

## **Social support within virtual communities for parents of children with autism / Anna Nimny**

### **Abstract**

The internet represents new ways of using which parents to Autistic children can express their feelings and make connections with others - the virtual community is one of them. Discussions can take place in this community without constraints of time and space (Granit & Nathan, 2000).

The role of online communities is important because they allow us to retrieve and share information, socialize, and also to get and give support on various issues.

The purpose of this study was to examine, using passive observation study, the contribution and significance of participation in an online support group for parents who are dealing with raising their autistic children on a Forum placed at "Tapuz People" portal. In fact, research on virtual communities designed for parents of children with autism is in its infancy, hence the importance of examining this issue.

The research method used in this study was qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The study examined a few aspects of an online social support messages including exchanges which took place between the participants; frequency of social support messages as well as social support methods which are typical to messages on an online support groups.

Messages posted at the forum were regarded as research population. Overall sample of 1450 messages was examined. This sample constitutes all the messages posted in a four months period of time, between June 15t and September 30t, 2006.

Earlier studies examined social support at an online community (e.g. Coulson, Buchanan & Aubeeluck, 2007; Mo & Coulson, 2008), using the SSBC model: "Social Support Behavior Code", developed by Cutrona & Suhr ( Cutrona & suhr,1992). This model presented five support-intended communication behaviors: information support, tangible assistance, emotional support, network support and esteem support.

The results of this study, likewise, indicate that major part of social support behaviors in this community were classified as informative support of different topics related to autism, such as: information on the disability, process of diagnosis, methods of treatment, recommendations for professionals, rights and laws, tips, definitions and jargon, referral sources, etc. Another salient social support was an emotional support to friends. This support is reflected in sharing, virtual affection, expressions of sympathy, empathy, encouragement, etc. Other forms of support expressed in the forum were shown in this order: estimated support, tangible assistance and support networks. It is apparent that the information exchange and emotional support presented in the support group are related to the unique challenges faced by parents of autistic children. The findings of the Forum as a source of social support emphasize the contribution of virtual communities to social support for parents of children with special needs and strengthen other studies examining virtual communities. These findings demonstrated that the exchanges between the members are important in the sense that they are providing social support for its members, in addition to the transfer and assessment of information. Reviewing the interactions and behaviors in the community, indicated that most of them were positive. Minor portion negative interaction included criticism, arguments, and disagreement. The relationships between members of the forum are expressed also outside the virtual forum by contacting the phone, chat, face to face meeting, conferences, events, etc. Although these connections outside the forum occupy a small portion of the volume of messages, they point towards a "border crossing" between Internet and reality so that the online world and the offline world are intertwined. This way, the circle of friends in real life grows. Also found, were ways of social support representation which are characterized by messages sent to the forum and are unique to an online support groups. These representations were to express visual and emotional communication of the user as well as signatures.

Main limitation of this study was the researchers' subjectivity to the analysis. As in any content analysis, the researcher himself interprets the contents and the content is subject to his exclusive interpretation.

Content analysis in this study was conducted with quantitative tools, but the results were affected by the personal perception of the subject by the analyzer who phrased the research questions and built the measuring scales based on the model of Cutrona & Suhr.



As previously mentioned, this study focuses on limited questions of social support. Therefore, further studies are recommended. These Further studies should examine additional information behavior, information retrieval from greater number of online support groups and even comparison in order to allow more comprehensive results. The authors point of view of the examined forum should also be regarded (through interviews, for example) and a question which they could refer to is how they see the forum as a source of social support? This will validate the interpretations given by the model and strengthen the validity of the findings.

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