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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Navigating Stress and Seeking Support on Reddit: A User-Centered Study of Online
Support-Seeking Behaviors

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in Informatics

by

Jiayu Yin

Thesis Committee:
Professor Madhu Reddy, Chair
Assistant Professor Elena Agapie
Professor Sean Young

2024

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Navigating Stress and Seeking Support on Reddit: A User-Centered Study of Online Support-Seeking Behaviors

By

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Master of Science in Informatics

University of California, Irvine, 2024

Professor Madhu Reddy, Chair

Seeking help and support on social media platforms is common for individuals experiencing stressful life challenges. By disclosing personal difficulties and stress, individuals can potentially receive helpful social support and improve mental health. This study aimed to examine users' experience of seeking support on social media, particularly on Reddit, to cope with stressful life events. Sixteen individuals with support-seeking experience were interviewed to understand their intentions for sharing personal difficulties and stress, their strategies for seeking support, and the nature and perceived helpfulness of support they sought and received on Reddit. The findings revealed the personal and psychological impacts of online support, as well as the benefits and potential downsides of using Reddit for support-seeking in managing stressful life challenges. This study contributes to the HCI literature by providing an empirical understanding of users' experiences of seeking support on social media platforms. It also discusses the implications for platform designers and users for improving the effectiveness and responsiveness of online support to better serve the diverse needs of those seeking help online.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Stress is an omnipresent aspect of modern life. It can be defined as “a state of worry or mental tension caused by a difficult situation that prompts us to address challenges and threats in our lives” [97]. The effects of stress, from daily irritations to significant life challenges, are profound, influencing physical health, psychological wellbeing, and overall life satisfaction [73]. Stressful life events (also called stressors), ranging from daily hassles (e.g., family or partner conflicts, heavy academic workload) to major life changes (e.g., divorce, loss of a job), are considered to be one of the main causes of psychological distress, sometimes even leading to physical and mental health crises [95, 46, 21]. In the United States, the current stress level experienced by Americans is 20 percentage points higher than the global average [85]. Research suggests that the coping mechanisms against stress can significantly alter its negative consequences, highlighting the importance of effective stress management strategies [20].

One stress management strategy, self-disclosure, as a therapeutic activity to express one’s stress and related feelings, has been shown to mitigate distress and improve mental wellbeing [45, 67]. By sharing personal difficulties, individuals can elicit potentially helpful social

support, which could help improve mental health [29, 57]. With the advent of the digital age, social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit have become prominent platforms where such disclosures frequently occur, allowing users to communicate their stresses and seek support beyond their immediate physical environments [17, 91, 98]. Users are able to express their negative emotions, share their experiences, and seek advice and support from others in similar situations on social media platforms [28]. The prevalence and potential mental health benefits of these online disclosures have become a growing focus of research [60, 27, 4].

Among various platforms, Reddit, with its unique structure of semi-anonymity and community-focused subreddits, offers a distinctive environment for stress disclosure and support seeking [4]. Unlike platforms requiring real-name policies, Reddit’s users can use pseudonyms with limited personal information on their profiles without revealing their real identities [27]. Reddit also provides an additional level of anonymity through “throwaway accounts,” enabling individuals to discuss unpopular thoughts and sensitive content with a temporary, anonymous account [4, 27, 48]. The semi-anonymous environment on Reddit creates a safe space and attracts many individuals to share their stressful experiences, stigmatized mental problems, and uninhibited feelings and thus seek support without fear of identity exposure [27, 52].

However, not all the posters receive the desired social support, with some even feeling more depressed or disappointed after seeking support there [27, 32]. Previous online social support studies have predominantly focused on content analysis to understand the post contents and characteristics, the received comments, or the relationship between them [77, 4, 58]. However, there is a gap in knowledge about users’ experience of seeking support and the subjective perceptions of the support they receive on the platform. Additionally, while prior work has explored the social support within specific communities (e.g., black fathers, teenagers, posts in the sexual abuse subreddits) [77, 4, 58], few have addressed the broader spectrum of stressful life events (stressors) that span various aspects of life (e.g., work, study,

family, relationship). My study seeks to address these gaps by interviewing individuals who have used Reddit for online support-seeking to understand their experiences using Reddit to cope with stress through online community interaction. Specifically, I investigate users' motivations for disclosure and help-seeking, the nature and effectiveness of support sought and received, and the personal and psychological impacts of online support. The following research questions guided my study:

RQ1: What are the users' motivations and intentions to seek support on Reddit?

RQ2: What factors influence how users articulate their stress on Reddit when seeking help?

RQ3: What are people's perceived helpfulness to the responses they receive on Reddit, especially when compared to other help-seeking approaches?

To answer these questions, I interviewed 16 participants who had support-seeking experiences on Reddit to cope with stressful life events. I employed the Social Support Behavioral Code (SSBC) developed by Cutrona to categorize the types of support observed (informational support, instrumental support, esteem support, network support, and emotional support) and to examine their alignment with users' needs [26, 6]. In chapter 4 (Findings), this study discusses the various benefits of engaging with Reddit's diverse communities and the effectiveness of different types of support in addressing users' specific needs. I also uncover the impacts on participants' mindsets and behaviors elicited by these online interactions, revealing not only immediate support benefits but also long-term effects on users' wellbeing and social connectivity. However, users may face inherent challenges from the platform's semi-anonymous and asynchronous nature, which could complicate the receipt of timely and empathetic support. In chapter 5 (Discussion), I further discuss the necessity for users and platform designers to foster clearer communication, enhance engagement strategies, and refine the platform's mechanisms to better serve the diverse needs of those seeking help. This study contributes to an empirical understanding of users' experiences of seeking support on

social media platforms and the effects of online support in stress management and navigating life challenges, and offers implications for both users and platform designers to enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of online support.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Stressful Life Events and Mental Health

Research has identified stressful life events (stressors) as precipitators of acute mental health issues, including major depression and anxiety disorders [21]. Stressful life events, or stressors, are broadly described as significant occurrences that disrupt an individual's usual activities and require substantial psychological adjustment processes [74, 9, 16]. These events (stressors) can include a wide range of experiences, from daily hassles (e.g., family or partner conflicts, heavy academic workload) to major life changes (e.g., divorce, loss of a job, diagnosis with a serious illness). They can challenge the individual's adaptive capabilities, potentially reducing physical resistance and increasing the likelihood of illness. [56, 47, 74, 21, 16, 98, 38]. Furthermore, stressful life events are known to impact subjective wellbeing significantly, such as leading to diminished life satisfaction [96] and premorbid symptoms of depression [39]. Various studies suggest that the nature of the stressor, the individual's coping style, and other mediating factors like emotion regulation play crucial roles in determining the overall psychological impact. Adaptive coping strategies and supportive environments are shown

to mitigate some of the negative effects of these stressors, highlighting the importance of holistic approaches to mental health and wellbeing management in the face of stressful life events [63, 30, 96].

2.2 Seeking Social Support

Social support is described as “a network of family, friends, neighbors, and community members that is available in times of need to give psychological, physical, and financial help” [62]. Studies suggest that individuals require empathy from others: those who have undergone similar experiences, have shared stigma, and those who give the sense that they are ‘human’ and fundamentally ‘normal’ despite their self-doubt [35, 34].

Substantial research has found that social support has beneficial effects on stress coping and general mental health. Social support can buffer the impact of stressful life events by decreasing psychological and physiological responses to stress [70, 50, 22]. It also plays a critical role in developing personal coping strategies, providing different perspectives, reducing negative emotions, aiding recovery from distressing situations, and enhancing resilience to stress [19, 22, 80, 64]. This support is beneficial not only offline but also in online settings, where social networks provide a platform for exchanging support that can significantly influence mental health [87]. A literature review by Leavy [49] reveals that, however, the lack of social support is strongly linked to increased psychological distress, particularly in depression, where it is associated with dysfunction and symptoms. Research suggests that having supportive social networks, including friends, family, and partners, decreases the risk of mental health issues like anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts [23].

In this thesis, I employ a categorization schema of The Social Support Behavioral Code [26] to describe the type of support individuals seek and receive. This schema includes five

types of support - informational support (providing information or advice), instrumental (tangible) support (expressing willingness to help in a tangible way or actually do so, such as offering to talk to someone or do something for them), esteem support (showing respect and confidence in abilities through acts such as complimenting someone), network support (communicating belonging to a group of people with similar concerns or experiences), and emotional support (showing love, concern, or empathy) [6]. Additionally, Barbee & Cunningham's categorization of support-seeking behavior [7] points out that individuals may seek support in direct or indirect ways. Direct support seeking involves asking for help, while indirect support seeking involves dropping hints about a problem. In this thesis, I will only discuss direct support-seeking behavior on social media.

2.3 Social Support in Online Communities

In the digital age, online social communities such as social media platforms have become one of the major venues for individuals to disclose themselves and seek social support [61, 87]. Social media platforms provide an environment that brings various social contexts together [11, 55], leading to a situation where “online friends” from different contexts compose a broad audience, resulting in a “context collapse” [90, 87]. Therefore, seeking social support on social media differs significantly from asking for help from a small group of people (e.g., family or colleagues) present in everyday offline settings because one single post on social media can reach those broad audiences of different backgrounds and professions [87, 99]. Especially for informational support, this “context collapse” indicates that broad audiences online have a wealth of expertise and experiences to share, implying that social media audiences could provide greater informational support than offline contexts [87]. Moreover, interactions on social media are not restricted by time or location. The availability of online audiences worldwide at any time enables users to communicate with individuals from different parts

of the world [87, 44].

Numerous studies have demonstrated that online communities provide a platform for people to seek and give support related to various experiences, including but not limited to diabetes, weight management, and mental health [36, 66, 27, 4]. These online communities enable individuals to manage negative emotions by sharing their stressful events or other issues and seeking advice or support [27]. Similar to in-person support, online support also plays a vital role in reducing depression and improving self-efficacy and quality of life [69]. Research has shown that supportive reactions such as comments with specific kinds of support (e.g., emotional support or esteem support) have a positive impact on perceived empathy and can reduce the suicidal thoughts conveyed in one’s Reddit posts. [28].

Furthermore, anonymous online spaces like Reddit provide people with better space to disclose their distress and seek support from others, especially when individuals encounter difficulties seeking support within identified contexts. These difficulties can be related to the social stigma and discrimination associated with the problems they seek help with [86, 52]. People may also feel that admitting they have a problem and need help makes them look weak or less competent, which presents an undesired image of themselves [33]. Studies have shown that higher anonymity in online communities can promote disclosing stigmatizing experiences [53], or seeking direct and indirect support [5]. In terms of providing support, studies suggest anonymity can facilitate more empathetic and supportive interactions by reducing the fear of stigma and promoting more open and honest conversations [4, 27].

2.4 Perceived Helpfulness of Social Support

Scholars have defined social support as a “meta-construct” comprising various sub-constructs aimed at understanding more specific social support mechanisms [40, 89, 37]. The sub-constructs

include *received social support* and *perceived social support*. *Received social support* refers to the specific supportive actions that the recipient receives from their support networks. On the other hand, *perceived social support* refers to the recipient's perception regarding the general availability of support and/or overall satisfaction with the support offered [72?]. Studies [37] reveal that while there is a positive, but not strong, correlation between received and perceived social support, suggesting that the mere receipt of support does not automatically enhance individuals' perceptions of being supported. This discrepancy between received and perceived support means that even if one receives a high level of support, if it's not perceived as supportive or aligned with the individual's needs, it might not contribute positively to their well-being.

One of the potential reasons for this discrepancy could be a mismatch between the types of support people seek and the support they receive, which is a crucial aspect of social support interaction. Individuals in different situations have diverse preferences for types of support, and not all types of support provided in online platforms are necessarily beneficial [83]. For example, self-disclosure in online support groups allows individuals to express their emotional needs, often resulting in receiving emotional support. Similarly, asking questions helps to identify and fulfill informational needs, leading to informational support [94]. According to the Optimal Matching Model of Stress and Social Support, social support is most effective if it corresponds to the individual's needs [25]. Receiving social support that matches individuals' needs and preferences results in improvements in psychological adjustment, efficacy, ability to cope with distressing events, and resistance to illness [25, 15, 4]. However, mismatches between desired support and received support still occur, and it is important to understand individuals' preferences for support and to examine whether they received the support they sought [94, 93]. This examination could help us understand how to enhance people's perceived social support through support-seeking approaches.

Numerous previous studies have focused on the social support received by individuals from

online communities. However, few studies have explored the perceived social support of support-seekers and examined whether they received the support they desired. Therefore, based on the existing literature, this study aims to investigate how individuals perceive the social support they receive online, including their subjective assessment of how this support helps them cope with stress and navigate life challenges. The study also examines the alignment between the type of support sought and received. Additionally, it explores the benefits and potential challenges users face when seeking support on Reddit. This work aims to contribute to the empirical understanding of users' experiences of seeking support on social media platforms and the effects of received support in stress management and navigating life challenges, building on prior research.

Chapter 3

Method

This study employed semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of individuals in the USA who use Reddit to discuss stressful life events and seek help or advice. A total of 16 interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed to understand how individuals utilize online communities for stress relief and advice. The subsequent subsections elaborate on participant recruitment, data collection, analysis methodologies, and observed limitations during the study.

3.1 Participant Recruitment and Screening

Participants were recruited through multiple approaches. Initially, I manually screened Reddit posts for potential participants. This process included searching within specific subreddits known for discussions around various forms of stress and help-seeking, such as r/GradSchool, r/college, r/PhD (for academic stress), r/Anxiety, r/Stress (for mental health support), r/Advice (for general advice), r/StudentLoans, r/povertyfinance (for financial stress), and r/jobs, r/careerguidance (for employment-related stress). Posts within the past

year containing keywords like “stress,” “advice,” and “help” were considered. Eligible posts were required to: (1) explicitly mention a stressful event, (2) seek advice or help, and (3) have received more than three comments.

From approximately 100 posts that initially matched these criteria, direct messages were sent to the authors to invite them to participate in the study. The eligibility for participation was:

- (1) had experience sharing stress-related situations on Reddit and seeking help,
- (2) their posts had received at least three responses,
- (3) were 18 years of age or older,
- (4) were located within the US.

However, I only received eight responses, and of these, only three individuals met all eligibility criteria and agreed to participate. To expand the participant pool, I implemented additional recruitment strategies. Public recruitment posts were placed on subreddits like /r/samplesize and /r/assistance, along with institution-specific subreddits like /r/UCI and /r/UCSD, where my affiliations allow for survey recruitment. The UCI’s SONA system was also utilized for recruitment. Candidates from these platforms were required to complete a signup questionnaire, which included answering demographics questions and submitting screenshots and links to their relevant Reddit posts and a screenshot of their Reddit account profile to verify the authenticity of their information and compliance with the study’s requirements.

Out of 128 individuals who responded through these additional recruitment subreddits channels, 11 met the eligibility criteria. Two more participants were recruited through the UCI SONA system, along with the original 3 participants from my Direct Message (DM) invitation, bringing the total to 16 participants. Each participant was compensated with a \$25 gift card upon completion of their interview. The entire recruitment process, including the criteria and methods, was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB)

of the University of California, Irvine. Their demographic data and the basic information of participants' Reddit posts experience are shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Participant Demographics and Their Reddit Posts Information

Participant	Age	Gender	Occupation	Type of stressors in their Post [1]	Subreddits they posted in
P1	18-24	Female	Graduate student	Social stressors - workplace social dynamics	r/GradSchool
				Psychological stressors - academic	r/GradSchool
P2	18-24	Female	College student	Psychological and Social stressors - academic	r/college
				Psychological and Social stressors - academic, peer pressure, and Covid	r/college
P3	18-24	Non-binary	Graduate student	Social stressors - stigma and social expectations	r/Truthoffmychest
P4	18-24	Male	Graduate student	Psychological and Social stressors- peer pressure and self-imposed pressures	r/Truthoffmychest
P5	18-24	Female	College student	Psychological stressors - academic development concerns, family conflicts	r/lawschooladmissions
				Psychological stressors- academic, family conflicts; Financial stressors	r/UCI
				Social stressors - relationship issues	r/UCI
P6	25-34	Female	Employed full-time	Social stressors - family expectations, parenting challenges	r/Motherhood
P7	25-34	Female	Employed full-time	Social stressors - relationship issues	r/Advice
P8	18-21	Female	College student	Psychological stressors - academic pressures	r/UCI
P9	25-34	Male	Graduate student	Psychological stressors - life transitions	r/GradSchool
P10	18-24	Male	College student	Psychological stressors- life transitions	r/collage
				Physical stressors- physical illness	r/costochondritis
P11	18-24	Female	College student	Psychological or Occupational stressors - academic pressures and development concerns	r/UCSD
				Psychological stressors - dealing with loss	r/UCSD
P12	18-24	Female	College student	Occupational stressors - poor leadership, challenging educational environment	r/UCI
P13	25-34	Male	Self-employed	Life change and Financial stressors - unemployment, lost one's residence	r/TenantHelp
P14	18-21	Male	College student	Social stressors - life transitions leading to social isolation	r/UCI
P15	18-24	Male	Self-employed	Social stressors - relationship issues, dealing with loss	r/MomForAMinute
P16	25-34	Male	Graduate student	Psychological stressors - academic pressures	r/GradSchool

3.2 Data Collection: Semi-Structured Interviews

All the semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants via Zoom, each lasting around 60 minutes (between 50 and 70 minutes), from July to October 2023. Interviews were recorded after obtaining participants' consent. During each interview, I started by introducing the study's objectives, followed by the participants' agreement to engage in the recorded conversation. Participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions about their experiences utilizing Reddit as a platform for seeking support and advice during stressful periods.

Before the formal interview process, pilot interviews were conducted with two individuals from my network to test the interview questions. These preliminary sessions were instrumental in refining the wording and order of the interview questions. In the formal interview session, I read the participants' Reddit posts and the associated comments prior to each interview to tailor the interview questions based on the unique context of each participant's Reddit posts. Key questions included the motives behind their posts, their decision-making in sharing personal experiences, the perceived helpfulness of the community's responses, and their subsequent reactions to the various types of feedback.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis phase began with transcribing recorded interviews using the Otter platform, accompanied by manual verification of the transcripts to ensure accuracy and my familiarization with the data. Inductive open coding was the initial step in the thematic analysis. I began open-coding the data for the first two interviews. My advisor and senior doctoral students reviewed these preliminary codes to refine the coding scheme. Simultaneous with coding, I also wrote memos to document observations about the codes or quotes related to

the research questions. After completing the open coding for all interviews, I proceeded to organize the codebook. Examples from the codebook included “Seeking Experienced Advice,” “Validation of Experience/Feelings,” “Concerns About Online Safety & Privacy,” “Connecting with Similar Experiences,” “Perspective-Enriching Comments,” and “Social Support through Direct Messages.” Then, I started the axial coding process, grouping related codes into themes and identifying themes in response to the research questions. Emergent themes included “Reasons for Posting,” “Support Mechanisms on Reddit,” “Negative Impact of Responses,” “Benefits of Reddit Use,” and “Limitations of Reddit.”

Chapter 4

Findings

In the findings section, I summarize how support was sought and received on Reddit, the strategies users used for sharing their stress and seeking support there, and the positive impact of the support received there. I also conclude the advantages and disadvantages of posting on Reddit as a help-seeking approach compared to other real-life help-seeking approaches based on participants' opinions.

4.1 How Support was Sought and Received on Reddit

In this section, I present the manifestation of different types of support individuals sought and the support they received on Reddit. My empirical study found all five types of social support from Cutrona's Social Support Behavioral Code (SSBC) [26] in participants' help-seeking experience, including emotional, network, informational, esteem, and instrumental support. It is worth noting that many posts or responses may fulfill multiple types of support.

4.1.1 Emotional and Network Support

Many participants intend to seek *emotional and network support* on Reddit, and participants' desire for both kinds of support usually comes together. Participants express their aspirations for others' understanding, empathy, comfort, and a sense of connection. For example, P5 mentioned:

“I would say (I was looking for) emotional support and mental support. When someone tells you ‘I have been there’, sometimes it brings that sense of you’re not alone.”

This platform offered a space where individuals felt less isolated by sharing their experiences and struggles with others who could relate to them. Similarly, P7, who faced friendship challenges, sought a sense of connection to feel less isolated:

“I just wanted to find people who are relatable... like (if) there’s more people out there going through the same issues... to have that feeling of me not being alone... and not to feel like it’s a niche event.”

The pursuit of emotional and network support on Reddit is often driven by participants' perceived lack of such support in their offline lives and their need to be heard. For example, P12 stated: *“Because when I get super stressed out, I feel like kind of alone and like I don’t have anyone to like lean on to... So that’s why I go to Reddit,”* Despite having some support networks in their real lives, some participants found those offline networks might be ill-equipped to understand their specific challenges. P2's mentioned:

“I feel like... my family and my friends sometimes cannot understand how I feel... For example, right now, I cannot talk to my parents about this thesis situation, because they expect me to do good in school.”

Consequently, P2 preferred an alternative outlet for anonymously seeking empathy, especially with sensitive issues.

Participants received numerous emotional and network support after posting their feelings and seeking support on Reddit. For example, P11, grieving the loss of her cat during a busy midterm week, found comfort in responses emphasizing the importance of showing compassion to herself:

“A lot of people were very comforting and reassuring, they let me know that it’s okay to grieve, outside of being a student, you’re also human. So take the time to feel your emotions fully, rather than brushing them off.”

Network support also provided relief through a sense of belonging from others’ similar stories. P5’s experience with a relationship breakup was met with similar experiences on Reddit, where other users shared their journeys of heartbreak and healing,

“One person was basically telling me how they went through a breakup and they were really sad. But then they just took care of themselves, and then they found the love of their life. They found somebody better so that made me feel a little better. Like it’s not the end of the world, or there will be better people.”

Such emotional and network support of empathy and relatability transformed participants’ initial despair into a realization that their feelings were a common human experience, fostering a sense of community and making their emotional burden feel less isolated.

However, not every interaction yielded positive emotional support. A few participants have encountered negative emotions and concerns, primarily from responses that lacked empathy or were discouraging. For instance, P10’s share about college anxieties met dismissive comments such as *“College is only four years, what else you’re gonna do?”* and *“No one cares,”* exacerbating their stress and depression and leading them to delete their original

post due to those non-supportive comments. Their experience indicates a potential risk of emotionally negative feedback from Reddit audiences despite people seeking emotional support.

4.1.2 Informational Support

Many participants mentioned that they turned to Reddit for **information, advice, insights, or others' opinions** when faced with stressful scenarios. This *informational support* aspiration is primarily due to limited information or experienced peers in their immediate circles. For example, P1 sought advice for navigating the complexities of toxic academic relationships and noted, *“This is like a very rare situation. I’ve never seen anybody else go through this.”* Consequently, P1 turned to Reddit, reasoning,

“Because I know some people who are on Reddit have dealt with toxic advisors. So maybe somebody might have gone through something similar and would be able to offer advice on what to do.”

This intention reflects their objective to uncover solutions and acquire knowledge or information to stress-related challenges, especially from others with relevant experiences. Moreover, sometimes, even though people in their real lives gave them some opinions or advice, they wanted to seek alternative perspectives for a broader range of opinions beyond their immediate social circle. For instance, P5 stated:

“I was looking for opinions from the world that outside people who don’t know me... And just pour out my emotions and my experience to them and just see... how people outside my WhatsApp contacts would be helpful to me... just wanting to get people’s perception outside.”

After sharing their stress, most participants received the desired advice or information

to navigate their challenges or overcome their stress. P1, for example, sought efficient strategies for conducting a literature review and found the advice on note-taking techniques like “*annotating*” and “*making the color-coded notes,*” provided by those with relevant experience, particularly useful after adopting these methods.

Additionally, beyond direct advice, some participants gained valuable information that aids in problem-solving and stress management. P12, for instance, was “*referred to the university ombuds office, a confidential student affairs panel*” to address academic and administrative concerns, a resource they were previously unaware of. This exchange of advice and information on Reddit not only facilitates practical solutions but also empowers users with enhanced confidence and reduces their stress.

4.1.3 Esteem Support

None of the participants expressed that they were seeking other’s direct compliments to increase their confidence in facing stressful situations. However, some participants seemed to have already made up their minds about the situation before posting on Reddit and were merely **seeking reassurance** for their feelings or decisions. This implicit desire could count as an implicit expectation for **esteem support**. For example, P5, while posting the question “*To go to graduation or not,*” actually sought confirmation of their inclination of not going to avoid financial burden, stating,

“To be honest, I just wanted people to tell me that... it was not worth it to spend 1000s of dollars to go back (to campus) just to graduate (during the pandemic). I kind of just wanted like reassurance that it wasn’t a bad decision.”

This indicates that, behind the facade of seeking opinions, there was a deeper need for reassurance from the community to support a decision they were leaning toward. Their

expectation of validation reflects a desire for their perspectives to align with a broader consensus.

The participants who received reassurance after their posts felt supported. For P6, grappling with family pressures around childbirth, received Reddit audiences' affirmation and advice, shifting their perspective and lessening the guilt they felt before posting on Reddit:

“Someone is saying that nobody has to tell me when to have a baby, and there is no standard time to have a baby... Everyone has their own time. And I should prepare myself for that financially. So that I didn't have to regret..... I'm not forcing myself to do something that I'm not prepared for... I felt satisfied and I don't hold any guilt that you're not doing something when I should be.”

However, expectations of reassurance can leave users feeling disappointed or more stressed when the feedback diverges from their hopes. When P5 seeks reassurance of their decision not to spend money attending the graduation during the pandemic, they mentioned:

“I just focus more on the comments that are saying it's okay, you won't regret it (for not going to the graduation)... if everyone was saying that like I might have gone to graduation. Yeah, those made me kind of like sad, like am I gonna regret it? That made me more stressed.”

The instance indicates the complex landscape of seeking help on Reddit, where the community can sometimes lead to diverse interactions that might include discouragement, reminding users of the platform's dual nature in providing both comfort and opposite opinions.

4.1.4 Instrumental Support

Overall, no participants specifically looked for instrumental support when asked about their intentions of seeking help on Reddit. However, quite a few of them received *instrumental support* from the Reddit community after posting their situations, mainly through others expressing willingness to help participants in the Direct Message (DM) channel. For example, P2 expressed stress about their thesis and met someone on Reddit who had just graduated from their major. They offered to help P2 with their thesis topic through DM. P2 stated:

“So I just asked them about some theory that I don’t really understand. And fortunately, she helped me to explain the theory that I want to use in my thesis. So that’s also helpful.”

Another notable aspect of instrumental support on Reddit is how some online support has transcended the digital space, reaching into in-person tangible support. P13, facing the desperate situation of being evicted from their rental house, received tangible help from two people from “*an organization that dealt with tenant rights*” after seeing their posts. They described:

“Both of them drove an hour plus out of their way to lend me some backup while I entered the home and grabbed a handful of possessions. . . . These guys took their own time and helped bring justice to my situation.”

Furthermore, sometimes instrumental support from Reddit could lead to in-person friendships or long-term social connections between support seeker and provider, originating from a one-time post. For instance, P5, after sharing about their hardship of breakup, was connected by someone in a similar situation, and they initiated conversations in the DM, leading to a supportive exchange and eventual friendship:

“The one girl who I was talking to, she said, Hey, I saw your post on Reddit. . .

We can definitely be friends. You can vent to me and I'll be here to listen... I'm also going through a breakup in my relationship. I also need to talk to someone... We talked a lot and we actually became friends of that... We got each other's number."

This dimension of Reddit suggested its role not just as a platform for virtual support but as a bridge to tangible help and even meaningful, lasting relationships, enriching users' lives beyond the confines of the internet.

4.1.5 Mismatch between Support Sought and Received

Although many participants reported receiving the support they anticipated after sharing their situations on Reddit and found that quite helpful, some mismatch between the support sought and received was also uncovered. Some participants with expectations of a certain type of support may find the responses "*not really helpful*" or even "*hollow*" when they receive other types of support. For example, P9, seeking advice for their academic stress, expressed that they preferred "*practical things, actual strategy that I could actually do*" to others' experiences of similar challenges (network support) because "*that's not really helpful... and It's just kind of more of a comparison... even they can be very sympathetic.*"

P13 also echoes this sentiment when feeling a bit disappointed after receiving others' sympathetic words of emotional and esteem support on Reddit rather than practical advice, stating,

"I guess that I was looking for... more sort of practical advice, I guess, about regulating my own emotions and expectations, versus like just saying, like, just being broadly sympathetic with no, like, direction... I also sort of found it very hollow."

Participants' narratives revealed that sometimes they valued the support that directly aligned

with their initial intentions more and did not value the other kinds of support they received from Reddit posts.

4.2 Choosing What and How to Share

Within the broad framework of deciding what and how to share on Reddit, participants employed multi-faceted strategies in drafting their posts and choosing the subreddits to ensure their posts reached the desired audience effectively while also safeguarding their privacy.

4.2.1 Strategies for Achieving Desired Engagement

Participants strategically craft their Reddit posts to maximize desired engagement. This deliberate approach is influenced by three key considerations: (1) Attracting responses through strategic content-drafting, (2) Avoid getting negative responses, and (3) Privacy concerns.

Attracting Responses through Strategic Content-Drafting

Participants learned from observing other posts in the Reddit community and developed their strategies to attract engagement. For example, P8 adapted their posting style based on observations of what works: *“at first I also didn’t really know how to like post that well on Reddit. So I kind of, like mimicked maybe other people’s posts.”* Learning from the community’s response patterns, the strategies for participants to attract engagement include transparency, details, clarity, and avoiding overly emotional phrasing. P10 explains the value of transparency: *“Typically, I try to be really honest in my posts so I can get honest back.”* Additionally, participants stressed the importance of crafting detailed yet concise questions

to enable better understanding and more specific and actionable responses. P11 reflects this,

“if they are not detailed with their questions, then they’re not going to get the most helpful responses. So for example, I saw a post...was asking, I’m going to be majoring in, like electrical engineering. Do you have any advice for me? And if we leave it really vague like that, you know, they’re going to get a lot of different answers.”

Furthermore, P5 discusses employing emotionally charged language to heighten urgency and attract more attention,

“I think the first time (I posted it), I was very calm, people just thought it was boring. But the second time I was like,(using the word) panic (in posts’ title)...So then (more) people wanted to like help.”

However, while honesty and emotional expression are valued, some participants also caution against oversharing depressive sentiments, which might inhibit engagement. For example, P10 mentioned finding this balance, *“I feel like I leave out like anything like really sad or something like that...Because I feel like it can get like annoying...”* Similarly, P11 elaborated:

“I like to post with a level-headed mind, meaning that I’m not feeling overly emotional in the heat of the moment. And I don’t want my posts being like, oh, my gosh, helped me kind of thing. I want to seem reasonable with how I ask.”

This approach indicated their consideration of how emotional tone can influence the community’s willingness to engage, striving to maintain authenticity while fostering a conducive atmosphere for support.

Avoid Getting Negative Responses

The anticipation and desire to avoid negative feedback also significantly influence how participants frame their posts. This cautiousness is also due to their previous observation or experience of judgment and unconstructive criticism. For example, P11 noted community dynamics,

“(this subreddit) has, for the most part, a very supportive community. And I say for the most part, because there are times where I have noticed that other people tend to tear one another down.”

This implies that participants assessed the potential impact of their words. P3 reflects on their thoughts in the post-drafting process: *“Could it get other people angry? Could it like, get negative reactions that could break me even more?”* Similarly, P8 expressed their concerns, *“At that time that I made the post, like I had that scared feeling because I don’t want people to think I’m dumb or something.”* Those thoughts revealed an awareness of some communities’ vibe and a deliberate effort to avoid contentious wording that might elicit negative responses.

Privacy Concerns

Driven by privacy concerns, many participants emphasized their caution to protect their personal identifying information and avoid oversharing it to maintain their anonymity on Reddit. P2’s approach, *“but I’m not informing them, like my school name or... I just tell them anonymously,”* illustrates the selective sharing of details to prevent personal identification. P1 specifically mentions avoiding gender identification to avoid unwanted attention: *“I definitely don’t want to share that I am a woman...Because that’s, that’s really what brings all the creeps over.”*

Some participants also differentiate between types of stress they are willing to share due

to privacy concerns. For instance, P8 mentioned they'd keep personal stress private and only discuss more generalized types of stress on Reddit, *"I feel like my other kinds of stress, they're more personal. So like, I don't want other people to know about something."*

Even within Reddit's anonymous environment, users like P4 and P10 adopt additional private accounts for more sensitive sharing. This extra layer of anonymity protection helps manage their digital footprint, as echoed by P12's apprehension about the permanence of online activities.

"I'm really selective about what I post on social media... digital footprint, I've always been really worried about like, because everything you put on the internet stays forever. So I'm really selective about what I post on social media."

4.2.2 Selecting the Appropriate Subreddits

In terms of where to share their support-seeking posts on Reddit, many participants mentioned they chose subreddits relevant to their stress topic and subreddits that they are familiar with to post, driven by various reasons: (1) Witnessing Supportive Behaviors, (2) Familiar Group of People, (3) Safety and Privacy Concerns.

Witnessing Supportive Behaviors

Participants' choice to post in familiar subreddits often stems from witnessing supportive behaviors within these communities before, even if the stress shared is not directly relevant to the subreddit's main focus. For example, P5's choice to discuss their relationship breakup within their university subreddit is influenced by prior observations of the community's supportive nature:

“It’s definitely a subreddit that I’m familiar with...I know what the community is like... [Their university subreddit] was like, I know we’re all students and I’ve seen like other posts before where it’s like people struggling with mental health... And people are all like, very friendly. Like oh, you can DM me to talk?”

This witness of communal supportiveness also encourages users like P6, P7, P3, and P12 to share their personal stories of stress, indicating the importance of a subreddit’s perceived warmth and supportiveness.

Familiar Group of People

Another critical factor in selecting a familiar subreddit is its members’ shared values or characteristics, such as being of similar age or attending the same college. This shared context fosters a deeper sense of connection and understanding. P11’s experience of sharing their grief over a pet’s passing in their university subreddit indicated,

“I feel like the students at [their university subreddit] can relate to the pressure and stress of the quarter system... and extenuating circumstances that can distract you from, like my cat passing away... They’re a lot more empathetic to those kinds of situations (than other subreddits).”

Safety and Privacy Concerns

Similar to their privacy concerns in 4.2.3, safety and privacy considerations also play a significant role in choosing familiar subreddits for posting personal stress and situations. P5 articulated their preference for interacting with peers rather than “random adults” in broader forums

“I definitely didn’t want to be talking to like, random adults...I kind of wanted to

just talk to people my age, maybe even like, potential people to be friends with not like, weird strangers online.”

This preference for familiar subreddits is partly driven by the need to maintain a sense of security and privacy in online interactions, suggesting the importance of a safe and supportive environment for sharing personal stresses and seeking help.

While familiarity with the subreddit influences many participants’ choices of where to post, a few participants prioritized relevance over familiarity to find the most relevant audience for their questions rather than sticking to familiar subreddits. For example, P1 mentioned their strategy,

“I think Reddit has the nice thing of they have like a subreddit for each topic... And that kind of makes it super easy to choose a subreddit... like the problems I have, like, I have PCOS. And that’s like a very woman-centric problem. So probably will go into PCOS sub and post (my questions).”

This method ensures that users can quickly find communities most relevant to their needs, where members share a common experience or interest. Similarly, P11 mentioned their unconcern for privacy indicated a focus on directly seeking out the most relevant subreddit, regardless of prior familiarity. This emphasizes the utility of Reddit’s vast and diverse network of specialized forums for obtaining targeted support and information.

4.3 Positive Impact of Reddit

The feedback from Reddit posts sometimes goes beyond getting helpful support; it influences users’ mindsets and behaviors and even potentially leads to profound, long-term impacts.

4.3.1 Mindset Changes

Participants reported a variety of mindset transitions after getting responses from Reddit, including gaining new perspectives, fostering optimistic thinking, evoking self-reflection and critical thinking, and so on. For instance, P2 found insights and new perspectives from Reddit audiences when they fell into the trap of social comparison quite enlightening and made them less stressed. P2 reflected,

“(The comment) talks about most people only compare up, which means they only compare themselves to people who are doing better, which I think that’s like the core of my problem. . . .So I think I shouldn’t feel this way. . . I shouldn’t compare myself to others and just focus on myself.”

Similarly, Feedback from the community sometimes led users to reevaluate their situations from self-reflection. P9, struggling to decide whether to drop out of graduate school due to high pressure, was prompted to reflect on their reasons for “*attending graduate school in the first place*” by a comment, leading to a renewed commitment to their chosen path. These interactions encourage deeper self-reflection and can pivot users toward more informed decisions.

4.3.2 Behavior Changes

The feedback from Reddit posts sometimes inspires users to enact behavioral changes by directly applying the advice and information they have gathered to their lives. P14’s journey out of their social comfort zone from listening to others’ advice from Reddit illustrates this perfectly. They shared,

“I reached out to my clubs more... trying to purposely drag more people into the conversation or strike up conversation even though I’m introverted... forcing

myself to be extroverted... and then reaching out to like past friends saying, 'How are you doing?'"

Similarly, P4 took steps to minimize the negative impacts of social media when facing struggles of social comparison, guided by Reddit's wisdom,

"I tried moving away from sad social media posts... even if lessen the time... And not compare your (my) life with anybody... and move at your (my) own pace with less pressure."

These accounts indicated how Reddit not only acts as a sounding board for concerns but also as a catalyst for action, driving individuals towards adjusting their behavior based on the collective advice received from the community.

However, while many participants acted on the advice received from their Reddit posts, they also emphasized the importance of independent thinking and judgment, selectively listening to the suggestions that aligned with their circumstances. For example, P12 highlights their autonomy and personal judgment over the consensus:

"Although I'm getting multiple different answers, whatever decision and whatever choice I make is ultimately my own... And so I thought it would be a nice challenge to take both, although I don't think people said to take both... because I thought it was the best choice for me."

Additionally, P9 recognized the limitations of advice from Reddit on trying "*strategies to work with other people*" due to their actual situation. They noted a mismatch between well-intentioned advice and their personal applicability,

"My grad school classes are generally smaller, but I'm also really an introverted person... So, while it was good, objective advice, it just ... I couldn't really adopt."

These instances suggested that users value and consider external suggestions but ultimately filter and apply this advice through the lens of their individual contexts, preferences, and autonomy, ensuring the final actions resonate personally and are genuinely beneficial.

4.3.3 Long-Term Impact

Interestingly, beyond the immediate benefits of receiving support, some participants have reported a lasting impact from their one-time posts that have shaped their personal growth and future reflections. These long-term impacts often involve revisiting past posts for motivation, witnessing personal development, and using previous interactions as benchmarks for progress and resilience. For example, P5 reflects on their journey and growth by revisiting past posts,

“Sometimes I’ll go back and look at posts I made months ago... it’ll make me realize everything I got through it and I can get through more things.”

P5 uses these reflections as motivation, especially when preparing for grad school reapplication based on their previous decisions and the community’s opinions to never give up on their dream schools:

“Sometimes, if I’m feeling stressed about law school, or studying again for the LSAT. I might go back to the post for motivation, like I don’t want to be in this position (getting rejected by dream schools again). Yeah, I know I want to do better.”

This enduring impact of Reddit indicates its role not just as a platform for immediate support but also as a personal archive that participants can draw upon for motivation, reflection of their growth, and resilience over time.

4.4 Reddit VS. Other Help-seeking Approaches

Some participants reported they seek help through Reddit and other approaches, such as talking to their friends or family in their immediate social circle or reaching out to therapists. They compared Reddit to other approaches regarding the perceived helpfulness of the received support.

4.4.1 Reddit Advantages

In comparing Reddit to other methods of seeking help, such as personal networks or professional therapy, participants highlighted several advantages of the platform.

First, Reddit's vast user base provides an unparalleled opportunity to connect with experienced individuals across various fields, enabling **more accessibility of information and experienced People**. P11 noted, *"I believe I attracted the audience I was looking for. . . were upperclassmen with major similar to my own...I thought that they gave great advice that I wouldn't be able to find from, say, an academic advisor."* P3 also valued the feedback from individuals on Reddit who had faced similar challenges, emphasizing Reddit's ability to aggregate a wide range of experiences.

Second, participants found that Reddit responses tend to be **more thoughtful and elaborate** compared to other platforms. P2 was impressed by diligent advice from Reddit,

"Reddit is more helpful and it kind of amazed me that sometimes people took time for writing a lot. . . Like a lot of people commented like very structured, and willing to give advice. Meanwhile when I talk to outside Reddit, like in Instagram, probably my friends just like my stories or give emojis reacts. They don't really helpful."

Third, the **variety of answers** on Reddit allows users to explore **multiple perspectives** and choose the best solution for their situation. P1, P3, and P7 valued the Reddit users for offering a “*higher variety of answers,*” facilitating broader possible problem-solving actions than the singular viewpoints from personal conversations within their immediate circle.

Furthermore, many participants spoke highly of genuine concern and support from the Reddit strangers, indicating the **sense of belonging and the supportive nature** of Reddit communities. P2 and P5 expressed their surprise at the overwhelming positivity and encouragement received, highlighting Reddit’s capacity to create a supportive environment. For example, P5 noted,

“Oh I was so surprised like the community everyone was so friendly and supportive, and it definitely made me feel better. Like I talked to some people their DMs and people just had so many nice comments.”

Lastly, anonymity on Reddit is a crucial advantage that encourages participants to share personal stress and challenges more comfortably and freely than on platforms where they are known, like Instagram or Twitter. This feature allows for privacy and security not found on other social media, as P2 expressed, “*I just don’t want to reveal about my kind of struggling (on Instagram).*” And P5 shared: “*So Reddit is anonymous. I can post I can talk to people, and it’s still not too revealing.*” In addition to enabling posters to disclose freely, the anonymity of Reddit also encourages **more genuine and open-hearted mutual disclosure** of individuals’ shared struggles in comment spaces. P14 appreciates the openness and genuineness of anonymous exchanges:

“People online are like, a lot more genuine than people in person would ever be...people on Reddit are willing to share more about they being socially awkward, their actual problems, honest opinions. . . like mental health issues they are struggling, because they’re hidden behind the anonymity of being online. . . But if you’re

talking to someone face to face, they are not going to tell you certain things... like their deep secrets.”

4.4.2 Reddit Disadvantages

Despite Reddit’s advantages in offering support, participants also noted limitations inherent to the platform as a means of seeking help.

First, the **lack of a personal connection** from online support means that helpers may not fully grasp the user’s situation, making the support feel **less tailored and in-depth**, unlike the depth and personalization in face-to-face support. P12 expressed a core challenge of online advice:

“Because these people don’t know me and I don’t know them. There’s definitely, I guess, a barrier because there’s no personal connection with these people I’m talking to online. I can’t necessarily trust their information as much as I trust those from friends and family.”

Second, the **lack of real-time interaction and difficulty establishing follow-up communication** can make Reddit less effective for ongoing support. P1 contrasts the willingness of colleagues to engage in follow-up questions with the fleeting nature of Reddit interactions:

“People in the lab will be all completely happy while helping you with like, follow-up questions, but people on Reddit might not do that... I think it’s because people don’t have time... to kind of sit down and come back to your post.”

The timing of assistance on Reddit can also misalign with the user’s immediate needs. P5 noted:

“I posted definitely like immediately when I’m feeling stressed...after a while...I

wouldn't even need to post because I would be calm thinking... After two or three days... the notification wasn't as important I was passed a stress or already made a decision."

Third, while **anonymity** fosters a sense of safety and openness, it also enables negative behaviors like trolling and **non-empathetic responses**. Over half the participants experienced unfriendly responses, and some even faced racism and sexism. P9 recounts experiences of receiving unhelpful or even hurtful feedback, *"Someone was like 'Don't be a coward.' He, got basically downvoted for that"*. The attribute of anonymity can sometimes yield criticizing or disparaging comments, deterring users from seeking further help and potentially exacerbating their distress.

Additionally, The **distinction between online sympathy and tangible, real-life assistance** presents a notable challenge in virtual support systems. P4 reflects:

"With friends, if they start crying during the conversation, the friends can be there to provide comfort, but for online people, they won't be there for this support." This underscores the limitation of digital empathy, which, while meaningful, cannot replicate the immediacy and physical comfort of in-person support. Moreover, P15 criticizes the superficial nature of online sympathy, describing it as a *"shallow substitute for real connection,"* vs. *"tangible, physical help in daily life."*

Lastly, the likelihood of receiving responses on Reddit is often tied to the relatability of the content shared. **Personal-specific problems tend to elicit less engagement** than experiences that resonate with a broader audience, according to participants' experience. P2's post about pandemic-induced stress drew significant support, indicating the communal resonance with common shared challenges. Conversely, P1 and P5, who shared more personal concerns, noticed a disparity in response volume, with P1 noting, *"The adviser problem was like a very personal problem...So I think that's why it didn't get as much attention."* This

phenomenon highlights the importance of finding a subreddit or community within Reddit where one's specific stress or problem is likely to resonate, maximizing the potential for meaningful engagement and support.

4.4.3 Advantages of Real-life Support

Real-life support, according to participants, can offer a depth of empathy, immediacy, and personalization that digital platforms struggle to match. The tangible presence and understanding from friends and family create a supportive environment where emotional and practical needs are more directly addressed. Furthermore, real-life interactions facilitate real-time communication and follow-up, an area where Reddit's asynchronous nature falls short. P4's experience indicates the value of physical presence and its comfort, especially in moments of vulnerability. P10 also mentioned *"talking to someone like in person. They're like, on there, physically there. So conversation feels more genuine and tends to, in my experience, like calm you down more. And it's more like, comforting."* Moreover, the shared history and deeper personal connections in real-life relationships ensure that the advice and support received are tailored to the individual's unique context and needs. The trust and understanding built over time mean that advice from friends and family is often perceived as more credible and heartfelt, as P12 noted: *"they (friends) are looking out for me in my best interests"*, indicating they value the insights from those who truly know them. Similarly, P15 mentioned, *"I think it's almost always gonna be better to talk to somebody directly. Because they know sort of the nuances of the conversation in a way that you can't fully communicate over text to a stranger."* This nature of in-person connections, where the understanding of one's history and personality, can enrich the support provided.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This study explored different types of support sought and received on Reddit and participants' perceptions of those received support, including emotional, network, informational, esteem, and instrumental support, as defined by the Social Support Behavioral Code (SSBC) [26]. These five types of social support were observed in participants' help-seeking experience in this study. In this discussion, I delve into the benefits and perceived effectiveness of the diverse forms of support provided through Reddit. I also address the challenges users may encounter on semi-anonymous and asynchronous platforms like Reddit and outline implications for individuals and designers to enhance support-seeking interactions online.

5.1 The Perceived Effectiveness and Benefits of Diverse Forms of Support from Reddit

Consistent with prior studies that explore Reddit's support mechanisms [27], this study's findings highlighted that the feedback received on support-seeking posts on Reddit is often positive and encouraging, even though interactions are between strangers who are not obligated

to offer help. Participants reported most forms of support they received to be beneficial and effective in navigating their stress and life challenges. However, the value of this support is influenced by the alignment with the seekers' initial intentions; participants more often valued the support that aligned with what they were initially seeking and did not value in the same way the other kinds of support they may have received. For instance, participants seeking specific types of support, such as informational or instrumental, perceived emotional or esteem support as less helpful and sometimes superficial. On the other hand, those seeking emotional/esteem support focused more on the emotional/esteem support (e.g., encouragement comments) they received and tended to overlook the informational support received. Consequently, matching the type of support offered with the specific needs of the help-seeker is very important. This corresponds to the Optimal Matching Model of Stress and Social Support's model that the effectiveness of social support increases when there is a high degree of match between the type of support and the specific needs of the individual facing stress [25]. Thus, correctly matched support can foster more meaningful and effective interactions, thereby improving the recipient's ability to cope with stress and enhancing overall mental health outcomes and problem resolution [25]. Otherwise, the mismatch between provided and needed support can lead to negative psychological consequences, such as aggravating stress rather than alleviating it [59]. This can lead to a decrease in the likelihood of individuals seeking help in the future due to perceived inefficacy of the support. Such mismatch can also result in wasted effort and potential frustration for information providers who feel their well-intentioned advice is disregarded or unappreciated, possibly deterring them from participating in future support interactions [76].

Feedback on posts can not only offer comfort but can also act as an intervention, changing participants' mindsets and behaviors. This finding aligns with literature that characterizes emotional support in social media spaces as potentially transformative cognitive interventions (i.e., helping individuals overcome negative thinking patterns and foster positive thinking) [6]. Previous studies by Black et al. [10] and Välimäki et al. [92] have demonstrated how

online support groups on platforms like Facebook can increase self-efficacy and decrease stress levels through long-term engagement. Interestingly, I found that even a single help-seeking post without long-term engagement on social media could potentially lead to similar cognitive benefits. As participants reported, one-time interaction, such as comments or direct messages received on Reddit, can help them gain new perspectives, and promote positive thinking and self-reflection when facing stressors. Compared to closed or personal network-based platforms, Reddit's audience is more diverse and can offer a wide range of perspectives and viewpoints that could affect how the poster thinks about an issue. These mindset shifts are crucial because they can contribute to reducing the posters' overall stress and anxiety levels and aid in problem-solving [92]. Furthermore, the effectiveness of informational support received via Reddit does not just end with information gain for the poster; it can catalyze tangible behavioral changes - participants reported applying the advice and insights gained from Reddit suggestions leads to real-life actions. For instance, users reported translating the advice received into actionable steps in real life, such as adjusting study habits and improving social strategies. Chuang & Yang [18] and Buehler et al. [14] have highlighted how seeking informational support via social media often results in receiving actionable advice that participants apply in real life. This study resonates with prior work [18, 14], highlighting the potential of online support to influence tangible changes in individuals' lives for handling stressful situations, underscoring the practical implications of receiving targeted, relevant advice. Recognizing the impact of informational support on mindset shifts and actionable changes can help us understand the potential of these social media platforms in mental interventions or behavior modification. For example, users may apply the advice received from social media platforms to modify study habits, improve dietary choices [18], or enhance relationship management strategies [14]. Furthermore, mental health professionals might consider incorporating moderate and strictly structured social media use to complement their therapeutic practices, such as cognitive and behavioral intervention [2], especially for individuals who respond well to digital interactions.

Among the types of support participants received from their Reddit posts, a notable aspect is the transformation of network or instrumental support interactions from the digital realm to in-person friendships. Network support has been recognized as crucial for fostering a sense of belonging among individuals with similar experiences [26, 57]. Consequently, online network support not only alleviates feelings of isolation but can also lead to meaningful, real-life friendships and sustained social connections, revealing the potential for online exchanges to evolve into real-world connections from one-time posts. These connections often begin with commenters sharing their own stress experiences under the original poster’s (OP’s) posts and offering further communication via direct messages (DMs). As these interactions deepen, the commenters and the original posters (OP) discover common ground and sometimes choose to pursue friendships, culminating in exchanging contact information and eventual face-to-face meetups. Notably, such in-person friendships typically develop within subreddits related to participants’ real-life contexts, such as university-specific subreddits. Prior works [8, 88, 12] have pointed out that online social interactions that have personal meaning can lead to the formation of real-world friendships and discussed several elements for forming friendships virtually. This study, aligning with previous studies [8, 88, 12], demonstrates that online platforms can serve as initial points of contact that lead to deeper, more meaningful relationships, highlighting the potential of social media to extend beyond virtual spaces and contribute positively to users’ social lives. Particularly for individuals who may feel isolated in real life, such potential of social media provides them with opportunities to engage socially more, which can be crucial for mental health and wellbeing. For mental health professionals, these insights suggest that encouraging participation in online communities might be a potential supplement to traditional social skills training, particularly for individuals who struggle with in-person socialization.

Overall, the benefits of the support received on Reddit (i.e., mindset and behavior changes and long-term friendship formation) can have some long-term effects. Andalibi et al. [6] have pointed out that the long-term effects of such social support in support-seeking contexts need

to be better understood. Furthermore, these interactions could provide participants with a source of motivation and a means of tracking personal growth over time, thereby leading to another enduring effect on personal development. For example, individuals keep their past help-seeking posts as a personal archive that they can revisit for future motivation, self-reflection, and resilience building. Previous research has identified the significant role of social support from online communities in long-term behavioral change contexts [24] and long-term mental health [75]. Spiliotopoulos et al. [81] show the potential impact of social media on motivation and personal growth within the healthy living context by sharing user activities or milestones. Complementing prior work, this study highlights the significant role that online social support plays in long-term personal development and motivation. Social media like Reddit is not merely a platform for transient support but a space for continuous personal development and resilience-building. Therefore, mental health practitioners can potentially leverage these insights to recommend participation in online communities as part of therapy, particularly for individuals who benefit from writing and reflecting on their experiences. Future research could explore the specific mechanisms through which online interactions lead to sustained personal growth and how these can be optimized to support mental wellbeing.

5.2 Potential Challenges Users Faced When Posting Support-seeking on Peddit

Although there are a number of benefits to online social support, users also encounter challenges when seeking support and help on social media, such as empathy deficits, privacy risks, or lack of immediate response and in-depth engagement. This section discusses the implications of those potential challenges, specifically in the context of support-seeking.

A primary challenge is the empathy deficit in some responses in online communities. Despite a generally low incidence of harsh feedback in help-seeking contexts in my data, insensitive criticisms towards help-seekers still occurred, which was particularly problematic for users seeking support for stress or depression and are more vulnerable [71]. Previous literature shows the “online disinhibition effect” of online communication - the reduced personal accountability in online space, along with anonymity, can make people less restrained than in the face-to-face world and can lead to hostility or harsh criticisms, as well as unusual supportive behaviors [13, 82, 68, 84]. Therefore, while anonymity in online communities can provide safety for those seeking help and encourage openness among support providers, it also allows for negative behaviors such as non-empathetic or even harmful responses [82]. This double-edged sword underscores how decreased accountability on anonymous platforms can lead to harsh or judgmental comments that exacerbate feelings of distress, isolation, or depression [42]. This challenge suggests the need for social media platforms which are used extensively for seeking support, to implement stronger moderation tools and community guidelines that protect vulnerable users. Enhanced moderation could involve more sophisticated mechanisms for detecting and mitigating hostile behavior and providing users with more control over their interaction experiences.

Second, this study not only reveals the potential for forming in-person friendships through Reddit, but also underscores the potential privacy and safety risks of meeting online friends offline. Although participants’ experience of such in-person friendships was typically developed within subreddits related to their real-life contexts (e.g., university-specific subreddits), and while they reported positive experiences from these “serendipitous opportunities,” numerous studies have pointed out the risks in meeting online friends offline[54]. The dangers include sexual predators, thieves, and blackmailers [79]. These findings raise crucial considerations for platform designers and policymakers to create safe, supportive, and engaging online environments that promote healthy transitions to offline interactions. Moreover, the decision by some participants to share private contact information after a short talk with others

suggests that positive online interactions might, to some extent, reduce individuals' privacy concerns. However, the relationship between social support and privacy concerns is complex and not fully understood. This gap suggests avenues for further research to explore how different social supports impact users' privacy concerns and to investiga

Additionally, the asynchronous nature of help available on Reddit presents another challenge for individuals who need urgent support. Although asynchronous communication allows for interactions unconstrained by time and space [31, 6], the findings highlight that it also limits the immediacy of support and the depth of engagement, which is critical in scenarios such as emotional burnout or acute stress [43]]. Prior research indicates that asynchronous discussions can hinder the development of sustained supportive relationships or in-depth dialogues that evolve over time [65, 78]. In the context of mental health support, this means users may not receive timely help because most online support interactions are one-time with few follow-ups, leading to insufficient support during critical moments [43]. Furthermore, in some cases, the lack of personal connection often makes the received support feel less tailored and in-depth compared to real-life interactions. For instance, support from close peers can provide better support because these peers know the help-seekers' situation and personality better. Previous literature [41] also shows that greater intimacy with a spouse and friends led to higher satisfaction with support during a crisis. This aspect suggests that seeking support in online communities may not always be beneficial. For individuals who need immediate and continuous emotional support, supportive interactions with familiar individuals is more effective than relying on anonymous and asynchronous online platforms. However, my data indicate that not all individuals have accessible emotional support resources in their lives. Therefore, for these individuals seeking online support might be the only way to get support..

Lastly, sometimes, a lack of engagement in individuals' help-seeking posts can lead to feelings of helplessness. Previous research revealed how relatable content in online communities like Reddit encourages user participation and engagement, noting that posts perceived as

universally relevant or appealing tend to generate more comments and interactions [51]. Similarly, my findings suggested that the likelihood of receiving responses is closely linked to the relatability of shared content. Posts about personal-specific problems typically receive less engagement than those involving experiences that resonate with a broader audience. Such engagement driven by content relatability could directly influence the amount of support received online. While participants desire supportive engagement, the lack of supportive engagement could occasionally leave help-seekers feeling that the challenges they are experiencing are insoluble and helpless. For individuals seeking support, this suggests the importance of strategies to frame their posts and questions that resonate more broadly to maximize engagement and receive high-quality support. An increased focus on developing best practices for online help-seeking behaviors and support provision to the operation of online platforms in a way that supports mental wellbeing would be helpful.

In the larger context, the challenges identified in this study —such as empathy deficits, privacy risks, or asynchronous communication— suggest that online social support is not uniformly effective and can vary dramatically in its impact. For individuals posting help-seeking on Reddit, the unpredictability of receiving supportive versus negative feedback, coupled with the uncertainty about whether their posts will be engaged with at all, poses potential risks. These risks might have practical implications for mental health outcomes, such as exacerbation of stress and isolation, and for the overall effectiveness of social media as a therapeutic tool. This underscores a need for platform designers and community moderators to enhance mechanisms that not only encourage positive interactions but also optimize support in a consistent, timely, and empathetic way. Addressing these challenges effectively could transform social media into a more reliable sanctuary for those seeking help.

5.3 Towards Better Online Support Provision: Implications for Designers and Support-Seekers

In order to address the above-mentioned challenges faced by users seeking support and to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of support within online communities, I outline several implications for platform designers to support support-seekers.

Clear Communication of Support Expectations. One significant takeaway of this study is the importance of matching the type of received support with support-seekers' initial intentions. This implication stresses the need for posters to articulate their specific support expectations when seeking help in online communities. This clarity can prevent mismatches between the support sought and the support provided. For example, posters could indicate whether they are seeking shared experiences, comfort, or practical advice rather than judgment or unsolicited guidance. This could be facilitated by using targeted tags or flairs, such as “advice,” “support,” or “Does Anyone Else?” when creating a post [3]. Such tags help potential responders understand the context and nature of the support needed, thereby aligning responses more closely with the help-seeker's expectations. Furthermore, platform designers and community moderators could develop and promote a standardized set of help-seeking tags within communities known for discussions around specific types of support (e.g., emotional support, practical advice, and shared experience). This system not only streamlines the support process but also ensures that help providers do not expend effort on unwanted types of support feedback, enhancing efficiency and reducing frustration on both sides.

Strategies for Increasing Engagement and Quality of Support. Almost all of the participants indicated their desire to maximize engagement and support from others. To elicit higher engagement and support quality, help-seekers should consider the audience's relatability to the content shared. For example, posting in subreddits with a user base that

potentially shares similar experiences or emotional states would increase the relevance and empathy of the interactions. Furthermore, help-seekers could strategically frame their posts to appeal directly to these target audiences by explicitly stating their target demographic or situational context, such as “seeking advice from fellow graduate students managing heavy course loads; seeking advice from new mothers.” Platform designers can aid this process by implementing algorithms that detect key phrases indicating the desired audience and prioritizing these posts in the feeds of users whose persona matches the help-seekers criteria. This “targeted push notification” approach not only enhances engagement but also the relevance and applicability of the advice provided.

Addressing the Urgent Support Needs. The asynchronous communication typical of online forums can offer flexibility but often at the cost of timely support. This issue is particularly acute for users in urgent need of emotional or practical assistance. To mitigate this challenge, help-seekers could incorporate temporal words in their posts or titles to signify the urgency of their needs, helping other users understand the immediacy required. For platform designers, developing an algorithm capable of recognizing urgency expressed in support-seeking posts and promoting these posts to potential responders through timely recommendations could be invaluable. Such a feature would ensure that urgent posts receive timely responses, thereby aligning support more closely with the temporal dynamics of users’ needs.

In summary, these implications suggest a multi-faceted approach involving both strategic adjustments by users and technical enhancements by platform designers. Together, these strategies might be able to improve the engagement, efficiency, relevance, and timeliness of support in online help-seeking environments.

Chapter 6

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, as a non-native English speaker, I encountered some linguistic barriers that posed challenges during the interviews. Some participants were also non-native speakers. These language differences occasionally led to misinterpretations of nuanced meanings during the interviews, with some insights only becoming apparent during my transcription, preventing the possibility of immediate follow-up for clarity. Sometimes, communication barriers extend beyond language proficiency; cultural differences in communication styles sometimes result in misunderstandings. For instance, there were instances when participants made jokes or asked questions that I did not immediately understand due to these cultural nuances. Meanwhile, some participants may have recall bias due to the time elapsed between their support-seeking posts and the interview (e.g., a four-year gap), which is a standard limitation of self-reported data. Additionally, although this study did not specifically target student populations, the participant pool was predominantly composed of students, likely attributed to their familiarity with research studies and willingness to sign up. This participant demographic may limit the representativeness of the findings to the wider, diverse population of target Reddit users, suggesting the need for further research involving a more diverse demographic.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

This study contributes to HCI literature by providing an understanding of users' experiences of seeking support and the perceived effectiveness of received support on social media platforms in the context of stress coping, specifically on Reddit. I detailed the various types of support that participants sought and received; I then examined users' strategies for sharing their stress and achieving desired engagement. The findings revealed the immediate and long-term benefits of the diverse support received in navigating participants' stress but also highlighted the importance of aligning the type of support offered with the specific needs of the help-seeker. The study further discussed the potential challenges users faced when seeking support on Reddit.

The findings suggest a need for users and platform designers to foster clearer communication, enhance support engagement, and refine the platform's mechanisms to improve the responsiveness and effectiveness of support within online communities. This study encourages researchers to further explore how online support can be optimized to consistently benefit users with diverse needs of help and to ensure that their inherent challenges do not undermine the positive potential of these platforms. Furthermore, future research into the mechanisms

of how social media influences psychology and behavior and how these platforms can be integrated effectively into mental health strategies to promote public health is needed.

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