Bringing theory to research on computer-mediated comforting communication

Scott E. Caplan *, Jacob S. Turner

Department of Communication, University of Delaware, 250 Pearson Hall, Newark, DE 19716, United States

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Abstract

The current paper sought to advance the literature on computer-mediated emotional support by outlining a candidate theory of online comforting communication. We present a model that explicates the discursive, cognitive, and affective processes that function to reduce emotional distress and help improve one's psychosocial well-being. We identify unique attributes of online social interaction, as compared to face-to-face (FtF) interaction, that may be especially useful for facilitating empathic and adaptive comforting communication. Additionally, we explain how unique features of computer-mediated comforting communication may work to facilitate the cognitive and affective processes that result in alleviation of emotional distress. Final sections of the paper advance research questions and hypotheses to guide future empirical research examining the efficacy of online emotional support. © 2005 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Supportive and comforting communication

Whether in the psychotherapist’s office or talking with friends, people seek out social interaction to cope with emotional distress. In fact, interpersonal communication is a “central (if implicit) mechanism through which support is conveyed” (Burleson, Albrecht, Goldsmith, &

* Scott E. Caplan (Ph.D., 2000, Purdue University) is an assistant professor and Jacob S. Turner is a graduate student in the Department of Communication at Bowling Green State University.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 302 831 2958; fax: +1 302 831 1892.

E-mail addresses: caplan@udel.edu (S.E. Caplan), jacobst@bgnet.bgsu.edu (J.S. Turner).

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Sarason, 1994, p. xi). Emotional support from others is beneficial to our well-being, relieves distress, and helps improve our quality of life (Burleson, 1994). Although the study of emotionally supportive, or comforting, communication in face-to-face (FtF) encounters is well established (e.g., Burleson, 1982, 1985, 1994; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Burleson & Mac-George, 2002; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Samter & Burleson, 1984), we know relatively little about how these processes work in a computer-mediated context.

Some scholars have pointed out potential drawbacks of CMC that might hinder comforting conversations. For example, Braithwaite, Waldron, and Finn (1999) describe some online conversations as “negative, hostile, or malicious encounters” (p. 145). Additionally, online partners can engage in “flaming” (Finfgeld, 2000) or verbal harassment (White & Dorman, 2001). The literature identifies several other potential problems with online support including the lack of non-verbal cues, fleeting or irregular groups, and a lack of physical contact between group members that, together, may foster communicative experiences perceived as impersonal or incomplete (Finfgeld, 2000; Han & Belcher, 2001; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; White & Dorman, 2001; Wizelberg, 1997).

However, contrary to those who argue that online interaction is less personal than FtF conversations, others contend that CMC facilitates supportive communication (e.g., Precece, 1999; Wright, 1999, 2000, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). In one review of online support literature, Walther and Parks (2002) report that “the Internet must be judged as a fabulously successful medium for social support. Understanding, reassurance, and advice flow out from literally thousands of online-support groups” (p. 545).

To date, researchers have yet to firmly establish whether participation in online emotional support has therapeutic value that is less than, equivalent to, or beyond that obtained via FtF support (Finfgeld, 2000; Owen, Yarbrough, Vaga, & Tucker, 2003; Walther & Boyd, 2002). The few studies that have compared computer-mediated and FtF psychotherapy sessions have reported that participants in both groups exhibited relatively equivalent outcomes (e.g. Cohen & Kerr, 1998; Day & Schneider, 2002; for a review see Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004). As Davison, Pennebaker, and Dickerson (2000) suggest, research on online supportive communication “has unknown, and largely unstudied, potential.” (p. 210). To advance our understanding of online emotional support, Walther and Parks (2002) assert that the most important “question for researchers is not whether the Internet is capable of providing social support, but rather why it should be so effective as a support medium” (p. 545).

The current article addresses Walther and Parks (2002) question by presenting a theoretical account of how and why online emotional support interactions work to bring about positive emotional change. The first section below presents Burleson and Goldsmith’s (1998) appraisal theory of comforting communication and identifies the most important communicative features of effective emotional support. Next, the second section identifies attributes of online social interaction that may be especially suited for facilitating the types of communication that Burleson and Goldsmith hypothesize are likely to produce relief from emotional distress. The third section proposes a number of research questions and hypotheses to help guide future research.

2. An appraisal theory of comforting communication

Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) propose an appraisal theory of comforting communication and define comforting communication as a specific sub-category of supportive com-
municative behaviors. According to Burleson and Goldsmith (1998), “comforting focuses specifically on dealing with emotional distress, whereas ‘social support’ may encompass a range of ways in which (and mechanisms through which) individuals benefit from involvement in caring relationships” (p. 247). In short, comforting communication seeks to alleviate emotional distress experienced by others (Burleson, 1985, 1994; Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Burleson & Samter, 1985; Samter & Burleson, 1984). Although there are a variety of lines of research on different forms of online social support, the focus of the current article is explaining the processes involved in computer-mediated comforting communication.

Drawing from Lazarus’ cognitive appraisal theory of emotion (e.g., Lazarus, 1991, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) contend that emotions are products of cognitive appraisals. From their perspective, effective comforting communication fosters adaptive cognitive reappraisals of upsetting experiences, which in turn ameliorate emotional distress. The following section explains the cognitive, behavioral, and affective processes involved in alleviating emotional distress in a conversational partner.

2.1. Appraisals, emotions, and reappraisals

The cognitive appraisal theory of stress and emotion contends that emotional distress arises from one’s evaluation that a situation is relevant to, but incongruent with, one’s goals (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In general, appraisals are cognitive-evaluative processes that determine: (a) whether a specific situation is relevant to one’s goals; (b) whether it is congruent or incongruent with those goals; (c) the extent to which one can cope with the situation (Lazarus, 1990, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Lazarus & Launier, 1978). Put differently, situations invoke stress responses “at the perceptual level – it is not the demand itself but rather the individual’s assessment of it that makes it a stressor” (Ben-Sira, 1991, p. 20). Empirical evidence supports the claim that positive changes in one’s cognitive appraisals of a distressing situation result in positive emotional changes (e.g., Ross, Rodin, & Zimbardo, 1969; see the reviews by Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998; Lazarus, 1991; Smith & Pope, 1992).

Appraisal theorists contend that altering a negative stress response (e.g., changing an upsetting emotion) involves a reappraisal process (Lazarus, 1991; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Smith & Lazarus, 1993). Reappraisals are often difficult to attain, and only occur when: (a) one perceives a change in the situation, or (b) one arrives at a new interpretation of an unchanged situation (e.g., construing new meaning of unchanged circumstances) (Lazarus, 1991). The positive emotional changes brought about through cognitive reappraisals are more stable and functional than those achieved through less effective coping strategies such as distancing, avoidance, or denial, especially when dealing with consequential matters (see Lazarus & Lazarus, 1994, pp. 156–173). After explaining how emotions arise and change, Burleson and Goldsmith go on to explain how interpersonal communication can facilitate distress-alleviating reappraisals, and as a consequence, positive emotional change.

Whether offline or online, comforting communication works by “discursively constructing” adaptive, or less troublesome, cognitive reappraisals of a distressing experience or situation (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 259). A comforter must engage in a conversation that helps the other work through his or her emotions, thereby facilitating distress-alleviating reappraisals. Burleson and Goldsmith also point out that “all that can be done in
many situations of emotional distress is to ‘be there’ and help the other work through her or his feelings by being a good conversational partner’ (1998, p. 260). Burleson and Goldsmith maintain that conversation is ‘a medium in which a distressed person can express, elaborate, and clarify relevant thoughts and feelings’ (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 260).

For the purposes of the current article, the appraisal model of comforting provides an organizing framework for developing research questions and hypotheses about how computer-mediated emotional support works. The major argument developed in the following sections is that some features of online social interaction are especially effective at facilitating the conversational conditions that Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) identify as facilitating adaptive reappraisals of distressing experiences. The following section outlines the conditions necessary for comforting and explains why online emotional support may help conversational partners meet those conditions.

2.2. Three conditions for effective comforting conversations

Broadly, Burleson and Goldsmith assert that adaptive reappraisals are most likely to result from conversations in which the focus is on an expression of the thoughts and feelings surrounding a distressing experience. In other words, not all conversations are going to foster reappraisals; “if conversations are to promote functional reappraisals of events, those conversations must focus on appropriate topics, and those topics must be explored and elaborated in useful ways” (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 262).

Burleson and Goldsmith propose three conditions required for effective comforting communication: (1) participants must be willing to enter into a conversation that will involve discussing upsetting matters; (2) talk must be focused on the distressed individual’s thoughts and feelings about the upsetting experience; (3) the distressing matter must be discussed in a way that facilitates reappraisals. As the following sections explain, online social interaction may be more effective than FtF communication at meeting these conditions.

2.3. Comfort, safety, and willingness to discuss upsetting matters

According to the appraisal theory of comforting communication, effective comforting conversations occur in settings where both participants “feel secure and comfortable with discussing troubling events and the feelings aroused by those events” (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 265). In other words, one’s willingness to engage in comforting communication requires a non-threatening conversational environment.

In FtF conversation, Burleson and Goldsmith’s first condition is difficult to attain because discussing one’s problems or negative emotions often creates a “self-presentational dilemma” where disclosure may result in making one’s self look weak, ridicule or rejection from others, or stigmatization (Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998, p. 263; also see Coates & Winston, 1987). Thus, achieving the type of conversational environment most conducive to effective comforting requires reducing the distressed other’s self-presentational anxiety. Burleson and Goldsmith argue that “the willingness and ability to express and explore negative feelings will be enhanced if participants feel safe and secure about doing so” (1998, p. 263). We propose that establishing such an environment may be easier and more effective if the conversation is computer-mediated.
Online, it may be easier to establish a safe and secure environment in which participants are willing to discuss deeply personal and upsetting matters. One of the most widely noted features of CMC is that, compared to FtF conversation, online social interaction often involves less personal and social risk than FtF conversation (Caplan, 2003). Online social interaction may be especially adept at fostering feelings of interpersonal comfort and security. For these reasons, Caplan (2003) argues that some people, especially those who are lonely or socially anxious, develop a preference for online social interaction; they feel safer, more efficacious, more confident, and more comfortable with online interpersonal interactions and relationships than with traditional FtF social activities.

A number of scholars note that the heightened levels of anonymity and the reduced non-verbal and demographic cues characteristic of CMC may make online support more comfortable and reduce social anxiety (Barrera, Glasgow, McKay, Boles, & Feil, 2002; Braithwaite et al., 1999; Caplan, 2003; Finfgeld, 2000; Finn, 1999; Han & Belcher, 2001; McKenna, Greene, & Gleason, 2002; White & Dorman, 2001; Wizelberg, 1997; Wright, 2002). The potential for greater anonymity in online social interaction allows people who are reluctant to seek support in a FtF setting to communicate with others in a straightforward and honest way about their conditions, to be more self-disclosive, and to be more direct in asking personal questions about others. As Tidwell and Walther explain, “CMC provides some sheltering effects not offered in FtF conversation, and mediated interactants may feel more comfortable disclosing more intimate information, with less self-consciousness, than in FtF settings” (2002, p. 325).

Walther (1996) proposes that online social interaction may be more effective than traditional FtF behavior for interpersonal endeavors that involve social risk. Walther contends that CMC facilitates hyperpersonal communication that surpasses normal levels of interpersonal exchange (also see Robinson & Turner, 2003). According to Walther, the reduced number of available non-verbal cues in CMC increases message-editing capabilities, and the temporal features of CMC allow interactants to be more selective and strategic in their in self-presentation, form idealized impressions of their partners, and, consequently, engage in more intimate exchanges than people in FtF situations (see Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther, 1993, 1996; Walther & Burgoon, 1992).

Some research lends support to the hypothesis that people may have an easier time feeling comfortable and less self-conscious about disclosing personal feelings online than via FtF communication. For example, Joinson (2001) examined the differences in levels of self-disclosure between CMC and FtF conversation, hypothesizing that self-disclosure levels would be greater in CMC than FtF because of the increased private self-awareness, decreased public self-awareness, and increased visual anonymity in CMC. Joinson’s results indicated that CMC participants exhibited greater levels of spontaneous self-disclosure than those who engaged in FtF interactions. Tidwell and Walther (2002) also found that people meeting for the first time via CMC produced more personal self-disclosures than those who met FtF.

A number of scholars argue that one group of people that may especially benefit from reduced social risk associated with online support is people suffering emotional distress surrounding stigmatized conditions such as HIV, AIDS, cancer, eating disorders, physical disabilities, and even old age (Braithwaite et al., 1999; Cline & McKenzie, 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; White & Dorman, 2001; Wright, 1999, 2000, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). People suffering from stigmatized conditions are especially challenged when seeking out FtF emotional support. In FtF situations, peoples’ efforts to conceal their stigmatized
condition may result in loneliness, deception, and anxiety about revealing their stigma to others (Goffman, 1963). Their anxiety is well-justified; individuals with stigmatized conditions often experience devaluation, avoidance, and rejection when others become aware of the stigma (e.g., Bull & David, 1986; Bull & Rumsey, 1988; Bull & Stevens, 1981; Harris, Milich, Corbitt, Hoover, & Brady, 1992). As a result, many stigmatized support seekers “deny themselves many of the benefits – the social support, and social relationships – that come with being open about a stigma” (Smart & Wegner, 2000, p. 235; also see Gibbons, 1986).

If Burleson and Goldsmith’s theory is correct, then CMC should be an attractive alternative means of obtaining emotional support for stigmatized individuals. When one is able to maintain anonymity, revealing a concealed stigma to others may be highly beneficial (Smart & Wegner, 2000). The argument advanced in the current article is that computer-mediated social support interactions may be especially helpful at creating a conversational context that is less socially risky than its FtF counterpart.

In cyberspace, conversations of stigmatized issues are likely to be much less threatening. Walther and Boyd (2002) contend that since online social ties are weaker links than FtF relationships (i.e., there is greater social distance in online interactions), computer-mediated discussions of stigmatized topics are likely to be perceived as less threatening than their FtF counterparts. In a study assessing Usenet support group members’ attraction to CMC support, Walther and Boyd found that participants were attracted to CMC because of its increased anonymity and its increased social distance, which facilitated better stigma management.

In another study, Wright (2002) found that cancer patients were more motivated than their family and friends (who did not suffer from the stigma associated with being a cancer patient) to communicate interpersonally online. McKenna and Bargh (1998) conducted three separate studies of stigma and online social support, concluding that “individuals used the shelter of anonymity to express those important aspects of themselves that might well be sanctioned if expressed for attribution – that is, publicly and non-anonymously” (p. 17). Thus, stigmatized individuals might especially benefit from online social support because, online, they have the unique opportunity to discuss sensitive topics without having to worry about the inherent interpersonal costs of revealing potentially embarrassing information about one’s self (Gustafson et al., 1999; White & Dorman, 2001; Wright, 2002).

Aside from the diminished sense of social and personal risk available via online social interaction, there are other reasons why CMC is likely to enhance individuals’ willingness to engage in discussions of personal and upsetting topics (Burleson and Goldsmith’s first condition for effective comforting communication). For instance, computer-mediated emotional support allows support seekers who have limited mobility to participate in groups that they would be less willing, if at all able, to attend if offered in an FtF format (Braithwaite et al., 1999; White & Dorman, 2001; Wright, 2002). Along a similar line, online conversation partners are not bound by proximity and geographical barriers; individuals can communicate with a seemingly limitless number of diverse people who would be difficult or impossible to locate in most FtF cases (Barrera et al., 2002; Braithwaite et al., 1999; Finfgeld, 2000; Finn, 1999; Walther & Boyd, 2002; White & Dorman, 2001; Wizelberg, 1997; Wright, 2002). In an early study of an online breast cancer support group, participants reported time and again that a major benefit of the online forum was the similarity among group members on items such as attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, demographics, and religious preference (Sharf, 1997).
Indeed, as Preece (1999) points out,

local [FtF] support groups provide an opportunity to meet maybe five, 10, or even 20 other people experiencing similar problems. Online support groups can connect thousands of people, and for each person who posts publicly, there may be many who benefit from lurking or who opt to make private contact via E-mail with a person who has posted (p. 64).

In sum, CMC may be more effective than FtF communication at fostering the comfortable and non-threatening conversational environment that Burleson and Goldsmith suggest is necessary for effective comforting to take place. Compared to FtF interactions, online comforting offers greater anonymity, weaker social ties, greater control over self-presentation, and, perhaps, a less anxiety-provoking environment. The available research on stigma and online support indicates that stigmatized individuals find CMC to be especially helpful in minimizing the social risks associated with discussing their conditions. The following section addresses Burleson and Goldsmith’s (1998) second condition for effective comforting communication and reviews literature indicating that CMC may also help individuals discuss upsetting emotions and experiences.

2.4. Focusing on thoughts and feelings about an upsetting experience

After establishing a safe and comfortable environment where a distressed individual is willing to discuss upsetting matters, effective comforters must also direct the conversation such that talk is focused on the distressed individual’s thoughts and feelings about the upsetting experience. Based on Rogers’s (1957, 1975) client-centered model of psychotherapy, Burleson argues effective comforting requires the comforter to legitimize the concerns and feelings of the distressed other; empathy allows a support provider to explicitly acknowledge, elaborate, and legitimize a distressed person’s feelings (Burleson, 1985, 1994). Empathy, as defined by Strayer (1987) involves “understanding the psychology of others (i.e., their thoughts, intentions, feelings, etc.) or, more specifically their feelings” (p. 218). A substantial body of research highlights the importance of empathy as a key ingredient in comforting or emotional support (e.g., Burleson, 1994; Cutrona, Cohen, & Igram, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992).

Although there is no data, yet, about whether CMC may be more or less empathic than FtF conversation, some scholars note the importance of empathy in online emotional support. For example, Wright (2002) surveyed participants of a cancer support website who reported that their perceptions of group members’ similarities (i.e., homophily) and identification with common experiences (i.e., empathy) were the important advantages of the online support forum.

Additionally, Preece’s research indicates that empathy is a prominent feature of participants’ discussions in online support groups that deal with emotional distress (Preece, 1999; Preece & Ghozati, 2001). Preece (1999) contends that CMC support groups are likely to emphasize empathy because of the high density of members with similar or shared experiences. In one study, Preece (1999) content-analyzed postings in online support groups for people coping with serious health problems such as diabetes, cancer, and infertility. The researcher coded messages as either empathic, non-empathic, question/answer (factual), personal narrative, or other. Preece found that the two highest percentages of
the 500 postings from 251 individuals sampled from the online support groups were empathic discourse (44.8%) and personal narratives (32%). Empathic postings “had a strong empathic content and echoed the definition of empathy given by psychotherapists... the overall feeling conveyed in these messages was one of mutual understanding and caring developed from shared experience” (Preece, 1999, p. 71).

With regard to empathy,

online support group participants could identify strongly with the fear, the pain, the inconveniences, the frustrations, and the delights expressed by others who were recovering from an accident, surgery or illness. They were either going through similar experiences or they had been there. They knew what the other person was experiencing and feeling. Empathy was the compelling ingredient in many of these conversations (Preece, 1999, p. 65).

Despite these findings indicating the prevalence of empathic messages among participants in some online support groups, Preece reports that “little if anything has been written about empathy online but much has been written about communities and computer supported social interaction” (p. 67). The theory presented in the current article establishes a useful framework for developing a line of research on empathy in CMC environments.

Tidwell and Walther (2002) provide a second explanation for why CMC may be better than FtF conversation at fostering talk that focuses on the distressed individual’s thoughts and feelings about the upsetting experience. Tidwell and Walther (2002) report that CMC appears to be better, at least during initial interactions, at producing more direct, disclosive, and intimate exchanges than FtF conversation. For example, in one study Tidwell and Walther (2002) found that:

as opposed to FtF, CMC led to higher proportions of more intimate questions and lower proportions of peripheral questions, as well as fewer instances of peripheral disclosures (p. 335).

Tidwell and Walther’s findings that CMC users had less peripheral questions and disclosures indicates that the online interactions were better able to maintain a conversational focus on personal thoughts and feelings.

The scarce mention of empathy in the online support literature is symptomatic of the overall lack of theories about online emotional support. The appraisal theory of comforting provides a framework that explains how and why empathy helps a distressed other discuss their thoughts and feelings. From this framework, researchers begin to examine how CMC and FtF interaction differ in regard to expressions of empathy or talk about upsetting feelings. Additionally, researchers can also investigate how a comforter’s ability to focus and direct conversation may differ between online and FtF conversations. The following section addresses how CMC helps satisfy Burleson and Goldsmith’s final condition for effective comforting conversation, facilitating adaptive reappraisals.

2.5. Facilitating adaptive reappraisal with personal narratives

Whereas the previous section explained why empathic discourse is a vital feature of comforting communication, the current section explains how CMC can facilitate adaptive reappraisals by creating an environment conducive to expressing personal narratives. As with the previous sections, the argument advanced here is that CMC may be especially
well-suited for fostering the types of narrative discourse that researchers believe help alleviate emotional distress.

Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) hypothesize effective comforting conversations may foster adaptive cognitive reappraisals by helping an individual clarify, organize, and work through thoughts and feelings about an upsetting event. Such clarification can help stimulate reappraisals and bring order to otherwise disorganized and maladaptive thought processes. Specifically, Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) assert that,

as a result of concretizing and exploring these thoughts and feelings, and putting them into words to convey to another person, the distressed person may be led to modify his or her goals, views of the situation, and coping efforts. Modifications in motives, perceptions, or actions constitute a new appraisal of the situation and, if these changes are functional, an improved affect state should result (p. 260).

In general, narratives have been reported to play a key role in reappraising stressful experiences (Anderson & Martin, 2003; Brody, 1987; Geist & Dreyer, 1993). A substantial body of research on the mental and physical health benefits of verbal disclosure supports Burleson and Goldsmith’s (1998) hypothesis. People who generate detailed verbalizations about their thoughts and feelings surrounding a highly stressing experience exhibit greater mental and physical health benefits than people who engage in more mundane verbalizations (e.g., Pennebaker, 1990, 1992, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker & O’Heeron, 1984). Theorists speculate that verbalization facilitates coping by helping one to translate thoughts and feelings into an organized narrative in a manner that permits one to come to terms with an otherwise confusing and upsetting experience. Harber and Pennebaker (1992) suggest that, “by giving traumas clear beginnings, middles, and ends, writers may circumscribe the boundaries and thereby get past them” (p. 376). According to Pennebaker and Seagal (1999), “Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that the emotional effects of that experience are more manageable” (p. 1243). Moreover, researchers have found that verbalization of feelings is maximally useful when those feelings are expressed in an elaborated, narrative form (for a reviews see Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth, 1998).

Currently, there is little, if any, literature on how computer-mediated comforting might facilitate narrative discourse that fosters reappraisal. The sparse research available is consistent with the hypothesis that online emotional support facilitates narrative discourse. In one study reported above, recall that Preece (1999) found that personal narratives were the second most frequent type of posting among participants of a Usenet support group. More recently, Alpers et al. (2005) employed a text analysis procedure to examine the content of 521 messages posted among members of an online breast cancer support group. Alpers et al. (2005) compared their online group’s discourse to the written discourse that Pennebaker, Mayne, and Francis (1997) found to promote health and coping. In fact, Alpers et al. (2005) used the same text analysis program (the linguistic inquiry and word count or LIWC; Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001) used in Pennebaker’s earlier work on written emotional verbalization. The results indicated that the online support group participants’ discourse exhibited a distribution of word categories similar to the standard distribution found with participants in written verbalization studies. Although Alpers et al.’s preliminary research is consistent with the claim that computer-mediated comforting fosters discourse that can facilitate reappraisals, much work remains to be done. The methods and procedures employed by Alpers et al. (2005) may prove useful for future
studies seeking to analyze the discourse of online comforting communication. Such studies may eventually lead researchers to develop and test specific hypotheses about how online emotional support conversations function to bring about distress-relieving reappraisals.

2.6. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the increasing interest in computer-mediated emotional support, research on the topic is sparse because there are few detailed and empirically testable theories. The appraisal theory of comforting provides a useful framework for organizing previous research and developing new research on online emotional support because it explicates the cognitive, affective, and communicative processes that, together, function to reduce emotional distress.

The unique features of online social interaction, reviewed above, lend themselves to facilitating the three conditions that Burleson and Goldsmith (1998) prescribe for effective comforting communication. Online support readily provides a safe situation and supportive audience. Moreover, people may have an easier time finding others who convey empathic concern, focus conversation on emotional disclosure, and prompt personal narratives. As a result, online communication provides us with an incomparable opportunity to gain emotional support where otherwise we might not be willing or able to do so. Of course, whether or not such activities characterize different online support conversations remains an untested empirical question. Additionally, the research on emotional verbalization suggests that the very act of writing out a narrative of one’s thoughts and feelings in an online support group may promote positive reappraisals.

In general, future studies of online social support that measure the extent to which online emotional support communication meets Burleson and Goldsmith’s three conditions for effective comforting would represent an important first step toward developing a theory-based line of research on effective computer-mediated comforting. Additionally, the arguments advanced in the current paper suggest a number of specific research questions which we believe will help researchers move closer to studying the efficacy of online emotionally supportive communication.

One research question for future researchers to pursue is whether online supportive communication employs messages that are more, less, or equally empathic to those conveyed in similar FtF encounters. To date, the available evidence indicates high levels of emotional and empathic forms of communication in certain online support groups (e.g., Braithwaite et al., 1999; Finn, 1999; Owen et al., 2003; Preece, 1999; Wright, 2002). Based on the research presented earlier, we suspect online emotional support is equally or more empathic than its FtF counterpart.

A second research question to address is whether participants who engage in online comforting communication are more likely to experience adaptive cognitive reappraisals than people who participate in more traditional FtF support activities. Finally, a third research question involves the observed emotional benefits of verbalizing one’s thoughts and feelings about distressing experiences. In light of Preece’s findings that participants in online support groups frequently engage in conveying personal narratives, and Pennebaker’s findings on the benefits of written emotional verbalization, do participants in online support groups experience similar health benefits? If so, then researchers would move much closer to establishing non-anecdotal evidence that CMC support groups do, in fact, benefit their participants psychosocial well-being.
In conclusion, the current paper sought to address issues that have not received wide attention in previous research. First, we have proposed one candidate theoretical framework (i.e., appraisal theory) that offers a detailed explanation of how the online emotional support process might work. Second, the model presented above provides a rationale for developing and testing hypotheses regarding the efficacy of online support groups. Thus, instead of merely counting the advantages and disadvantages of online support when compared to FtF, or simply measuring the perceptions that people have about participating in online support groups, researchers can employ the appraisal theory of comforting to begin to develop a systematic and theory driven interrogation of the online emotional support process.

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