quality: 'The kind of emotional support you can get offline, you won't get online, no matter which [SNS] functionality you use.' [14]. Offline social support is still perceived as foundational to human relationships: 'If I am experiencing a deep sense of loneliness, I won't be able to lower it by trying to get support through social networks... loneliness [can't be addressed] with a 'heart' reaction on a 'story.' [19]. 'If you are interacting over just messengers, without seeing each other with some regularity, you will feel less close over time.' [16]. "It is very hard to sustain a relationship without seeing the [person's] face [in real life]." [17].

That being said, multiple respondents acknowledged that, on its own, they viewed the exchange of social support online as effective enough or at least convenient. 'Offline social support is better than online... but [the latter] is cheaper

from the cost-benefit point of view.' [20]. '[Exchanging support] is more convenient online, but, in the end, more effective offline.' [12]. 'It is easier to reach out to someone through private messages than meet them offline.' [10]. Some posited that SNS social support is just as effective as offline when considering all the advantages and drawbacks of both forms on balance. '[In terms of effectiveness], I would say that private messages are on par with communicating offline' [8]. '[Since I live abroad,] communicating online is just as meaningful as doing it offline... I can't say that one works better than the other for me.' [2].

Some respondents were reluctant to make a call on the effectiveness comparison one way or the other [4]. As one respondent put it, which of the two kinds of social support would prove more effective "depend[ed] on the situation" [15], 'on the group of people, on the goal of the support' [3]. Many respondents pointed out scenarios in which online social support would be more effective than offline, emphasizing the numerous benefits of SNS support discussed earlier. For example, the asynchrony of the online realm was explicitly mentioned as the advantage over the real world more than once: 'With some of my friends, I can be more candid online since the ability to react to a message later provides... a sense of safety [during] heavy discussions' [8]. 'You can be more open. You have the time to correctly phrase what you really want to say.' [6].

One respondent said that exchanging social support online was "better" since 'online, you may be anonymous or just not show your face, which makes [exchanging support] easier... [takes away] social anxiety.' [5]. Another said that offline communication in the form of meetings with her friends sometimes felt mentally exhausting for her since those meetings could be sporadic and infrequent, while online, the communication was more predictable, and you could more easily 'regulate its intensity' [8]. '[Online, you don't have to engage in small talk,] you can get right into it.' [6]. '[Online] support is more focused, you are after some particular thing, while offline interaction [does not have a strictly defined purpose].' [1].

One study participant summed up her attitude thus: 'Of course, [SNS] won't replace real-life communication, you won't get the same experience there, but [due to the war,] I am grateful for the existence of [SNS]; at least we have this much, and it really helps.' [8]. Another said something to a similar effect: 'Offline support is not always possible... if it was all I had, I would be pretty unhappy.' [16]. Ultimately, social networks are just a tool, and it is up to the users how effective it will be in satisfying their social support needs [1]. 'All the advantages of online social support are also its drawbacks... people can both call me stupid and give me support from any place on Earth.' [18]. Overall, as this chapter illustrates, the experience of exchanging social support online is heavily context-dependent; for example, in some contexts, online social support can also be "exhausting," a descriptor used for offline support in the previous

paragraph: 'For the first few months [of the full-scale war] some people wrote to me every two or three days, and that was... exhausting... I started ignoring them' [10].

The negative impact of SNS on social support exchange

One of the dominant motifs in the criticism of social support on SNS is the depersonalization of interaction. 'In my view, social networks completely dehumanize others.' [9]. On SNS, 'you can't see the other person, may not know who they are, can block [their account] at any moment...' [9]. This makes people "more impulsive." "[T]hey don't take the time to reflect' [20] and are more prone to negative comments since they cannot see other people's reactions [7]. Meanwhile, the genuineness of positive reactions might be in doubt. 'You don't know if the reactions are real, what the person is really thinking.' [7]. 'I can't tell if the person is sincere online' [9]. At the same time, the very fact that a user can completely refrain from revealing their identity online was mentioned earlier in a positive light as decreasing the anxiety from asking for the kinds of support that may lead to prejudicial treatment (Hayes et al., 2016: 7).

Expanding on the theme of having less information on SNS, the respondents often found fault with the general ambiguity of digital conversations. 'Sometimes... you can't tell what people mean and have to ask them again. You didn't put a smiley at the end, and your words already have a different air.' [6]. 'Since people can't see you, everyone will read into your words something different.' [20]. 'A lot of my friends say to me that were I to communicate in real life the way I do online, they wouldn't be friends with me. In messages, [unlike offline,] I come across as awkward, rude, unclear.' [19].

A recurring issue, which stems from the depersonalization, is the relative 'shallowness' of the communication encouraged by SNS: 'The emoji comments... detract from the depth [of the exchange].' [8]. The decline of "in-depth communication" was also blamed on the ubiquity of "likes" [19]. 'Everything happens very fast... it does not leave an emotional trace.' [19]. A related problem is "ghosting" – unexpectedly breaking off a conversation without an explanation or just leaving a message unanswered. Respondents reasoned that on SNS, it is easy to avoid a response since the other person cannot see you and does not engage with you directly: 'It is much easier to ignore [a support request on SNS].' [16]; 'You can easily run away from a conversation.' [15].

Some expressed privacy concerns over asking for support online, since any conversation, even a one-on-one, can be preserved in some way and subsequently reshared without the knowledge or consent of all the parties: 'Even private conversations can be vulnerable because screenshots exist; you don't know

whom people can send this to.' [10]; 'You have to filter your words through the understanding that there may be more than two people in this conversation.' [12]. A benevolent example of this possibility was offered by another respondent:

Once I wrote some thoughts on self-acceptance [on Facebook]... how I acknowledge... that I'll never be perfect, and one of my friends got scared that I was developing depression, made screenshots of my posts and sent them to my mom saying: 'Look what your daughter has written, she is probably hurting'... and my mom [then] calls me and wonders... [if I am okay] [6].

Social media algorithms that punish inactivity may place a burden on people who rely on SNS for support. One respondent said that she felt pressure to post something on Facebook regularly since if she did not, then she would probably find her next post, which might be an appeal for support, receiving limited exposure [6]. Another respondent endorsed this account by saying that he regularly posted various updates to his page so that his audience was primed to respond to support-related posts whenever they would come: 'Social networks want us to be constantly engaged with our audience.'" [11].

Despite the earlier mentioned fact that most of the interactions on social networks are designed to leave a permanent record, their UIs in most cases do include the "undo" option. "Likes" can be withdrawn, messages unsent (ordinarily within a limited time period), and comments deleted. This received criticism from a respondent:

Personally, I don't like the ability to delete messages because when someone writes to me and then unsends the message, I have to wonder what is the reason... For example, on Strava⁷, you can't withdraw 'Kudos' [to someone's workout]... it is actually their philosophy since if you say, 'Well done' in real life, you can't then say, 'No, I am taking it back,' ... and that is a cool philosophy [19].

An interesting side effect of the way in which social networks encourage public interactions is that, to an extent, they expose the relative amount of social support available to other people. Friend counts, view counts, and "like" counts have become crude indicators of one's social capital. This can have both positive and negative effects (Marengo et al., 2021; Fioravanti et al., 2021). A positive example was cited by a respondent who mentioned that she factored in the number of comments under a post in her decision of whether to leave her own ("For some person, my comment will constitute just one-hundredth of the support

⁷ An internet service for tracking workouts with built-in SNS features.

they've received, while for another, it will be a half... I am more likely to comment under the latter person's post because then it will be more impactful.") [9]. The same applies to "likes": "I don't always understand what my activist friend talks about in her Facebook posts because she writes for the other activists, but I always 'like' her posts because I see that they receive few 'likes.'" [6].

Speaking of the negative effects, estimates of someone's support using purely quantitative online metrics are often inaccurate. "It is very difficult to come to a definitive conclusion... about how another person perceives their level of online support." [16]. 'Sometimes it may look like a person has a huge amount of support online, but then when push comes to shove, it does not translate into real actions... SNS may create an illusion of support.' [12]. Some respondents said that it was difficult for them to predict the level of response their social support request would garner, which in some cases discouraged them from publishing it: 'Sometimes I stop myself, [thinking,] what if I won't get any advice, and I will be shouting into the void... what if I am lonely?' [20].

Continuing the discussion of the adverse effects, the 'transparency' of social support exchange on SNS may also lead to negative social comparison: "I posted a cool photo, but it got fewer 'likes' than my friend's." [19]. The respondent from the previous paragraph shared how she had felt conflicted about a very particular but common scenario of public social support exchange on SNS – that of birthday greetings. On Facebook, the latter tend to accumulate as posts on the person's page or in their comments, making them visible to not only the recipient but most of the other well-wishers – as are the responses from the person receiving the greetings. The interviewee posited that responding with different intensities to different posts essentially created a hierarchy of birthday greetings in which everyone could see their place.

I may 'like' or 'heart' [a comment], write 'Many thanks' or something lengthier... and I thought about how this may look from the outside, why [someone] gets just a 'like,' and someone else gets [a comment]... but I decided that I needed to react authentically [based on the perceived level of sincerity]... if somebody gets upset, so be it [20].

Effects of the 2022 Russian invasion

The Russian war in Ukraine has deeply impacted nearly all aspects of the Ukrainians' lives, and online social support was no exception. In the wake of the 2022 invasion, social networks rapidly became an indispensable tool in crowdfunding resources for both Ukraine's military and humanitarian needs: 'Essentially all volunteering is predicated on social networks.' [12]. Within the sample, at least half a dozen people have mentioned raising money for the

Armed forces of Ukraine over the last year, and still more used their accounts to repost military support requests from others. The phenomenon of facilitating material social support online on such a scale as happened in Ukraine from 2022 onwards merits a separate examination, but the topic could not be avoided in the interviews for this study. The respondents said that SNS were very effective at consolidating financial support for military gear: "They are 100% effective... both for small-scale fundraisers when you join forces with friends and more [significant] ones... It is quick and easy." [8]. As usual, the knowledge of the algorithm proved advantageous: "I made a post on my birthday, which was also a crowdfunding announcement, and replied to every single comment so that the post was pushed harder [by Facebook], and I saw the waves of transactions [which coincided with latest responses]." [12]. "When you include a link in the [Facebook] post itself, its impressions collapse, therefore you see things like, 'All details in the first comment!'" [11].

At the same time, some supportive sharing on SNS has also become more socially fraught since the war has placed people in vastly different circumstances and made even their near future highly uncertain. Since every day may bring some devastating news, some people may find positive content inappropriate:

People have become very sensitive... I understand that everyone has a ton of problems... and if you want to share something positive... and are counting on support, [it is difficult] to pick the right timing. [For example,] in the morning, you post a happy 'story,' and in the afternoon, a tragic shelling takes place, and your 'story' receives indignation instead of support... Personally, this has been significantly restraining me from being more active in public [12].

Conclusions

Over the past two decades, exchanging social support online has assumed a pivotal role in many people's lives. Billions have come to rely on SNS for social support on a daily basis. Social networks have enabled people to access and provide social support in novel and often unexpected ways, mitigating the effects of economic disruptions and humanitarian crises. Ukrainians, in particular, have harnessed the power of social networks to their full potential since February 2022, using them to pool together resources, show unity in the face of the invading Russian army, and retain a sense of national community while being scattered around the world.

The effects of the war on online social support provision are far-reaching and continue to unfold (and will hopefully be part of a dedicated exploration

later on), but they do not fundamentally alter the gist of the sentiments toward social support on SNS derived from the interviews.

The respondents described the medium of social networking sites as having a generally positive impact on the process of social support exchange, endowing people with new and powerful capabilities in this department. SNS combine the ability to seamlessly communicate with hundreds of people spread around the globe at the speed and pace of one's choosing with a high degree of resilience to physical shocks and an extensive set of digital affordances that can be used to successfully emulate most of the support interactions that take place offline. They are generally considered an effective medium for social support exchange, even if in some important respects they fall behind the experience of interacting and exchanging support in real life. Still, online social support has its drawbacks, such as data privacy issues, heightened risk of negative social comparison, and the encouragement of shallow, depersonalized interactions.

The exchange of social support on social networks is a phenomenon as varied and multifaceted as its real-world counterpart, evidenced by the fact that even the relatively small sample of participants interviewed for this study have produced wide-ranging and even contradicting opinions on the same limited set of topics, while rarely repeating each other. This is due, in part, to the significant context-dependency of the experience, which sometimes makes even separating the features of online social support into unambiguously positive and negative ones a challenging task. Therefore, further studies, particularly those using a qualitative design, will undoubtedly uncover many more fascinating details on the topic. Moreover, since SNS as a technology and a part of online culture continue to be in a state of constant flux, new rules and norms for online behaviour are expected to continue to develop, naturally sustaining the importance of this kind of research.

Limitations

This article is not intended to be an all-encompassing review of the phenomenon of social support online, but it does endeavour to offer a well-rounded perspective informed by the opinions of a small but diverse group of young and middle-aged Ukrainians. However, besides the modest number of participants, other factors might inhibit this research's epistemological power. One of the chief difficulties in conducting it was that, as some respondents have admitted, the subject was difficult to discuss comprehensively without significant preparation. As was briefly touched on earlier, support provision is often unconscious, and a substantial number of interview participants did not initially recognize many of their online behaviours as having a dimension of social support. Even though the respondents were informed in advance about the interview topic, this gap

in understanding persisted and usually had to be bridged during the interview itself. As one respondent noted, an hour into his interview, 'The more we talk, the more I see some elements where I can show or receive support [on SNS]... without realizing it.' [4]. Another said, in relation to online social support in general (and also towards the end of her interview), "I have never thought about this." [1]. Additionally, it should be stressed that as opposed to the early research on socializing online (Kraut et al., 1998), most of the people interviewed for this study have grown up with access to social networking sites as a fact of life, which may have had a limiting effect on the analytical distance from which they could approach the topic during the interview, especially the comparison with offline social support exchange.

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Annexe 1

List of respondents: [1] – woman, 35 years old; [2] – woman, 37; [3] – man, 34; [4] – man, 27; [5] – woman, 22; [6] – woman, 34; [7] – woman, 25; [8] – woman, 25; [9] – woman, 31; [10] – woman, 26; [11] – man, 40; [12] – woman, 33; [13] – woman, 38; [14] – man, 25; [15] – woman, 26; [16] – man, 26; [17] – woman, 25; [18] – man, 26; [19] – woman, 34; [20] – woman, 35.