

## **ABSTRACT**

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There are approximately 1.4 million transgender individuals living in the United States today, and, as the transgender population grows in numbers and visibility, key communicative questions remain regarding how social support mitigates the challenges associated with identifying as transgender. Literature suggests that transgender individuals might experience societal transphobia and that there is a positive relationship between social support and the overall wellbeing of transgender individuals, but there has been little research linking the two. The present study investigates what trans-specific experiences require social support and how those needs are met through the supportive messages of others. A content analysis was conducted on 50 message threads from the subreddit, TransSupport. Original posts were analyzed to determine common support needs, and subsequent replies were analyzed using Cutrona & Suhr's (1992) Social Support Behavior Code to examine the types of social support provided. Following the theory of optimal matching, determinations were then made as to whether the support provided suited the support need. The results section presents a typology of support needs present for an online transgender community as well as an analysis of how these support needs are being met through specific supportive messages.

Social Support Needs and Messages in an Online Transgender Support Community

by  
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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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## **Social Support Needs and Messages in an Online Transgender Support Community**

The term, *transgender*, refers to a diverse group of individuals whose gender identity differs from their biological sex (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006). Although some individuals who identify as transgender undergo sex reassignment surgery (SRS) to transition from one sex to another, others who identify as transgender might opt to transition solely in their gender expression by making other physical and social transitions, such as a changes in preferred pronouns, clothing, and communication styles and gestures. Moreover, transitions can occur from one sex to another (e.g., male to female) or from one sex to a more nuanced gender identity (e.g., male to genderqueer; Norwood, 2012). As of June 2016, an estimated 1.4 million adults in the United States identify as transgender, double the estimate from five years prior. A comparable estimate for transgender youth in the United States does not yet exist, as researchers have yet to develop a reliable method to tabulate the expected growing number of transgender teens and young children (Hoffman, 2016).

Although the transgender population is growing in numbers and visibility, transgender individuals are nonetheless frequently subjected to the effects of societal transphobia, including gender-based discrimination, rejection, and violence. In turn, these experiences with transphobia are associated with a higher risk for psychiatric symptoms, such as depression and anxiety (Lombardi, 2009). In that regard, the support of others can be instrumental in mitigating the challenges associated with identifying as transgender. Supportive family and peer networks allow transgender individuals to develop greater self-acceptance and congruence with their internal sense of self and gender, and the presence of

this general social support has been shown to be negatively associated with depression and anxiety. Moreover, connectedness to a community of similar others has been shown to serve as a counterpoint to external gender-based stressors by offering support from peers in order to normalize and validate emotional experiences related to external discrimination (Pflum, Testa, Balsam, Goldblum, & Bongar, 2015).

Given the significant and diverse support needs of the transgender community, more research is needed on the support received by transgender individuals. The extant literature suggests that transgender individuals might experience societal transphobia (Lombardi, 2009) and that there is a positive relationship between social support and the overall wellbeing of transgender individuals (Pflum et al., 2015), but there has been little research linking the two. In that regard, despite the growth in the body of research surrounding the effects of social support and the transgender identity, fundamental questions about the communicative aspects of social support for transgender individuals remain unanswered. For example, little is known about what trans-specific experiences require social support and how those needs are met by those offering support (Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2014). In order to answer these questions, an examination into specific types of social support is necessary.

### **Social Support**

When individuals communicate with the goal of supporting each other, they are said to be engaging in a socially supportive transaction. Social support can be understood through both its structure and function. Structural support refers to the extent to which an individual is connected to a supportive social network (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The structure of social

support is commonly defined with three components: *support schemata* that provide a mental map of supportive individuals, *supportive relationships* with individuals who provide support, and *supportive communicative encounters* (Pierce, Sarason, & Sarason, 1996).

Functional support refers to the specific functions that supportive networks can serve (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Within the category of functional support, social support can be divided into different types. Cutrona and Russell (1990) identify five types of social support:

informational, tangible, emotional, network, and esteem. Informational support provides support in the form of information, advice, or feedback. Tangible support provides useful goods and services. Emotional support provides concern, empathy, or sympathy. Network support provides a sense of belonging to a group of people with similar interests and concerns. Finally, esteem support demonstrates positive regard for someone's skills, abilities, and intrinsic value. Social support has been studied in relation to a wide array of psychological and social issues, such as mental health, interpersonal relationships, and workplace satisfaction (e.g., Boren, 2014; Dean & Lin, 1977; High & Dillard, 2012) with different types of social support having different effects in different situations (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Despite this large body of research on social support, little is known about the types of support received by transgender individuals, which limits our understanding of what and when support is most effective in this community. In that regard, Cutrona & Russell's (1990) typology of social support is essential in identifying the kinds of support received by transgender individuals.



Although there is a rich body of work examining the effects of different kinds of social support (Caplan & Turner, 2003; Mo & Coulson, 2010; Rains, Brunner, Akers, & Pavlich, 2016; Wright & Bell, 2013), more research is needed on specific support messages. One of the ways in which we can study specific support messages is through the unique features of computer-mediated support. Because computer-mediated communication is largely text-based, and many of the social cues available in face-to-face interaction are reduced or unavailable, research on online support has largely focused on messages rather than the processes and effects of social support (Rains et al., 2016). Two of the main aspects that differentiate online support from face-to-face support are temporality and anonymity. The text-based nature of online communication has been found to be beneficial in regard to self-reflection and, in removing the immediate reaction of others, provides a context in which participants can feel freer to discuss sensitive personal issues and feelings. Moreover, the relative anonymity of an online context allows participants to share these sensitive issues while maintaining some sense of personal privacy (Wright & Bell, 2003). Although the structure of an online context assists in the study of specific support messages, the functions found within an online context can also be beneficial. In an online context unlimited by physical boundaries, a large network of people who have diverse backgrounds, similar experiences, and varied attitudes are able to share experiences, and the Internet makes multiple sources of information and support accessible to those who are unable to get support elsewhere (Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2014).

Considering the structure and function of support in online communities, studying the support sought and received online by transgender individuals is particularly useful. Due to the continued presence of societal transphobia, an online context provides an outlet for transgender individuals to provide and receive social support that they might not receive otherwise. Horvath Iantaffi, Grey, and Bockting (2012) found that transgender individuals and groups are actively involved in creating websites that primarily target other members of the transgender community. Within these communities, transgender users are able to discuss personal and relational issues that they might not have an outlet for in their everyday lives. Often, transgender individuals will use cyberspace as an “alternative sphere,” which provides users with a social experience that is entirely different to their offline world (Marciano, 2014). In turn, these communities have been found to be beneficial in regards to personal and relational health. For example, Hillier, Mitchell, and Ybarra (2012) found that having an online community is important for LGBT youth to build social support and relationships with others. In that regard, examining an online support community might provide the best opportunity to study both support messages and support exchanges for the transgender community.

### **Optimal Matching Theory**

With the present need for research on transgender support, social support theory can provide insight as to how specific support messages function within this online community. The optimal matching model draws upon Cutrona and Russell’s (1990) social support typology and demonstrates how these types of support best correspond to different support

needs. To reiterate, according to Cutrona and Russell, there are five different types of social support: informational, tangible, emotional, network, and esteem. Optimal matching argues that there must be correspondence between the social support needed and the type of social support provided (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992).

According to the theoretical model of optimal matching, desirability, controllability, and life domain are the dimensions of support needs that are the most influential in determining which types of social support will be most effective. Controllability is thought to be the dimension with the greatest influence on social support matching, with more instrumental, action-facilitating support being more effective for controllable life events, and emotional, nurturant support being effective for uncontrollable life events (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). For example, problem-solving assistance, which offers informational and tangible support, is useful in moderating or eliminating the negative effects of a controllable life stressor. Emotional assistance, including expressions of emotional support and inclusion in a social network, is effective when the life stressor must be managed because it cannot be eliminated. Esteem support encourages active problem solving and enhances self-esteem, so it is helpful in responding to both controllable and uncontrollable events (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2014).

In addition to controllability, the desirability of the event and the life domain within which the stressor occurs are important influences in determining the matching of the support provided with the support need (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Regarding desirability,

undesirable events, such as vulnerability of physical and mental health, require more emotional support. In contrast, desirable life events, such as a wanted pregnancy, might require more informational than emotional support. In regard to life domain, Cutrona & Russell (1990) identify four life domains affected by stressors: assets, relationships, achievement, and social role. Assets include resources such as material goods, physical health, and access to desired activities. Relationships include interpersonal challenges, threats, or losses across all relational categories (e.g., family, friends, partners, coworkers). Achievement includes events involving status, evaluation, or competition. Finally, social role involves any role changes, such as the loss of one or the acquisition of a new one. According to the optimal matching model, different stressors affect different life domains and, thus, warrant different supportive responses (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2014). For example, Cutrona & Russell (1990) argue that a loss of or threat to one's assets would require tangible support. Moreover, stressors in social relationships create a need for network support in a way that solely personal stressors do not. When the stressor is associated with achievement, esteem support, which reassures an individual of his/her capabilities and worth, would be needed. Finally, changes in social role are believed to require network support and social integration (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992).

When determining the effectiveness of supportive messages, Cutrona and Russell (1990) argue that the type of support communicated should differ by stressor type. In order to determine the kinds of social support that are most effective in the transgender community,

an important first step is determining the support needs of community members as well as the types of support given in response to these support needs. In that regard, a study of online support in the transgender community guided by support matching models necessitates addressing the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What kinds of support needs are present within an online transgender support community?

RQ2: What kinds of social support messages are used to meet the support needs?

RQ3: How does the support provided match the support needs of the community?

### **Methods**

To answer these research questions, a content analysis was conducted on the initial posts and subsequent replies made in an online support community for transgender individuals. To address RQ1, support needs were analyzed through a latent content analysis of original posts. A manifest content analysis using Cutrona & Suhr's (1992) Social Support Behavior Code (SSBC) was conducted to identify the kinds of support messages used to meet the present support needs (i.e., RQ2). Finally, by assessing the controllability, desirability, and life domain of the stressors identified for RQ1, determinations were made regarding how the support provided (i.e., RQ2) matches the support needs of the community (i.e., RQ3). The following sections describe the sampling and coding procedures in further detail.

## **Sampling**

The sample consisted of messages from a subreddit, a smaller community within the social content-sharing site Reddit, called TransSupport. TransSupport is a subreddit dedicated to providing a nonjudgmental online community for transgender and nonbinary individuals who are seeking support. TransSupport was established in 2012 and, at the time of study, had approximately 2,500 subscribers. Users who wish to post on TransSupport only need to have a Reddit account, and posts that are irrelevant to the group are removed by one of the group's three moderators. Posts in the subreddit are displayed by title in reverse chronological order on the subreddit's main page. Within each post, the original post is displayed at the top, with subsequent replies appearing in chronological order below. Because there is no account needed to view messages posted in TransSupport, our Institutional Review Board considers them to be part of the public domain.

To begin the sampling procedure, the available data was unitized into threads. Each conversation, including the original post with its replies, was defined as a "thread." A thread's first author was referred to as the original poster, and subsequent replies as responses. The most recent 100 threads were collected by taking screenshots of each conversation, and each thread was numbered. Fifty of these threads were randomly selected for analysis using a random number generator. Each original post was included for analysis, and, for each thread with more than one response, each response was included for analysis. Replies to these responses, which often came from the original poster, were not included in the analysis. Across the 50 threads, the number of responses varied from thread to thread,

with an average of 2 responses to each original post. The final sample consisted of 50 original posts (analyzed for RQ1 and RQ3) and 120 responses (analyzed for RQ2).

### **Data Analysis**

**Support Needs.** The coding team consisted of myself and another graduate student, and the same coding team addressed each research question. In order to address RQ1, a latent content analysis was conducted on each original post to identify the support needs that were present. To do so, first, each thread in the sample ( $N = 50$ ) was read holistically for understanding. The coding team then read these posts independently to develop their own systems for categorizing the support needs. Next, the coders met to review and integrate their category systems. Then, using the system developed together, coders returned to the data individually to assess the exhaustiveness and inclusiveness of the category system. This process resulted in an exhaustive but not mutually exclusive category system describing the support needs present in the dataset.

**Support Provision.** Following the content analysis of original posts, subsequent responses in each thread were analyzed to identify the type of support provided. Each response was categorized using Cutrona and Suhr's (1992) Social Support Behavior Code (SSBC). The SSBC classifies supportive behavior into five different types: informational support (providing information, advice, and resources), emotional support (communicating affection, empathy, or concern), esteem support (communicating respect, confidence, and assurance), network support (communicating belonging to a group), and tangible support (providing or offering to provide goods or services).

To address RQ2 and identify the types of support provided within this community, the coding team used Cutrona & Suhr's SSBC (1992) to code for the presence and absence of each support type. Unsupportive responses received absence codes for all support types, and messages that exemplified more than one type of support received a presence judgment for each support type. To establish inter-coder reliability, the coding team was provided with a codebook containing operational definitions for each variable in the SSBC. We then coded a group of non-sample threads together to establish concurrence. After practicing the coding and refining the codebook, the team then coded 50 non-sample threads independently, using these codes to calculate reliability in terms of Krippendorff's alpha. The inter-coder reliability for each support type was sufficient (alphas ranged from .75-.83). Upon establishing sufficient inter-coder reliability, the sample was divided for independent coding. Presence/absence judgments for each support type were totaled and used to determine the frequency with which each support type occurred in the dataset.

**Optimal Matches.** Following Cutrona & Russell's (1990) optimal matching model, threads were analyzed in order to identify how the types of support provided in the community matched the support needs present. Cutrona & Russell (1990) identify controllability, desirability, and life domain as the three largest influences on the type of support needed, and in that regard, original posts were additionally coded for the controllability, desirability, and life domain of the stressor. To test inter-coder reliability, 25 non-sample posts were coded independently by the coding team. Following Cutrona & Russell's (1990) operationalization of controllability, desirability, and life domain,



controllability of the stressor was coded using a yes/no determination based on the ability of the individual to avoid the stressor or mitigate its effects. Desirability was similarly coded with a yes/no determination based on whether the stressor had the potential to result in gain or loss. Moderate inter-coder reliability was established for both controllability ( $\alpha = .68$ ) and desirability ( $\alpha = .68$ ). Finally, life domain was coded for whether the stressor affected assets (finances, health, etc.), relationships (with family, friends, etc.), achievement, or social role. Although it was possible for the stressor to affect multiple life domains, posts were coded for the main life domain affected by the stressor. The inter-coder reliability score for life domain was sufficient ( $\alpha = .89$ ).

Upon establishing sufficient inter-coder reliability, the sample was divided for coding. Following the coding of support needs, a list of theoretical “optimal matches” was developed based on the controllability, desirability, and life domain affected by each stressor (see Table 1). With an understanding of what constitutes an optimal match, the codes made in the analysis of RQ2 were reviewed, and the coders made yes/no determinations based on whether the support provided in each response matched the support need present in the original post.

## **Results**

In presenting the findings, I first outline the types of support needs present in the community, followed by the types of social support commonly provided in the community. Finally, I will discuss how well the support provided matched the support needs present in the dataset.

## **Support Needs**

Through the latent content analysis of original posts in the community, seven overarching support needs were found: negotiating identity, coming out, passing, managing physical health, managing mental health, maintaining relationships, and expanding networks.

**Negotiating Identity.** Support needs found in the community often concerned negotiating identity with the self and others. Within the self, this support need of “negotiating identity” concerned individuals who were unsure of their gender identity. Some users posted to the community because they were unsure of how they identified and wanted to discuss these questions in a trans-friendly community. As one user stated, “I have been questioning my gender identity for many years now...I feel like my male and female sides are constantly wrestling for dominance.” Similar questions manifested for those who were specifically questioning their transgender identity. One user explained, “For the last few days I’ve been feeling really uncomfortable about my Trans\* identity and I’m not sure why.” Occasionally, these questions of gender identity would intersect with sexuality, such as one user’s explanation of their identity concerns: “I think about men more than I do women, but in my fantasies I am always a girl/sissy.”

**Coming Out.** In contrast, posts from individuals who seemed confident in their identity but worried about disclosing this information to others were categorized as concerns about “coming out.” Often these posts sought advice on how to come out to specific family members or friends. One user simply asked, “How did you come out to your parents?”, while another user described their dilemma by stating, “I know my parents will understand since

they are very positive about the LGBTQ community. I just can't really find my way to bring my message across." Another user discussed coming out to their brother and asked, "Do any of you have another way that I can finally explain to him how I feel?" Moreover, many posts discussed the possibility of coming out to society. One user explained, "Now that I have just started college, probably the most accepting place I will ever be in my life, I am starting to think about coming out...if anyone has any good advice for me that would be appreciated."

**Passing.** Beyond coming out, the issue of "passing" in society was also a commonly voiced support need. Passing was categorized by individuals who were in the process of transitioning, medically or socially, and concerned with publically "passing" as their gender identity. Many of these posts addressed the fear of not passing and potentially being stigmatized by others. As one user explained, "I can't stand the idea of transitioning and not passing, the idea of having people look at me and see me as a hideous tr---y." Other posts concerned with passing served as requests for information to facilitate passing. For example, one individual in the beginning phases of transitioning who was concerned about their physical build asked, "Any transwomen who had similar builds and faces? What do they look like now?" Another user, a self-identified crossdresser, stated, "I am looking to buy something sexy to wear but don't know what sizes I should be looking for."

**Managing Physical Health.** Community members' posts also focused on physical health concerns, which were often related to the transition process. For example, one user described their pain experienced after an orchiectomy and asked, "Is something wrong, or is this a part of the healing process?" Support needs surrounding physical health also addressed

concerns regarding hormone replacement therapy. One user explained, “My doc started me off on a low dosage of 25mg spironolactone and 2mg estrofem. I took this for a month with no effect? Are the dosages ok? At what stage will I start noticing changes physically and mentally?” Moreover, some users sought location-specific resources regarding their access to physical health care. One user stated, “I was wondering what other people have chosen to do for their fertility storage options, especially in the Philly area.” Another user who was relocating to a different state explained, “I’m pre T and I’m concerned I won’t have access to the resources I need. If any of you live in SC, can you please give me some insight?” Finally, users’ physical health concerns had a financial component. For example, one user asked, “What things should I really pay attention to when picking insurance for nose and bottom surgery?” Another user asked, “For anyone that got electrolysis, what did it cost you? I’m thinking of getting it for my facial hair.”

**Managing Mental Health.** The support need of managing mental health was defined by expressions of anxiety, depression, and dysphoria. Expressions of anxiety included feeling of anxiety surrounding the self and others. As one user wrote, “I don’t want to get out of the house because I don’t want people to see how ugly I am/feel.” Other users described dealing with feelings of depression; one user simply stated, “Now, the depression is killing me.” Another user expressed the difficulties of fighting depression, stating, “I try to stay positive, look at the positive things, but it just makes me jealous and more depressed.” Expressions of body dysphoria (feelings of disconnect between gender identity and physical appearance) were also common, as exemplified by one user’s dilemma: “I’ve been feeling super

dysphoric for the last week or so, and it's not going away. This is one of the longest stretches I've gone through since I first started grappling with my gender identity." Posts surrounding mental health also involved the need for emotional release. As one user wrote, "I don't know what I'm asking for here, I'm just throwing my crap out into the world, venting might make me feel better."

**Maintaining Relationships.** The support need of maintaining relationships primarily dealt with managing interactions with and the expectations and reactions of others, including friends, family, significant others, and coworkers. Many of these posts solicited advice on how to communicatively manage relationships. For example, in trying to transition while maintaining a relationship with their family, one user asked, "How do I explain to them that I feel horrible when I'm perceived as male?" Similarly, other posts surrounding relationships involved the user standing up for oneself against others' perceptions of what it means to be transgender. One user explained, "One struggle I am finding with being true to myself is having to say 'no' or stand up for myself to others...it can be difficult. I am so used to trying to please others, to put myself second, even to my own detriment." Finally, some posts sought support in trying to strengthen or expand upon relationships post-coming out. For example, one user described the experience of going to lunch with old friends, explaining, "I felt so left out. I want someone who gets me, who supports me...I want to feel like 'one of the girls.'"

**Expanding Networks.** The support need of expanding networks was distinguished from maintaining relationships in that it was defined by direct requests for outlets to form

new relationships with others, particularly those in the LGBTQ community. One user who recently came out explained, “Being isolated from any LGBTQ communities, both my therapist and I figured it would be good to connect with others. Are there good online communities that I can join?” Others made requests for users to specifically reach out to them. One user stated, “I’m looking for a trans friend. Someone I can vent to, but really I need some help. If you’re interested in talking could you pm me on here?”

### **Support Provided**

Table 2 reports the frequency with which four of the five categories of social support were provided in the online community. Within the 120 responses, 154 instances of support were found. This dataset contained no instances of tangible support; as such, tangible support was not included in Table 2. Of the four categories remaining, the most frequently recorded support type was informational, followed by emotional with esteem and network support being the least frequently offered.

**Informational support.** Informational support was the most prevalent support type found in the community, accounting for 70% ( $n = 84$ ) of the sample data. Informational support often appeared in the form of advice, particularly in relation to decision-making. In providing advice to a user concerned about coming out to their brother, one user wrote, “Tell him you want his support and love, but if he cannot do that please be respectful of your life situation.” Informational support often came in the form of anecdotal advice, using personal experiences and narratives to give guidance to the original poster. Responding to someone concerned about the process of coming out, one user described the steps they took, stating,

“When I decided to try living as a woman I did start small, told only my brother, fiancée, and mother.”

Another common form of informational support was resource referral. This was often found in responses directing users to physical locations or tangible resources. In response to a post looking for fertility storage options in Philadelphia, one user offered a local suggestion: “I’m pretty sure the Free Library has some resources.” Often, resource referrals would also involve directing users to other subreddits that could perhaps be more beneficial in assisting the original poster. For example, in responding to a user’s request for support in transitioning and vocal exercises, one user replied, “FYI, you’ll get a lot more responses and insight over in r/ftm.” Finally, users used situational appraisal, primarily as a buffer for advice or as a segway into more emotionally supportive messages. This was exemplified in one user’s response to an individual considering transitioning: “It sounds like you’ve done your homework on what transition entails, and despite all that, the prospect of transitioning makes you happier. That tells me you’d be making the right decision.”

**Emotional Support.** Emotional support was the second most prevalent support type provided within the threads, accounting for 46% ( $n = 55$ ) of the data. Emotional support often appeared in the form of caring. A common form of caring was wishing others well in their journey, which was exemplified by one user’s response to a post regarding feelings of depression: “Hang in there. I hope things get better soon.” The community also provided emotionally supportive messages of empathy, typically in the form of narratives stressing the

similarity of one's personal experience with another's. For example, in responding to a user contemplating suicide, one user offered empathic emotional support by stating,

I've been dealing with suicidal compulsions for almost twenty years now. The one thing I can tell you that may make a little difference is that some of the best things I've ever experiences were in those twenty years. The compulsions are still here, but every day I get more experience in resisting them.

Similarly, users would offer sympathy if they wanted to provide support for situations they might not be able to personally relate to. In response to a user contemplating prostitution for financial reasons, one user wrote, "I'm so sorry for your trauma. I wish things were different." Another user responded to a post where the poster's parents had financial control and would not allow them to transition, "That sucks so bad. I am sorry to hear that that is happening to you." Users also offered validation, such as one user who responded to another's questions and concerns about "successfully" transitioning: "Fear that things will never get better is a very common, very human concern. There's nothing wrong with feeling this way." Emotional support was also provided via expressions of encouragement, such as one user's response to an individual considering transitioning: "If you feel ready, go for it!" Finally, emotional support was provided in the form of concern for outcomes, such as one user's concern for following up in a thread concerning coming out to one's parents: "Hey. Have you heard back from them yet? Want to talk about it?"

**Esteem support.** Esteem support accounted for 8% ( $n = 9$ ) of the total supportive messages. A majority of these messages offered regard for the original poster's skills and



abilities. One person wrote to a user who has recently encountered obstacles in the transition process, “You can win these battles...you are a soldier.” Users also demonstrated a regard for intrinsic value. One user wrote in response to a post about contemplating suicide, “You are a unique being in the universe, and every moment you spend interacting with others enriches the universe and everyone in it.” In another thread that discussed battling depression, a user wrote, “I just want you to know you are valuable and beautiful in your own ways.”

Additionally, some esteem support was provided in the relief of blame for behaviors or actions. For example, one user responded to a poster questioning their identity, “Whatever choices you make, I think it’s important not to beat yourself up for where you are and what you are doing.” Finally, esteem support was provided through compliments. Compliments were common in posts where the original poster was concerned about passing. In one such post, one user wrote, “I think you look pretty good already!”, and another, “I think you look very cute.”

**Network support.** Finally, network support accounted for 5% ( $n = 6$ ) of the support provided in this sample. This support type offered structural connections through the invitation of access. In response to one user’s first post in the community voicing concerns about transitioning, one user replied, “You are welcome here, we’re here for you.” In addition, network support was provided through the willingness to help through direct messages or communication on another platform. For example, in a thread concerning issues of anxiety and depression, one user wrote, “If you’d like to speak, let me know.” Another

user in the same thread offered similar assistance, stating, “Please PM me if you need to talk about anything.”

### **Matching of Support with Needs**

Matches were determined according to Cutrona & Suhr’s (1992) optimal matching theory. Table 1 illustrates the theoretical optimal matches for support type based on the controllability, desirability, and life domain of each stressor. Table 3 identifies the number and frequency of stressors identified by their controllability, desirability, and life domain affected. Analysis determined that 58% ( $n = 29$ ) of the stressors present in the community were controllable, with 42% ( $n = 21$ ) determined as uncontrollable. Posts coded as controllable largely mentioned ways to change or mitigate the stressor, such as discussing the possibilities for transitioning, whereas uncontrollable stressors in the community were largely found in posts where the original poster could not have prevented or changed the stressor, such as discrimination from others. In regard to desirability, 52% ( $n = 26$ ) of the stressors were determined to be desirable, with 48% ( $n = 24$ ) coded as undesirable. Desirable stressors in the community offered potential individual and social gain, and were primarily found in posts describing positive encounters with others, or describing and asking advice for steps in their journey. Undesirable stressors in the community posed threats or losses to one’s individual and social well-being, such as discrimination, issues of mental health, and setbacks to achieving their goals. Finally, 32% ( $n = 16$ ) of stressors affected the domain of assets, which largely surrounded issues of physical or mental health within the community. Twenty-six percent ( $n = 13$ ) of stressors within the community affected the relationship

domain, and largely posed potential gains or losses to personal relationships before, during, and after transition. Twenty-eight percent ( $n = 14$ ) of stressors affected the life domain of achievement, which primarily affected an individual's sense of accomplishment in attaining personal goals. Finally, 14% ( $n = 7$ ) affected the domain of social role, which predominantly concerned issues of taking on a new social role as another gender.

In comparison of these codes with the codes from RQ2, it was determined that 75% ( $n = 116$ ) of the support messages in the community provided a theoretical match to the support needs. In turn, 25% ( $n = 38$ ) of support provided did not constitute an optimal match. Of the support types that did not match the support need, many were instances of informational support provided to an uncontrollable, undesirable stressor, which would theoretically require more emotional support, or providing emotional support in response to a controllable, desirable stressor, which would theoretically require more informational or tangible support.

### **Discussion**

The present study provides insight into the support needs of transgender individuals and how those support needs are being met within an online transgender support community. In particular, a typology of support needs is presented to better understand the unique and diverse support needs of the transgender community. Content analysis of support provided indicated that informational and emotional support were primarily provided in the community, consistent with existing literature on online social support for the transgender community. In addition, comparison of support provided with the support needs indicated

that a majority of the support given within the community theoretically matched the characteristics of the support needs present. Possible explanations for these findings as well as their implications are discussed in detail below.

Despite a general knowledge of the role social support has in mitigating the effects of societal transphobia, little is known about the specific needs that transgender individuals may seek social support for. This study highlights seven overarching support needs present in an online transgender support community: identity, coming out, passing, physical health, mental health, relationships, and network expansion. These support needs are consistent with existing literature on the experiences of societal transphobia that transgender individuals might face. The support needs of negotiating identity, coming out, and passing are largely supported by literature suggesting societal transphobia can lead to internalized transphobia, identity concealment, and issues of self-esteem (Norwood, 2012), and that the Internet provides an outlet for individuals to confirm their gender identity and receive information that contributes to their overall wellbeing (Ross & Scholl, 2016). Moreover, family members and spouses/partners of transgender individuals may struggle with sensemaking processes surrounding coming out and transitioning (Norwood, 2012; Zamboni, 2006), thus contributing to the need for transgender individuals to seek support online in maintaining relationships before, during, and after transition.

The support needs of physical and mental health are also consistent with literature surrounding trans-related health care. Trans patients are a marginalized group in regard to healthcare, often experiencing social obstacles and health inequalities, such as denied

services, discomfort, and a lack of awareness of sensitivity to trans issues (Kosenko, Rintamaki, Raney, & Manness, 2013; Ross, Scholl, & Castle Bell, 2014). In turn, online sources of information are particularly important for trans individuals, given these deficiencies in traditional healthcare systems (Ross & Scholl, 2016), thus providing support for the finding that many individuals within the community sought support for issues surrounding physical health. Moreover, the support need of mental health reflects the existing literature suggesting that transgender and gender non-conforming individuals are at a disproportionate risk for psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Pflum et al., 2015). Research also suggests that the Internet is beneficial in alleviating feelings of isolation for transgender individuals, as it allows users to take part in local and global trans communities and share their experiences with others (Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2013; Hegland & Nelson, 2002). This is consistent with the present findings distinguishing “network expansion” as a separate support need, as it demonstrates that the online community specifically provides an outlet to expand their network of similar others.

In examining the support provided within the community, this study indicates that informational support was the most frequently provided type of support. The second most prevalent type of support found in the community was emotional support, with esteem and network support being the least frequently offered. These findings are partially consistent with previous research in online transgender support (Green-Hamann & Sherbloom, 2014), which found network support to be the most commonly provided, followed by informational

then esteem. However, the sample of the study conducted by Green-Hamann & Sherbloom (2014) consisted only of individuals who were actively pursuing a male-to-female sex-change operation. In turn, this may explain the partially inconsistent findings, as the present study's sample included a broader range of gender identities and points of transition, and thus might present different support needs in the community, which in turn theoretically require different support types.

In accordance with Cutrona & Russell's (1990) optimal matching theory, the present research suggests that a majority of the support provided in the community constitutes an optimal match for the support needs present. Optimal matching theory indicates that controllability of stressor is the most influential in determining the type of support required, with controllable events requiring more informational and tangible support, and uncontrollable events requiring more emotional support (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Although there were no instances of tangible support in the dataset, it was determined that most controllable events in the community were being met with at least one instance of informational support, and most uncontrollable events were being met with at least one instance of emotional support. Moreover, the frequencies of esteem and network support were consistent with Cutrona & Russell's (1990) theory, which suggests that esteem support is suitable for both controllable and uncontrollable events, as well as stressors that affect the life domain of achievement. Moreover, network support was largely consistent in matching with stressors that affected the life domains of relationships and social roles.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Although the study presents key insight into the ways in which support needs are being met in this particular online transgender support community, the nature of the data presented some limitations. First, the findings might be particular to the communication of users in this specific subreddit, and therefore cannot be generalized beyond the sample. In that regard, a large-scale study examining a variety of similar online communities on a variety of platforms would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the support needs and messages of online transgender support communities. Further, since there was no contact between the researcher and the members of the community, little is known about the perceived support of this community. Although this study provides insight into how well support needs are being theoretically matched, individuals' perceptions of social support may differ. In that regard, future research should include survey or interview data regarding perceived support.

Even with these limitations, the present study contributes to the literature on optimal matching theory and social support by looking at specific messages within an online context. Specifically, the present study explores the nuances of the support needs within the community and provides insight as to how these support needs are being met by assessing the fit of support provided to each individual support need within the community. Moreover, the present study contributes to the literature on the transgender community by examining the diverse and nuanced support needs and support messages provided in the community. In forming a typology of support needs and describing the types of support provided within this

community, a clearer understanding of the communication in an online transgender community is presented, which provides a framework for future researchers interested in studying specific supportive messages and interactions in similar communities.



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Table 1

*Optimal Matches of Support Need and Support Type*

Uncontrollable				
<u>Emotional Support</u>				
	<u>Assets</u>	<u>Relationships</u>	<u>Achievement</u>	<u>Social Role</u>
Undesirable (Emotional)	Tangible	Network	Esteem	Network
Desirable (Informational)	Tangible	Network	Esteem	Network
Controllable				
<u>Informational and Esteem Support</u>				
	<u>Assets</u>	<u>Relationships</u>	<u>Achievement</u>	<u>Social Role</u>
Undesirable (Emotional)	Tangible	Network	Esteem	Network
Desirable (Informational)	Tangible	Network	Esteem	Network

Table 2

*Number and Percentage of Support Types Provided*

Support Type	Number of posts	Percentage of total posts
Informational	84	70
Emotional	55	45.8
Esteem	9	7.5
Network	6	5

Table 3  
*Number and Percentage of Stressors by Controllability, Desirability, and Life Domain*

	Number of stressors	Percentage of total
<u>Controllability</u>		
Controllable	29	58
Uncontrollable	21	42
<u>Desirability</u>		
Desirable	26	52
Undesirable	24	48
<u>Life Domain</u>		
Assets	16	32
Relationships	13	26
Achievement	14	28
Social Role	7	14