



Modeling the relationship between IT-mediated social capital and social support: Key mediating mechanisms of sense of group

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes a model based on social capital theory to explain the formation of social support in virtual groups. Although previous literature suggests a direct effect of social capital on social support in face-to-face groups (e.g., working teams), it remains uncertain if such an effect exists completely in the same way among virtual social groups that count heavily on computer-mediated communication. In this study's proposed model, social support is indirectly influenced by social capital and need for affiliation via the mediation of sense of group (which includes perceived membership, mutual influence, and immersion). Empirical testing of this model, by investigating working professionals in online social networking communities, confirms the applicability of social capital and need for affiliation among virtual groups. Group-level data were analyzed by the technique of path analysis to test our hypotheses. Lastly, managerial implications and limitations of the research are provided.

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1. Introduction

Business organizations to date face dramatically volatile and turbulent competitive threats in global markets [1]. Effectively coping with such unexpected threats and taking advantage of them as opportunities lay heavily upon the ability of group social support in organizations [2]. Social support is considered “the exchange of verbal and non-verbal messages conveying emotion, information, or referral, to help reduce one's uncertainty or stress” [3]. Social support is critical due to its close relationship with people's physical and psychological well-being [4]. For instance, a buffering effect of social support is found to ameliorate the influence of physical or mental health factors such as depression, stress, irritation, anxiety, and somatic symptoms [5].

Despite social support transferring substantially from a real world to a virtual one in work settings due to rapid diffusion of social networking IT [6,7], scant attention has been paid to online social support that is substantially different from face-to-face social support, given the geographic dispersed nature of computer networks [8], the willingness of social networking IT users to trust and interact with online others [9], and the frequent participation of social networking IT users in online activities across virtual groups [10]. The online social support in this study can be conceptualized as online actions that people perform when they render assistance to a focal person via social networking IT [11]. The behavioral descriptions of our social support herein can be referred as “enacted” support that is substantially different from perceived support of availability and social embeddedness [11,12]. Collectively, the online social support in this study (i.e., enacted support in virtual communities) complements previous literature by evaluating what people actually do in virtual communities (e.g., Facebook) when they provide support, a research question that many studies have identified as critical for understanding coping and adjustment processes [11,13–17]. Based on

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previous literature that examines both online and face-to-face social contexts [18–25], this study summarizes the primary characteristics of online and face-to-face social contexts to better recognize their differences (see Table 1), highlighting potential improvements that may be made in the arena of online social support in this study.

Previous literature has explored how the use of social networking IT may be associated with social support and psychological well-being with mixed results [26–34]. While some research argued that online social relationships may detract from social involvement with friends more strongly than offline ones [26–37], others found that weaker ties generated online might replace offline ties with family and friends [29,33]. When examined over a longer period of time, online social support can be more efficient with improved communication and involvement with family than face-to-face social support [28], because online interactions and social support mitigate less loss in communication with others than offline ones [35]. In an experiment, Shaw and Gant [32] found increases in perceived social support and self-esteem following engagement in online chat sessions. Valkenburg and Peter [34] found that socially anxious adolescents perceived the social networking IT to be valuable for intimate self-disclosure, resulting in more online social support.

The proliferation of the social networking IT is facilitating technological and social changes that have been developing for decades in the ways that people contact, interact, and obtain resources from each other in a workgroup [36,37]. Using social networking IT, people in workgroups often adjust their social behavior to technological and social change [38]. Previous literature indicates that the emergence of new applications of social networking IT such as the establishment of virtual communities and the development of online social capital has excited considerable speculation about the technological innovation and social changes that could arise and be influential in global societies of the future [39]. Indeed, social networking IT strengthens group solidarities in virtual communities and affords a turn for networked societies that used to be loosely bounded and sparsely knit [8]. Nevertheless, little is known about the factors that drive group members to use social networking IT in order to obtain online social support [40], even though abundant findings in previous research have successfully examined IT usage from individuals' perspective. For that reason, investigating a potential paradigm shift regarding social support from co-located groups to virtual groups is essential in a modern business world full of social networking IT, which has helped bring about tremendous effects on virtual sense of group (or community) [41–47].

Online social support plays a critical role in a virtual group, which is inherently regarded as an innovative form of a social network linking people, organizations, and knowledge [46]. A virtual group is a set of social relationships forged through repeated contacts within the boundary of cyberspace [48] and can be defined as “a group of people with common interests or goals, interacting predominantly in cyberspace” [49]. Improved knowledge of the key determinants of online social support for virtual group members can help management prioritize human resources that are effectively tailored to the perceptions of virtual group workers, consequently improving group social support. Specifically, social support that involves online social affiliations by linking people or institutions together should not be studied in isolation, but rather be integrated into social networking based on a group in which they obtain such social support through sense of group [8,50]. Sense of group represents members' feeling of

Table 1
Comparisons of online and face-to-face social contexts.

	Online contexts	Face-to-face contexts
Condition of social interaction [18]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No waiting for participants to arrive • No early leavers or latecomers, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Waiting for others to arrive • Early leavers or latecomers during the interaction, etc.
Communication mode [19]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication and discussions through text; can be structured; dense; permanent; limited; stark 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verbal communication and discussions; a more impermanent mode
Friendship qualities [20]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The qualities of cross-sex online friendships were higher than those in face-to-face contexts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More interdependence, breadth, depth, code change, understanding, commitment, and network convergence
Physical and tangible settings [21]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings in virtual space; no shared physical context (other than text) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings in a tangible room; strong physical context
Location and time [22]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings any time • Concept of “to meet” is different since no scheduled time, location and date • No sense of leaving the meetings • Less controllable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings in “stop and start” fashion • Strong sense of when people meet – all those involved attend at same location, date, time, etc. • More controllable
Work mode [23]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work on multiple tasks simultaneously • Social contact continually maintained • Discussions often stop for various times, and then are restarted again • People sometimes lose sense of where they are in the discussions over long periods of time (cognitive overload) • High levels of reflections • Reshape conversations on basis of ongoing retrospection and understandings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work is condensed and focused • Limited times of meetings • Discussions are usually completed during meetings • Discussions occur within a specific time frame, thus it is less likely that people lose sense of where they are • Often little time for open discussions and retrospections during meetings
Involvement with other social groups [24]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Get access to other social groups easily • Get to see who is involved with other social groups • Participate in other social groups easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seldom have access to other social groups • Seldom involve with other social groups • Can't see what is happening in other social groups
Free and divergence degree [25]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loose-bound nature encourages divergent talk and adventitious interaction, since it is an open system regarding time, place, source and recipient 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are relatively densely knit and tightly bound networks of people • Divergent talks may be limited

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