"With A Little Help From My (Online?) Friends" – A Comparison of Support Seeking, Receiving and Providing Support in Online and Offline Communities

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1 Introduction

Social networking services (SNS) like Facebook are used by an increasing number of people worldwide for social exchange. Given the amount of time that is spent on these online services, they are likely to have an impact on how individuals interact with each other. On this note, anecdotal examples emphasize both positive (i.e., expanding or strengthening relationships) and negative effects (i.e., bullying, feelings of disconnectedness). To shed more light on this issue, scholars from various disciplines have started to investigate the significance of social networking services on interpersonal relationships and on how individuals might experience benefits on the one hand, or face challenges through the use of online services on the other hand [1, 2]. One research interest that has gained significant attention in recent years is the analysis of effects that social networks may have on the quantity and quality of interpersonal online social support in different contexts. For example, there is a growing body of research on individuals suffering from a disease and seeking social support in online communities in terms of receiving sympathy and obtaining relevant information about their diseases [3, 4]. In addition to health online communities, especially Facebook has been identified as a potential source of virtual social support in health-related matters [e.g. 5, 6]. Besides issues on health and well-being, other studies explored how users of social networks benefit from work-related exchange [e.g. 7]. However, most of the studies in this field – regardless of the context of analysis – tend to consider social support either from the receivers' or the providers' perspective, but seldom both. Moreover, the majority of studies narrow their focus to online environments only. Thus, it should be investigated whether social support that is received in SNS contexts "offers the same benefits as social support received from a circle of friends who are encountered in face-to-face settings" [8, p. 74]. As a consequence, online networks might have the potential to function as a sort of additional supplement to real life social support or also provide independent support. Accordingly, in order to broaden the picture on how virtual and real life interact in terms of opportunities of seeking, receiving and providing social support, both contexts should be taken into consideration.

Therefore, in this paper we investigated the potential of an online social networking service (in this case Facebook) for seeking, receiving and providing several forms of social support. In addition, we compared these online supportive relationships to the 'real life' support respondents perceived in traditional face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, psychological health measures and self-esteem as possible outcomes were assessed as well.

2   Literature Review

Within the last decade, the widespread use of online social networking services (SNS) has gained a lot of research attention. In this course, quite a number of scholars have emphasized the beneficial potential for building and strengthening interpersonal ties as well as multiple challenges to interpersonal relationships that might be associated with intensive SNS use [9]. Within the wide universe of networking services that are available online, especially Facebook has gained a lot of research interest from various disciplines. Since its creation in 2004, Facebook has become the most popular and influential SNS with around 1.3 billion users across the globe. In Germany, there are approximately 25 million registered Facebook users. Among German adults, aged 14 and above, almost 80 per cent are considered as being active users on Facebook. A total of 19 million people in Germany use the service every day. The average daily time spent on Facebook is around half an hour. Being an inherent part of our daily routine it is likely to assume that people use this platform to share their everyday concerns. Accordingly, Facebook users might receive or provide interpersonal online social support in addition to or as an alternative to help in 'real life' interactions. As a result of giving or receiving support, Facebook users might experience benefits in terms of higher life satisfaction or self-esteem through the use of this service.

Within most theoretical conceptualizations of social relationships, especially social support has been widely discussed and evaluated as an important interpersonal resource for more than four decades of research [10]. Regarding the impact of social media on interpersonal relationships, scholars have broadened their research interest in order to shed light on the question of how individuals experience social support in online social networking services compared to offline contexts with regard to possible qualitative and quantitative differences [e.g. 11].

On a basic level, social support can be defined as "emotional, informational, or practical assistance from significant others, such as family members, friends, or co-workers; (and that) support actually may be received from others or simply perceived to be available when needed" [12, p. 46]. In this theoretical conceptualization, social support comprises three different dimensions: First, *emotional support* refers to

an individual's affective needs, such as showing other persons that you care about them or have an understanding or empathy for their situation. With a view to the current literature, most research in this area has focused on this type of social support [13, 26]. Second, *instrumental support* occurs when individuals provide specific assistance to other persons, e.g., helping others to complete tasks or giving physical assistance. Finally, informational support is perceived when information is provided and shared with other persons in order to help them address problems in decision-making: *informational support* is offered to help a person cope with a situation himself [14, 15]. Despite this distinction, all three types of support are closely interrelated and often linked in complex ways in relationships with other individuals. Moreover, research indicates that all forms of social support are significantly related to various health outcomes [11].

Due to the fact that millions of Facebook users invest a huge amount of daily time in this service, it seems reasonable to assume that social support is not available only in face-to-face interactions. In fact, some of the individual needs can likely be met online as well. On this note, a number of scholars have investigated online *social networking services* like Facebook and their role in receiving social support by others. It has been found that social support provided online may indeed be beneficial for help-seeking individuals [e.g. 1]. Oh and colleagues [16] revealed positive associations among the number of friends in online networks and supportive interactions, perceived social support, and life satisfaction. Rozzell and colleagues [17] question the assumption of social support being a unique affordance of close relationships. Instead, their results indicated that Facebook usage might allow for social support to be obtained from both non-close and close relationships to a similar degree, therewith enabling the availability of additional sources or social support through online interactions [17]. However, other studies come to the conclusion that Facebook usage can result in both a feeling of connectedness and a feeling of disconnectedness [18]. To explain these contradictory results it might be promising to assess both online and offline behavior in seeking, receiving or providing social support. As was brought up above, online networks may function as an additional supplement to real life social support, eventually resulting in a higher overall support. Alternatively, social support in online and offline contexts might turn out to be an 'either-or phenomenon': People might deliberately decide whether their needs of receiving and/or providing social support might be fulfilled best in an online or offline context. For example, one could argue that the opportunities provided in virtual contexts – e.g. higher anonymity and self-disclosure or a potentially large audience [19] – might have the potential to 'replace' face-to-face settings [cf. 20]. However, the opposite might be true as well: In a recent longitudinal study on online and offline SNSs, online contexts showed to be inferior to offline contexts in terms of emotional or instrumental support [8]. The results further

indicated that only social support in offline contexts would contribute to overall life satisfaction. Accordingly, with the present study we aim to deepen our understanding of the impact of social media by looking more closely at the perceptions of social support experienced in online and offline environments.

3 Research Questions and Methods

In our study we aimed to analyze the potential of Facebook for seeking, receiving and providing (instrumental, informational, emotional) social support. In addition, we compared these online supportive relationships to 'real life' support respondents perceived in traditional face-to-face interactions. Furthermore, we wanted to assess psychological health measures and self-esteem as possible outcomes of mutual supportive behavior. In addition, we broadened our sample selection and included Facebook non-users to compare this subsample with users being engaged on this service. As the current literature shows contradictory results regarding online social support, we followed an exploratory approach. The following research questions were formulated:

1. *Perceived availability of support:* Is there a difference in the extent of perceived social support (emotional, instrumental) that is available via Facebook compared to real life contexts?

2. *Need for support:* Is there a difference in the need for social support on Facebook compared to Face-to-face (F2F) contexts?

3. *Seeking support:* Is there a difference in the extent of seeking social support on Facebook compared to F2F contexts?

4. *Providing support:* Is there a difference in the extent of provided social support (emotional, instrumental, informational) on Facebook compared to F2F contexts?

5. *Outcomes of social support (sought or provided):* Is there a relation between seeking and/or providing social support on Facebook and the user's self-esteem and general life satisfaction?

To investigate the research questions above we conducted an online survey in Germany. The respondents were acquired via several online forums and directly via Facebook. Facebook was chosen as it is currently the most prominent social networking service worldwide. First *Socio-demographic* data including the users' age, sex, profession, hierarchical level, educational information as well as the relationship status of the

respondents were collected. Furthermore, respondents were asked about the quantity, quality and frequency of their real life relationships. *Facebook usage* was measured by means of a self-developed questionnaire. It included general questions regarding the number of Facebook friends, the frequency of the users' activities as well as their usage of several Facebook applications (e.g., chat, commenting posts, using the 'Like'-button). In addition, we included eight items dealing with the participants' *motives* for using Facebook (e.g., "It is important for me to stay in contact with my friends via Facebook"). These items were measured with a 5-Point-Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). The *affective state* during the user's activity on Facebook was measured with six items focusing on negative and positive feelings towards Facebook posts and mails (e.g., "I feel cheered up when I see nice posts on Facebook"). These items were measured with a 7-Point-Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). With the information that was generated, we optained an overview of the Facebook usage, the involved emotions and the demographics of the investigated group and had the opportunity to differentiate within this group.

Social support was assessed with the Berlin Social Support Scales (BSSS), which has proven to be a well-validated measure [22]. For our study we included four (out of six) subscales, namely *perceived available support*, *need for support*, *seeking support* and *provided support*. All items were slightly adjusted in order to measure both one time social support relating to Facebook usage as well as face-to-face contexts. Four answer options were given, ranging from "fully agree" to "fully disagree". Since we have used the same scales for different settings, we were able to compare the different forms of social support in both settings.

Besides these scales based on social support or Facebook usage we investigated more general emotional states. *Life satisfaction* was assessed with five items taken from the Copenhagen Psychosocial Questionnaire (COPSOQ) [23]. These items (e.g., "My living conditions are excellent.") were assessed with a 7-Point-Likert scale. Self-esteem was measured with the Rosenberg self-esteem-scales [24]. These items (e.g., "I feel that I have a number of good qualities.") were measured on a 4-point-Likert scale (ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"). Additionally, the subjects were asked to evaluate their *general health* on a scale ranging from 0 (worst health state) to 10 (best health state). Internal consistency measures (Cronbach's alpha) of all scales were acceptable (a = .63–.88).

4   Results

4.1   Description of the sample

A total of N = 132 subjects participated in the survey. 116 respondents (87,9%) were active Facebook users, only 16 subjects declared to be Facebook nonusers. Due to the small size of this subgroup we refrained from further statistical analyses. The majority of the participants were female (72%, n = 95). Average age was 27.3 years. About half of the participants were university students (54.5%, n = 72), 16 subjects attended high school (12.1%), and 19 individuals were employees (14.4%). More than half of the participants were in a relationship (58.3%, n = 77), the majority had no children (83.3%, n = 110).

4.2   Descriptive statistics

57.3% of the study's participants used Facebook at least once a day, another 18.9% several times a week. Most of the participants used Facebook to view postings (57.7%), videos and pictures (43%) and to engage in one or more Facebook groups (43.2%). 28.7% of the respondents used Facebook to write messages to friends (28.7%). Only a few used Facebook to write postings themselves (15.9%) or to find new friends (4.6 %).

As was illustrated above, the subjects were asked to evaluate the quality and quantity of their relationships with 'real' friends. 27.9% reported that they could rely on one to three friends. 37.2% reported they had between four to six reliable friends. 83% of the participants evaluated the quality of their relationship as at least 'good'. 45% of the participants reported face-to-face contact with friends several times a week and 29.5% several times a day. The correlations between the dimensions of social support, self-esteem and life satisfaction are presented in Table 1, showing correlations for Facebook usage below the diagonal and correlations for face-to-face contact above the diagonal. As can be seen, there are differences regarding interrelations for social support in Facebook and in a face-to-face contact. For example, significant correlations could be found in real life settings between the need for support and perceived instrumental support (r = -.36; p < .001), while this was not the case with a view to Facebook usage (r = .18). In contrast, low self-esteem was associated with a higher level of need for support only for the virtual Facebook context (r = -.25; p < .05). Finally, self-esteem was significantly correlated with all forms of provided and perceived support to a high degree in face-to-face settings only. No single significant coefficient was found for Facebook usage.

Table 1. Correlations for social support in Facebook and in F2F contact

		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1	Provided Support emotional	-	.623***	.516***	.458***	.596***	.623***	.212*	.402***	.227*
2	Provided Support information.	.776***	-	.611***	.443***	.482***	.426***	.208*	.380***	.239**
3	Provided Support instrument.	.709***	.770***	-	.373***	.363***	.338***	.162	.313***	.198*
4	Support Seeking	.244*	.416***	.368***	-	.460***	.482***	.514***	.260***	.221*
5	Perceived Support emotional	.482***	.401***	.362***	.265**	-	.806***	.307***	.440***	.314***
6	Perceived Support instrument.	.388***	.370***	.399***	.280***	.678***	-	.356***	.418***	.362***
7	Need for Support	.078	.184	.205*	.503***	.281***	.184	-	.088	.125
8	Self-esteem	.042	.080	.038	-.262**	.037	.027	-.246*	-	.717***(a)
9	Life Satisfaction	-.064	-.170	-.145	-.293***	.039	-.043	-.191	.717***(a)	-

Notes. ***$p<.005$; ** $p<.01$; * $p<.05$; (a) Self-esteem and life satisfaction were not specified for Facebook usage or face-to-face contacts

Table 2 shows the mean values and standard deviations of the outcome variables. As can be seen, the health-related outcome variables show values above the theoretical average of the scale. The standard deviation for self-esteem indicates that most of the sample values are very close to the average.

Table 2. Mean values and SD of health-related outcome variables

Variable	M	SD
Self-Esteem	3.18	.50
Life Satisfaction	5.04	1.12
General Health	8.61	1.52

4.3 Perceived social support on Facebook and in real life

To analyze potential differences in the users' perceived social support on Facebook and in real life t-tests for dependent samples were calculated. As can be seen from Table 3, the availability for emotional as well as for instrumental support was significantly higher for face-to-face groups compared to Facebook.

Table 3. Group comparisons regarding the availability of social support

Variable	FB M (SD)	FtF M (SD)	t	df	p
Availability of emotional support	2.16 (.63)	3.83 (.39)	-24,28	104	.000
Availability of instrumental support	2.06 (.75)	3.80 (.35)	-20,93	104	.000

Note. FB = Facebook; FtF = Face-to-Face.

In a next step, t-tests were calculated to compare need for support and support seeking on Facebook and in real life (see Table 4). Similar to *availability of support*, values regarding both *need for support and support seeking* are significantly lower regarding Facebook compared to face-to-face interactions. Measured against the theoretical average of the scales, values for both support seeking and need for support via Facebook are quite low, while the scores regarding face-to-face contexts are close to average.

Table 4. Group comparisons regarding the need for social support and support seeking

Variable	FB M(SD)	FtF M(SD)	t	df	p
Need for support	1.42(.39)	3.05(.60)	-25,34	104	.000
Support seeking	1.31(.50)	3.29(.51)	-25,81	99	.000

Note. FB = Facebook; FtF = Face-to-Face.

Regarding the provision of emotional, instrumental and informational support to others the same picture is shown for our sample: In face-to-face contexts significantly more support is provided. As can be seen from Table 5, emotional support shows the highest average values in both contexts.

Concerning the relation between possibilities of seeking and providing social support on Facebook and health-related outcomes (self-esteem, general health, life satisfaction), Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. The following results emerged: With regard to *emotional, instrumental* and *informational support*, no significant correlations with any of the health-related outcomes were found. Accordingly, in our study helping others on Facebook did not lead to higher levels

of self-esteem, nor did it contribute to a higher life satisfaction or even better general health. However, *support seeking* revealed significant negative correlations with all three outcome variables, ranging from r = -.21 (p < .05) to r = -.29 (p < .01), indicating that higher levels of dissatisfaction and lower levels of self-esteem and general health, respectively, are associated with increased support seeking online.

Table 5. Group comparisons on the provision of social support

Variable	FB M (SD)	FtF M (SD)	t	df	p
Providing emotional support	2.77 (.57)	3.51 (.42)	-10,75	97	.000
Providing instrumental support	2.12 (.73)	3.11 (.60)	-12,10	97	.000
Providing informational support	2.39 (.93)	3.39 (.63)	-9,69	97	.000

Note. FB = Facebook; FtF = Face-to-Face.

Before coming to the conclusion, we want to come back to our research questions and answer them separately from the already shown outcomes.

Both, the perceived availability of support (1) and the need for support (2) in Facebook was less pronounced compared to F2F contexts.

In F2F contexts, seeking for support (3) and providing support (4) were significantly higher in comparison to Facebook contexts.

Finally, our study's results suggest that, while Facebook users with lower levels of self-esteem, lower general health as well as with lower life satisfaction had a higher expression in support seeking, the same reasoning did not apply for providing support in Facebook (5).

5   Conclusion

The aim of our present study was to investigate the use of Facebook for several forms of social support by means of an online survey. Taken together, there is strong evidence that the perceived availability of social support, need for support, support seeking and, finally, providing different forms of social support were continuously lower on Facebook compared to real life interactions. At least, this was the case for our sample. At the same time, our results are in line with other recent research in this area, where users perceived more emotional and instrumental support in offline contexts than in the SNS contexts [8].

What can we conclude from these results? It seems that Facebook as an informal way of private networking does not offer the same possibilities for sensitive needs such as social support compared to face-to-face interactions. Therewith, the results argue against a low threshold for social support in online SNS due to the ease of widely distributing messages or providing short comments to friends [25, p. 251]. The results regarding need for support strongly argue for this interpretation.

Also, it might be cumbersome and awkward for users to convey their feelings virtually. Especially intimacy and trustfulness as the essential glue for social support may be difficult to experience in a virtual context with rather loose ties like Facebook [19]. For example, in their interview study with 18 adult Facebook users, Vitak and Ellison [25] reported that some individuals experiencing a significant life event decided against announcing it and sharing their feelings on Facebook because they "would not want to appear 'needy' or have people 'feel sorry for her'" (p. 251). The authors come to the conclusion that Facebook might rather serve as a facilitator of support that takes place on more private channels.

The same applies for the provision of support: Detecting cries for help requires a skilled sender–recipient relationship where relevant information is identified, coded and decoded in a correct way. In addition, befriended strong ties on Facebook may react on a post with a phone call or in a face-to-face meeting instead of directly reacting on the platform [26, 27]. Furthermore, it could be seen that seeking support on Facebook was accompanied by more negative health-related outcomes. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that troubled persons seeking for help from others show some kind of health impairment [cf. 28]. On the other side, it would be interesting to analyze how health-related outcomes change over time when problems are solved by other Facebook users.

Our study offers a number of limitations: Especially the cross-sectional design, the unbalanced distribution of Facebook users and nonusers, and the low variance of the respondents' answers in general can be seen as critical. For further investigations, we would recommend to include participants from specific subgroups, professions, and also age groups. In addition, longitudinal studies of Facebook use are needed to discover causal effects and also possible changes in both social support and health-related outcomes.

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