

The Emotional Strength of Weak Ties: Reevaluating Social Support Online

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Abstract

While many theorists have argued that weak ties facilitate online social support, strong evidence within these communities clearly show that the distinction between weak ties and strong ties should be reexamined. After a short expose on tie strength and online social support, we give an example of how this research has operationalized weak ties only in terms of one of Granovetter's four basic components of tie strength: frequency of interaction. Furthermore, our analysis provides counterexamples against frequency of interaction as a predictor of relational closeness. While we portray past research as confounding weak and strong ties, we go on to provide examples of emerging online social support between ties that are obviously weak ties. Finally, our study points to future directions of research on online social support.

1. Introduction

Social support is traditionally described as informational or affective communication that alleviates stress and validates problems and emotions [4, 37]. Although many types of groups exist to provide social support for constituents both offline and online, the links that bind these participants to form such a “community” remain blurred. This paper reviews the literature on social support, primarily online social support relying on tie strength as a social support indicator. We suggest that key elements contextualizing the tie strength process have been largely taken for granted. Notably, many scholars tend to assume that online communication of support in various forums and groups surfaces from weak ties rather than strong ones [9, 17, 24, 37, 41, 42]. While weak ties have typically been argued to provide diverse, non-redundant information [18] and strong ties are more homophilous conduits of trust and understanding [23], social support contexts are argued to provide both informational and socio-emotional benefits through both weak and strong ties across the networks. Moreover, scholars are urged to re-evaluate

the fundamental nature of relationships in online communities that provide social support to constituents.

In the pages that follow, tie strength is explored followed by an overview of social support literature primarily as it deals with online contexts and tie strength. In sum, a general argument is posited suggesting that scholars approach online social support from a unified, albeit partial, assumption of relational quality (or lack thereof) in online situations of social support. While scholars claim to find evidence of social support online through weak ties, this paper questions the implication of tie strength in such contexts. Anecdotal evidence is provided to suggest that even in contexts of undeniably weak ties, social support results from interactions online.

2. The Strength of Relational Ties

Throughout our lives, we cross paths with many others and form various relationships that we may label as acquaintances, friends, coworkers, partners, etc. The strength of our relationships with these relational partners can range on a continuum according to functions, investments, expectations, emotional benefits, opportunities, etc. Network scholars refer to the intensity of relationships as tie strength, typically a binary nominal variable that is either weak or strong.

The “strength of weak ties,” posited by Granovetter [18], lies in access to resources. He describes structurally weak ties as relational partners across divergent groups that can provide one another with nonredundant information. In other words, because we tend to have more weak than strong ties, these diverse relational partners offer unique resources from their respective groups. Studies, for example, have shown the benefits of weak ties in knowledge sharing across organizational subunits [20] or technical advice sharing [12]. Granovetter [18] defines tie strength as “a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie” [15].

Krackhardt [23] similarly defines the strength of a tie according to the degree of interaction, affection, and time. Yet unlike Granovetter, Krackhardt suggests a “strength of strong ties.” According to this logic, strong ties provide a more affective relational dynamic; namely helping to reduce uncertainty and providing a “base of trust” [23]. McAdam [26] exemplifies the strength of strong ties in recruiting participants for high-risk activism-related behaviors. Hansen [20] found that weak ties were commonly relied upon for inter-unit knowledge sharing across an organization; although when knowledge was complex strong ties were sought. Because we have invested in these stronger relationships, we come to expect certain benefits from these close relational partners that weaker counterparts cannot afford.

Weak ties tend to result in more asymmetric relations, while strong ties are more influential because they result in symmetric or *reciprocal* communication [15, 18]. Simply put, weak ties typically provide us with information, and strong ties typically provide us with influence [8, 33]. The blurred and rather subjective boundaries demarcating strong versus weak ties [23] is therefore quite problematic in that multitude of operationalizations of tie strength exist. For example, many scholars treat weak ties as acquaintances in a low-density network while strong ties are characterized by close friends in tightly-knit, high-density networks [21, 17, 19]. For the purposes of this paper, we will define tie strength according to the four dimensions specified by Granovetter [18]: a) the amount of time spent interacting, b) the emotional intensity felt by communication partners, c) the intimacy or mutual confiding between partners, and d) the degree of reciprocation characterizing the relationship.

While Granovetter [18] articulates a dynamic definition of tie strength, he has neglected to empirically test these four basic components. Instead, he operationalized weak ties by quantity of contact between dyads (i.e., often, occasionally, and rarely). Presumably, Granovetter implies that frequency of communication encapsulates relational reciprocity and emotional intensity (making it a unidimensional variable), although this connection is never explicitly drawn. This assumption is widespread throughout network literature. For example, Friedkin [15] only measured tie strength as reciprocated discussions of current research among faculty across various academic departments at two northwestern universities. Wright [41] similarly defines tie strength according to frequency of interaction. Importantly, Marsden and Campbell [25] show that the intensity of a relationship is the best predictor of tie strength [see also 28] rather than an interaction-frequency type of measurement.

They explored friendship ties and concluded that measures of closeness (or relational intensity) were the most valid predictors of tie strength. Measuring duration or frequency of relational interaction with an alter led individuals to overestimate the strength of their relationships. Interestingly, frequency of interaction measures did not correlate strongly with either closeness or duration. Similar to Marsden’s finding about closeness, Gilbert and Karahalios [16] found that intimacy was the best predictor of relational tie strength. However, they also found intensity to be a key predictor as well. Therefore, this assumption, that interaction time alone can distinguish weak from strong ties, should be reevaluated.

Krackhardt [23] may suggest that social support is best accomplished through strong ties. However, throughout online social support, scholars tend to implicitly assume weak ties at play. In fact, Petrozzi [31] and colleagues assert that many studies do not report their measurement of tie strength, presumably due to this generalized assumption. With a growing body of literature on online social support, this paper calls for a momentary pause to question the nature of relationships within online social support groups, and whether studies have in fact identified clear cases of weak tie support.

3. Social Support – A Brief Overview

Cobb and Cassel introduced the term “social support” in 1976 discussing the link between health and social support. Wright and Bell [42] discuss the two different schools of thought that came from the introduction of social support, the direct effect and buffering effect. The buffering effect is defined as social support that protects people by buffering them from the negative effects of stress. For example, if you know you have a social support network, then life stressors will likely be perceived as less threatening. The direct effect is defined as a direct relationship between social support and psychological outcomes. For example, if a person’s car breaks down they can call on their support network to drive them to work. While these two schools have been thoroughly studied there is little consensus whether social support directly or indirectly buffers stress.

Similarly, Bambina [3] discusses the difference between perceived social support and received social support. Perceived social support is how people think about their social support network. For example, if a person has supportive friends to rely on, they perceive that they will be able to rely on them if a life stress occurs. Received social support is the actual social support that people receive during a stressful situation or after a life stressor. An example would be a

supportive conversation after the death of a family member. Most importantly, the perceived social support can differ from the received social support, which causes dissonance about the relationships involved.

Although these different models explain motivations and effects, the literature lacks a comprehensive account of social support in general. Bambina [3] notes, "indeed, as has been shown, social support had been indiscriminately treated as undefined supportive resources, occurring in a variety of arbitrary iterations and measured as a medley of social integration" [3].

Several typologies have been introduced to categorize types of social support. One of the most widely used [e.g., 2; 13; 37] is by Cutrona and Suhr [14] in their study of the satisfaction of spousal support. This typology suggests the following forms of support: informational support, emotional support, esteem support, tangible aid, and social network support. Cutrona and Suhr's [14] typology includes the most widely used categories of social support forms. *Informational support* is accomplished by offering facts and information, advice, or analysis of a situation in terms of alternatives. An example would be a person discussing the correct exercises to assist in physical rehabilitation [2]. An individual is then able to collect information from peers to reduce uncertainty. *Emotional support* characterizes groups or individuals who are expressing concern and care for an individual who is undergoing a life stress. The goal of emotional support is to replace emotions that are harming individuals with positive ones. Emotional support can come in terms of physical affection and reassurance, such as physical presence and haptic forms of support [2]. *Esteem support* is imparted by individuals offering compliments or other admiration in order to increase a person's feelings of self worth. These are often highly personal statements about a person's life, as general statements would not have as much effect. An example of esteem support from a social support group may be congratulating a member on meeting a life goal. *Tangible support* is defined by goods, services, or financial assistance that is offered to a person requesting social support. If a church group offers to help pay for a member's medical surgery, or a neighbor offers to help paint a house, these cases exemplify tangible support. *Social Network support* comes from recommending an individual to a peer or peer-group that they can get support from. When an individual feels like they belong to a larger community that shares in their experiences, they have social network support. When a counselor, for example, suggests to a patient to attend AA meetings this patient is ultimately receiving social network support.

In terms of the relational context of interactants, we could come to expect weak ties providing informational support and strong ties providing emotional and esteem support. Over the last couple decades, however, social support groups have migrated to online forums and scholars have and continue to demarcate these relationships as weak ones.

4. Social Support Online

While traditional forms of face-to-face social support are still well and thriving, online social support is well on its way to becoming a mainstream phenomena for some mental and health issues [38, 40]. In 2004, the Pew internet survey noted that 58% of adult users who use the internet accessed information about health or personal issues (as cited [3]). Walther [36], Coulson [13], and Wright [42] all cite the advantages online social support has over traditional face-to-face social support. Five notable benefits are highlighted: 1) the ability to transcend time and space by not being limited to certain people being awake or available to offer social support, 2) the ability to control information about a personal, health, or mental issue when requesting social support, 3) the advantage of using the internet to find expert information that may not be available locally, 4) anonymity allows for people to feel secure in discussing and supporting people with high risk problems, and finally 5) the opportunity to belong to a homophilous community of people. There is even research by Straus [35] suggesting that support groups online tend to be more supportive than face-to-face encounters. The most frequently identified advantage of online support forums is anonymity and lack of stigmatization [41], which may explain why benefits of online support may outweigh those of face-to-face interactions.

These interactions documenting online social support tend to rely on health-related sites and forums covering topics such as cancer [e.g., 3, 22], or Huntington's Disease [e.g., 13]. This transition to online communication has introduced a new set of questions about the nature of relationships online, and whether the strength of weak and strong ties play out in similar ways.

The general consensus across tie strength social support scholars [9, 36, 41] is that online encounters in support groups, commonly assumed to be weak tie interactions, provide socio-emotional benefits that transcend original theorizations of tie strength. Weak ties online go beyond merely offering us nonredundant, diverse information from other groups and regions, but also provide us with comfort and consolation otherwise attributed to strong ties. While this conclusion typifies online social support research, scholars have not

agreed on a common operationalization of strong versus weak ties, which may ultimately lead to skewed results.

Granovetter [18] draws on Homan's idea that frequent communication leads to stronger socio-emotional bonds between two people. Although Granovetter's [18] definition of tie strength originally included four components (amount of time spent interacting, emotional intensity felt by partners, intimacy or mutual confiding between partners, and degree of reciprocation), tie strength social support scholars tend to simplify the measurement of tie strength by focusing on time [18, 19, 29, 30, 41]. A common alternative conceptualization of tie strength is a more nominal account of relational "types" ranging from social support with "socially close intimates" and less intimate counterparts [39]. For example, studies often distinguish between weak ties such as acquaintances or strangers [12] and strong ties such as family, marital partners, and close friends [1].

The current landscape of online social support blurs these distinctions. While tie strength scholars assume that participants on these sites tend to be weak ties, studies do explicitly address the fact that "the development of close bonds between individuals with shared interests and problems tended to be the rule, not the exception" [7]. If close bonds develop across participants of various online support sites, does this constitute a strong or a weak tie? Granovetter's [18] conception of tie strength as purely indicated through time spent interacting together may not capture these socio-emotional bonds. Yet when accounting for his more holistic operationalization of tie strength, including emotional intensity and reciprocation, these relational dynamics become more strong than weak.

Despite tie strength scholars' tendency to continually equate frequency of interaction with tie strength, Wellman and Wortley [39] found no association between the frequency of interpersonal interaction and relational strength. In other words, the assumption that two individuals spending a great deal of time together implicitly assumes a strong tie was not empirically supported. Conversely, the most frequent contact that participants reported was with weak ties in their network. Equally important, Wright [41] found a relatively weak relationship between the frequency of interaction on online support forums and participants' degree of satisfaction. Such findings that media use does not predict relational closeness and satisfaction are empirically verified elsewhere [see 5]. Therefore, we may presume that frequency of interaction does not necessarily correlate with strength of tie, nor does it predict successful supportive interactions that fulfill personal goals for individuals.

Focusing on frequency of interactions online also oversimplifies online communication: "The internet is seen as a single entity that influences its users through sheer exposure" further promoting a technologically deterministic view [6]. Close relational bonds may also be formed over time, suggesting that tie strength may increase over few, discrete interchanges online [7]. In sum, not all computer-mediated interactions are the same; relational opportunity and quality are context dependent.

5. Reconceptualizing the Emotional Strength of Weak Ties

The landscape and possibilities for computer-mediated social support have changed over the last several decades in response to technological evolution. Early online social support research focused on Usenet message forums [36], which had very high transaction costs (users needed hardware, primarily a computer, and also needed to know how to use the complicated software). This limited many users from accessing social support groups within Usenet. As technology changed and the World Wide Web (WWW) gained popularity, the use of Usenet newsgroups decreased. The popularity of the WWW has caused a surge of online social support groups based around free and easy to join topical web forums. It is possible, and probable, that support groups exist for just about every major cause, from weight loss to women mourning for their recently deceased husbands. These message boards are usually restricted to messages and limited profiles. Finally, with the explosion of interactive Web 2.0 and social networking sites, online social support groups are starting to become online social networking support groups. An example would be www.diabetesfriends.net where people with diabetes can send messages in forums, link to friends, send private messages, and share private information from their profiles.

Similarly, with the adoption of the internet into people's daily lives, another technological change has occurred that has an impact on social support: the creation of the blog, otherwise known as the web blog, or website log. Whereas forums offer a many-to-many communication, blogs offer a one-to-many communication. Generally, blogs are written and maintained by one person who writes on various subjects. Blogs can be topical, or simply more like a journal or personal diary of daily happenings.

In an environment with limited social cues (as opposed to face-to-face interactions), Social Information Processing (SIP) Theory [37] suggests that individuals overcome and compensate for the lacking cues online. The technological evolution of the internet

has enhanced our ability to reduce uncertainty online and compensate for the otherwise relatively lean communication between users, allowing them to not only share messages, but to also access user profiles and find more similarities between one another. Haythorwaite shows that the stronger the relationship between the individuals the more likely they are to use multiple communication channels to reduce uncertainty. One may argue that, and future studies should explore, these new environmental features of web 2.0 (such as multiple channels of communication) offer users opportunities to connect to others socially and provide a potential context for strong tie development and stronger feelings of community.

Scholars exploring social support online have not explicitly documented this transition to web 2.0 and the new environment features mentioned above that may have implications for relational interactions. Very little online social support research accounts for a) some important new internet forms and b) the increased social cues available across some of those forms. Studies have typically focused on health related groups characterized by a unifying theme such as Huntington's disease online support group [13] and cancer support groups [3, 22]. Individuals participating in these types of groups have very different experiences than blog readers; particularly in terms of their motivations, expectations, sense of community, and relational bonds.

Individuals joining online support groups for cancer or diabetes have very specific *motivations* and *expectations* in terms of participation and outcomes. Typically, these individuals seek information or other forms of social support from homophilous others in the group. For example, a woman diagnosed with Huntington's Disease may seek a support group that can inform her about new treatments, suggest doctors, comfort her fears, etc. In general, individuals "go in search of people who will listen to them and who will address everyday issues and fears that healthcare providers may either not realize or have time to address" [42]. Blogs, on the other hand, can cover more diverse topics and be read by a population with greater potential for heterophily or diversity.

Participants may join support groups for the sense of *community* they reap [42]. Members of internet social support groups have been found to develop a strong sense of group identity [2]. Unlike forums, blogs do not inherently have a community. A blog, or website blog, is simply a log of communication between one person and the outside world: "weblogs are not necessarily social, although they can support social patterns" [34].

Because individuals pursue online social support groups with specific motivations and expectations, and

may also seek a community of like-minded people, the *types of relationships* they form online may look qualitatively different than relationships fostered via blogs. Participants of online support groups indicate that "people they turned to for online support understood their problems better than non-Internet supporters, despite the fact that they had never met members of their online support network in the face-to-face world" [42].

Now we may reiterate our main point here: scholars looking at social support online have implicitly assumed that relationships in these contexts are characterized by weak ties [9, 17, 24, 37, 41, 42]. However, Granovetter's [18] widely cited definition of tie strength suggests that emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocation all imply strong relational bonds. Undoubtedly, individuals seeking out social support in various health related forums can engage with others in ways that spark emotions, make them feel supported [42], and allow them to engage in reciprocal information sharing or other types of supportive behaviors.

Granovetter [18] himself suggests that strong ties imply within group communication whereas weak ties imply between group communication. Therefore, homophily (characteristic of social support groups) typifies strong relational ties and in comparison heterophily (more likely characteristic of blog-type communications) typifies weaker equivalents. Similarity leads to social connection, especially in social support contexts [27] and can lead to strong relational bonds. While some face-to-face theory is applicable to online communications, we begin to see that other theories break down when applied to contexts where physical bodies no longer interact.

We have argued throughout that scholars have taken for granted the nature of relationships online, assuming weak ties among social support group members. However, we have suggested that online social support group members may establish strong as opposed to weak ties due to the emotional bonds that they form with homophilous others, the reciprocal nature of social support, and the community that offers them a strong sense of identity and commonality. Next, we examine a few cases of online social support that are more clear-cut examples of weak ties at play. In looking at various blog communications online, we may see that individuals find social support from the weakest of ties.

6. Anecdotal Evidence of the Emotional Strength of Weak Ties

We are arguing, chiefly, that studies examining weak ties, some of which are cited above, actually have

examined bonds that are more properly conceptualized as strong ties. Here we provide some anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the emotional strength of weak ties in online situations that are undeniably characterized by weak ties. Here we define weak ties as members of an affiliation network that have no previous interaction.

PostSecret.com is a blog run by Frank Warren who receives up to a thousand postcards per week from people revealing their secrets. Warren chooses to publish 20 of these postcards online each week and viewers at home can choose to e-mail Warren a response to the postcard. With over 200,000 postcards sent to Warren so far, this large network of participants make up a sparse “community” of weak ties. The following is an exemplary postcard from the site:

“I bought the coolest phone on the planet and it still only rings as much as my old phone did” [written on an iphone screen].

In response to this posting, another viewer of PostSecret.com responds:

“Dear Frank,
I feel the same way. I often wonder why I even have a phone because I rarely receive calls. If there was a way we could contact each other that would be cool. My phone number is 605-212-7787 (with permission).
Sincerely,
Ryan (with permission)”

In this instance, Ryan (phone number used with permission) is providing social support to the original postcard sender who is feeling alone, and comforting him/her along with any other viewers that may relate to the postcard. Clearly Frank and Ryan have had no previous relationship or interaction and would be considered the weakest of ties. Traditional theorizing of weak ties suggests that these individuals might benefit from informational support, and yet Ryan offers emotional support [14] in his empathic reassurance to Frank (“I feel the same way”) and follows with social network support [14] in offering to initiate a telephone conversation. Jodi’s response to Ryan then reads:

“Frank,
Earlier today, I saw the secret about having the cool toy iPhone and still not getting any calls and it resonated with me. I couldn’t believe when I checked later this evening and saw the message from Ryan, including his phone number.

It’s pretty gutsy to have your private phone number published on a website that people read worldwide.

I decided to call. Immediately I was glad I had. Ryan answered by the third ring, and was so excited, so high on life, that it made me smile and has left me smiling ever since, something that’s been rare for me lately.

That South Dakotan stranger has heard from people from around the world, wishing him well, and reaching out to a person who was brave enough to admit they, too, were lonely. I hoped to help him smile and feel like he mattered and that people are basically good; yet those were the things our brief conversation gave to me.

~Jodi”

The scope of social support among individuals who have no tie is undeniable. Around the world, weakly tied viewers are offering emotional support to Ryan. Moreover, Jodi highlights what she has reaped from this interaction; she is “smiling...something that’s been rare for [her] lately.”

Similar blog environments capture this emotional strength of weak ties. In a website entitled “My Life is Average” individuals post an array of comments about their mundane daily activities and experiences. One woman writes:

“Two weeks ago, after battling leukemia for 4 years, my sixteen-year-old son, Erik, passed away. For the last 3 months, he read MLIA everyday, and it made him laugh, gave him something to talk about other than his prognoses, medical issues or anything else cancer-related. This site, he said, made him feel more average. Thank you, My Life Is Average. MLIA.”

A mother comments here about the social support that her son reaped in his final months; namely esteem support [14] in helping him feel “more average.” Although this blog is read by roughly 35,200 people per day, [32] multiple posts follow as fellow viewers express emotional social support in the form of condolences. For example:

“colorizedx3: Sorry for your loss”

“greatscott09: I am so sorry for your lose (sic). My grandma passed away on Oct. 20 from AML (acute myeloid leukemia). I understand how stuff like that goes. It is very hard to see, especially when they are on chemo”

Strangers, i.e., weak ties, reading this mother’s comment express their condolences as they offer emotional support [14]. Not only do they express concern, but they also offer relational reciprocity in divulging their personal experiences that lead them to “understand how stuff like that goes.”

Finally, a website called GivesMeHope.com features similar types of social support interactions amongst strangers.

"A year ago, I posted a farewell post on my blog saying I was planning on killing myself. That night, police called from two whole states away, stopping me until local help arrived. It was one of my online friends that raised the alarm. We live in two different countries. Friendship without borders, GMH (Gives Me Hope)."

In this case, a woman posting her "farewell post" unexpectedly receives tangible support [14] from an "online friend" who calls the police to help her.

These examples all express emotional social support in situations where frequency of interaction is unknown (though, previous interaction is near certain to be zero), and yet clearly emotional intensity, intimacy, and reciprocal services transpire across weak ties. Individuals comfort one another, make others feel appreciated, and respond to a need for emotional support from strangers, even though these have previously been thought to be in the domain of strong ties. Here, in addition to emotional support, weak ties provide esteem, tangible, and social network support [14] online.

Taken together, sites like PostSecret, MyLifeIsAverage, and GivesMeHope demonstrate the ability of weak ties to provide social support in various contexts. These blog environments are not as homogenous as communities online that aim to support like-minded or like-situated participants (e.g., cancer patients), and therefore individuals do not necessarily participate in these forums because they deliberately or consciously need support. Instead, the support manifests more organically when two otherwise strangers discover online that they do have something in common and can then offer various forms of support (whether informational, emotional, esteem, etc.) through these very weak ties.

Scholars solely operationalizing tie strength according to frequency of contact oversimplify the relational context of interaction. *We are not claiming here that scholars' conclusions about the emotional strength of weak ties is faulty. In providing some anecdotal evidence from blog interactions, we hope to show that although previous studies may be inherently capturing social support through strong ties bound by a homogenous community, here we truly see the emotional strength of weak ties play out.*

7. Future Directions

Scholars looking at social support online are faced with challenges that must be overcome. Three

challenges are addressed here; namely 1) the changing context of communication online, 2) the operationalization of tie strength, and 3) the type of "relationships" emerging and explored online.

As mentioned earlier, the introduction of internet 2.0 has changed the landscape of online communication. In addition to previous online environments, individuals may now view blogs or other forums (like GivesMeHope or PostSecret) that loosely connect them to many. In addition to traditional topical online social support groups, internet 2.0 offers the potential for social support anywhere people come in contact with each other. Scholars are encouraged to broaden their scope and investigate emerging communication frameworks that facilitate online social support.

Because our online communication adapts to a changing landscape of possibilities and contexts, we must re-evaluate our conceptualization of tie strength. Granovetter [18] proposed that the four elements of tie strength— "amount of time... emotional intensity... intimacy (mutual confiding), and...reciprocal services which characterize the tie" [18] — are unidimensional. But no empirical evidence confirms this assumption. Scholars are urged to scrutinize the dimensions of tie strength to potentially uncover a more multidimensional account of relational dynamics.

A more nuanced delineation of tie strength may be multidimensional because the interaction of two individuals may be described according to the strength of their relationship (i.e., how often they communicate, their relational intimacy, etc.) and by the strength of their communication (i.e., degree of reciprocation, goal attainment, emotional intensity, etc.). Studies confound these two dimensions, and a meta-analysis of social support studies may be a helpful first step in unraveling the current disarray of literature on the topic.

8. Conclusion

The main contribution of this paper is to take a momentary pause to question some taken-for-granted assumptions in the growing body of literature on online social support. The assumption that online communication tends to take place between weak as opposed to strong ties is challenged. A more unified operationalization of strong versus weak ties is a necessary antecedent to any future exploration and advancement of online relationships. Perhaps a more fruitful path would be to explore a full spectrum of relational dynamics encapsulating interaction (structure) and emotion (relational affect), rather than bifurcating relational possibilities into a binary measure of strong or weak. After all, scholars (i.e.,[25]) suggest that tie strength encompasses both a

quantitative assessment of time spent together as well as a more qualitative assessment of relational depth.

Since social support is possible through both strong ties and weak ties, perhaps this dichotomy of relational strength becomes a moot point when exploring sources and processes of interpersonal and group support. Alternatively, relational dynamics online may most accurately be captured by a continuous “strength” variable [16].

Online communication is not as “impoverished” or “impersonal” as originally theorized [7]. Further exploration of this unique and evolving context must acknowledge the infinite relational possibilities online; and take into account the development over time of fully functional relationships and communities.

9. References

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