

**What are the differences between the perceived unsolicited social support
provided by offline communities
and
non-support-based virtual communities.**

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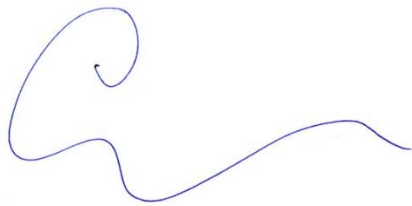
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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), no material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'E' followed by a long, wavy horizontal line.

Edie Scadden

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Ethical approval was given by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) for this research on 27 April 2013, AUTEC Ethics Application Number 12/52.

Abstract

There has been much academic debate since the advent of the internet as to the merits or shortcomings of the virtual community (Bell, 2001; Horrigan & Rainie, 2001; Rheingold, 1993/2000; Wellman, 2001a; Wilbur, 2000). I will demonstrate that, to date, very few researchers have touched on the social support aspect of virtual communities, although limited research has been undertaken around the support provided by non-support-based virtual communities. There has been no research conducted that compares this with support provided in offline communities. This research involved interviewing participants from a range of hobby communities, to compare the levels of social support and advice provided by their various communities, both virtual and physical.

There has been discussion as to whether or not the arrival of the internet heralded the demise of the community. Putnam stated that by 1996 the internet was being used by 10% of adult Americans, however the “nationwide decline in social connectedness and civic engagement had been under way for at least a quarter of a century” (Putnam, 2000, p. 170).

Researchers have indicated that there is a need for more in-depth research comparing virtual with physical communities, for instance Dutta-Bergman suggested that those who communicate with their local communities when in need, also communicate with their online communities for social support, and vice versa (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 482), and Piselli proposed that online communication operates in conjunction with other aspects of everyday life and proposed that research is needed into how these various methods of interaction dominate, coincide, or coalesce in their various environments (Piselli, 2007, p. 875).

Putnam concluded that online communication would ultimately supplement, rather than replace, the physical community (Putnam, 2000, p. 179). This research investigated the accuracy of Putnam's hypothesis, by looking at the social support provided by the participants' many communities (local neighbourhood, sports team or club, online gaming community, church, work colleagues, social networking community etc) and examining which of these they would most likely communicate with about important emotional, financial, health, bereavement or career problems and from which of these they would expect to receive support and advice.

Chapter 1: Overview

1.1 Introduction

Over recent decades, there has been an increasing reliance on the internet in the ways that we manage day-to-day life. Before its introduction, the principal sources of news and current affairs were newspapers, television and radio (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Hampton & Wellman, 2002; Prensky, 2001; Rowland, 1997). The internet has enabled news items to be broadcast widely, seconds after they happen, by anyone who happens to be 'on the scene' and has a smart phone or a tablet with them ("Mobile phone footage from Denver cinema shooting," 2012). In the past it was common for families to own an expensive set of encyclopaedias as well as books on gardening, first aid, DIY and cooking. Although these are often still present in the family bookshelf, much of the information is likely to be out-of-date. We are now more likely to "search the web" or "Google-it" when wanting a recipe for chicken casserole, finding out what plant will grow in that difficult corner, or how to treat a case of sunburn (Tough, 1995).

Similarly, the development of the internet has resulted in massive advances in how we communicate, and even who we communicate with (Prensky, 2001; Rowland, 1997). Before its invention, communication over distance was principally by telephone or letter and, in many instances, families kept in touch with relatives via the annual Christmas card and perhaps an update in a birthday card. Deaths or serious illness in the family, were communicated to those closest related, generally by telephone, and "the grapevine" would be relied upon for communication further afield. Children learned about other cultures and countries by writing to "penfriends" who they seldom actually met and whose response letters were eagerly awaited. Nowadays, communication with those on other continents from other ethnicities is a relatively straightforward and inexpensive process with the use of web forums, email, skype and social networking sites. There is also no need to wait for the post, as communication via internet technologies is more or less instantaneous (Farmer, Holt, Cook, & Hearing, 2009; Rowland, 1997).

The convenience of communication via the internet has also been responsible for the broadening of contact groups and associations. In the past if someone changed job or moved out of town they tended to lose touch with all but the closest of friends and colleagues (Hampton

& Wellman, 1999, 2001; Wellman, 2004). Those interested in model airplanes or patchwork would have been limited to sharing information about their hobby with those in their neighbourhood modelling or patchwork club (Griffith & Fox, 2007; Madden & Rainie, 2003).

During the 1990's and early 2000's, web-based communities started to form, based around common interest. Gaming and hobby communities became popular destinations on the internet and visitors to these sites utilised bulletin boards (BBS's) and member forums to communicate with others. Today, the model airplane enthusiast and the patchworker may venture on-line and join one of the many online communities dedicated to their hobby. They can share photos and discuss their latest creation in the forums and obtain advice from others with similar interests, many of whom would have been inaccessible, as strangers, in the past (Chaple, 2010; Griffith & Fox, 2007; Madden & Rainie, 2003). It has also become a more regular practice to share other important aspects of daily life with these groups. The announcement of the death of a family member, via such a forum, often results in sympathetic and heart warming responses (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002; Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Rheingold, 1993/2000).

This research will differ from that previously conducted, in that it will investigate which of their 'communities', the interviewees perceive as most likely to offer the strongest support in times of hardship or crisis. It will also investigate the relationship to the respondents, of those providing support.

The research will focus on unsolicited support. By unsolicited I mean support not requested but volunteered when a person announces an important event. For example, the announcement of a death in the family, impending surgery, plans to relocate to a new home, change ones' job or the arrival of a new baby are likely to be met with varying responses depending on location, relationship and other circumstances.

I will investigate the forms such support may take. Many may offer hands-on assistance: a visit during a hospital stay, help to shift house or an offer of prams, cots and baby clothes that are no longer needed. Others may put forward instructions on how to make or do something, advice such as details of a company that has job openings, or about the district one is moving to, or sympathetic comments as the result of a death or illness. Much of this assistance will stem from the experience or knowledge of others. Sproull, Conley and Moon (2005) pointed out that, until

the offer of assistance is actually made, the recipient is unaware as to what form that support is likely to take or the identity of the potential helper. Similarly, those with the potential to offer support and advice are unaware as to whether they alone have the ability to assist, until others step forward. (Sproull, Conley, & Moon, 2005)

As well as investigating which communities the support is provided by, I will also examine the channels the support is provided through. For instance, the model airplane enthusiast may meet regularly with their local club and communicate with fellow enthusiasts, both local and distant, through a bulletin board or forum. However, they may have other methods which they regularly use to communicate with members of these communities.

The focus of the research will be on “non-support-based” communities, with the research field being further narrowed to ‘hobby communities’ in an endeavour to collect a manageable amount of data. By “non-support-based” I mean those communities which have not been formed specifically for the provision of support. Parenting advice, health or medical forums and addiction support groups are therefore excluded from this research. A request for volunteers to be interviewed on the subject was sent to around fifteen New Zealand-based hobby sites including those focussed on gardening, scrapbooking, stamp collecting, lace making, motorcycle enthusiasts, automobile clubs, and science fiction fan clubs.

1.2 The Research Journey

Some years ago I was involved with an online strategy game known as “Metalknights” (<http://metalknights.com/>). The game boasted an active online community, the members of which communicated via “posts” to a bulletin board site (BBS). In May 2002 an entry appeared on the BBS: Could we please have a moment of silence for the player Herkules. The item advised that this teenaged player had been gunned down in a massacre by a gunman at the Johann Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, Germany. The resulting conversation or “thread” was initially made up of questions aimed at establishing whether ‘Herkules’ was in fact a victim of the shooter.

After considerable discussion around the various circumstances of the shooting, it was agreed by the group that this was likely, and the thread evolved into a memorial of sorts, with numerous entries from players sharing their memories of 'Herkules'. Many of these posts were extremely emotive. Some wrote of his playing style and sense of humour, many shared anecdotes about their experiences in games alongside or against him. Others mentioned that he was due to graduate that year and had been promised a trip to the USA as a reward by his parents. He had been looking forward to meeting, in person, some of the USA-based members of the Metalknights community.

I was moved by the warmth of the posts and the outpouring of fond remembrances of interactions with 'Herkules', whether these were within the game, on the bulletin board or, for a select few, in real life. I wondered whether a 'real life' gathering of these people would have elicited as strong a response: would they have been as ready to share their thoughts and emotions without the anonymity of being behind a computer screen? Would their reactions have been the same? Many of these seemed to benefit from another's contribution triggering their own memories. Would they have become 'tongue-tied' and struggled for the right sentiment without these cues, as many do in grieving situations? The community breathed a collective sigh of relief when the post appeared at the end of the thread a few days later which read: "Thanks for caring you guys, same name, but it wasn't me".

A year later, in 2003, I had the opportunity to examine the concept of grieving in virtual communities for a research paper. I was interested to observe that a considerable number of online communities had very active bulletin boards, all demonstrating varying levels of support. Although many of these displayed high levels of emotional involvement and intimacy, others had threads that were pedestrian and non-committal when expressing the contributors' thoughts on the passing of a fellow community member. My research left me with the feeling that deeper investigation was required in order to perhaps explore these extremes of commitment and empathy.

It became apparent from my research that, for many of those who were comfortable communicating in an online environment, it had become commonplace to share the challenges and triumphs of everyday life with others within these various communities. As a result they were benefiting from the experiences and knowledge of a wide range of people from differing

cultures and backgrounds. Many of those offering advice and support were also geographically distant. Without the establishment of the 'worldwide web', and the communication channels provided through these online communities, it is unlikely that access to such knowledge and experience would have been easily accessible (Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Rheingold, 1993/2000; Rowland, 1997; Tough, 1995). This research is a progression from that undertaken nine years ago in 2003.

McKenna and Seidman (2005) observed that the boundaries between electronic and physical communities were becoming blurred by the greater frequency of family and friends using electronic networks to communicate and online acquaintances meeting in real life (McKenna & Seidman, 2005, p. 213). While preparing for this research, I was interested to discover a developing trend of communicating life changing events via social networking communities such as Facebook. The resulting offers of advice and assistance appeared to originate from a variety of sources – some from work colleagues, others from family, old school friends, acquaintances, friends and colleagues. The inclusiveness of announcing such events as a general statement to such a diverse group struck me as a sea change from what has previously been the norm. It was also interesting that many of the responses originated from those that possibly wouldn't have been aware of the event without the use of social networking technologies, meaning that a wider support envelope was being provided by the use of such communities.

1.3 Internet Use in New Zealand

Advances in the field of communication have been rapid since the early days of the internet. Easier access to home and workplace computers, together with high-speed broadband have markedly increased exposure to new methods of communication technology. The Statistics New Zealand ISP (Internet Service Provider) Survey (2011) showed that NZ broadband subscribers numbered 1.5 million as at June 2011, an increase of 14% from June 2010. This survey also revealed that the number of subscribers with upload speeds over 1.5 megabits per second increased by 73%; at this rate, uploading a photograph to the internet would take around 15 seconds. Previously, half of all broadband subscribers had had less than 256 kbps (kilobits per second) available to them, however this figure had decreased to 20% in the more recent survey

(Bascand, 2011). In their 2009 report, Statistics NZ reported that in rural areas one out of every two homes had broadband, which was an increase from one in five reported in 2006. This report also revealed that 75% of NZ households had home internet access, compared to 65% in 2006. Prior to that, data from the 2001 New Zealand census showed that only 37% had home internet access (Bascand, 2009).

Households identified as European were reported as having only the second highest level of internet use (38%), in Statistics New Zealand's 2004 report, which was based on findings from the 2001 census. Those of Asian ethnicity recorded the highest usage with 58% (Social Statistics Division, 2004, p. 11). Maori were listed at 30%, with Pacific Islanders at 26%.

In their report, prepared as part of the World Internet Project, Smith, Gibson, Crothers, Billot and Bell reported that in 2011, 86% of New Zealanders used the internet. Ninety-one per cent of those with internet access in the home had broadband access, compared to 84% in 2009 (P. Smith, Gibson, Crothers, Billot, & Bell, 2011, p. 20). It was also reported that internet usage by Maori and Pacific Island people in New Zealand had increased markedly. The 2001 survey reveals that there is virtually no difference in the usage statistics by ethnicity for those under the age of 30. For those aged between 30 and 59 years, the gap is narrow, with Europeans being reported at 95%, with Asians at 87% and Maori and Pacific Islanders on 85% (P. Smith, et al., 2011, p. 33).

1.4 Organisation of Thesis

This thesis will be comprised of five chapters. Chapter one will provide an introduction to the research, details of the journey that my research has taken from inception to culmination, statistics on internet use in New Zealand and identify possible limitations of the research.

The Literature Review which will make up chapter two will be divided into two sections. The first section will deal with that focusing on social support in support-based communities. The second will investigate literature on communities which do not have the provision of support as their main purpose. The chapter will be structured chronologically to enable the analysis of developments over time. I will demonstrate that questions comparing social support within

virtual and offline communities, particularly within non-support focused communities, are relatively unexplored in the literature to date.

In chapter three, I will outline the method used to gather and analyse research data.

Demographic data on each of the research participants will also be contained within this chapter, together with the questions asked during the interviews. Chapter four will contain the actual data collected via the interview process. A second section of this chapter will review each of the online communities from which the volunteers originated. This will include usage and membership data, where available, and observations on each of these communities. Initial reflections on the data and the communities will also be included in this chapter.

Discussion of the data and response to the research question of “What are the differences between the perceived social support provided by offline communities and non-support-based virtual communities” will be contained in the conclusion in chapter five.

For the most part, I have endeavoured to use “layman’s terms” in the writing of this thesis and have included definitions or explanations of phrases and terminology in many instances. This is so that those unfamiliar with virtual communities and other forms of communication technologies, such as my 87-year old father-in-law, can read and understand my research. The exception to this is the Literature Review chapter, which has been written using the more formal academic terminology and phrasing. As the literature being reviewed is predominantly of academic origin it was considered more appropriate for this chapter to be structured in a more scholarly manner.

1.5 Limitations and Delimitations of the Research

It was identified that a sub-group of online communities would need to be targeted as a base group for the recruitment of volunteers. This would enable the collection and researching of richer, experiential data. New Zealand hobby communities have been selected as this target group and a call for volunteers was submitted to around fifteen such communities. A delimitation of this research may have been inadvertently created by the narrowing of this field.

Initially I received communication from nine volunteers, which was reduced to the six who were ultimately interviewed. As the research participants are self-selected, there is the possibility that a bias towards the research subject may exist. A further limitation may be the result of the relatively small sample of hobby communities, with only four communities being represented. However, all four of these communities are quite diverse in nature, which serves somewhat to diminish this limitation. It is noted that two of the four communities are smaller, and less active from a community perspective than the other two.

Initial questions aimed at collating demographic data reveal that all six respondents describe themselves as NZ European. On examining the four communities, the majority of the members of all four appear to be of European extraction, with only a smattering of other nationalities/ethnicities represented. It is possible that those of other ethnicities do pursue these hobbies, but the majority of these do not appear to frequent hobby-based communities such as those studied.

Of the six interview subjects, five are aged over 40, and therefore have not “grown up online” and do not perhaps take communication through that medium for granted. Were there more participants from a younger age group a different picture may have emerged.

The participants were asked to list all the communities they felt themselves to be a part of, whether virtual or physical. Despite being prompted for as many of these as possible, it is extremely likely that some were omitted. For example, only one of the six listed “family” as a “community”, and one admitted that the list “doesn’t even touch the stuff that I do with the family”. Similarly, only two of the respondents mentioned local community, however this may be simply because they did not consider theirs to be representative of a “community”.

A major limitation of this research is that its findings will be out-of-date by the time it is submitted, and are likely to be already out-of-date (Hampton & Wellman, 2002). Advances in technology are occurring rapidly, particularly where communication and mobile technology are concerned (P. Smith, et al., 2011). Any study which focuses on communication can merely be a snapshot in time. My research journey in itself provides a prime example of that. From its inception within the forum of a gaming community to the social networking which is commonplace today, people are communicating using different methods as a matter of course.

Nowadays one can update one's Facebook status from a hospital bed, in a car or at a rock concert so that all of their "Facebook friends" can be informed of the latest developments. However, as at March 2013, Facebook's annual report revealed a decline in usage with many of their younger users shifting to networking applications such as Twitter, Tumblr and Instagram, which is owned by Facebook (Bigelow, 2013).

Modern communication technologies have been used to mobilise the populace to overthrow dictatorships: for example those of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (Chen, 2011; Govern, 2011); cause race riots such as those in Sydney, Australia which resulted from the online publication of an anti-Muslim video (APN Newsdesk, 2012; Cooper, 2012); circulate cellphone video of mass shootings, such as that uploaded to YouTube after the shootings in a Colorado cinema ("Mobile phone footage from Denver cinema shooting," 2012); and catch car thieves (Aldridge, 2012; Gye, 2011). The observations in this thesis merely reflect the situation as at the year 2012. A similar research project in five, ten or fifty years' time is likely to draw entirely different findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter will provide an overview of the literature to date. It will be divided into two sections. The first of these will deal with literature focusing on social support in support-based communities. This will be followed by a section investigating literature into communities which do not have the provision of support as their main purpose. The chapter will be structured chronologically to enable the analysis of developments over time. I will demonstrate that questions around social support within virtual and offline communities are relatively unexplored in the literature to date.

As early as 1984, Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire suggested that computer networks may one day be used for the provision of mental health support and that social support networks might also evolve from computer networks (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984, p. 1131). Others questioned the benefits of networks which utilised computer-mediated communication (CMC) for the provision of social support, with Rice and Love (1987) in particular, proposing:

The typical conclusion is that as bandwidth narrows, media allow less “social presence”; communication is likely to be described as less friendly, emotional, or personal, and more serious, businesslike or task-oriented. If the social presence concept is accepted, CMC, because of its lack of audio or video cues, will be perceived as impersonal and lacking in sociability and normative reinforcement, so there will be less socioemotional (SE) content exchanged (Rice & Love, 1987, p. 88).

Contrary to Rice and Love’s assertions, the situation today is that increasing numbers are going online to share their thoughts and concerns, and hopes and triumphs with those from their various virtual networks. Many of these are often ‘strangers’, globally distant and unlikely to meet face-to-face, but united by a common interest or purpose. Increasingly, participants in these groups are providing social support in the form of advice, shared experience and information (Brennan, Moore, & Smyth, 1991; Finn, 1999; Galegher, Sproull, & Kiesler, 1998; Greer, 2000; Lorig, et al., 2002; Preece, 1998, 1999; Preece & Ghazati, 1998), empathy and encouragement (Finn, 1999; Lamberg, 1996; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Preece, 1998, 1999; Preece & Ghazati, 1998), and in some cases, they are meeting in real life to offer support (Finn, 1999; Rheingold, 1993/2000).

There has been much written about social support provision within online support-based communities. By “support-based”, I mean communities created to deal with parenting, cancer, old age, health, fertility, suicide, addiction etc. There has been considerably less research conducted on the social support provided through gaming communities, hobby groups and other non-support-based networks.

2.1 Social Support in Support-based Communities

The theory has been offered, that those subscribing to online support groups do so because of a deficiency of social support within their local networks. Some of the reasons suggested for this lack of support have ranged from isolation of the sufferer (Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002; Galegher, et al., 1998; Greer, 2000; Tanis, 2008), lack of understanding around the affliction (Bakardjieva, 2004; Tanis, 2008; Turner, Grube, & Myers, 2001), or awkwardness in discussing conditions of a sensitive nature (Galegher, et al., 1998; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Reeves, 2000; Weinberg, Schmale, Uken, & Wessel, 1996).

With the increasingly ubiquitous use of the internet in daily life, interaction through electronic support networks, particularly health-related forums, has steadily gained in popularity. Much of the literature has reported a growing trend for accessing support and information online (Barrera, Glasgow, McKay, Boles, & Feil, 2002; Lamberg, 1996; Lorig, et al., 2002; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Perron, 2002; Preece, 1998; Preece & Ghozati, 1998; Signy, 2009). King (1994) drew the distinction that attendees at local support groups would generally contribute only once, if at all, during face-to-face meetings, but the 24-hour availability of electronic groups afforded opportunities to communicate more often (King, 1994, p. 48). His study of electronic support groups for recovering addicts highlighted the benefits of the more regular contact with others from diverse backgrounds. He suggested that the provision of emotional support via an online network improved the chances of remaining substance-free (King, 1994, p. 50).

Foderaro's (1995) work related the existence of an electronic support group for sufferers of RSI. That such a group exists is ironic as RSI is commonly caused by incorrect or over-use of the computer (Foderaro, 1995). She voiced the concerns of health-care providers, that inaccurate information may be published in such forums. Her concerns were echoed by subsequent

literature (Boase, et al., 2006; Hoch, Norris, Lester, & Marcus, 1999; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Sproull & Faraj, 1997; Winzelberg, 1997). Foderaro however, acknowledged that these concerns had been mitigated by the increasing participation of medical professionals participating in or administrating support groups (Foderaro, 1995).

Also in 1995, in their study into AIDS-sufferers' use of electronic communication, Boberg, Gustafson, Hawkins, Chan, Bricker, Pingree, Berhe and Peressini (1995) highlighted the importance of access to support and information for those suffering from terminal illness. They endorsed the use of this technology for overcoming the obstacles of distance and mobility and suggested that advantages included the provision of information, disclosure support and access to advice from fellow-sufferers (Boberg, et al., 1995, p. 290). Other benefits identified were the anonymity of the medium, the inability to form prejudices based on race or gender, or to see the physical deterioration of participants in the later stages of the disease. The authors concluded that although not providing a complete substitute for face-to-face support, important advantages were offered by electronic communication. Their research into a computer-based support system, showed that much of the discussion occurred between the hours of 9.00 pm and 7.00 am, which demonstrated a significant advantage over local groups, which were generally unavailable during these times (Boberg, et al., 1995, p. 300).

Among those to endorse Boberg et al's observation around after-hours access (Miller & Gergen, 1998; Sharf, 1997; Turner, et al., 2001; Winzelberg, 1997), Lamberg's (1996) research similarly found that the majority of messages posted on medical-support discussion boards were contributed after hours. She suggested that the opportunity to become better informed about ones illness and to sympathise with fellow sufferers and their families, were popular motives for becoming involved with such support groups. The prospect of interacting with those similarly afflicted, with whom communication may otherwise be impossible, particularly for less common disorders was also highlighted in Lamberg's report (Lamberg, 1996, p. 10).

Weinberg, Schmale, Uken and Wessel (1996) concluded that the majority of the benefits of in-person support can be satisfied through an electronic forum, and from the comfort of one's own home (Weinberg, et al., 1996, p. 28). In their research into a support network for breast cancer sufferers, they introduced the hypothesis that cancer in a loved one often posed an awkward topic for discussion, with the consequence that those closest may unconsciously restrict

communication and support. Cancer patients may also feel uncomfortable in soliciting such levels of support from loved ones (Weinberg, et al., 1996, p. 24). Sharf's (1997) report, which was similarly focused on a breast cancer support group, cited being better prepared for symptoms and treatments, as an advantage of involvement in such support groups (Sharf, 1997, pp. 65, 73-75).

The nature of the online medium also enables the contributor to participate at any time and to reflect at their leisure before adding comments or replies to threads. In Winzelberg's (1997) discourse analysis of an online support group for those with eating disorders, he suggests that, due to these characteristics, a supportive and caring environment may take longer to cultivate than in face-to-face support groups (Winzelberg, 1997, p. 396). He cautions that feelings of vulnerability may result from revealing sensitive information in a public forum, recommending that those participating in such groups should do so in conjunction with face-to-face "psychological treatments" (Winzelberg, 1997, p. 405).

Madara (1997) is another author who alluded to the often inconvenient timing of face-to-face meetings as a deterrent to attendance. He also made the distinction that class, race, creed, social status and age are of limited consideration in online forums, and that greater importance is attached to what participants may contribute to the discussion (Madara, 1997, p. 20). Preece (1998) supported Madara's (1997) view on inconvenient meeting times, suggesting that the time constraints of modern lifestyles often present obstacles for attendance at local meetings. She proposed that the opportunity to communicate with a broader cross-section of sufferers, rather than the few likely to be available locally was an important benefit (Preece, 1998, p. 33), a point which was echoed in subsequent literature (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Turner, et al., 2001; White & Dorman, 2001).

Preece and Ghazati (1998), pointed out that the requirements of online communities varied enormously, with participants in health-focused networks predominantly needing information and empathy (Preece & Ghazati, 1998, p. 92). Their study of 100 virtual communities revealed only nineteen of these showed no empathetic content whatsoever, with only one of those nineteen being related to health support. They noted that empathic communities tended to develop when patient support or emotional support topics are the focus of interest and that the

majority of non-empathetic communities were concerned with science, religion or culture (Preece & Ghazati, 1998, p. 93).

Stephenson's (1998) report of a support network for parents of premature babies, warned that the consequences of participating in such forums may not always be positive. She recounted that the discovery of a participant who dishonestly claimed to be mourning a deceased infant, resulted in some members leaving the community, with others casting suspicion on the legitimacy of messages from others. She concluded that, despite the obvious benefits for information and support via online groups, there was always the risk of unfavourable outcomes (Stephenson, 1998, p. 1297).

Galegher, Sproull and Kiesler (1998) surmised that despite the expectation of confidentiality and anonymity in face-to-face support groups, there is still a possibility of meeting someone from one's workplace or local community, resulting in exposure or embarrassment. The pressure placed on attendees to actively contribute and share emotions was also identified as a deterrent to attendance (Galegher, et al., 1998, p. 497). They suggested that the anonymity of participation in online support groups, together with the opportunity to gain a variety of perspectives on an issue or problem, due to the more diverse membership were important advantages (Galegher, et al., 1998, p. 498). They also mentioned that participants in electronic groups often expressed their relief on discovering that they are 'not alone' in their suffering, an aspect which was raised in much of the literature (Bakardjieva, 2003, 2004; Finn, 1999; Galegher, et al., 1998; Johnson & Ambrose, 2006; Lamberg, 2003; Malik & Coulson, 2008; Preece, 1999; Sproull & Faraj, 1997).

In their investigation into networks for the disabled, Braithwaite, Waldron and Finn (1999) identified the benefits of overcoming mobility-challenges, which may preclude attendance at local meetings, access to support for those unable to communicate verbally and the alleviation of feelings of isolation (Braithwaite, et al., 1999, pp. 127-128). In a similar study, Finn (1999) revealed that globally there are 24 million severely disabled, with 1.7 million Americans suffering permanent disabilities which confine them to their homes, and a further 12.5 million suffering temporary disabilities. He maintained that caregivers for the disabled are often confined to their homes in order to provide 24-hour assistance, which often results in feelings of depression and loneliness (Finn, 1999, p. 220). Finn indicated that electronic support groups offered

considerable therapeutic benefits, and proposed that they be incorporated into treatment regimens for the disabled and utilised as a supplementary source of training for health specialists (Finn, 1999, p. 229).

Davison, Pennebaker and Dickerson (2000) examined support groups for twenty specific medical conditions, both online and in the cities of New York, Los Angeles, Dallas and Chicago, to ascertain which of the medical conditions inspired the greater levels of participation in online forums and to identify parallels between the physical and virtual networks (Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000, p. 210). They discovered that face-to-face alcoholism-support groups boasted a high participation rate, suggesting that the physical support aspect of Alcoholics Anonymous was more attractive than online support. The highest activity within any online group was recorded by a forum for those suffering chronic fatigue syndrome, with similar activity-levels registered by a multiple sclerosis group, results which they attributed to the debilitating nature of these conditions which made attendance at local meetings more difficult (Davison, et al., 2000, p. 211).

Greer's (2000) research into a cerebral palsy support group acknowledged its diverse global nature with patients, caregivers and family members largely from America but with representation from Iceland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom (Greer, 2000, p. 222). Greer endorsed the suitability of online communication for CP-sufferers, citing limitations for face-to-face communication due to the erratic movements symptomatic of the disease (Greer, 2000, p. 223). In his study of cancer support groups, Sharp (2000) observed that in illness-related groups the death of a participant is often a foregone conclusion. He indicated that sympathetic condolence messages were therefore tempered by the knowledge that the same fate awaits others in the community (Sharp, 2000, p. 146).

Horrigan and Rainie (2001) surprisingly suggested:

Different types of online groups attract different types of internet users and elicit different kinds of participation from members. People involved in medical support groups are different from people in hobbyist online communities. Those drawn to groups involved with civic engagement are different from those who belong to professional and trade groups (Horrigan & Rainie, 2001, p. 20).

This observation is intriguing, as group membership is not generally exclusive. A model train enthusiast is no less likely to suffer from a serious medical condition than an online gamer, and should they be comfortable with online interaction, it seems likely that they will use this medium to locate and communicate with other sufferers. Furthermore, and as will be demonstrated in my research, people generally have diverse interests, whether they be professional, hobby, entertainment or politically-focused and consequently, rather than being limited to one electronic community are likely to subscribe to several, although they may act differently in a professional environment than in a recreational setting. It is also interesting to note that Rainie, in association with Philip Howard and Steve Jones (2001), in an article published just one month later, advanced this view:

Many users feel that using internet tools has improved the way they do their hobbies, manage finances, get information about health care, shop, and generally learn about new things.The magnitude of the effect is surprising – experienced users are two, three or four times more confident than new users to declare that their online access has improved different aspects of their personal lives (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001, p. 400).

which more accurately reflects the multiplicity of online interaction for the majority of users and contradicts the earlier observation.

White and Dorman (2001) maintained that some illness-sufferers require high support levels, and suggested that electronic networks offered an effective method of support in between face-to-face meetings. They proposed that virtual environments were often the only forum for communication with fellow sufferers, for those with uncommon illnesses (White & Dorman, 2001, p. 694), a perspective which was supported elsewhere in the literature (Bakardjieva, 2003, 2004; Greer, 2000; Lamberg, 1996; Sharp, 2000).

Walther and Boyd (2002) identified that a significant characteristic of online support environments is that discussion usually commences with an issue being raised, whereas face-to-face discussion would commence conversationally before leading into the problem (Walther & Boyd, 2002, p. 155). They assert that with delicate or personal matters, communication via an electronic medium holds considerable appeal (Walther & Boyd, 2002, p. 182). Kummervold, Gammon, Bergvik, Johnsen, Hasvold and Rosenvinge (2002) supported this claim, revealing

that in their study of mental health forums, 75% of respondents expressed a preference for discussing sensitive issues online and nearly half disclosed that issues broached online were often unsuitable for in-person discussion (Kummervold, et al., 2002, p. 59).

Researching virtual networks frequented by elderly Japanese, Kanayama (2003) reported that sympathetic posts were often evident upon the notification of death, illness and hospitalisation (Kanayama, 2003, pp. 281-282). She observed that many relationships developed online were extended offline and recommended that future research should investigate the correlations of the environments and the blurring of boundaries (Kanayama, 2003, p. 285).

Bakardjieva (2003, 2004) reported that those surveyed in her investigation of online support networks considered them a safe environment, presenting a family-like atmosphere for communicating experiences and receiving supportive and caring responses (Bakardjieva, 2003, pp. 302-304; 2004, pp. 131-132). She reported that a member of an amputee-support group, asserted that he knew more about living with his disability from one year's participation in an online group, than he had learned in the previous twenty as an amputee (Bakardjieva, 2003, p. 303; 2004, p. 132). The safety of online environments was also highlighted by Lamberg (2003), whose research into groups for depression-sufferers disclosed that anxiety or fear of discrimination often prevented participation in localised groups. She reported that close relationships were often formed as a result of interaction in the "Walkers In Darkness" forum, a group boasting 2400 registered contributors, and that participants sent flowers or money in times of misfortune (Lamberg, 2003, p. 3073).

The Pew Internet Report (2005) on trends in internet usage observed that expectations of the internet were increasing markedly, with more than one third of those questioned stating that they utilised it for investigating health-care issues (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005, p. 61). They suggested that the traditional doctor/patient relationship is changing to become more partnership-based, with better informed patients empowered to work with medical professionals to determine treatment options (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005, p. 65).

In an account reminiscent of Stephenson's work (Stephenson, 1998), Jordan (2005) reported that considerable sympathy and support were generated within the blog of leukaemia-sufferer, Kaycee Swenson, whose death was ultimately communicated by her mother (Jordan, 2005, p.

200). As a consequence of in-depth investigation by contributors, it was revealed that both Kaycee and the blog were fictitious creations by the mother (Jordan, 2005, pp. 208-209). Subsequently, the blog was removed, however contributors asserted that Kaycee's fictitious existence was insignificant and that it was more important that the blog had been responsible for fostering a caring, sympathetic community (Jordan, 2005, p. 206).

Johnson and Ambrose (2006) acknowledged that despite the informational requirements of multiple sclerosis sufferers being largely fulfilled by the National Multiple Sclerosis Society's website, the requirements for greater support exists. They indicated that participation in online forums for sufferers enabled better management of feelings of panic and insecurity. The authors cited the example of Club Avonex, an electronic community whose members synchronised their regular injections, logging on simultaneously to provide support and comfort during a painful process (Johnson & Ambrose, 2006, p. 110). They suggested that the conversational flow of messages held merit for medical researchers, particularly in areas where the cause of illnesses or possible adverse reactions to therapies may be difficult to otherwise ascertain (Johnson & Ambrose, 2006, p. 111).

In Buis's (2007) study which compared distinctions in the support offered and analysed public forums dealing with Duchenne muscular dystrophy, epilepsy and celiac disease, with a total of 298 caregivers and patients studied. Buis deduced that disease-controllability had a direct relation on the level of support offered, with the least controllable, muscular dystrophy, receiving the most emotional support and the more controllable celiac disease displaying a greater level of informational support (Buis, 2007, p. 2). She also noted that there was a marked under-utilisation by males in the communities studied, despite the consideration that Duchenne muscular dystrophy is predominantly diagnosed in males and epilepsy occurs more frequently in men. She speculated that the absence of masculine viewpoints may have discouraged the participation by other males (Buis, 2007, pp. 22-23).

Xie's (2008) research into the OldKids electronic community for Chinese senior citizens provided an account of tangible support provided by one participant to another. The son of a non-Beijing-based OldKids member was hospitalised in Beijing. A Beijing-based member visited the son and on his release, logged him into the site to reassure the mother that he was fully recovered (Xie, 2008, pp. 736-737). Examples of instrumental support being generated via an

electronic support network, although uncommon, have been reported in other literature (Kanayama, 2003; Lamberg, 2003; Salem, Bogat, & Reid, 1997).

Malik and Coulson (2008) reported that participants in an infertility support group expressed a reluctance to discuss their infertility with family and friends, thereby increasing reliance for support on their partners and consequently causing heightened relationship stress. Many surveyed stated that communication with others similarly afflicted proved beneficial in reducing relationship pressure (Malik & Coulson, 2008, p. 108). It is notable that a number of those interviewed reported that despite being encouraged and reassured by accounts of successful treatments, these were often responsible for intensified depression for those who had undergone numerous failed treatments (Malik & Coulson, 2008, p. 110). The authors theorised that due to the nature of infertility, both informational support with making treatment decisions and emotional support in times of stress were important needs which could be satisfied by online groups (Malik & Coulson, 2008, pp. 110-111).

2.2 Social Support in Non-support-based Communities

Much research and discussion has been conducted into the social support available through electronic support groups. In contrast, there has been relatively sparse literature examining the support provided through gaming communities, hobby networks and other non-support-based networks. However the advent of new communication methods via the internet and the increasing tendencies for interaction with others within such networks, have opened up new avenues for the provision of social support. Those that are comfortable swapping tips and tricks in hobby communities, sharing battle strategies in online games and uploading photos in electronic social networks are just as likely to share the trials and tribulations that they face in daily life and as a result receive supportive advice, sympathy and offers of assistance through these same communities (Cummings, Butler, et al., 2002; Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Rainie, 2001; Tough, 1995).

The provision of social support in non-support-based communities was first raised by Rheingold (1993) in his much-referenced publication, the release of which heralded heated discussion by academics disputing his use of the term “community” in relation to an electronic forum

(Fernback & Thompson, 1995). In his largely anecdotal book, Rheingold related his experiences in the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), reporting numerous examples of caring and support generated by contributors to the forum. He highlighted the advantages of accessing supportive information at any time of the day or night, from fellow parents and medical professionals through an electronic forum (Rheingold, 1993, p. 18) and the opportunity for better contribution through being able to compose one's post before submitting (Rheingold, 1993, p. 23). Castells (1996) proposed that greater sincerity is often witnessed in a virtual community due to the uninhibited quality of online interaction (Castells, 1996, p. 389), a view that is reiterated by Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia and Haythornthwaite (1996), who added that such communication was frequently more direct and imaginative than in face-to-face situations (Wellman, et al., 1996, p. 213). They countered reservations raised about inaccurate advice and information being published on the internet (Foderaro, 1995), by arguing that people have always offered and received advice – the online environment simply allows greater visibility of that advice and enhances access to it (Wellman, et al., 1996, pp. 219-220).

Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Kiesler, Mukopadhyay and Scherlis' (1998) paper, "Internet Paradox: A Social Technology that Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being", contended that frequent internet use contributed to a significant decline in social interaction, and maintained that a direct correlation existed between decreased involvement in real life social networks and internet use (Kraut, et al., 1998, p. 1028). They suggested that internet use encouraged the substitution of inferior relationships with those only weakly connected, for strong relationships with close family or friends (Kraut, et al., 1998, p. 1029). Further, with the exclusion of groups specifically created for support-provision, participants in common-interest communities were discouraged from digressing from the topic of interest, meaning that support provision was rare (Kraut, et al., 1998, p. 1030).

The works of Kraut et al and Rheingold were later revised with the authors in both instances amending the findings: In the 2000 edition of Rheingold's 1993 work, he acknowledged the changing face of virtual communities since his original writing (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 323) and stated that his previous stance was his response to the popular belief of the 1990's that "only socially crippled adolescents would use the internet to communicate with other people" (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 324). Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson and Crawford in

their 2002 revision of the previous work (Kraut, et al., 1998), resurveyed 208 of those previously studied and observed that the negative effects reported had subsided overtime. In addition, they surveyed 406 new internet users and reported positive effects, particularly among those with strong existing social support networks (Kraut, et al., 2002, p. 49). They suggested that the previous study may have been influenced by the novelty of internet access meaning few of those surveyed had friends and family also online, thereby limiting support opportunities. The positive effects recorded in the later study were attributed partly to the more widespread internet access of recent times (Kraut, et al., 2002, pp. 51-52). Advances in the internet over time, in particular better communication services and increased news, hobby and health information being provided by the time of their later research, were also credited as reasons for the changed outcomes (Kraut, et al., 2002, pp. 68-69).

Putnam (2000) supported the premise that advancements to the internet had significantly enhanced opportunities for social interaction, asserting that by removing the impediments of distance and time from communication methods, people may conveniently switch between the various groups with which they associate (Putnam, 2000, p. 171). He predicted that communication within electronic communities would supplement rather than supplant physical community involvement (Putnam, 2000, p. 179).

Wellman and Frank (2000) proposed that, despite being involved in numerous networks and communities, changes to personal or family circumstances often dictated subsequent changes to the interaction within these groups (Wellman & Frank, 2000, p. 19). In later works, Wellman (2001 (2) and 2002) indicated that rather than being exclusively in-person or online, most community interactions are made up of a combination of media: telephone, e-mail, discussion boards and face-to-face communications (Hampton & Wellman, 2002, p. 368; Wellman, 2001b; Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001, p. 440). He further suggested that in an electronic community, those who perceived a stronger connection to the group were more inclined to provide support (Wellman, 2001a, p. 52).

Rainie (2001) reported a noteworthy development in computer-mediated support when recounting that after the US terrorist attacks of 2001, commonly referred to as 9/11, 33% of internet users reported using bulletin boards and electronic forums to offer consolation, share grief or discuss the tragedy (Rainie, 2001, p. 2). Further, the overloading of telecommunications

networks in the aftermath of the tragedy, meant telephone contact was impossible, leaving the internet as the only method for communicating with friends and relatives (Rainie, 2001, p. 11).

During 2002, several authors investigated the implications of the internet on relationships over distance. Nie, Hillygus and Erbring (2002) identified as beneficial the unique ability to rejuvenate communication between friends and relatives perhaps separated by distance (Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002, p. 217). Hampton and Wellman's (2002) report on Netville, a Toronto suburb equipped with a high speed internet connection, observed that those not connected to the network struggled to maintain communications with support networks based more than fifty kilometres distant, however those with access preserved, and in many cases, increased support levels (Hampton & Wellman, 2002, p. 366). Wellman, with Gulia and Potter (2002), detailed the results of their 1968 survey of 848 respondents from the East York borough in Toronto, together with those from a smaller survey conducted ten years later (Wellman, Gulia, & Potter, 2002, pp. 10-11). They reported that the local neighbourhood no longer provided a boundary for the provision of social support, with many of the respondent's communities being made up of those located at distance and with whom communication was predominantly by telephone or email (Wellman, et al., 2002, pp. 2-3).

In their report, McKenna and Seidman (2005) made the observation that the boundaries between electronic and physical communities were becoming increasingly blurred by the greater frequency of family and friends using electronic networks to communicate and online acquaintances meeting in real life. They highlighted the need for flexibility in future research into communication media, as boundaries became further blurred and merged as new technological advances are developed (McKenna & Seidman, 2005, p. 213). The observation that thousands of internet users provide voluntary support to others on a daily basis, without prospect of reward, the majority of whom are unlikely to meet, was advanced by Sproull, Conley and Moon (Sproull, et al., 2005, p. 139). They echoed the earlier findings of Boberg et al (Boberg, et al., 1995) when suggesting that the invisibility of communication via the internet removed prejudices based on physical attractiveness, race or gender when deciding whether to provide support or assistance. They further proposed that until help is offered in an online environment, each possible helper may assume that they are the only person who could provide the assistance needed (Sproull, et al., 2005, p. 144).

The findings of a Pew Internet and American Life Report (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman & Rainie, 2006) established that use of the internet enabled improved access to assistance when dealing with financial or health-related issues, whether the assistance was from friends and family, a more distant associate or someone previously unknown to the user (Boase, et al., 2006, p. ii). Of those surveyed, 39% reported that the internet had played a fundamental role in making important decisions, with only 5% of those reporting that they received poor information via that medium. When the 39% were asked to rate the importance of online over offline information, 57% stated that information gleaned from the internet rated higher than that gained offline (Boase, et al., 2006, pp. 37-38). In an additional report from Pew Internet released the same year, Horrigan and Rainie revealed that, during the period between January 2002 and December 2005, there had been a 54% increase in internet use by caregivers of those with serious illnesses, and a 40% increase by those who were themselves suffering from illness (Horrigan & Rainie, 2006, p. 1).

Peña and Hancock's (2006) research into the content of 5,826 messages posted within the Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast gaming community revealed that social or emotional messages numbered substantially higher than task-related postings, with the majority being of a positive nature (Peña & Hancock, 2006, p. 92). They suggested that due to the aggressive nature of the game, the results held important connotations for theories that violent games incited violent behaviour outside of the game, however they acknowledged that outcomes may have varied depending on the type of game studied and the levels of violence (Peña & Hancock, 2006, p. 106).

In one of the few works comparing support-based and non-support-based communities, the conference paper of High and Solomon (2008) recognised that despite a non-support focus, discussion forums often carried supportive posts. They reported that through frequent interaction and increasing familiarity with other contributors, forums often developed a community-feeling, with sympathetic postings often evidenced (High & Solomon, 2008, p. 6). Real life concerns and troubles would often be communicated to the general community, resulting in supportive or sympathetic responses, despite the discussion being unrelated to the topic or focus of the group (High & Solomon, 2008, p. 7). High and Solomon further suggested that the supportive voluntary responses of contributors may often be judged more sincere and

compassionate that those offered by close friends and family who may feel obliged to offer support (High & Solomon, 2008, p. 11).

A perhaps unexpected development, which was reported by Rood and Bruckman (2009), is that of socially supportive communities being created within product sites, in particular those for Mini Cooper cars and Campbell's Soup (Rood & Bruckman, 2009, p. 209). Survey respondents stated that discussion in both forums ranged from the weather to parenting support and were similar to conversations one would have with a neighbour (Rood & Bruckman, 2009, p. 214). One respondent from the Mini Cooper Owners' Lounge reported that when her premature grandson died she visited the Mini site in an endeavour to locate someone to grieve with at 3.00 am (Rood & Bruckman, 2009, pp. 214-215).

Research into this sphere can only be historical in nature due to the rapidly changing face of technology and its uses (Hampton & Wellman, 2002, p. 351), and in fact the majority, if not all, of the publications cited here are merely a view taken at a specific point in time. Only one of the publications reviewed here investigated the sources of social support rather than its effects, that of Wellman, Gulia and Potter (2002). Although published in 2002, the data was collected during 1968 and 1978, and it must be noted that a very different situation exists in today's society (Wellman, et al., 2002).

In more recent times, interest has been shown in the role of social networking communities such as Facebook in the provision of health support. Farmer, Bruckner Holt, Cook and Hearing (2009) conducted a search on Facebook between December 2007 and January 2009, looking for both the medical and lay terms for the most widespread non-communicable diseases, as acknowledged by the World Health Organisation, to ascertain their representation among Facebook users and user groups. They identified 757 support groups which were subscribed to by 290,962 Facebook members. The groups were a mixture of patients (47.4%), carer-support groups (28.1%), fundraisers (18.6%) and other (5.8%). The highest membership was for those related to cardiovascular disease and malignant tumours, which totalled 141,458 between them (Farmer, et al., 2009, p. 456). The authors considered that the media provided a useful mechanism for the sharing of health experiences among patients and caregivers, and for the sharing of research findings (ibid., p.459).

Dr Beverley Smith (2011) related her experiences of a 30-year old cancer patient, undergoing palliative care, whose friends had created a Facebook page to raise funds for his children's future. She recounted the reaction of extreme animosity from the patient's father, who was unaccustomed to social networking and felt this to be an invasion of the family's privacy. Other family members more familiar with its use disagreed. Although peace was eventually restored, Smith suggested that Facebook may in future become a standard part of palliative care in the same way as preparing families to make funeral arrangements. Smith ponders:

Is it harder to die in private now that these days of social media tools and the internet have arrived? Are feelings about social networks determined by the age of family members and the familiarity of the tool? (B. Smith, 2011, p. 429)

While substantial research has been conducted into social support within support-based communities, considerably less exists around non-support-based networks. Research into the relationship between online and offline communities has also been largely neglected, as noted by McKenna and Seidman (2005) who emphasized that interaction between real life and virtual communities are increasingly overlapping and merging, triggering fresh insights and theories deserving of analysis (McKenna & Seidman, 2005, p. 213).

It is clear there are many unanswered questions around social support within online and offline communities. Technologies for communication and interaction are experiencing frequent developments which have impacts on everyday life. There is the distinct possibility that as we become more accustomed to communicating with others through electronic media, these networks will become increasingly responsible for the provision of social support (Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Lang, 2012; Laugesen, 2010; Tough, 1995). As virtual and non-virtual worlds continue to mesh and networks are further expended to facilitate global participation, it is to be expected that challenges for researchers will continue to present themselves.

Chapter 3: Method

3.1 Data Collection - Interviews

This research will contribute toward a greater understanding of the unsolicited social support provided within virtual and physical communities, by evaluating the feedback from the interview respondents. Due to the fact that the study utilises feedback from volunteers as its basis, a qualitative methodology will be employed for the evaluation of this data. Qualitative research analyses non-quantifiable data. This differs from quantitative research, which has its focus on the analysis of figures (Bryman & Burgess, 1999). Qualitative research will provide a richer, more descriptive account of the various communities studied and the social supported offered within these, by investigating experiential feedback.

Barrera (2000) reveals that there are numerous valid and reliable measures for the qualitative analysis of social support. In particular he identifies the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS), the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB), the Perceived Social Support from Family and Friends (PSS-Fa, PSS-Fr), the Social Relationship Scale (SRS), the Social Support Network Interview and the Social Support Questionnaire, as measures worthy of mention (SSQ)(Barrera, 2000, p. 218). Heitzmann and Kaplan (1988) identify the Norbeck Social Support Questionnaire (NSSQ); the Personal Resource Questionnaire (PRQ); the Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB) and the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List (ISEL) as other reputable questionnaires for the analysis of social support (Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988, pp. 80-88). Heitzmann and Kaplan indicate that it is important for researchers to evaluate the level of satisfaction with the support provided, i.e. quality over quantity. They further suggest that the 'perception' of support availability may carry more importance for researchers than the 'receipt' of support (Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988, p. 79).

These established surveys do provide a valuable starting point for researching social support within communities. However I identified that a smaller set of research questions, in the format of an interview, would be more appropriate for this research. The use of qualitative research interviews will encourage in-depth descriptions of events, for later analysis and interpretation. The interview questions will be aimed towards encouraging the contemplation on incidences of unsolicited social support experienced by the participants, from within their various

communities. This type of interview facilitates contribution to theoretical and conceptual knowledge based on the life experiences of the interviewees (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314). As identified by Stuart Hannabuss (1996), interviews also provide an opportunity for the interviewer to adjust the questions in order to elicit fuller responses where appropriate (Hannabuss, 1996, pp. 22-23). The interviewees will be prompted to share their own experiences, which will enable a greater richness of data.

Barrera (2000) indicates that when faced with life's challenges such as the loss of a loved one, serious health concerns or individual hardship, people will often consult members of their various communities for advice, reassurance or hands-on assistance (Barrera, 2000, p. 215). In his analysis of the published research into social support, he states that much of the existing research has analysed the regularity of support provision in relation to the form and purpose of the support and that there is a need to investigate subtypes of support in greater detail (Barrera, 2000, p. 222). He also reports that numerous studies (Dignam, Barrera, & West, 1986; Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983; LaRocco, House, & French, 1980; Procidano & Heller, 1983) have indicated that the source of social support is of significance. It is perhaps notable that the research to which Barrera refers were conducted in the 1980's (Barrera, 2000, p. 223), and in more recent times, due, in particular, to advances in communication technology, potential sources for support provision have increased markedly.

Barrera (2000) also highlights that research has rarely focused on interactions between individuals and their various environments (Barrera, 2000, p. 238). Many of these environments, both online and in-person, may be regarded as "communities" and individuals often enjoy camaraderie within several different communities (Horrigan & Rainie, 2001; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Wellman, 2005). The nature of these interactions may vary depending on the nature of the connection, or the original purpose of the community. One is likely to act differently within a gaming community discussion board than one would within a forum for Mazda car owners or chess players (Rood & Bruckman, 2009). Similarly, some communities may be more supportive than others and some members of the community may be more likely to offer support than others (Laugesen, 2010; Tapaleao, 2012; Tough, 1995). It has been identified that by narrowing the target audience, the research may delve deeper into the experiential aspects of

social support in offline and online environments. A sub-group of online communities will therefore be the target for the recruitment of volunteers for this research.

The American online hobbyist population has grown from 45% in 2005 to the 2007 figure of 59%, with 29% of those surveyed reporting using the internet for hobby information on a daily basis (Griffith & Fox, 2007, p. 1). Research conducted by Mary Madden and Lee Rainie (2003) showed that searching online for hobby information was one of the most popular uses of the internet for those aged over 65 years. (Madden & Rainie, 2003, p. 58). There are numerous communities of hobbyists online. Many are made up of those who may never meet. Others are comprised of those who come together in the physical space to pursue their hobbies, and also interact with each other in the virtual world. Prior to the advent of the internet, collectors, crafters, radio or car enthusiasts had to attend hobby shows and clubs if they wanted to interact with like-minded individuals. Nowadays many more opportunities to share ideas, designs and information and showcase ones' creations or talents exist, due to the ease with which one may now connect globally with a wider community of fellow hobbyists (Chaple, 2010; Griffith & Fox, 2007)

New Zealand-based online hobby communities have been identified as the target group for this research. Although this group equates to a broad cross-section of possible respondents, it is hoped that wider range of ages and backgrounds may be attracted than if the research was conducted over a group such as gaming communities. Despite five of the six volunteers recruited being aged over 40, all six represented markedly different backgrounds.

A request for volunteers was emailed to the administrators of a number of hobby websites with active forum or bulletin board sections. The majority of these were agreeable to volunteers being recruited from their sites and suggested that I register to communicate via their website and communicate my request for volunteers via their forums. The administrator of garden-nz.co.nz added a post to my 'thread' encouraging members to volunteer and endorsing the value of assisting with my research. Unfortunately there were no volunteers from that particular hobby community.

Nine interview subjects responded to my forum post: five from Kiwibiker.co.nz, a motorcycle enthusiast site; two from ratclub.org, a club for owners of pet rats; one from swnz.dr-maul.com

which is the NZ Star Wars fan club site and one from gatheringdarkness.co.nz, a community of medieval re-enactors. The five Kiwibiker volunteers were ultimately reduced to two as three of these failed to return their signed consent forms.

It is notable that my request for volunteers on the Kiwibiker forums resulted in a five page response thread, with some contributors expressing outrage and incredulity that I should be asking a motorcycling community to assist with an academic project. Others responded that they themselves had academic backgrounds and supported my request. I eventually responded advising that their community had been recommended to me (which it had) and explaining my research in greater detail, but in words of one syllable. From that point the negative comments ceased and discussion turned to the idiosyncrasies of research design. I noticed that a couple of days later, the thread was removed by an administrator – as there are several of these I am uncertain as to who removed this or the precise reasons for its removal. The emails I received from members of this site stated that they had been involved in academic research in the past, generally with their own university study or that of friends. They objected to the implication from some of the community that motorcyclists were not intelligent enough to assist with academic research. I suspect that the three other volunteers who originally contacted me from Kiwibiker, did so as a reaction to the negative posts and that once these abated, lost interest.

The initial communication with the volunteers was via email. All nine received consent forms and information sheets which contained details about the study. As referred to previously, only six of the nine returned the signed consent form. Copies of these consent forms are held both electronically and as paper copies on file.

With all but one of the participants being based in locations outside of Auckland, it was agreed that the interviews would be conducted using Skype. Skype is a freely downloadable program which allows communication using Voice-over IP (internet protocol), from computer-to-phone or computer-to-computer. Only one of the participants had Skype on their personal computer, so for the other five, Skype was used to telephone them from my computer to their telephone. The interviews ranged in duration from twelve to twenty-eight minutes in length.

MP3 Skype recorder, another free application, was utilised so that the interviews could be recorded for later transcription, thereby ensuring a correct representation of the data. Five of the

interviews were recorded using this method, those using Skype-to-phone. However the Skype-to-computer interview failed to record. In this instance, the interview was typed up directly after the session ended and was sent by email to the respondent, who proofed and amended his responses where he saw fit, and returned it. All other interviews were transcribed within the hour immediately following the interview. The recorded interviews are held on file, electronically as voice recordings and as typed transcripts both electronically and as paper copies on file.

3.2 Demographic Data

Questions which have been designed for collating demographic data reveal that all six respondents describe themselves as NZ European. One of the six was born in Europe, but has been residing in NZ for over 14 years and considers herself a 'kiwi'. Four of the respondents are female and two male, one is aged in their 20's, four in their 40's and one in their 60's. A wide variety of occupations is represented: one lists himself as a company director, another as a salesperson. There is a student and mother and a high school teacher. There is also a full-time mum who until recently worked for a mental health organisation and a prop-maker for film and television. The majority of the respondents also identify with other hobby communities: two with belly dancing and one with ballroom dancing groups, one with a yoga community, and another with the steam punk community.

Table 1: Demographic Data

ID	Gender	Age rage	Occupation	Ethnicity
Kiwibiker 1	Male	60's	Company Director	NZ European
Kiwibiker 2	Female	40's	Salesperson	NZ European
Rat Club 1	Female	40's	Student/mother	NZ European
Rat Club 2	Female	20's	High school teacher	NZ European
Medieval	Female	40's	Full-time Mother	NZ European
Star Wars	Male	40's	Prop-maker	NZ European

3.3 Interview Questions

The following interview questions have been selected, and will be asked of each respondent:

1. Firstly, can you please list all the communities you consider yourself to be a member of, either virtual or physical (i.e. neighbourhood, workplace, sports team, church, online hobby group, online gaming community etc)
2. Which of these communities do you feel the closest to?
3. Do you feel more involved with any of your communities than you were five years ago?
4. Thinking about life-changing events such as looking for a new job, moving to a new town, the diagnosis of a serious illness (either your own or in your family), a death in the family, which of these communities would you be likely to mention such an event to? (List as many as you like)
5. Have you ever had occasion to let others know about a life changing event such as those in the previous question?
6. (If Yes) When you did this, did you receive any supportive comments or suggestions? If so, which of these communities did the comments or suggestions come from?
7. (If no) If you did so in the future, from which of these communities would you expect to receive the most support?
8. Have you ever been in the situation where you received support from someone whom you had never met in person before?
9. Could you tell me about any instances of unsolicited support you have received in the past?

These questions were chosen to encourage the respondents to reflect on social support in relation to all of their various communities and allow them the opportunity to relate their life experiences. In several instances, in an attempt to flesh out one or two “yes/no” answers, the respondents were asked whether they had anything else they wished to share. In most instances this was successful and anecdotal responses were forthcoming.

None of the respondents answered in the negative for question 5, so question 7 was not asked. Question 3 was not particularly relevant – all of the respondents responded in the affirmative and, on hindsight, it would have been remarkable if any had responded negatively to this

question. The question was however useful for establishing a rapport with the respondents, which according to Hanabuss (Hannabuss, 1996, p. 25), is an important aspect of interviewing. It also served to encourage the respondents to contemplate their involvement in their various communities over time.

3.4 Data Analysis

Due to the qualitative nature of the data being collected, grounded theory methods will be used for the purpose of analysis. Grounded theory methodology, as developed by Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) involves examining, comparing and questioning the statements of the participants, to determine themes that respond to the research question (Arksey & Knight, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). It provides a series of systematic processes commencing with the collection of data, progressing through the identification of concepts and categories and the relationships between these categories, and culminating in a conceptual theory or theories (Glaser, 1999; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Areas where little research has been undertaken on a particular topic are often viable candidates for grounded theory research as it will generally result in the generation of new knowledge in the form of theory (Birks & Mills, 2011, pp. 16-17).

People experience similar events and processes differently: for instance, women in a maternity hospital in Auckland, soldiers fighting in Afghanistan, or tourists travelling from Auckland to Melbourne, all have unique stories to tell based on similar life experiences. There are patterns between these stories (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). As suggested by Birks and Mills, stories are often utilised in interpretive methodologies. For example, narrative analysis employs stories as a data source. Ethnographies use storytelling as a device to communicate research findings. In research which utilises grounded theory, data is often sourced from stories generated via the interview process (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 117).

As noted by Glaser, grounded theory may utilise any and all data, whether this be obtained from documents, observations or interviews, in whatever combination and from whatever source. Grounded theory can incorporate not only what is being said, but also the conditions of and

around the story and how the story is being told. (Glaser, 2001, p. 145; 2002, p. 1). The use of grounded theory methodologies enables the simultaneous collection and analysis of the data.

Comparative analysis of the interview responses will be used to investigate and categorise concepts, trends and patterns within their responses. Themes will be developed and theory will be generated as a picture is formed by further analysis of these themes. Two types of grounded theory may be generated by the use of comparative analysis: substantive or conceptual.

Substantive theory is that developed for aspects of sociological enquiry which have a basis in substance. Conceptual or formal theory relates to that developed for the research of concepts or hypotheses. (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 32) The general principle of grounded theory is to continue to analyse the data until theoretical saturation of each aspect is reached. Theoretical saturation means that no new data is being generated by the interview subjects and conclusions based on the data already collected may be formed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 188).

As the sample group of participants is relatively small, the information collected is unlikely to be representative of the general population of hobby communities. However, an understanding of developing trends in the provision of unsolicited social support may be furthered by their input. Analysis of the various online hobby communities from which the respondents were recruited will also be incorporated into this research, in particular an examination of the forums of each. Comparisons of the respondents' perceptions of their experiences in the sphere of unsolicited social support within their various communities will enable the formation of a picture of the provision of support in today's society, particularly as a contrast to those of yesteryear.

The reliance on local neighbourhood, church and school communities will also be examined. In earlier times, these communities, together with the family, often formed the nucleus of daily life. They were commonly the principal sources of material and emotional support, particularly in times of crisis (Murray, 2003; Wellman, 2005). Is that still the case today? Would the respondents still be likely to let the neighbours know they are planning to move to a new town? Or is the first indication the appearance of a For Sale sign up the street? The significance, or insignificance, of technology on social support in modern society will be also be explored. Would the respondents be more likely to communicate details of a life changing event over the internet or would they generally use recognised pre-internet forms of communication? Who would they tell? And how would they be likely to tell them?

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This chapter will present and discuss the data collected from the interviews with the six volunteers. It will also review of the four hobby communities from which they were recruited. The chapter will be divided into four sections. The first section will provide a brief introduction to the participants. This will be followed by their insights into unsolicited social support within the various virtual and physical communities with which they identify. The third section will investigate the four online hobby communities from which the participants originated, while the fourth will contain initial reflections on the data collected.

4.1 Introduction to Research Participants

Respondent One was recruited from Kiwibiker.co.nz, a motorcycle enthusiast site. He is a male aged in his 60's and is a Company Director and proprietor of a business in the Waikato region of the North Island. Aside from [Kiwibiker](http://Kiwibiker.co.nz), he identifies with the local community where he lives as well as that where his business is situated and the NZ ballroom dancing community. He does not use Facebook as he considers it an invasion of privacy. He stated that of the communities identified, he felt closest to the ballroom dancing community.

The second of the volunteers from the [Kiwibiker](http://Kiwibiker.co.nz) community was a female aged in her 40's. She is employed as a salesperson in the Hutt Valley in the lower North Island. She listed other motorcycling communities, the steam punk community, a belly dancing community, Facebook, a school community and the health industry as communities that she is a member of. She felt that there was no particular community to which she felt closest, however she had become more involved with the motorcycling communities during recent years.

The third respondent, a female also in her 40's, volunteered from ratclub.org, a club for pet rat.owners. She is a mum who lives in a small town north of Auckland and is about to return to college as a student. She lists her other communities as her church, the church school which her children attend, Facebook and the German Shepherd Rescue Club. The German shepherd and the rat communities meet both online and in person. She is deeply involved with all of these communities and struggled to identify which she felt the closest to, however when pressed

decided that the church and the rat club were slightly ahead but equally important. She qualified this by saying that she was “on rat club every night but I don’t see the church people every day”.

The youngest participant, in her 20’s, was the second volunteer from ratclub.org. She is a high school teacher based in a small city in the South Island. She includes the teaching community, the high school community, Facebook and “Parent to Parent” as other communities to which she belongs. She also advised that although she herself is not a churchgoer, she is involved with a church community through her family. She stated that she felt closest to both the rat club and Parent to Parent, at present. Parent to Parent is a support organisation for parents of children with disabilities. This respondent is a member of a subgroup called Sibling Support and she has a sibling with special needs. It must be noted that as Parent to Parent is specifically a support-based community, and this research is focused on non-support-based communities, the respondent’s relationship and interactions with them will not form a part of this thesis. They have been included in this section as part of the respondent’s profile with the sole intention of accurately reporting the content of the interview.

Participant number 5 is a female in her 40’s who describes herself as a full-time mother of four, who until recently worked for a mental health organisation. She resides in the eastern Bay of Plenty and came to the study through gatheringdarkness.co.nz, a community of medieval re-enactors. She lists the Northern Horde and the Battle of Nations (NZ) which are similar re-enactment communities, the laughter yoga community, drum communities and a belly dancing community as others that she is involved with. She added that this list doesn’t include communities that she is a part of with her family. The Battle of Nations Team is a newer group of experienced re-enactors and medieval combatants, that has been formed to compete at an international festival and events on a global scale and as it is in its infancy is quite time-consuming at present. This is the group that she currently has the closest relationship with, although in the past she has had a close attachment to the belly dance community.

The only other male respondent is also aged in his 40’s and works in the city of Auckland as a prop maker for the TV and film industry. He volunteered to assist with this research through swnz.dr-maul.com which is the NZ Star Wars fan community. He lists family, the prop-making community (both online and in real life), Facebook and his local neighbourhood, as well as a punk/rock/fusion/electronic band of which he is a member as communities he is involved with.

Family, the prop-makers and the band were communities that he felt the closest involvement with at present.

All six respondents describe themselves as NZ European. Despite being prompted to list as many communities as possible, it is extremely likely that some were omitted. For example, only one of the six listed “family” as a “community”, although the medieval re-enactor admitted that the list “doesn’t even touch the stuff that I do with the family”. Similarly, only two of the respondents mentioned local community, however this may be simply because they did not consider theirs to be representative of a “community”.

4.2 Data Collected by Interview

The interviews commenced with some light conversation designed to put the respondents at ease, and then the demographic questions were asked. The question of “Do you feel more involved with any of your communities than you were five years ago?” resulted in affirmative responses from all six candidates, which in hindsight is the logical outcome for such a question. This question worked well as a vehicle for establishing a rapport with the respondents, which is an important aspect of interviewing according to Hanabuss (Hannabuss, 1996, p. 25), and also encouraged the respondents to contemplate their involvement over time.

Participant 1 stated that he would advise all of his various communities about life-changing events.

I would mention it to everybody. I mean I have done that.....I am selling my business, going into something else, certainly I mentioned that to my shop community because it impacts on them, and it will get mentioned on Kiwibiker eventually. I am sort of faced with a serious illness right now.....I have had progressive liver disease through a bad choice of ancestors and I mention that to everybody as well because it is one of those things.

He advised that his customer base had proven the most supportive of his communities although the Kiwibiker community could be supportive if “it gets its mind around it”.

There is very much a mob reaction thing on there so if you mention something like ill health, like I have mentioned that I have a progressive illness which will kill me, for that sort of thing you get a lot of sympathy, but it varies a lot. It varies with who you are talking to, the older people tend to be pretty supportive if anyone gets into strife, but they can also be incredibly vicious and you get that sort of keyboard warrior mentality.

He mentioned that as the result of the recent death of a Kiwibiker member from cancer, a rally had been organised to raise funds for cancer research.

People can get behind a cause and someone takes a lead, you get a bit of mob mentality and others will join in because it's the cool thing to do.

The second Kiwibiker respondent advised that she would advise both the motorcyclists and belly dancers of important events and had received a lot of support in the past from both of these groups. She added that many of her various communities preferred to communicate via Facebook rather than through their community forums.

Facebook is probably one of my main communities but through Facebook I access other communities. I have a lot of social networks within Facebook and it is our nexus point. For instance, I use Facebook to access a large majority of my motorcycling groups, literally all over the world, and the steampunk community as well.

The third participant considered that she would communicate life-changing events to the school and the church, as well as individuals in the rat club and the dog rescue.

I wouldn't put it on line but would tell individuals at the German Shepherd rescue and again at the rat Club, we communicate on Facebook and for something like that I would also send a personal message to the ones I wanted to know about it.

The other participant volunteering from the rat club advised that many of her closest friends were in rat club as well as on Facebook, so these were the communities she would be most likely to talk to about of life-changing events. She added that the rat club members had been extremely supportive over her father's recent death.

They were always aware of the issues I was facing and didn't have to be prompted by me or anything because they were there, and they were friends.

Respondent 5 stated that the support she had received from the belly dancers on the death of her sister had been “phenomenal” however in recent times she had been undergoing some work-related troubles as well as a violent traumatic event and the medieval re-enactors had been the ones providing the greater support.

The Northern Horde in particular, because they are local, but also the other blokes who tend to know me online have been surprisingly sensitive and they will pick up on the fact that I am not being my usual chirpy self, and I might start off with “No, I don't want to talk about it” but generally they will be the people I will talk about it with. The post-traumatic stress disorder has been quite severe and again they were aware I was not my usual robust self and they have been able to help me get over that as well.

With the battle of Nations blokes, the combatants are largely “there” and there's not too much deep thinking and the empathy is there but they don't necessarily encourage you to wallow in feelings of gloom. They are much more likely to say “get your kit on and let's go have a fight.” And that fixes everything doesn't it?

The sixth interviewee advised that family, the prop-making community and the band had been supportive in the past. He did not cite any instances of support received from the hobby community through which he had volunteered, the Star Wars fan community, and he also did not list them as a community he would advise of life-changing events. This respondent is also the only one who listed family as one of his “communities”. It is possible that the stronger reliance on family as a community connection may be responsible for a weaker connection with the hobby community. However, as will be demonstrated, this was the weakest of the four hobby communities in terms of support and empathy.

Three of the respondents advised that although they had not had occasion to receive social support from someone they knew only in an online capacity, they had however had occasion to provide support to someone they had not met in person previously.

The medieval re-enactor advised that as an administrator for many of her communities, she was often contacted by people wanting to join these groups, but who needed reassurance, that a mental or physical disability would not result in prejudice.

It surprises me being involved in so many online groups how often people will get in touch with me by email or phone because they have heard about a particular group and they want to participate in that particular activity and quite early on in conversation they will say something about their mental well-being or specific disabilities and they want assurance that they won't be stigmatised for it. In these cases I have then met them in the flesh to help with support and sometimes that support means getting them to participate because I know that the group dynamics can offer the support they need.

Some of the respondents related incidences of support being given to, or by, those who had not previously met "in real life", which was consistent with that previously reported (Finn, 1999; Kanayama, 2003; Rheingold, 1993/2000; Xie, 2008). The respondent from the Star Wars Fan community stated that a member of the prop-making community, who he had known in a virtual capacity only, had had a case of degenerative RSI and he had met her in real life to provide support with her condition.

Respondent 3 reported that she was currently fostering some rats which belonged to a rat club member who had moved to her area from out of town and needed someone to care for them until she had things sorted out.

When she came to my place she was desperate for accommodation and we hadn't known each other before she dropped them off and I just prayed with her and two days later she had found somewhere to stay and it was really awesome. For me it is a way of making a difference in other people's lives and I wouldn't have met them if it wasn't for those websites.

The male Kiwibiker respondent said that although he hadn't experienced social support in person from someone he had met on line, he had received material support from a Kiwibiker member who was a computer technician and that there was a sound system expert who would help other Kiwibikers at no charge. He also advised that as he had been a passenger on board

the inter-island ferry the Wahine, which sunk in Wellington harbour in 1968, he had had occasion to receive support from those he hadn't met before.

It was an interesting experience because you know what people are like when there's some sort of crisis you get a whole lot that race in there and they can't wait to get involved – there was a lot of that. We were picked up by a little steam powered tug boat that was out there, which tried to tow the ship into the harbour without success. But when that hit the shore and we disembarked there were heaps of people racing around and they wouldn't let you stand there in wet clothe, they literally ripped your clothes off and put you into other stuff and in a way it was almost invasive, they didn't give you much space.

The other motorcycle enthusiast mentioned that in the past she had been involved with a church community and during the six months after her husband had passed away she had often arrived home to find a meal had been dropped off anonymously. She added that it was her opinion that online communities were more able to provide support than physical ones, simply because of the amount of participants.

*I meet very few people in my day-to-day life and certainly if it wasn't for things like Facebook and Kiwibiker, all of the s**t we have to persist through, they reach more people and it is just a numbers game, there is more likely to be somebody that you resonate with, just simply because of the numbers out there.*

Her observation reflects those of researchers (Boase, et al., 2006; Boberg, et al., 1995; Braithwaite, et al., 1999; Galegher, et al., 1998; King, 1994; Preece, 1998; Rheingold, 1993/2000), that one advantage of online community is the capability to reach a wider range of people than would otherwise be available.

Both of the rat club respondents praised the support they had witnessed or experienced through their online communities:

When I adopted my dog through German Shepherd Rescue they don't just leave you to look after it, they encourage you. Like, they've got a general website and they have also got a Yahoo group and you get invited to join that once you adopt. It's not for the

general public you have to be invited and you get to share everything there and often it's not about dog behaviour. One woman, her husband got cancer and he died and everyone just rallies around. There was a guard of honour of German Shepherds at his funeral, because the community was such a big part of his life. The lady whose husband had cancer gained quite a few friends she wouldn't have known without the shepherd community. And if a rat dies or has to be put to sleep everyone sympathises with each other online. (Respondent 3)

Last year I was in a serious accident, I was on my way up to Auckland and I was in a car crash, and the rat club really rallied around and all sent me huge messages of support and some of them came to visit me in hospital and were all really worried for me and lots of them even sent messages of support to my family and sent me gifts and were really supportive and helped me get back on my feet and that kind of thing. When I was in hospital I was able to see those messages on Facebook and on the Message Board because they were there and I could look at them when I wanted and how I wanted and the people messaging me didn't need me to be there which was better for all parties as well. (Respondent 4)

Their commentary, and that of Kiwibiker 1, serves to add weight to the observations of researchers (High & Solomon, 2008; Jordan, 2005; Kanayama, 2003; Lamberg, 1996; Preece & Ghozati, 1998; Rheingold, 1993/2000) around the sympathetic nature of many of the communities previously studied. Respondent 4's observation of being able to view the messages of support from her hospital bed, "when I wanted and how I wanted" emphasises another important benefit of the virtual environment and upholds the research findings on all hours and all location access, outlined in the literature review section of this thesis (Boberg, et al., 1995; Rheingold, 1993/2000; Rood & Bruckman, 2009; Weinberg, et al., 1996).

Both the Kiwibiker respondents made mention of the extreme reaction on the Kiwibiker forum to my request for volunteers, as mentioned previously in Chapter 3.

It's a very interesting group. There's an awful lot of little bastards on it quite frankly...I don't know if you followed your thread? Well I stopped reading it because it

was making me angry. But there you go, personally I thought that you had a perfectly good reason for putting that post up there but you get that sort of mob reaction.

(Respondent 1)

I stuck my neck out in Kiwibiker because there were so many drop kicks.....keyboard warriors. (Respondent 2)

Both of these respondents referred to the “keyboard warrior mentality” during their interviews, in relation to the Kiwibiker community, with respondent 1 adding:

On that particular forum though I have a policy that it is just little symbols on a screen and it doesn't deserve my attention half the time so when stuff goes like yours, I tend to ignore it, I don't wade in there and fight people, my theory is if you can't say something good don't say anything at all. I recognise the fact that in forums like that people will say things that they wouldn't say in real life.

4.3 Review of the Online Hobby Communities

The six volunteers to be interviewed for this research were recruited from four online hobby communities: Kiwibiker.co.nz, a motorcycle enthusiast site; ratclub.org a pet rat club; swnz.dr-maul.com which is the NZ website for Star Wars fans and gatheringdarkness.co.nz a site for medieval re-enactors/role players. All four of these communities also provide opportunities for their members to meet and interact “in real life”. A review of the communities and their forums is necessary to add perspective to the research data collected by interview.

4.3.1 www.kiwibiker.co.nz

The Kiwibiker Forum reported 145,101 message threads, 3,198,004 separate posts and 26,048 registered members with 2,725 active members, as at 23 August 2012. The most users on line were reported as 894 on 11th August 2012 at 19:33. The membership appears to cover a broad

cross-section of society, ranging from labourers to company directors to housewives, and represents those new to motorcycling as well as seasoned riders. A wide range of ages is represented in this community and there are posts from New Zealanders living abroad. The forum page displays details of those currently viewing the pages, separated into guests and members, with the member names also listed.

This was quite an active forum with numerous sub-sections, the majority of which were motorcycling-related, with the off-topic (non-motorcycle-related) forum entitled “Rant or Rave”. The main Kiwibiker page included notices for charity fundraising rides, rallies and details of funerals, however these were somewhat out-of-date as all of the events advertised had already taken place when this review was conducted in August 2012.

This community had been recommended to me as an example of a supportive community. When my request for volunteers was posted to the forum, five pages of discussion were generated over just two days, ranging from the incredulous and negative (doesn't she realise we are bikers? Why is she asking us this crap? I don't even understand what she is talking about.....why is she studying communication studies when she can't communicate?), to the supportive (speak for yourself, I have signed up to help! This is the perfect forum for this request!). One charming contributor even searched for a photograph of me on the internet, posting the link to this along with his opinions on my appearance. After receiving email requests from a couple of the members I responded to the thread, letting them know that their community had been recommended. I also explained my research in greater detail but in smaller words. From that point the negative comments ceased and discussion turned to the pro's and con's of research design. A couple of days later the thread was removed.

Posts within the off-topic “Rant or Rave” forum covered 941 pages as at 31 August 2012, with the last 42 pages all recording responses within 2012. With an average of 25 distinct threads per page, this equates to a highly active off-topic forum.

The two respondents from this community represented extremes in their online activity, with the elder of these having their only involvement with an online community through Kiwibiker, and the other interacting with various online motorcycling communities, the steam punk community, Facebook and sub-groups of Facebook.

4.3.2 www.ratclub.org

Subtitled “The Kiwi Rat Resource”, as at 23 August 2012 the site reported 17,360 message threads, 261,570 posts and 1,335 members. The highest number of users online was stated as 43 on Wednesday October 5, 2011 at 5:09 pm. The actively posting members appear to be predominantly female and young (teenage to mid-twenties) with a smattering of older members. The Club holds regular “Rat Meets” when members take their rats to a prearranged venue to meet other community members and their rats. They also have stalls at pet expos and the like. The main page includes a directory of recommended veterinarians as well as a cage calculator which can be used to establish how many rats can safely be housed in various sized cages. Subsections of the forum ranged in content from adoptions and memorials to stories and photos.

There was an interesting exchange in the general forum as the result of a thread started by a member advertising their rats for adoption:

“BUT I can't believe the negative and hurtful comments from some of this clubs members..... I did what I thought was the best thing to do and post their adoption on here.

WOW what an eye opener that was, I was totally honest in my reason for re-homing our girls and didn't make up some BS story about circumstances changing, to then be told my listing horrified and for another person to be rude enough to just tell to clean more.

Come on guys you are better than this, Rat-club can be a fantastic place with all your wealth of knowledge, experience and passion for you ratties and I understand that this is a public forum but some of you just need to keep your negative comments in check.”

The post received 464 views and 18 responses, most of which were supportive, with one contributor pointing out:

“I think a lot of what people are experiencing is part of online forums - there are hundreds of people, most of which you'd probably not have much in common with outside of ratclub, and typed text also can be read in oh-so-many tones of voices. Just

take RGs comment above - I figured it was sarcasm, but probably because I've been around ratclub long enough to know a lot of peoples style of typing and what they're likely to actually mean. Emoticons are the only thing I can suggest to help with things, since they add a little 'tone' to your text."

The Memorials section of the Forum displayed 748 threads as at 31 August 2012 with 8,616 posts. As one would expect, the posts in this part of the forum were highly sympathetic and emotional. It is also worth noting that the section entitled Rat Stories and Photos, which was the most subscribed forum with 5,776 topics encompassing 84,749 individual entries, also included many supportive posts, with many offering advice.

The off-topic forum entitled "Anything but Rats" included a well-subscribed (21 pages with 312 replies) thread entitled "Hair" which included photos of members' various hair styles and hair colour experiments. Anyone viewing this thread would have been able to turn up at a rat meet or expo and work out who was who without too much trouble.

Another post in the off-topic section, entitled, "Cat is pregnant" stated:

*"Ok im not trying to spam the forms but i just wanted to say my cat is pregnant, AGAIN
So this is her 2nd litter,we couldnt fix her up because we didnt have money at the
time,Now that she is pregnant my mum dosent wanna pay for them to get cut out."*

This post resulted in 14 responses, the majority of which were either scornful or lecturing in tone, all demanding that the author get the cat fixed as soon as was healthy, and many casting doubt on the author's suitability as a pet owner.

There were a total of 193 pages in the "Anything but Rats" forum and those with responses dated 2012 equating to 14 pages on August 31. There were 15 threads per page with most pages averaging at least three or four "Happy birthday" messages.

This is an extremely active forum and it was obvious that members of the group were for the most part very involved with the rat community. The majority of the posts that I reviewed were written in a friendly chatty tone and from the conversations it appeared that the majority of the members had met in real life. Both of the volunteers from the rat club were quite heavily involved with Facebook as well as various other online and offline communities.

4.3.3 www.gatheringdarkness.co.nz/

The main page identifies that the site “is dedicated to medieval re-enactment in New Zealand, with a particular focus on both National Association of Ancient and Medieval Arts (NAAMA), and Living History.” The forums boasted 10,744 message threads, however there was no indication of the number of posts within these. There were 646 registered members but no statistic as to most users ever online. I endeavoured to register for the site however received an email which read: “Thanks for making an application for an account on Gathering Darkness. Due to recent fraudulent activity we require you to call xxxxx - during business hours on + 64 (xxxxxx) to confirm your registration.” As I knew someone who was a member of the community, they offered to post the request for volunteers on my behalf; and I was able to access most areas of the website and forums without being registered, I didn’t pursue registration to the community.

The majority of the posts on the off-topic forum are relatively impersonal and unemotional although there is a rather lengthy a farewell message from February 2012 which reads:

“12 years ago a freind of mine introduced me to the New Zealand Re-enactment scene and I fell in love with a large group of people who made all of my childhood dreams of knights, swashbuckling heroes, and sword fighting come true.

I attended my first Naama in 1999 and took part in a full pitched battle of more than 100 men in armour, I was in heaven on earth. I have made many strong and long lasting freindships and have met brothers, comrades and lovers and I look back over those years with a mix of happiness, sadness, and pride.

But now re-enactment in this country has become a an elitist gathering of self inflated middle class beige plutocrats who strive to impose thier ideals and opinions on all around them, for no reason other than they think they are right and everyone who stand before them is wrong, childish, and bereft of any true honour.

well I have had enough, I no longer wish to be assiciated with a community that has reduced what was once fast and free and exciting to stationary, slow and dull beyond words. What was once joyful and full of song and laughter to a pale p[ompous imitation of the Society for Creative Anachronisims.

To all of the freinds I have made I will still honour our bonds born from love and pain and battle but you will not see me on a feild of combat or in a feasting hall ever again,

you won't see my words on this forum ever again, if you want to talk to me or socialise with me call I will welcome you into home and happily break bread with you.

But to the self promoting, slack jawed, fat, bloated, middle class bourgeoisie beige dentists and IT Trolls who treat this hobby and sport as thier own persoanl fiefdoms I say rot in hell the lot of you I hope you grow old fast and die in your beds."

This was responded to by a site administrator on the same day with:

"Personal note: Goodbye Carl. Best of luck to you and yours.

Site Admin Note: Discretion is the better part of valour. Please consider your replies before you make them."

Of the 442 views Carl's post received there were only 13 replies, all of whose authors had taken the administrator's advice.

A click on the members tab at the bottom of the Forum Index page redirects to a member directory with details of date joined, location, number of posts and date of last visit. As many of the "last visits" were listed as 1st January 1970, which is before the advent of the internet, there is some doubt as to the accuracy of the data in this section. The earliest post in the General Discussion thread is dated Jan 15, 2007 and states that the "GD site has been going strong for a few months now". This date is also some decades after 1970 which adds weight to the premise that the forum has been around since 2006.

Topics within the "General Discussion" forum totalled only 39 threads all of which were contained on one page. Seventeen of these threads had responses during 2012, with the rest being older. The research participant from this community had indicated that the medieval re-enactors provided a strong support network, however it appears that support provided by this community is delivered through an avenue other than this forum.

4.3.4 <http://swnz.dr-maul.com/>

This is a much smaller community than the other three, with a total of only 752 message threads, containing 9,004 posts and only 217 members listed. Highest user numbers online

were recorded as 26 on Thursday Jul 22, 2010 9:49 am. There was a relatively small percentage of the 217-strong membership actively posting. Those that were, appeared to be aged between their 20's to their 40's with the majority being male. It was interesting that once I had registered to the site and logged in for the first time, this was the only one which didn't require sign-in on subsequent visits but displayed a "Welcome back" message each time I accessed the site.

The main page hosts news items including upcoming events, with the oldest of these occurring in April 2012, but there were some current listings also. This page also contained links to their Facebook and Twitter pages. The forum had sections for conventions, collectibles and buying and selling, along with the off-topic forum.

The most popular thread in the off-topic section was that for "Introductions" which contained 188 posts ranging from November 2009 until June 2012. However, the off-topic forum displayed only 21 threads which had response dates during 2012. There were also a total of only 98 topics posted during its lifespan to February 2010, covering a total of four pages. The majority of these were "Happy birthday" messages to members. It is noted that the respondent had not listed this site as one of the communities that he turned to for the provision of support and it appears that this may be the least supportive of the communities examined.

4.3.5 Discussion on the Online Hobby Communities

Although the interviewees generally regarded their communities as supportive, for the most part the public-facing forums and bulletin boards of the four communities displayed minimal evidence of this, with the possible exception of the rat club. Of the forums studied, the <http://swnz.dr-maul.com/forums/> (the Star Wars Fan Club) and that located at <http://www.gatheringdarkness.co.nz/forum/index.php> (medieval re-enactors) displayed the least activity and, over the period of my review, minimal emotional capital. The Kiwibiker community was the only one of the four which reported "active" members (2,725) as well as "registered" members (26,048). Their "active" membership figure represented more than double that of the next highest membership figure which was the Rat Club with 1,335 "registered" members. The Gathering Darkness and the Star Wars communities reported 646 and 217 registered members,

respectively, and this smaller membership is likely to have been responsible for their lower levels of social capital and empathy.

The forum at <http://www.kiwibiker.co.nz/forums/forum.php> (motorcyclists), displayed a total of over 3 million posts for 145,000 message topics. Although extremely active, this forum was populated by a vastly diverse range of people who, despite having a common interest in motorcycling, appeared to have vastly different expectations of the Kiwibiker community and the forums. An example of this was the reaction to my request for volunteers within the off-topic forum of Kiwibiker. The posts on this thread ranged from the objectionable and abusive in some instances, to the positive in others, and covered the whole gamut in between. Originally five potential volunteers from this community responded to my request. The implication within the thread from some of their community, that motorcyclists were not intelligent enough to be involved in academic research, appeared to have provided the incentive for some of them to respond. One in particular wrote:

I recognize (having spent quite some time in the hallowed halls of Otago University myself) that it is easy to become so accustomed to the daily use of jargon specific to your chosen area of study - but remember not everyone speaks that language.

There are lots of personalities on kiwibiker, and despite the fact that many (and I absolutely include myself in this description) present themselves as having a vulgar sense of humour, and little to no respect or compassion, it is a website, and the unfortunate result of relative anonymity is the 'internet persona'.

I would encourage you to return to your post, ignore the irrelevant and stupid posts, and break the basis of your study down into much more simple terms, basically, give it to everyone in the most basic English possible.

Once I had done as the writer suggested the thread settled into a discussion on research design, presumably subscribed to principally by the academics amongst the community. The Kiwibiker responsible for the email reproduced above unfortunately did not proceed with the process to participate in this research.

Overall, the forums at <http://www.ratclub.org/forum/> (rat club) demonstrated the strongest community-feeling with a chatty, “village-square” atmosphere to the dialogue. The members of this community appeared to meet in person as often as possible with well-attended “rat-meets” and booths at pet expos. There was no shortage of advice, encouragement and offers of in person assistance where needed, although this was predominantly of a ‘rat-nature’. It is acknowledged that discussion of a more personal nature was generally held on their less public Facebook page or by personal message.

The review of these forums demonstrated a contrast to the situation in the early 2000’s, when many online common interest, hobby or gaming communities had highly active bulletin boards which were often used to discuss matters other than those related to the principal purpose of the community. During that era however, online social networking communities were still in their infancy.

4.4 Reflection on the Data Collected

Of the respondents, none listed their local residential community as one that they felt close to, or that they would share a life-changing event with. Kiwibiker 1 however, who owned a small business, listed the shop community as one that he would share details of such events with. He also indicated that he would mention such events with all of his communities. None of the respondents listed any involvement with sports teams or with online gaming communities.

Family was listed as a source of social support by only one of the six respondents, being one of the two male volunteers. Research has demonstrated that women are generally more empathetic than males and more often associated with support provision (Trobst, Collins, & Embree, 1994). Bearing this in mind it is entirely possible that the female respondents considered themselves to be the support providers for their family unit and therefore did not list ‘family’ as one of their sources of social support. The other male respondent, being more mature than the other volunteers surveyed, is similarly more likely to consider himself a source of support for younger family members.

Three of the respondents indicated a relationship with a church community. Rat Club 1 indicated an active relationship with her current church community as well as with that of the

church she had attended in her previous neighbourhood, despite moving some distance. This contradicts the findings of Wellman and Frank (Wellman & Frank, 2000) that changes to personal or family circumstances often resulted in changes to relationships within the community, and supports those of Wellman, Gulia and Potter who proposed that the local neighbourhood no longer provides a boundary for the provision of social support, with many of the respondent's communities being made up of those located at distance (Wellman, et al., 2002). However this respondent's situation is possibly an isolated example. She described her connection with the church as being stronger due to the fact that her children attended the local Christian school and that many of the other churchgoers also had children at this school. The church and the rat club were described as the communities she felt closest to, however she qualified this by adding that she was online with rat club members every night, but didn't communicate with church members every day.

Two other respondents reported a connection with a church community. Rat Club 2 advised that although she was involved with a church community through family, she wasn't an active churchgoer herself. Kiwibiker 2 had been involved with a church in the past but no longer considered herself to be part of any church community. Kiwibiker 2 was also one of two respondents who listed themselves as members of belly dancing communities, the other being the medieval re-enactor.

All but one of the six respondents reported being actively involved in Facebook, the exception being Kiwibiker 1 who regarded it as an invasion of privacy. The fact that Kiwibiker 1 was the most senior of the six respondents and that social networking communities such as Facebook are a relatively recent phenomenon possibly contributed to his stance, a hypothesis which is supported to a degree by Smith (B. Smith, 2011, p. 429).

None of the six had received in-person social support from someone they had previously known solely in an online capacity. Three of them, however, had been the provider of physical support to someone from their virtual community. A fourth, Kiwibiker 1, although he did not have personal experience of this, related the instance of a nationwide rally which had been organised by the Kiwibiker community, to raise funds for cancer research as the result of the death of a fellow member of cancer. Many of those participating in the rally had not known the cancer victim or many of the other rally participants, prior to the rally.

He mentioned that he had recently been diagnosed with a progressive illness which would ultimately become terminal and stated:

for that sort of thing you get a lot of sympathy, but it varies a lot. It varies with who you are talking to.....the older people tend to be pretty supportive and if anybody gets into strife, then they are very helpful, but they can also be incredibly vicious and you get that sort of keyboard warrior mentality.

One of the rat club members confirmed the sympathetic nature of their community, reporting that they were extremely supportive when it came to rat illnesses or deaths. She added:

In fact I was looking at my Rat Club calendar just before you rang and I was about to text Nikita because the photo for this month is of Millie and Millie has died just recently so when we have finished here I am going to text her and send her some hugs via text.

The second Rat Club respondent described one of the benefits of the virtual nature of the club being that after her car accident she was able to view the messages of support through the club forums or Facebook groups from her hospital bed and communicate with others without them having to visit. The Star Wars fan stated that support in an offline environment was inclined to be more one-to-one than that provided in an online forum. He reported that a friend that he knew both online and in real life had recently suffered a bereavement, which had not been publicised within the virtual community. Although he himself was aware of the bereavement, he felt he could not offer support, because the friend was unaware that he knew of the situation.

The medieval re-enactor was experiencing some employment issues which had been having serious impacts on her health. She had found it invaluable talking “around the subject” without mentioning specifics, with the re-enactors, both local and online, who had proven to be unconditionally supportive and understanding, as well as respectful of the need for confidentiality. She felt that although she still had a long way to go, their support had been extremely beneficial in her recovery. The fact that her hobby communities shared online and offline presences provided an additional support aspect:

there's not too much deep thinking and if you start being querulous it isn't that they will tell you to toughen up and get over it, the empathy is there, but they don't necessarily encourage you to wallow in feelings of gloom.

As already mentioned, my research was conducted over a relatively small sample of hobby communities, with only four communities being represented. However, all four of these communities are quite diverse in nature. Also, of the six respondents, five are aged over 40, and therefore have not “grown up online” and do not perhaps take communication through that medium for granted. Were there more participants from a younger age group a different picture may have emerged (Myers & Sundaram, 2012; Prensky, 2001).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis investigated the differences between the perceived unsolicited social support provided by offline or physical communities and that provided by non-support-based virtual communities. As previously acknowledged, this is an area that has been under-researched until now. Dutta-Bergman theorised that those who communicate with their local communities when in need also communicate with their online communities for social support, and vice versa (Dutta-Bergman, 2006, p. 482). Piselli suggested that online communication works in conjunction with other aspects of everyday life and that research is needed into how these various methods of interaction dominate, coincide, or coalesce in their various environments (Piselli, 2007, p. 875).

There has been discussion as to whether or not the arrival of the internet heralded the demise of the community. Putnam reported that by 1996 the internet was being used by 10% of adult Americans, however the “nationwide decline in social connectedness and civic engagement had been under way for at least a quarter of a century” (Putnam, 2000, p. 170). He suggested that online communication would ultimately supplement, rather than replace, that of the physical community (Putnam, 2000, p. 179). This research investigated the accuracy of Putnam’s premise, by looking at the social support provided by the participants’ many communities (local neighbourhood, sports team or club, online gaming community, church, work colleagues, social networking community etc). It examined which of these they would most likely communicate with about important emotional, financial, health, bereavement or career problems and from which of these they would expect to receive support and advice.

As indicated earlier, in section 1.2 – The Research Journey, I had noted shifting trends in the popularity of various media for communicating with friends, family and associates during the years since my first interest in support provision within non-support based communities. As reported by McKenna and Seidman, the modern-day tendency for family, friends, colleagues and acquaintances to communicate via electronic networks has resulted in the virtual and physical worlds becoming increasingly blurred and merged, with online relationships spilling over into in real life (McKenna & Seidman, 2005, p. 213).

In earlier times, one would share details of important events across the garden fence or in the supermarket, or maybe across the table at the bridge club or in the lunch room at work (Murray, 2003; Wellman, 2005). For those separated by distance, telephone (landline not cell-phone) or the postal service were generally the only methods for the communication of life-changing events (Rowland, 1997). Such events would generally have been shared on a “need to know” basis. This was due mainly to the time-consuming nature of communicating the news to everyone individually by telephone. Those able to offer assistance or support might not have had the opportunity to do so, as they may not have been aware of the situation until after the need had passed, if at all.

The coming of e-mail, for those that had access, served to broaden communication networks and provided a faster alternative to the post for communicating with those located at a distance (Boase, et al., 2006; Hampton & Wellman, 2002; Howard, et al., 2001; Rheingold, 1993/2000; Rowland, 1997; Wellman, 2001b). The introduction and development of the worldwide web was responsible for the formation of virtual communities of like-minded people, around common interests such as online gaming, sports or hobbies (Chaple, 2010; Griffith & Fox, 2007; Madden & Rainie, 2003). The forums and bulletin boards of these communities had begun to develop into a thriving mechanism for communication, at the time I originally became interested in this topic in 2002. The sharing of life-changing decisions and events within these forums was becoming more commonplace, with supportive, sympathetic and helpful comments and suggestions regularly being the response of members of these communities. As suggested by Wellman:

The human use of these technologies is creating and sustaining community ties. These ties have transformed cyberspace into cyberplaces, as people connect online with kindred spirits, engage in supportive and sociable relationships with them, and imbue their activity online with meaning, belonging and identity (Wellman, 2001b).

Rheingold, as early as 1993 reported:

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends

and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk (Rheingold, 1993, p. xvii)

For those comfortable communicating in an online environment, it has become routine to share such events with others within their various virtual communities. As a result they are able to benefit from the experiential knowledge of a wider range of people from diverse cultures and backgrounds. Those offering advice and support may often be located on the other side of the world. Without the establishment of the worldwide web, and the subsequent communication channels provided through various online communities, access to such knowledge and experience would not have been as easily accessible (Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Lang, 2012; Laugesen, 2010; Tapaleao, 2012; Tough, 1995).

It has been noted in this thesis that the development of the internet has enabled an abundance of websites to be established offering support and advice for those plagued by illness, injury or addiction. These communities provide opportunities to learn from the experiences of those similarly afflicted, enabling communication with others who understand first-hand what they are experiencing. This research did not examine support-based communities of that nature. As demonstrated in the Literature Review, this is an area that has already been well-researched.

The social support provided by the participants' various non-support-based communities was the subject of this study. It investigated their perceptions of the support networks within their local neighbourhoods, sports clubs, online gaming and hobby communities, church, and social networking communities. It examined which of these communities they would be most likely to inform about important life events or situations and from which of these they would expect to receive support and advice.

That the support be unsolicited was an important consideration for this investigation. By 'unsolicited' I mean support not requested but volunteered when a person announces an important event. For example, the announcement of a death in the family, impending surgery, plans to relocate to a new home, changing one's job or the arrival of a new baby are likely to be met with varying responses. Unsolicited support is notable in that it is often unexpected and may come from unexpected avenues.

The form such support may take was also investigated. Many may offer hands-on assistance. This may take the form of a visit during a hospital stay, help with shifting house or the offer of prams, cots and baby clothes that are no longer needed on the announcement of the arrival of a new baby. Others may offer empathetic comments, advice or helpful suggestions. Words of sympathy on the death of a loved one are an important part of the grieving process. Details about a district you may be relocating to, job openings in your area or instructions about how to repair or build something can be of enormous benefit. The individual offering the support is able to draw on their personal, local or learned knowledge to provide this support. Sproull, Conley and Moon (2005) pointed out that, until the offer of assistance is actually made, the recipient is unaware as to what form that support is likely to take or the identity of the potential helper. Similarly, those with the potential to offer support and advice are unaware as to whether they alone have the ability to assist, until others step forward. (Sproull, et al., 2005)

The channels that support is generally being provided through were examined in this study. The model airplane enthusiast, the Star Wars fan or the pet rat owner may meet regularly with their local club. They may also communicate with fellow enthusiasts, both local and distant, through a bulletin board or forum within their hobby communities. However, are there other methods which they regularly use to communicate with members of these communities? As suggested by Wellman (1996) people have always offered and received advice – the online environment simply allows greater visibility of that advice and enhances access to it (Wellman, et al., 1996, pp. 219-220).

In order to interview those from communities which were specifically non-support-based, hobby communities were selected as the target sub-group for this research. By selecting a smaller subset of online communities, it was hoped that richer, experiential data may be examined. The volunteers for this research represented a relatively broad cross-section of possible respondents, due perhaps to the diverse nature of their hobbies. The diversity of backgrounds and circumstances of the respondents proved beneficial, particularly during the comparative analysis phase of their responses, using the principles of grounded theory. Theoretical saturation, as outlined by Strauss and Corbin, was reached utilising the responses of this relatively small group of interview subjects (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 188). Of the six respondents, five were aged over 40, and therefore had not “grown up online”. Had more of the

participants been younger, a different picture is extremely likely to have emerged, due to their familiarity with virtual environments.

According to Howard, Rainie and Jones, since the development of the worldwide web, the rate of internet distribution has far exceeded that of other communication technologies (Howard, et al., 2001, p. 383). Experienced internet users reported substantial improvements in their communication with family and friends as well as the extension of their social networks, as a direct result of their internet connectivity (Howard, et al., 2001, p. 400).

The positive implications of the internet on relationships which were being maintained over distance have been highlighted by Nie, Hillygus and Erbring (2002), who identified the internet's unique ability to rejuvenate communication between friends and relatives (Nie, et al., 2002, p. 217). Wellman, Gulia and Potter (2002), reported that the boundaries of the local neighbourhood were no longer an impediment for the provision of social support. It is interesting that one of the respondents in this study indicated that although she and her family had recently relocated to a new town, they had maintained an active relationship with the church community from the previous neighbourhood as well as forming a relationship with the local church community. As suggested by Barrera, numerous studies have indicated that the source of social support is of significance (Dignam, et al., 1986; Kobasa & Puccetti, 1983; LaRocco, et al., 1980; Procidano & Heller, 1983) and it is notable that in more recent times, due, in particular, to advances in communication technology, potential sources for the provision of support have increased markedly.

One distinction between communication within virtual and physical communities has been identified by Walther and Boyd. Face-to-face communication generally commences with light conversation and issues or concerns are only raised later once the conversation has turned in their direction or 'the timing feels right'. In a virtual community it is much more likely that a contributor may start the conversation or 'thread' with "Guess what happened" or "I'm going to be a Mum", thereby opening the dialogue for supportive comments, advice or offers of assistance (Walther & Boyd, 2002).

As previously indicated, people generally have diverse interests which may be pursued in an online or face-to-face environment. These may be of a professional nature, as in the case of our

prop-maker. They may participate in an online game and communicate with other gamers through its forums or they may follow a sport and use an internet-based fan forum to keep up-to-date on what is happening with a favourite football team. They may be politically-minded and follow a cause they are passionate about or a political party they are a member of. Or they may relate to a hobby such as those through which the volunteers for this study were recruited (Griffith & Fox, 2007; Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Howard, et al., 2001; Tough, 1995).

These environments, whether virtual or physical, may be regarded as communities and individuals often enjoy involvements with several different communities, as has been demonstrated by this research. The nature of these interactions may vary depending on the nature of the connection, or the original purpose of the community. One is likely to act differently within a gaming community than within a forum for Mazda car owners or chess players.

Although a different face may be projected in a professional environment than in a recreational one, social support may often be forthcoming from a myriad of sources, both virtual and physical (Howard, et al., 2001; Rood & Bruckman, 2009). Barrera highlighted that research has rarely focused on the interactions between individuals and their various environments (Barrera, 2000, p. 238). Some communities may be more supportive than others and some members of the community may be more likely to offer support than others.

Family was listed as a source of social support by only one of the six respondents, being one of the two male volunteers. Research has demonstrated that women are generally more empathetic than males and more often associated with support provision (Trobst, et al., 1994). Bearing this in mind it is entirely possible that the female respondents considered themselves to be the support providers for their family unit and therefore did not list 'family' as one of their sources of social support. The other male respondent, being more mature than the other volunteers surveyed, is similarly more likely to consider himself a source of support for younger family members.

The interview questions were aimed towards provoking the respondents' reflection on examples of unsolicited social support from within their various communities, based on their life experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). As the sample group of participants is relatively small, the information collected is unlikely to be representative of the general population of

hobby communities. However, it is hoped that an understanding of developing trends in the provision of unsolicited social support may be furthered by their participation in this study.

A review of the public forums of the respondents' various hobby communities, compared with their perceptions of their experiences of unsolicited social support within these various communities was of interest. Although the interviewees generally regarded their communities as supportive, for the most part the public-facing forums and bulletin boards of the four communities displayed minimal evidence of this, with the possible exception of the rat club.

Of the forums studied, the <http://swnz.dr-maul.com/forums/> (the Star Wars Fan Club) and the <http://www.gatheringdarkness.co.nz/forum/index.php> (medieval re-enactors) displayed the least activity and, over the period of my review, minimal emotional capital. The Kiwibiker community was the only one of the four which reported "active" members (2,725) as well as "registered" members (26,048). Their "active" membership figure represented more than double that of the next highest membership figure which was the Rat Club with 1,335 "registered" members. The Gathering Darkness and the Star Wars communities reported 646 and 217 registered members, respectively, and this smaller membership is likely to have been responsible for their lower levels of social capital and empathy.

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There are lots of personalities on kiwibiker, and despite the fact that many (and I absolutely include myself in this description) present themselves as having a vulgar sense of humour, and little to no respect or compassion, it is a website, and the unfortunate result of relative anonymity is the 'internet persona'.

I would encourage you to return to your post, ignore the irrelevant and stupid posts, and break the basis of your study down into much more simple terms, basically, give it to everyone in the most basic English possible.

Once I had done as the writer suggested the thread settled into a discussion on research design, presumably subscribed to principally by the academics amongst the community. The Kiwibiker responsible for the email reproduced above unfortunately did not proceed with the process to participate in this research.

Overall, the forums at <http://www.ratclub.org/forum/> (rat club) demonstrated the strongest community-feeling with a chatty, “village-square” atmosphere to the dialogue. The members of this community appeared to meet in person as often as possible with well-attended “rat-meets” and booths at pet expos. There was no shortage of advice, encouragement and offers of in person assistance where needed, although this was predominantly of a ‘rat-nature’. It is acknowledged that discussion of a more personal nature was generally held on their less public Facebook page or by personal message.

The review of these forums demonstrated a contrast to the situation in the early 2000’s, when many online common interest, hobby or gaming communities had highly active bulletin boards which were often used to discuss matters other than those related to the principal purpose of the community. During that era however, online social networking communities were still in their infancy. One of the earliest of these, Friendster, was only launched in 2002 with MySpace being released in 2003. Facebook, which was founded in 2004, announced that “People use Facebook to stay connected with friends and family, to discover what’s going on in the world, and to share and express what matters to them”. As at June 2012 Facebook boasted 955

million active users (Facebook, 2012). Two of the respondents reported that separate Facebook groups, formed expressly for use by those in their hobby communities, were often used to share important or life changing events, as a preference to utilising the public forums of these communities.

In Rheingold's 1993 work he proposed:

Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudo-communities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but I believe they are in part a response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world (Rheingold, 1993, p. 362).

Rheingold's later revision of this work however, included the observation that the virtual communities described by him previously had changed in the intervening years (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 324). He commented that the assumptions, proposals and arguments which he had put forth in the original publication, were widely criticized (Delanty, 2003; Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Robins, 2000). Much of the criticism was aimed at his use of the term "virtual community" and he surmised:

When you are the first person to write about a subject, new works emerge that are based in part on challenging your own. That's how scholarship is supposed to work, although I didn't have any notion that what I was doing was supposed to resemble scholarship. I just knew that there was something very wrong about the public image of online social life that existed in 1992 (Rheingold, 1993/2000, p. 325).

He added that had he known what to expect he would have entitled the book "Virtual Social Networks". Nowadays the phrase "virtual community" does not garner the heated discussion among academics and critics that was evidenced by Rheingold in the 1990's (Fernback & Thompson, 1995). It is a phrase that is commonly used in academic literature and textbooks – a search of any University Library's database will bring to light dozens of titles related to the concept.

My research has demonstrated a shift over the past ten or fifteen years, away from the sharing of life changing events on bulletin boards and community forums. Although these

forums still exist and are active to varying levels, and sympathetic posts can still be found within them (particularly within the rat memorials!), my research found little discussion of the type evidenced in the early years of my interest in this subject. Social networking environments like Facebook and Tumblr have rapidly become a more popular vehicle for discussion of important life events. The expansion of these online environments is as important for communication media as that of email, in that they open new avenues for communication across distance (Farmer, et al., 2009; Lang, 2012; Laugesen, 2010; Myers & Sundaram, 2012; Tapaleao, 2012).

Aside from the provision of an alternative method of interaction for participants in virtual communities such as those researched here, social networking forums have provided a medium for keeping in touch with past associates, family – both near and far, and old school friends. Additionally, when relating an important life event or decision, many of the responses and offers of support may originate from sources that possibly wouldn't have been aware of the event without the use of these channels, therefore a wider support envelope is being provided by the use of this medium (Farmer, et al., 2009; Horrigan & Rainie, 2006; Laugesen, 2010). The introduction of smart phones and tablets, enabling access to online networks anytime, anywhere has contributed to the increase in popularity of such networks (Ipsos MediaCT Germany, 2011; Mitchell, Christian, & Rosenstiel, 2011; Osman, Talib, Sanusi, Shiang-Yen, & Alwi, 2012; Prensky, 2001).

From the inception of my research a decade ago, within the forum of a gaming community, to the social networking which is commonplace today, people are now communicating with a broader cross-section of friends, relatives and associates on day-to-day basis. Before online networking, the relatives from overseas generally sent an annual Christmas card with an update of the year's events and if you were lucky, the latest family photo. Nowadays you can be kept up-to-date with all their news as it happens as well as viewing and commenting on the latest photos of the family vacation, new baby or new home, as these are uploaded to their Facebook, Tumblr or Instagram page (Farmer, et al., 2009; Lang, 2012; Laugesen, 2010).

During the time I was researching this thesis I received a "personal" message through Facebook, sent to myself and six others, which read "you guys heard about xxxxxx? killed in a car accident." The message contained a link to the deceased's Facebook page which had,

during the space of the two days since he had died, become a memorial website. It was now overflowing with old photographs, condolences messages and postings along the lines of “anyone remember the time when.....”. Funeral details were posted there as well as details of the after-funeral ‘wake’, to be held at the University bar he had frequented in the “old” days. Many of the remembrance messages from the site were read out by those speaking at the funeral. After the funeral his family also used the page to communicate with mourners and thank them for attending. Smith questioned whether it was more difficult to die in private now that the internet and social media are so commonplace (B. Smith, 2011, p. 429). This is quite possibly the case although I suspect such memorial tributes as that related above and reported by Smith are still in the minority at present.

Social networking communities such as Facebook have become an increasingly popular medium for updating on everything from what is planned for the holidays to ones latest medical/career/ family/financial crisis. Recently I have offered support for a relative in England who has undergone knee replacement surgery, for a friend of my husband’s who has had a fever, but is “feeling much better now, thank you”, and an old school friend who has made it six months without a cigarette. Without access to communication channels such as these I would not have known about the knee replacement (until the arrival of the Christmas card), or the illness and would not have been in touch with the old school friend – they are one of the many who have ‘found’ me on Facebook.

My research shows that virtual communities continue to be formed by like-minded individuals, created around hobbies, sports, gaming, and other subjects of common interest. Heated discussion still takes place in these forums, to varying degrees, the same as it does in face-to-face communities. There are still those who will notify these communities of important events in their lives, using these communication channels, however they no longer appear to be as popular a choice for communication of this type or with others from these communities. Although the MetalKnights BBS site no longer exists, in the past week I received an invitation to join their closed Facebook community. Although Herkules hasn’t found his way there yet, many of the old time players have.

As evidenced by this research, there is a growing trend away from sharing details of life-changing events within open forums for online communities such as those examined here.

Those interviewed for this research however, would not be aware of the existence of many of the people they interact with online were it not for the existence of these and other common interest groups. Before the internet, people kept pet rats, collected fan memorabilia, rode motorbikes and dressed up in costumes to participate in re-enactments. Local clubs around these and other hobbies existed long before the internet, however membership of these would predominantly have been made up of those living locally and therefore the knowledge and experience provided would have been more limited (Chaple, 2010; Griffith & Fox, 2007; Tough, 1995).

Putnam enquired whether the new “virtual communities” were simply taking the place of the physical communities such as those our parents inhabited (Putnam, 2000, p. 148), communities such as those portrayed in television shows like “Happy Days” (Marshall, 1974-1984) and “The Waltons” (Hamner, 1972 - 1981). Back in the day, the local neighbourhood, church and school communities, together with the family and workplaces, formed the nucleus of daily life. They were commonly the principal sources of material and emotional support, particularly in times of crisis (Murray, 2003). This research has shown that these physical communities do still have a valid place in modern society and in the provision of social support, to varying degrees. However, the ubiquitous nature of the internet and associated communications technologies means that news and events are now able to be broadcast to a far wider audience than in earlier times, using these media.

Earlier, I pondered whether communication within neighbourhood communities had reached a stage whereby the first indication that the neighbours were moving would be the appearance of a For Sale sign up the street. When our neighbours moved away recently, I was informed of their impending departure by a post on Facebook which included a photograph of their new home. The post resulted in positive responses and offers of assistance with the shift and boxes for packing. The week before they moved another notice was added, also via Facebook but this time just to those in the neighbourhood, inviting them to a barbecue to meet the new owners. Although this method of telling the neighbours you are moving is still relatively uncommon, it is perhaps an indication of future directions.

Of the six respondents interviewed for this study, five were aged over 40, and therefore had not “grown up online”. Had more of the participants been younger, a different picture is likely to

have emerged. The phrase 'digital native' was coined to describe those born after the introduction of digital technologies. Through the use of technology from an early age, digital natives are comfortable and very often expert in utilising digital devices and communication methods in their daily life. Smart phones, tablets and online social networking have become very much a part of everyday life. School classrooms and university campuses are equipped with wireless connectivity and students are using the latest in digital technology to interact with their peers (Myers & Sundaram, 2012; Prensky, 2001). The introduction of fibre optic cabling and its associated high speed data connection into New Zealand homes should herald further advances in technology and its use (Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment, 2012). Imagine..... Mum, Dad and the kids sitting around the living room at Christmas, catching up with the overseas relatives on the 50-inch television with a web cam, using Skype over the fibre optic network.....as predicted by "The Jetsons" (Hanna-Barbera, 1962).

5.1 Directions for Future Research

This research is simply a "snapshot in time" and is more than likely out-of-date already. The current situation is vastly different to that experienced fifty years ago. The development of communications technologies such as social networking sites in the past decade has further altered the landscape of communication and support. The development of 3G and 4G mobile technologies, wi-fi access and tablet pc's have further enhanced the portability of these technologies enabling anywhere, anytime access to communities and networks (Mitchell, et al., 2011; Osman, et al., 2012; Prensky, 2001). McKenna and Seidman suggest that as family and friends from the physical space become intermingled with those from the virtual space, the opportunities for research will be many as communication domains continue to merge and advances in communication technology continue to be developed (McKenna & Seidman, 2005, p. 213).

Modern technologies have been used to mobilise the populace to overthrow dictatorships like those of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Muammar Gaddafi of Libya (Chen, 2011; Govern, 2011); circulate live on-the scene footage of breaking news events, such as that uploaded to YouTube after the shootings in a Colorado cinema ("Mobile phone footage from

Denver cinema shooting," 2012); and catch car thieves (Aldridge, 2012; Gye, 2011). As a consequence of the April 2013 Boston marathon bombings, law enforcement officials issued pleas to the public to share their cellphone footage, in an endeavour to identify the culprits (Jervis, 2013). There were negative ramifications of this however, with later reports of innocent bystanders being targeted online as possible suspects (Thurston, 2013). The observations in this thesis merely reflect the situation as at the year 2012. A similar research project in five, ten or fifty years' time is likely to draw entirely different findings.

As mentioned earlier the respondents interviewed for this research were predominantly over forty – had the participants been younger, a different picture is likely to have emerged. It would perhaps be of interest to interview a cross-section of online gamers, who tend to have a younger representation. A comparison between the two groups may present another aspect to the research, although allowances for the time passed between interviews of the two groups would need to be made.

As far back as 1988, Heitzmann and Kaplan proposed that an evaluation of the level of satisfaction with the support provided, i.e. quality over quantity as a viable area for investigation (Heitzmann & Kaplan, 1988, p. 79). It would perhaps be of interest to investigate this topic in light of the variety of sources for social support available in modern society.

It is clear there are many unanswered questions around social support within online and offline communities. Technologies for communication and interaction are undergoing frequent developments which have impacts on everyday life (Mitchell, et al., 2011). As already mentioned, the enhancements to existing and future technologies through the introduction of high speed fibre optic cabling to New Zealand homes, will likely have impacts on how we interact with many of our various communities globally (Ministry of Business Innovation & Employment, 2012). The more widespread use of tablet pc's and smart phones enables interaction with our communities and networks from locations other than in front of the personal computer, as was the case in Rheingold's day (Ipsos MediaCT Germany, 2011).

It is likely that as we become more accustomed to communicating with others through new forms of electronic media, our virtual networks will become increasingly relied upon for the

provision of social support. It will be interesting to discover what new forms community may take in future years. As virtual and non-virtual worlds continue to mesh and such networks are further expended to facilitate global participation, it is to be expected that challenges for researchers will continue to present themselves.

For the most part, I have endeavoured to use “layman’s terms” in the writing of this thesis and have included definitions or explanations of phrases and terminology in many instances. This is so that those unfamiliar with virtual communities and other forms of communication technologies, such as my 87-year old father-in-law, can read and understand my research.

6. References

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