

THE DIFFERENCE IN PERCEPTION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE SOCIAL SUPPORT

University of Twente – Bachelor Thesis



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Abstract

Background. Perceiving social support is important because it is positively linked to our mental health. In times of the advanced and beneficial technology, social support can also be perceived through social media. Existing work on the effects of perceiving social support in online settings has often stressed that social media can give the possibility, especially for young adults, to receive and perceive social support. The aim of this study was to compare the difference in the perception of social support in real life and through social media with the focus on the three social provisions attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration.

Methods. 173 subjects (130 female, 43 male) aged 18 to 59 years, who were mostly students, participated in the study. The participants filled out the same questionnaire consecutively two times, but with different instructions. One time for the perception of offline social support and the other for the perception of online social support.

Results. There is a difference between the perception of attachment online and offline, likewise there is a difference between the perception of reassurance of worth online and offline. However, little difference was found between social integration online and offline. The mean scores speak for the perception of social support in real life rather than the perception of social support through social media.

Conclusion. Participants perceived greater offline social support than online social support in all three social provisions. This indicates that offline social support is more favored than online social support. Still, there was little to no difference found between the perception of social integration online and offline. It can be concluded, that online social support is not completely inferior to offline social support.

1. Introduction

Encourage, lift and strengthen one another. For the positive energy spread to one will be felt by us all. For we are connected, one and all.

Deborah Day

Throughout life, we receive social support from a variety of people, which is defined as “the cognitive appraisal of being reliably connected to others” (Barrera, 1986). The process of interaction in various relationships improves our coping, esteem, belonging and competence (Gottlieb, 2000). Having connections to other individuals and how we perceive their support is thus important for our mental health. The perception of social support during times of stress has been consistently linked to good mental health, for example low levels of psychological distress (Barrera, 1986). Not just improving mental health, perceiving social support can also reduce negative physical effects because of the link between the psychological well-being and the physical health (Nabi & Prestin, 2013).

Cohen and Wills (1985) distinguished between two mechanisms through which social support is related to mental health outcomes, the main effect and the stress-buffering effect. The main effect of social support can occur when a person receives regular positive experiences. This has a direct effect on our health. The stress-buffering effect is a mechanism by which support can affect physiological processes. Those who receive great social support, have greater health and well-being than those with poor social support. This effect posits that social support is linked to health because it weakens the link between stress and negative health outcomes. Most researches on social support assume that the link between social support and mental health reflects the stress-buffering effect (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

Social support is present in all life stages. Through the rise of the internet, social support is also accessible at all times. The steadily increasing use of social networks such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter enable a new platform where people are connected to each other more than ever. Especially young adults are comfortable with online communication and are using social media enthusiastically (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Facebook, for example, registered more than 175 million active users on January 2009, which is twice the population of Germany (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

According to Tang, Chen, Yang, Chung and Lee (2016), especially students are motivated to use Facebook regularly because of the giving and receiving of online support and the maintaining of relationships. Facebook can provide three types of online social support. First, informational support offers guidance, advice, information and feedback, which can help the user to solve a problem and is provided by friends who can quickly give suggestions via Facebook. Second, affectionate support offers expressions of love and affection in form of “likes” or messages, that can express support and various emotions. Last, Facebook seems to enable social companionship in a known and trusted online environment, where users can spend time and share memories with each other. (Tang, Chen, Yang, Chung & Lee, 2016).

Nabi and Prestin (2013) revealed that the more friends someone has on Facebook, the stronger is the perception of social support. Having many Facebook friends is associated with reduced stress and increased well-being. Acquiring social support is thus one of the most important reasons for online social networking (Park, Kee & Valenzuela, 2009). Still, there are contrasting opinions about the perception of online social support and offline social support, which is social support in real life.

Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson (2009) asked participants in their previous research about their perceptions of online and offline support. Some participants mentioned that online support was their main support in challenging times in their lives. They especially valued this kind of social support as the career restricts them to meet other people in real life. However, the fact that the physical presence and body language was missing in online social support was crucial for other participants. They stated that the lack of non-verbal cues limited the quality of online social support. Furthermore, the immediate feedback and reaction was missing when one really needed emotional support. Some participants felt insecure with the fact that they did not know when they will get an answer and misunderstandings could arise easily, which in return could be solved quickly in offline settings. Other participants did not agree with this statement. They argued that the possibility for creating a misunderstanding can be avoided, because people can take their time to think thoroughly about what they answer, and they also have the possibility to read it through again. The researchers concluded that it is essential to know the person and the context of the situation well when giving online as well as offline social support (Pfeil, Zaphiris & Wilson, 2009)

There are several reasons why people seek social support. According to Weiss (as cited in Cutrona & Russell, 1987), there are six different social functions or provisions needed

to feel adequately supported, namely attachment, social integration, reliable alliance, guidance, opportunity for nurturance and reassurance of worth. Cutrona and Russell (1987) developed the Social Provisions Scale, which items were based on these provisions. Three of the provisions, namely attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration have parallels with Cobb's (1976) three classes of social support. According to Cobb (1976), social support is information that can lead the individual to believe that he or she (1) is cared and loved for, (2) is esteemed and valued and (3) belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation. Attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration represent Cobb's emotional, esteem and network support, which is why this study only focuses on these three social provisions.

According to Russell and Cutrona (1987), *attachment* is defined as the emotional closeness one has to another person. A sense of safety and security can be derived from such a relationship. *Reassurance of worth* is provided by relationships in which one's abilities, values and skills are acknowledged. The term self-efficacy is linked to this social provision. Lastly, *social integration* is provided by a network of relationships in which individuals feel a sense of belonging and share similar interests and concerns with each other. Such a support provides a sense of identity, pleasure, comfort and can even have an impact on the own well-being (Russell & Cutrona, 1987). Getting these three functions through social support is essential, because deficits in for example attachment can lead to emotional loneliness or social loneliness when there is no social integration (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984).

When comparing the three social provisions in online and offline settings, the social provision *attachment* is probably more provided through offline than through online connections. Since attachment is linked to emotional closeness (Russell & Cutrona, 1987), it is likely for the individual to perceive more support from intimate relationships in the real life. In a study of Pfeil, Zaphiris and Wilson (2009), participants who were in need of emotional support argued that immediate feedback and reaction is missing in online communication. The social provision *reassurance of worth* is also probably more perceived through offline than through online connections. According to Russell, Cutrona, Rose and Yurko (1984), reassurance of worth is mostly provided by work relationships, where the own skills and abilities are acknowledged. It is thus presumably more difficult to get this acknowledgment through social media. The last social provision *social integration* is likely to be perceived a bit more in online than in offline settings. One of the main reasons to use social media is to connect with others and share similar interests (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007). Even

though both online connections as well as offline connections can probably provide a sense of identity and belonging to the individual, it can be assumed that social media users can create an identity more faster and easier. In the real life, this presumably takes more effort and time (Pfeil, Zaphiris & Wilson, 2009). Furthermore, there is probably no need for social media users to be in an intimate relationship to share similar interests or concerns.

These three social provisions can be used to measure how an individual perceives social support. Since the perception of social support is linked to mental health (Cohen & Wills, 1985), it is important to do further research in this field. By investigating social support not just in real life but also in various social media, because of the rising use and popularity among young adults, the question of the difference in perception of online and offline social support comes up. This study will focus on the comparison of the perception of online and offline social support by measuring the social provisions attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration.

Following hypotheses occur:

It is expected that

1. the perception of **attachment** is greater through *offline* social support
2. the perception of **reassurance of worth** is greater through *offline* social support
3. the perception of **social integration** is greater through *online* social support

2. Methods

2.1 Design

This study used a cross-sectional online survey design to examine the difference between the perception of social support online and offline. The participants were recruited by convenience sampling. This study was part of a larger study that was conducted together with four other researchers under the broad topic “Social media and mental health”.

2.2 Participants

173 subjects (130 female and 43 male) participated in the study. The age range of the participants was from 18 to 59 years ($M = 21.66$, $SD = 3.67$). 61.3% of the participants lived in Germany, 34.1% in the Netherlands and 4.7% in other countries. The majority (68.2%) answered that the highest degree they already have received is “High school graduate or Abitur”. Furthermore, the current employment status of the most participants were “University student” (60.7%) and “Student (school)” (30.1%). Participants who did not give their informed consent and did not answer all questions, were taken out before the data analysis.

2.3 Procedure

The ethics commission of the University of Twente approved the study, before putting the questionnaire online. During the period of April and May 2018, participants were recruited. Each of the researchers recruited at least 25 peers and family members by asking them if they want to contribute to the study. Those who decided to participate received a link, which directly led them to the questionnaire on Qualtrics, a software with which researchers can collect and analyze data. Also university of Twente students could participate in the study by logging into the university’s test subject pool called SONA where they could fill out the same questionnaire.

The questionnaire started with an informed consent, which briefly gave the participants information what the questionnaire is about and what they can expect. The confidentiality of their answers was emphasized, and participants had to give their consent to continue. After giving the consent, participants filled out the questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire, an appreciation message was shown and a short debriefing to let the participants know what concepts the researchers wanted to measure. In case of remaining questions or remarks the participants got the possibility to contact one of the researchers.

The time needed to fill out the questionnaire was about 25 to 30 minutes. All subjects

participated voluntarily in the study and did not receive any reward, besides the students of the university of Twente who received 0.75 credit points for their participation on SONA.

2.4 Materials

2.4.1 Demographics

At the beginning of the questionnaire the participants were asked a few demographic questions. The multiple-choice questions asked about the participants' sex, age, residence, occupation and educational level. An example of a demographic question is: "What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? If you are currently enrolled, what is the highest degree you have received already?". The participants could choose to answer the educational level question with "No schooling completed", "Middle school", "High school", "Bachelor", "Master" and with some more options.

2.4.2 Social Provisions Scale

The Social Provisions Scale developed by Cutrona and Russell (1987) was used. The questionnaire measures six provisions or functions. Each provision consists of four items, so the scale has 24 items in total. The provisions are: (1) *attachment*, which is provided by intimate relationships (example item: "I have close relationships that make me feel good"); (2) *social integration*, which means to share interests and concerns with social relationships ("There is no one who likes to do the things I do"); (3) *reassurance of worth*, which acknowledges the individual's skills and abilities ("There are people who value my skills and abilities"); (4) *reliable alliance*, derived from relationships in which assistance under any circumstances is the most important ("If something went wrong, no one would help me"); (5) *guidance*, in which trustworthy and authoritative individuals give sufficient advice ("I have someone to talk to about decisions in my life") and (6) *opportunity for nurturance*, in which the individual is responsible for the well-being of another. An example item would be: "I feel responsible for taking care of someone else" (Weiss, 1974, as cited in Russell, Altmaier, & Van Velzen, 1984).

12 of the 24 items measure the presence of a type of support, for example "There are people I can count on in an emergency" and the other 12 items measure the absence of it, for example "No one needs me to take care of them" (Russell & Cutrona, 1987). Responses range on a 4-point scale consisting of 1 = "strongly disagree", 2 = disagree, 3 = agree and 4 = "strongly agree". Russell and Cutrona (1987) found a good internal consistency reliability of the Social Provisions Scale ($\alpha=.93$). Findings of another study supported the construct and

predictive validity of this instrument (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984; Russell, Altmaier and Van Velzen (1984).

2.4.3 Stimuli

The Social Provisions Scale could be filled out online on Qualtrics or on the test subject pool of the University of Twente (SONA). The participants had to fill out the Social Provisions Scale two times. The first time was to examine the degree to which the participants' social relationships in real life provide various dimensions of social support. Examples of social support in general were given to the participants, for example "friends, coworkers, fellow students around you", to clarify that this scale is about the participants' perception of offline social support. The second time was to examine the degree to which social relationships on social media provide various dimensions of social support. Participants were given the examples of social support through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

2.5 Data analysis

A paired-samples t-test was conducted through the statistical program IBM SPSS Statistics 24. The data were analyzed in two ways. First, the descriptive statistics of the variables attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration online and offline were calculated to indicate if the results supported the hypotheses. Second, the mean differences of three pairs were calculated to determine if the differences were significant. The first pair was offline attachment and online attachment, the second was offline reassurance of worth and online reassurance of worth and the third pair was offline social integration and offline social integration.

3. Results

3.1 Descriptive statistics

The means, standard deviations and ranges of the social provisions attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration online and offline are presented in table 1. Notably, all of the mean scores for offline social support are higher than the mean scores for online social support.

Table 1

Comparison of means, standard deviations and ranges for the three provisions online and offline

	Offline			Online		
	M (SD)	Min	Max	M (SD)	Min	Max
Attachment	2.52 (0.23)	2.00	3.50	2.39 (0.34)	1.00	3.50
Reassurance of Worth	2.52 (0.32)	1.75	4.00	2.23 (0.44)	1.00	3.25
Social Integration	2.35 (0.24)	1.50	3.00	2.30 (0.36)	1.00	3.00

Note. Responses were made on a 4-point Likert scale.

3.2 Hypothesis testing

To examine the mean differences between the perception of social support online and offline, a paired-samples t-test was conducted. To test if attachment was greater perceived in real life than through social media, the first pair consisted of the variables attachment online and offline. Results showed that there was a significant mean difference in the scores for attachment ($M = 0.12$, $SD = 0.37$; $t = 4.37$, $p < .001$). Looking at the mean scores in table 1, the offline score ($M = 2.52$) for attachment is higher than the online score ($M = 2.39$).

To test if reassurance of worth is greater perceived in real life than through social media, the second pair consisted of the variables reassurance of worth online and offline. A significant mean difference could also be found in the scores for reassurance of worth ($M = 0.28$, $SD = 0.53$; $t = 7.09$, $p < .001$). The offline mean score ($M = 2.52$) was likewise higher than the online mean score ($M = 2.23$).

To test if social integration is greater perceived through social media than in real life, the last pair consisted of the variables social integration online and offline. For this pair, there was no significant mean difference found ($M = 0.05$, $SD = 0.40$; $t = 1.56$, $p = .121$). Among the three pairs, the mean difference of the social integration pair was the lowest. Even though

the mean score for social integration offline ($M = 2.35$) is slightly higher than the mean score online ($M = 2.30$), the difference is not big enough to state that both variables differ from each other.

Summarized, the results showed that there is a significant difference in the mean scores of attachment online and offline and reassurance online and offline. Only for the mean scores of social integration online and offline there was no significant difference found.

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the difference between the perception of social support online and offline. Particularly three social provisions were taken into account, namely attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration.

The results showed that there is a difference in the perception of attachment online and offline. Since the participants perceived more attachment offline than online, hypothesis 1 can be *supported*. One possible reason for this result could be that the population, which is mainly consisting of students, seek a lot of intimate relationships and a sense of safety and security at their age. This is presumably easier perceived in real life than through social media (Pfeil, Zaphiris & Wilson, 2009). According to Bowlby (as cited in Collins, Ford, Guichard, Kane & Feeney, 2010), attachment in adulthood can best be seen when facing stressful events. The proximity to significant others are sought in response to fatigue, feelings of rejections by others, achievement failures and more. Support and care is strongly needed in such situations. Students, who are mostly young adults, can be faced with stressful situations, when they are for example studying for a test or achieving a bad grade. Their need for emotional closeness is expectedly strong, also because young adults are presumed to have a lot of dating experiences, passion and intimacy (Montgomery, 2005).

The results also show that there is a difference in the perception of reassurance of worth online and offline. Participants perceived more reassurance of worth offline than online, hypothesis 2 can thus be *supported*. Reassurance of worth had the greatest mean difference of all three provisions. A possible explanation is, that this provision is mostly provided in settings where the own skills and abilities are acknowledged, for example at the university (Russell, Cutrona, Rose & Yurko, 1984). Because a large portion of the participants were students or pupils, it is reasonable that they would perceive reassurance of worth by people at the university or school, likely when showing or applying the own skills in a groups project.

The results are *not* in accordance with the third hypothesis. Other than expected, there is no significant difference between the perception of social integration online and offline. It was expected that the perception of social integration is greater in online than in offline settings, because there are so many possibilities to share similar interests through social media (Java, Song, Finin & Tseng, 2007). Unexpectedly, the mean scores for offline social integration were higher than the online scores. Despite the little differences in the mean, the online perception of social integration is not that different from the offline perception. One

possible explanation could be again, the sample. On the one hand, students can share similar interests and concerns with friends, fellow students in a study association or in a sports club. There are many possibilities where students can create a social identity in their immediate environment to feel a sense of belonging (Freeman, Anderman & Jensen, 2007). On the other hand, with the rise of the internet it gets easier to create a social identity online (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007) and as expected, many can share similar concerns and interests through. This result does not only speak for the perception of social integration in real life but also through social media, which in turn can be indicative of the need to further investigate social support online and offline.

4.1 Strengths and limitations

This study has strengths as well as limitations. One remarkable strength is, that there are a lot of studies which focused on social media, online social support or social support, but no studies were found that combined these concepts with each other. The investigation of the difference between the perception of online and offline support in light of the three social provisions can thus be seen as a novelty in the field. As the interest and use of social media is rising, it can be beneficial to combine these social provisions and to research how that can affect people's perception, and well-being. If the influence is positive, social media use can be further developed to increase the mental health of social media users. It is thus recommended to do more research about these combined concepts.

Of course, this study also had several limitations that need to be taken in account when looking at the results. First, there were two groups of participants which were over-represented in the study, namely female and students. About 75% of the participants were female and about 60% students, which is why the study cannot be generalized. The study restricted participation especially to students or young adults, since this age group is most likely to use social media (Tang, Chen, Yang, Chung & Lee, 2016). To tackle this limitation, it is suggested to target more male and non-students for a more equally distributed sample.

Second, the study did not counterbalance the order of the stimuli. The participants had to fill out the Social Provisions Scale twice. The first was to measure perceived offline social support and the second was to measure perceived online social support. This could have led to an order effect, which refers to how the order of stimuli influences the participants' behavior. The results from the scale about the perception of online social support could be lower because participants may become bored, tired or fed up by the time (McLeod, 2007). To counterbalance the order effect, it is suggested that the participants are divided in half. That

means, one half of the participants are filling out the questionnaire about the perception of offline social support and the other half the questionnaire about the perception of online social support.

The last limitation would be that the Social Provisions Scale is not aimed to measure the three provisions online, despite a good validity. There is no assurance if the scale is also measuring the participants' perception of social support online. To make sure that the participants answered the questionnaires in according to the different instructions, examples of offline social support were given in the instruction of the first questionnaire and examples of online social support were given in the instruction of the second questionnaire. For the next time, it is suggested to additionally state in the beginning that one questionnaire will be about the perception of offline social support and one about the perception of online social support. This way, participants will know that there will be two identical questionnaires, but with different instructions.

All in all, it is proposed to do further research to investigate the relevance of different variables in combination with perceived social support online and offline.

4.2. Conclusion

This study was interested in researching the difference of the perception of online and offline social support. The focus was on the three social provisions attachment, reassurance of worth and social integration. When looking at the results, it can be said that offline social support was greater perceived than online social support, especially in the provisions attachment and reassurance of worth. Even though social integration was also greater perceived in real life, the difference to the perception through social media was not significant. Based on this, it can be concluded that not only offline social support is important, online social support can also be. Future researches can build on these results and explore more about the differences and benefits between social media and mental health.

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