

1-1-2013

Examining The Use Of Spirituality As A Form Of Social Support In Computer-Mediated Communication

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**EXAMINING THE USE OF SPIRITUALITY AS A FORM OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN
COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

by

KRISTOPHER M. PAAL

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

2013

MAJOR: COMMUNICATION

Approved by:

Advisor

Date

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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family, particularly my wife Missy and son Aaron. Thank you for all you have done for me through this journey.

I would also like to dedicate this research to the memory of Dr. Gail Fahoome, who tragically passed away just prior to the completion of this process. Her commitment to research and academia were to be admired, and I am thankful she was able to serve on my committee.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing this journey in doctoral study would not have been possible without the support and guidance of so many individuals. While I am sure there will be someone I may forget, I would like to specifically acknowledge a number of people.

I would like to thank each member of my dissertation committee for their service, guidance, and feedback throughout this process. I have been honored to work with each of you throughout these long years, and I am grateful for the opportunity. Dr. Gail Fahoome provided a solid foundation for me concerning research design and understanding the extent that our generalizations truly extend to. Dr. Mary Garrett instilled in me the strong desire for asking critical questions and to look deeper beneath the surface. Dr. Katheryn Maguire has been both an amazing role model and mentor over the years. Her understanding of social support processes go well beyond the confines of research.

I extend a very special thank you to Dr. Matthew Seeger who has served as my advisor throughout this project. It has certainly been a long road, but your insightful feedback and comments have helped me become a better writer and researcher.

In addition, I would like to thank my “former” colleagues at Malone University, specifically within the Communication Arts program. Andrew, Marcia, David, Ann, Tammie, and Kerrie experienced all of my highs and lows of completing a dissertation while teaching. Special thanks to Kahle Bryant, Alyssa Pearson, and Rachel Stojkovic who served as coders.

Finally, without the love and support of my family and friends (who are too numerous to name here) I’m sure I would have given up long ago. Mom and Dad, I can never thank you enough for making me value my education. You, and countless others, have been the embodiment of the types of support discussed within this document and I am eternally grateful.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace and computer-mediated communication have become powerful forces in modern society. Online dating, blogs debating gun control and the controversial posts that follow, and even virtual identity fraud all provide examples of the emergence of how computer-mediated communication changes the landscape of interactions. According to U.S. Census information for the year 2010, over 80% of Americans use the Internet either inside or outside of their homes (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). As newer and faster communication technologies emerge, the number has grown. As Gattiker (2001) stated:

Cyberspace is neither a pure pop nor culture phenomenon nor a simple technological artifact. Instead, it is a powerful, collective, mnemonic technology offering a computer-generated, interactive, virtual environment of cyberspace. With its virtual environments and simulated worlds, cyberspace is a metaphysical laboratory, thereby providing people with a tool for examining our very sense of reality and the world we live in. (p. 12)

Physical boundaries are becoming less of a limitation for the translation and transfer of culture among wider audiences. With so many people online, many research questions arise concerning how individuals use this new form of communication (Campbell, 2005; Igarashi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Ramirez, Zhang, McGrew, & Lin, 2007; Warisse Turner, Grube, & Meyers, 2001; Wright, 2000a). While recent research reports that a large number of Internet users seek health-related information (Macias, Stavchansky Lewis, & Smith, 2005; Rains & Young, 2009), the actual utility of the Internet continues to be extended with each technological advance. Internet surfers now do everything from ordering pizza to participating in religious services online. Therefore, the ongoing task for communication research in the 21st century is to provide precise explanation of computer-mediated communication (CMC) phenomenon (Walther, 2009).

CMC is defined as “synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders’ computers to receivers” (Walther, 1992, p. 52). According to theory and studies (Campbell-Eichhorn, 2008; Houser, Fleuriet, & Estrada, 2012; Kalman & Rafaeli, 2011; Walther, 1992), the Internet is increasingly a site for individuals to initiate, develop, and maintain interpersonal relationships using CMC. For example, the proliferation of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and MySpace indicates that more individuals are turning to CMC to fulfill interpersonal needs and processes (Craig & Wright, 2012). CMC provides individuals with greater autonomy over self-presentation and disclosure (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006), and can reduce the fear of negative evaluation (Keaten & Kelly, 2008). Heath and Bryant (2000) noted that, “people spend many hours of contact via the Internet with persons around the country and globe. Many of these people never meet. Nevertheless, they form strong, platonic and even romantic relationships” (p. 220). Given that so many individuals are using CMC for relationships, how does CMC influence the expression of specific interpersonal processes?

Theory such as Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT; Walther, 1992) provides a framework for explaining how online relationships are initiated, developed, and maintained through CMC’s limited nonverbal cues available. Although SIPT has been a theoretical perspective primarily used to help explain relational developmental aspects of CMC (Antheunis, Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2012; Ramirez, Walther, Burgoon, & Sunnafrank, 2002; Ramirez & Zhang, 2007; Walther, 1996), it also has potential to be extended to explain certain relational processes associated with CMC. One such area that holds promise is in the realm of communication that is interpersonally supportive.

CMC scholars have begun to examine a wide range of CMC interpersonal phenomenon, one area being the way CMC is used for interpersonally supportive reasons. The effects of CMC support have been reported (Aldridge-Sanford, 2010; Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Wright, 2002) as well as some of the general types of support present identified (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2009). However, the characteristics of specific types of CMC support have not been thoroughly examined in the literature and need further discussion. One type of support that merits additional inquiry is associated with spirituality, which is attributed to divine sources (Maton, 1989), Earth-spirited faiths (Smith & Horne, 2007) or world religions (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). It is important to note that spirituality as examined in this study is not limited to Christian religious traditions but encompasses a number of religious and philosophical practices. Spiritual support, generally defined here as channeling through communication power which is divine or beyond the natural realm to meet the needs of self and another, is still a concept in greater need of exploration and refinement. General ethical considerations in traditional face-to-face settings about private beliefs may limit the use of certain types of support, such as spiritual support (Polzer-Casarez & Engebretson, 2012). Since CMC is a medium providing anonymity through its various contexts for interaction, will the context influence expression of spiritual support? Due to its nature, CMC may enable certain types of support that include spiritual themes. Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to add to the growing body of literature on CMC by examining how spirituality is used as social support within CMC. The following section provides a brief rationale for the need for this study and defines key terms used.

Rationale

Examining interpersonal communication in CMC can be daunting when considering how new technology impacts interpersonal relationships. Early debate against the utility of CMC was that it was, as social presence theory states, “information deficient” (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). A primary area of concern of early CMC research examined the actual viability of CMC to appropriately manage relationships (Walther, 1992). Earlier CMC research also explored many different issues, ranging from how relationships initiated through CMC vary from those initiated face-to-face (Walther, 1992; Walther & Burgoon, 1992) to whether fully-functional relationships can be maintained through CMC (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003; Query & Wright, 2003; Ramirez et al., 2002; Robinson & Turner, 2003; Tidwell & Walther, 2002). As the body of research on CMC impact on society grew research has become even more specific, examining such phenomena as online silence as a tool for relational maintenance (House et al., 2012), its impact on education and learning (Sherblom, 2010), and work performance (Santra & Giri, 2009).

Socially supportive communication, defined by Burleson and MacGeorge (2002) as the “verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid” (p. 374), has become a growing area for CMC inquiry. Specifically of interest has been how individuals communicate support through online support communities, discussion boards, and groups (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2010; Rains & Young, 2009; Wright, 2000b). Besides offering social support, Coulson and Greenwood (2012) stated that online groups and communities formed around support are defined by their ability to “transcend both geographical and temporal barriers as well as anonymity and asynchronous text-based communication” (p. 871). For the purposes of the current study, the term *online*

community generally is used to refer to CMC found within discussion boards, communities, support group, or social network.

CMC support within an online community can provide a communicator a sense of anonymity which may aid disclosure of difficult topics (Green-Hamann, Campbell-Eichhorn, & Sherblom, 2011). Rains and Scott (2007) identified online forums as a medium where anonymity will be prevalent. Scott (1998) defined anonymity as the “degree to which a communicator perceives the message source as unknown or unspecified” (p. 387). While communicators in an online community may eventually lose their anonymity, it is important to explore how certain types of support may better be expressed when there is anonymity. Furthermore, research has examined anonymity within the context of blogs (Qian & Scott, 2007) but there is greater need to examine anonymity within other online contexts.

The presence of online social support can be a particularly useful alternative for individuals experiencing extreme circumstances or challenges (Braithwaite et al., 1999). One such area that presents immense stress and difficulty is the loss of a loved one, commonly called bereavement (Christ, Bonanno, Malkinson, & Rubin, 2003). Online support provides an outlet for bereaved individuals who are either seeking an anonymous way to solicit support (Green-Hamann et al, 2011) or due to various concerns may not be able to directly access face-to-face channels of support (Aldridge-Sanford, 2010). Studies have examined such things as how computer-mediated social support reduced stress (Wright, 1999), how the interactions within blogging promoted social support (Rains & Keating, 2011), and the role social networks play in providing emotional social support (Wright, 2012). However, what seems to mainly be absent in the literature is a clear examination of themes and characteristics found within a computer-mediated social support message.

There has also been increased interest in understanding the intersection of social support and spirituality (Baesler & Ladd, 2009; Kleman, Everett, & Egbert, 2009). Defined by Kirkwood (1994), spirituality is an individual's ultimate existential aspirations and the methods for how they are achieved. Spirituality is expressed through an intrinsic relationship with the divine. Key to understanding spirituality is the recognition that it broadly encompasses all beliefs concerning forces and powers beyond human capability and is not limited to a specific religion, doctrine or theology. Spirituality has been discussed as not only an indicator of health (Krause, 2011), but also as a form of social support (Roff, Simon, Nelson-Gardell, & Pleasants, 2009). However, spiritual support, generally defined in the current study as channeling through communication power that is divine or beyond the natural realm to meet the needs of self and another, is still a concept in greater need of exploration (Johnstone, McCormack, Pil Yoon, & Smith, 2012). According to Egbert, Mickley, and Coeling (2004), even with numerous measures and support for spiritual support, it has often been overlooked in health communication research. Furthermore, while spirituality and spiritual support has been discussed in terms of CMC (Campbell, 2010; Cheong & Poon, 2008), there is no clear explanation as to how spirituality is characterized in CMC and how it relates to social supportive messages. Therefore, how are deeper characteristics of religion, mainly spirituality communicated through the channels of CMC? How can CMC be seen as a channel of communication where deeply rooted spiritual beliefs are expressed, discussed, and used for supportive purposes? Finally, how do individuals specifically use CMC as a means for spiritual support? These questions guide and ground the current study.

The purpose of the current study is to provide examination of spiritual support messages and their themes as found within CMC. The objective is to provide better explanation for how

spiritual support is utilized in CMC. The following chapter provides further rationale and defense for the present study. First, this chapter reviews pertinent background issues that emerge when examining spirituality and CMC. Second, it reviews research literature on spirituality, religiosity, social support messages, and Social Information Processing Theory. Each of the components discussed in the literature review are discussed in terms of the present study. Research questions for the study are discussed in the final segment of this chapter.

Background

When investigating spiritual support in CMC, there are a number of pertinent issues that help ground the need for inquiry. The following is a brief overview of some of those pertinent issues, as well as certain assumptions and limitations of the current study.

Spirituality is not religiosity. Parrott (2004) stated that within the broad discipline of communication, limited research has actually examined spirituality and religiosity. Perhaps one reason that spirituality has not specifically garnered the attention of many researchers is because of the complexity and confusion concerning spirituality's meaning. For example, Marler and Hadaway's (2002) study confirmed that individuals have a difficult time differentiating between spirituality and religiosity. Spirituality may contain aspects of various world religions, philosophies, and existential practices and is broader in scope than that of religiosity. Furthermore, since much of the literature available on spirituality and religiosity contain concepts that overlap, it may come as no surprise that there is still little written beyond health communication and rhetorical analyses about the role of spirituality in communication. The current study addresses the need for more research in the construct of spirituality.

Although some suggest that neither religiosity or spirituality should be favored over the other for scientific inquiry (Egbert et al., 2004), the problematic issue of their confusion in

research literature can be a legitimate concern, as evident by studies which either sporadically interchange the terms (see Baesler, 1997; Nadler, Courtright, & Nadler, 1996) or never adequately define them (see Dudley & Wisbey, 2000; Johnson, Jang, De Li, & Larson, 2000). Underwood and Teresi's (2002) study about religiosity and spirituality provides the following concerning differentiating between the two:

Religiousness has specific behavioral, social, doctrinal, and denominational characteristics because it involves a system of worship and doctrine that is shared within a group. Spirituality is concerned with transcendent, addressing ultimate questions about life's meaning, with the assumption that there is more to life than what we see or fully understand. (p. 23)

The clear distinction between spirituality and religiosity is that the majority of literature on spirituality focuses on individual feelings of being connected with oneself and something larger than oneself (God, or the divine). The literature on religiosity focuses on the more ritualistic and societal driven aspects of how individuals connect with the divine and express their religions (Underwood & Teresi, 2002). Two terms that clarify this distinction between spirituality and religiosity are "intrinsic" and "extrinsic." In a very early exploration of religiosity, Allport and Ross (1967) explained the dichotomy of the intrinsic and extrinsic nature by saying, "the extrinsically motivated person *uses* his religion, whereas the intrinsically motivated *lives* his religion" (p. 434). Whereas extrinsic religiosity is ritualized and instrumental, intrinsic spirituality is more holistic and puts religion into action.

The current study seeks to extend research on spirituality by examining how intrinsic spiritual beliefs can be expressed as spiritual support messages sent via CMC. This is important for researchers as more individuals turn to CMC and online communities for various purposes. By examining spiritual support in CMC, communication scholarship will not only have a richer sense of the utility of spirituality and spiritual support, but also of CMC in online communities.

The need for continued research on spirituality. Baesler (1997) reported that throughout the latter half of the 20th century, Americans steadily reported praying to a higher power. A nationwide study conducted by The Barna Group (2005) indicated that nine of 10 adults engage weekly in some sort of faith-related activity. Recent Gallup poll research (Newport, 2012) reported that 69% of adult Americans claim to be either moderately or very religious. In a post 9/11 society where religious extremism is prevalent in various world religions, many people not only have different opinions about spirituality, but they also have many spiritual questions. Researchers have examined issues related to spirituality ranging from its role in identity formation (Hall & Edwards, 2002; Kirby et al., 2006; Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Mullikin, 2007) to its impact on family relations (Considine & Miller, 2010; Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; Huang, 1999; Hughes, 2004; Wilcox, Chaves, & Franz, 2004). However, little research has examined the traits and characteristics of spiritual messages in CMC. Understanding the unique characteristics and structure of spiritual support in CMC would extend the realm of spiritual research.

Furthermore, continuing to examine spirituality in CMC is warranted because of the variety of ways it manifests in online contexts. Whether it is through arguments on discussion boards as to whether prayer should be allowed in school, debate over world religion, or through online communities that offer spiritual guidance and nurturing, more and more people use the Internet for spiritual purposes (Considine & Miller, 2010). Due to the proliferation of media, spiritual messages are increasingly being studied more critically to understand their meaning in many contexts (see Blaney & Benoit, 1997; Campbell, 2005; Fiese & Tomcho, 2001; Johnson et al., 2000; Miller, 1999; Mullikin, 2007; Russell, 1999; Sass, 2000; Zagano, 1990). It is clear that

issues related to spirituality are evident throughout CMC and require further attention by research.

Where people meet online. As newer communication technologies have become commonplace in society, more individuals are accepting and participating in online communities (Wang, Chung, Park, McLaughlin, & Fulk, 2012). For instance, a Pew Research Center survey (Duggan & Brenner, 2013) indicates 67% of Internet users are members of a social networking site. While individuals certainly still congregate and relate with one another in real life, the Internet offers the ability for communities and groups to gather from across the globe to discuss and interact with one another. Obviously, the presence of online communities and groups presents challenges and research opportunities for communication scholars. The following is a brief overview of some of the background issues concerning online community.

The term *online community* is often synonymous with other terms like *online group*, *computer-mediated group*, and even *social network*. For the purposes of the current study, an online community is a group of individuals with a common interest who use CMC for rule-governed and ongoing interaction and togetherness (Rodgers & Chen, 2005). Rule-governed interaction indicates that there is some code of conduct for online participants and that CMC is typically moderated. Most CMC takes place within discussion boards (or *discussion threads*, in some cases), which use a topic tree interface for individuals to post CMC for others to read and respond to (Basden-Arnold, 2005). Membership in an online community is commonly associated with having shared similarity with others (Wright, 2002) and the willingness to interact and respond to other member posts (Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Online communities often are formed around a common purpose, such as fandom (Albrechtslund, 2010; Bennett, 2012) or support (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2009; Pfeil et al., 2010). The

current study is interested in online support communities, which is considered an online community whose common purpose is to provide computer-mediated messages of social support to their members.

Many individuals use online communities for the purpose of support and report that has led to increased social support and better self-efficacy in dealing with health concerns (Rains & Young, 2009). As previously discussed, the Internet provides a medium for individuals whose general access to face-to-face interactions is limited or prohibited due to various reasons (Braithwaite et al., 1999). Klaw, Dearmin-Huebsch, and Humphreys (2000) concluded that individuals in a stigmatized community may be drawn towards using online communities for aid or support. One example is Basden-Arnold (2005), who examined the use of bulletin boards in online communities focused around large families (i.e., multiple children) to discuss how CMC is used as social support for families that may not be able to access face-to-face support. Furthermore, Peterson (2009) examined how members of an asynchronous online support group for gay men living with HIV/AIDS and examined the message characteristics that helped them remain positive. Not only does this research illustrate how particular groups who may not have direct access to support use CMC, but it also provides justification for examining the message characteristics of how other online support communities support one another.

Assumptions and Limitations

Several assumptions and limitations frame this study. The first assumption is that CMC is a legitimate channel for messages associated with relational processes to be communicated. Whereas this assumption has been supported given its grounding in theory (Walther, 1992, 1996), it is important to note that at times messages shared through CMC can be impersonal and not serve relational functions. Another important assumption is that individuals who use CMC

both send and receive socially supportive messages. CMC can be used for multiple purposes; therefore, it is safe to assume that individuals use CMC for reasons associated with social support. A related assumption is that social support messages are capable of being identified as supportive in CMC from an outside party. Being that observed CMC has already transpired, it must be assumed that one can be capable of identifying it as support. One final assumption is that spirituality can be observed as a construct. Whereas spirituality has been defined as an intrinsic relationship with the divine, it is assumed that through the construction of valid and reliable measures that spirituality may be observed, as it is manifest and latent in communication processes.

A number of limitations must be considered. One important limitation is that the current study focuses only upon the text of CMC. Although advances in theory and research develop which examines how photos, videos, and emoticons aid CMC, the current study does not address these areas. Other scholars are now exploring the role of some of these areas of CMC (see Igarashi et al., 2005), but the current study only emphasizes the communicative functions of text based messages in CMC. In other words, the present study is interested in the written content of discussion boards more-so than the emoticons, visuals, and videos that may also be posted on a particular discussion thread. A further limitation of the current study pertains to the analysis of pre-existing discussion board threads. Threaded discussions pose a limitation because analysis is focused upon communication which has already taken place as opposed to communication in action during observation and analysis. To clarify, the present study is limited by viewing the transcripts of communication which have already taken place.

Review of Literature

In analyzing spiritual support and social support within CMC, it becomes important to not only have theoretical grounding but previous research that supports the concepts under examination. The following review of literature discusses the theory that grounds this research: Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992). Various approaches and perspectives to the scholarly investigation of spirituality, social and spiritual supportive messages, and bereavement are also discussed.

Social Information Processing Theory

As more technological innovations influence communication, research must develop theories that properly explain CMC (Scott, 2009). According to Mohammed and Thombre (2005), CMC offers “a level of protection, insulating the person presenting herself or himself from the usual threat of rebuff or ridicule that may occur in face-to-face interactions, particularly when sensitive information is revealed” (p. 348). One way this can be interpreted is that communication theory explaining face-to-face interactions may not appropriately explain interactions taking place via CMC. Furthermore, Jones (1995) wrote that CMC, “not only structures social relations, it is the space within the relations occur and the tool that individuals use to enter that space” (p. 16). Given the new technological innovations and unique characteristics associated with CMC, proper theory must be developed and applied for its examination. The following section provides a brief overview of earlier theoretical approaches associated with CMC and an in-depth examination of social information processing theory (Walther, 1992), which theoretically grounds the current study.

Earlier CMC approaches. The development of specifically computer-mediated communication theory has been an ongoing process. Communication scholars have been

studying CMC since the mid-1970s, with the advancement of several perspectives and approaches (Lamerichs & te Molder, 2003). For example, many scholars provided revision to existing theory in an attempt to explain how CMC impacts group decision-making processes (Contractor, Seibold, & Heller, 1996; Poole & DeSanctis, 1992; Scott, 1999). However, this approach is too limiting in explaining the extensiveness of CMC's utility and scope. Scholars have also offered various theories to explain how interpersonal relationships develop through computer-mediated communication. Both social presence theory (Short et al., 1976) and media richness theory (Daft & Lengel, 1984) provide useful examples that illustrate how CMC differs from face-to-face communication. In most early theoretical approaches, CMC was seen as highly impersonal and not capable of building and sustaining interpersonal relationships (Walther, 1992). Tidwell and Walther (2002) cited several perspectives that characterized CMC as impersonal and unable to contribute to relational development for reasons such as the lack of nonverbal communication and other interpersonal cues. These perspectives have not been able to stand the test of time, as current theory has shown otherwise. One such interpersonal communication theory is Walther's (1992) Social Information Processing Theory. SIPT is a logical, parsimonious theory that has broad scope and utility for understanding how communication functions in the development and maintenance of relationships and social support exchanges.

Social Information Processing Theory. The SIPT seeks to explain how “without nonverbal cues, communicators adapt their relational behaviors to the remaining cues available in CMC such as content and linguistic strategies, as well as chronemic and typographic cues” (Tidwell & Walther, 2002, p. 319). Central to this explanation of the SIPT is the implication that communicators are capable of learning how to adapt to CMC and continue to form impressions

of other communicators despite not having all of the cues present in face-to-face communication. In essence, SIPT provides a rationale of relational development specifically through CMC (Walther, 1992). Even though communicators using CMC cannot utilize all of the same channels used in face-to-face communication such as non-verbal gestures, impressions can still be developed through the decoding of linguistic messages and adapting to those messages.

Before going further, a distinction about SIPT needs to be made. The terminology of “social information processing” has been used before by other theorists, most notably Salancik and Pfeffer (as cited in Pollock, Whitbred, & Contractor, 2000 – primary sources), in their work on social context and job satisfaction. Walther’s (1992) foundational piece on SIPT of CMC provides this explanation:

Fulk, Steinfield, Schmitz, and Power (1987), following Salancik and Pfeffer (1977, 1978) originally used this term to describe a socially constructed subjective model of media choice (as opposed to a rational choice model, such as media richness theory). The implication of their use of the term was that one’s perception of an object is in large part determined by the communication one has with others about such objects. This article does not contest or affirm their position (which they have since renamed “social influence model”; Fulk, Schmitz, & Steinfield, 1990) . . . The present use of the term is consistent with its use in psychological literature regarding impression formation and related social-cognitive processes. (p. 68)

The distinction is that Walther’s (1992) use of the term is centered on the individual cognitive process of socializing with another person, as opposed to the influence of society on processing information. In other words, SIPT may fall in line with some of the basics of the original concept of Salancik and Pfeffer’s (1978) Social Information Processing, but Walther used his version to propose a theoretical framework specifically of individual CMC relational development.

Impression and relational development in SIPT is predicated upon the presence of two features in CMC: passage of sufficient time and message exchanges (Walther, 1992). Passage of

sufficient time indicates that even though CMC is slower than face-to-face communication, communicators can still develop impressions and relationships given adequate time (Walther & Tidwell, 1995). In other words, even though there will be a lapse of time between when two people “meet” and post messages in an online discussion room, they may still develop an impression of the other if the online discussions persist long enough. Message exchange refers to the very specific verbal and linguistic cues available for communicators using CMC (Walther, 1992, 1996). Based upon the fact that there will not be an opportunity to focus upon certain non-verbal cues, communicators will have to fully develop impressions based upon the words exchanged in the CMC. For example, the communicators in the threaded discussion presented will have to rely on the written content and construction of the messages exchanged to form an impression of the other communicator. As a result of these two features, communicators can adapt how they communicate in CMC. Specifically, Walther (1992) stated that four requisite elements must occur for CMC adaptation to take place: there must be motivation for relationship, the proper ability to decode messages sent through CMC and form impressions, the advancement of these impressions towards making assumptions about the other communicator, and the management of relational change due to the communication. Therefore, if these elements are present in CMC between two people, SIPT’s perspective will say that it is more than likely that a relationship can be developed and maintained.

When explaining spiritual and social support in online bereavement support communities, the four requisite functions of CMC are essential concepts establishing that individuals are engaged in a relational process. First, the motivation for relationship is assumed to be based upon the need for community members to bereave the loss of a loved one. Based upon the textual cues of online discussion boards, members should be able to decode and process the

messages which are supportive or disclosing issues related to bereavement. Once processed, community members should be able make an impression of the other and adapt their reply appropriately. Seen through the requisite functions of CMC, exchanging social and spiritual support can be seen as a relational process. However, one area that has not been adequately examined is how the context of CMC may influence the use of social support.

Both sufficient time and message exchanges may lead to less miscommunication between online communicators. For instance, Gattiker (2001) wrote that miscommunication as a result of various cultural misunderstandings can be avoided in CMC by taking time to carefully craft messages. While early approaches to CMC would dismiss humor and colloquial writing as having no place in CMC, Walther (1992) argued the chronemic issues related to CMC still provide opportunity to utilize certain communication styles. As long as CMC participants still “think before they write,” carefully stylized messages with specific relational purposes can still be communicated. This is fundamental for the transmission of spiritual and social support messages in CMC. Specifically, spiritual and social support messages are messages that require thought and consideration before being conveyed (Maton, 1989).

The hyperpersonal perspective of SIPT. According to Walther (1996), relationships developed through CMC can be impersonal, interpersonal, or hyperpersonal. As noted previously, early CMC literature primarily dismissed CMC as illegitimate because there is opportunity for communicators to act very impersonally. Walther (1996) stated that impersonal CMC is actually legitimate at times, because it may still serve a purpose (such as simply retrieving basic information). An interpersonal relationship can also be an outcome of CMC as outlined and described above. Building off of the fundamental assumptions and propositions of SIPT, which explained how interpersonal relationships are developed through CMC, Walther

(1996) argued that CMC can actually lead to a stronger relationship than that of face-to-face communication.

Walther (1996) used the term “hyperpersonal communication” to illustrate “CMC that is more socially desirable than we tend to experience in parallel face-to-face interaction” (p. 17). Due to the minimal number of cues present in CMC, communicators may be able to develop an exaggerated relationship through an over-attribution of similarity. This over-attribution may be the result of a number of factors which take into consideration some of the very basic elements of communication: sender, receiver, channel, and feedback. Through distortions of these elements in CMC, the relationship may appear to be more serious than what it actually is. Walther (1996) summarized by saying that, “CMC provides, in some cases, opportunities for selective self-presentation, idealization, and reciprocation” (p. 28). In other words, CMC does present opportunity for communicators to present themselves in particular framed ways, which may lead to the idealized perception of the individual by the receiver.

A rather discouraging illustration of hyperpersonal communication is how an online predator may seek out victims by selectively presenting themselves in particular ways that are idealized to victims. This in turn causes the victim to reciprocate communication and may ultimately lead to some detrimental action. However, a more encouraging perspective of hyperpersonal communication is that it may actually assist the idealization of the self, considering the work done on self-presentation and idealization conducted through studies in Social Identity Theory (see Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Garza, Lipton, & Isonio, 1989; Hogg & Grieve, 1999; Stets & Burke, 2000), and the work conducted by Goffman’s studies of self-presentation (1959). Furthermore, spiritual and social support in CMC may be related to aspects of hyperpersonal communication, specifically that exchanging supportive messages in an online

support community could lead to an over-attribution of similarities. For instance, when individuals exchange similar experiences in a bereavement online community with intent of helping the other, they may develop a hyper-sense of commonality.

Walther's hyperpersonal communication concept was examined by Warisse Turner et al. (2001) by focusing specifically on online cancer support groups. Through a comparative study of the support offered by face-to-face communication versus CMC, the researchers were able to examine what influences may contribute to the development of a hyperpersonal relationship. Subjects reported developing deeper connections with those providing support through a cancer support listserv when the face-to-face communication was not strong in their lives (Warisse Turner et al., 2001). Further, those who found high levels of socially supportive communication on the listserv were more inclined to contact one another via personal e-mail, which supports the hyperpersonal communication assumptions of presentation, idealization, and reciprocation. The study indicates that given the preference, individuals may seek traditional forms of social support but will seek social support via CMC when traditional forms are not strong enough. Regardless, through the framework provided by SIPT, CMC is seen as a viable site for relational development and for processes associated with social support.

Tidwell and Walther (2002) explored the effects of hyperpersonal CMC on disclosure, impression, and evaluations of others. Their findings revealed that online communicators will feel motivated to be liked and will adapt to the limited cues present to become more desirable and attain interpersonal goals. This provides support to the claim that a hyperpersonal relationship appears more serious than it actually is.

Sherblom (2010) highlighted how the hyperpersonal perspective explains how instructors can take advantage of CMC (such as email) to bolster the impression of their students.

According to findings, instructors developing hyperpersonally with students can potentially increase participation, increase collaborative learning and provoke in-class discussion. This conclusion illustrates a direct link between SIPT and the ability to impact relational processes. Although the hyperpersonal influence impacted face-to-face relationships, it would still be of interest to see how it may influence relationships that may never meet face-to-face.

SIPT centered research. There has been empirical support for SIPT. Walther and Burgoon (1992) were able to support SIPT and a cues-filtered out perspective of relational development through CMC. Tidwell and Walther (2002) conducted an experiment where the partial purpose was to provide “further support for the notion that mediated interactants can and will develop personalized relationships characterized by intimacy” (p. 342). They compared dyads of strangers in both controlled face-to-face settings and in CMC settings and found that interactive uncertainty strategies were employed more by subjects using CMC than in face-to-face situations. Significantly more questions were asked in CMC than in face-to-face communication. Findings also revealed that face-to-face communication led to more superficial questioning than did CMC. The questions and disclosures in CMC were significantly found to be more intimate and less peripheral than those in face-to-face situations. Overall, the findings reinforced Walther’s assumptions in SIPT that communicators will adapt to the content of messages in CMC to develop relationships and relational intimacy. Further empirical support for SIPT can also be found in Walther, Loh, and Granka (2005); Walther and Bunz (2005); Ellison et al. (2006); Ramirez (2007); Ramirez and Zhang (2007); Thompson (2008b); and Kingsley Westerman and Westerman (2010).

SIPT in research studies. SIPT provided the theoretical grounding for numerous recent studies since initial conception. The cues filtered out approach of SIPT aided the comparison of

conflict approaches between CMC and face-to-face interactions (Hobman, Bordia, Irmer & Chang, 2002). The findings showed relational and process oriented conflict was more evident in CMC than face-to-face interactions. Having limited nonverbal cues aided individuals in resolving conflict, which provides support for SIPT's ability to explain relational processes. Kalman, Ravid, Raban, and Rafaeli (2006) examined the chronemic aspects of lapse time and response rate in asynchronous CMC. Their findings help explain how responsiveness and interactivity are positively related, and that there seems to be a threshold when lapse time damages interaction. Thompson (2008a) used SIPT to explain parents' and teacher's use of relational communication in their CMC and the linguistic, verbal, and textual cues they used to adapt to one another. Exploring online dating, Farrer and Gavin (2009) provided additional support for SIPT through a grounded theory analysis concluding that "online daters adapt their efforts to present and acquire social information using the cues that the online dating platform provides" (p. 411). Additionally, this work highlights the ability for SIPT to explain certain relational processes associated with dating. Antheunis et al. (2012) demonstrated that in the absence of certain nonverbal cues in CMC, individuals will revert back to language based strategies to reduce uncertainty and engage in relational processes. This study is particularly helpful as social and spiritual support messages in the current study are being examined as specifically language based strategies.

SIPT in the current study. In summarizing SIPT, Walther (1992) proposed a theory that helps make CMC a legitimate site for not only interpersonal communication but hyperpersonal communication as well. Impersonal communication does exist through CMC, but the same can be said of regular face-to-face communication. SIPT provides the theoretical framework to state that given the proper amount of time and the ability to process and adapt to

messages, CMC provides authentic and meaningful communication between two or more communicators. One of the most intriguing caveats offered through initial SIPT research has been that as the filtered cues of CMC take place, communicators adapt their messages and may develop stronger connections than in face-to-face communication. How the cues filtered out approach of SIPT impacts some of the relational processes that take place through CMC continues to be understood and requires additional attention. The current study adds to the body of literature on SIPT by examining spiritual and social support messages in online contexts. SIPT can offer perspective for how members of an online support community use support messages. Due to the limited cues available, individuals can adapt their messages and engage in support processes with other members. It is with this in mind that the investigation of social support messages through CMC becomes more important.

Social Support

There are times in life when an individual needs the help and support of another person. From a child's early development of social skills to the final days experienced by a cancer patient in hospice, the concept of supporting someone in need is commonplace in society. Virtanen and Isotalus (2011) stated that the essence of social support is "the awareness of a real or potential void in a person's experience, and of otherness that intends to alter that experience to achieve wholeness" (p. 37). In other words, social support takes place when there is awareness of difficulty and expression of assistance. Burlison and MacGeorge (2002) defined social support as the "verbal and nonverbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 374). Implied by this definition is that when support is initiated by one individual to another, communication is involved. Burlison, Albrecht, Goldsmith, and Sarason (1994) stated that social support is studied as communication

because it is through the means of communication that support is enacted, responded to, and provided. Segrin and Flora (2005) explained the communicative power of social support, stating “the availability of social support significantly enhances people’s general well-being and happiness in addition to their ability to withstand a variety of major stressors” (p. 226). At the heart of all studies of social support is the discovery and understanding of how supportive person-centered communication has the ability to effectively bolster an individual’s sense of well-being (Bertera, 2005; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997; High & Dillard, 2012; Reinhardt, Boerner, & Horowitz, 2006). The current study is particularly interested in how social and spiritual support messages are utilized in CMC. The following section discusses pertinent areas within the vast body of research concerning communication and social support, with specific attention provided to Cutrona and Russell’s (1990) matching framework. Bereavement is also discussed in terms of phenomena wherein social support takes place.

Early conceptualizations of social support. The study of how social support is communicated has developed over time. Albrecht and Adelman (1984) defined social support as a network of social connections where instrumental aid is exchanged. According to this perspective, individuals should be connected through some sort of shared network. The major contribution to research from this perspective is that social support takes place within a shared network, whether that is family, friends, or some other group. Conceptualizing a shared network into the nature of social support indicates that communication must take place within that network. To clarify, how can an individual receive support if they cannot communicate that need to others with whom they are connected? However, the issue of social support as an “instrumental aid” in this definition is vague, because instrumental aid may range from simply

giving an affirming word to another person to offering the same person monetary support. The understanding of social support necessitated a clearer explanation of what types of support exist.

Social support has also been seen in relation to the behaviors that enable an individual to have a sense of increased control over the situations they experience. Researchers such as Tolsdorf (1976) focused on how support is an action or behavior that helps achieve personal goals. A key distinction in this approach is that social support seems to be a concept that can be highly individualistic and self-centered. However, social support, seen as a concept that focuses highly on achieving personal goals, significantly limited what social support can actually accomplish in relational situations. Furthermore, it does not help provide clarification of what communicated social support is.

While early conceptualization and examination of social support from a communication perspective provided a framework for understanding certain supportive features, it had limitations. Given the need to understand what types of social support individuals express and how they express them, a considerable amount of communication research has focused upon the concept of how social support is enacted.

Enacted social support. Burleson et al. (1994) indicated that early social support research was overly driven by the study of the social networks that delivered social support. The major thrust of this research contributed to understanding the characteristics of these supportive networks. The study of supportive networks led to more of a psychological approach to social support, which emphasized how individuals perceive the available support and their satisfaction with it (Burleson et al., 1994). This psychological perspective provided understanding of the effects of social support but did not give an appropriate explanation regarding how social support

occurs. Current study of social support has evolved to examine the emphasis of the enacted socially supportive aspects of communication

Cutrona (1996) explained that one way to encapsulate the broad nature of social support research is to understand that all approaches are based upon the assumption that individuals have to rely upon one another to meet certain needs. Therefore, it has been stated that social support is best understood as the umbrella construct under which many distinct processes take place (Goldsmith, 2004). For instance, providing advice will still have specific processes and contexts wherein it would be more appropriate as opposed to the processes of providing something physically (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). By conceptualizing social support as an overarching construction of the processes individuals find support, Goldsmith argued research can then focus upon support as enacted support. Enacted support is defined as “the things people say and do for one another” (Goldsmith, 2004, p. 4) that would be considered supportive. Enacted support may also be influenced by personal factors as well, such as nature of relationship, context, and mood (Egbert, 2003). Numerous studies have examined how support is enacted in relationship with other concepts (Birditt, Antonucci, & Tighe, 2012; Chen & Feeley, 2012; Xia et al., 2012). Furthermore, the examination of enacted social support has led to advances in understanding the types of social support offered and received. Specifically of interest to the current study is the optimal matching framework (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), which helps identify the enacted types of support in interactions.

An optimal matching approach to support. Another way to understand social support is in terms of the interactions wherein social support takes place. By viewing social support as a specific interaction, communication researchers must address how communication plays a critical role in the success or failure of social support enacted between two or more individuals.

An interactional perspective of social support differentiates from a message perspective in that the context of the communicated messages becomes more central to the study than just the message. It becomes essential to consider the very difficult and specific contexts in which social support takes place. The messages that are exchanged in one context may not be as socially supportive in another. Therefore, this perspective of social support is primarily driven with understanding the impact of contexts where specific interactions lead to social support. For example, examining the interaction of someone who has just lost a loved one and a caregiver might provide strategies and insight into how the caregiver may better address the needs of the bereaved. Perhaps this example partially explains the importance of health communication, which at its root aims to help understand how care is communicated in complex and stressful times.

Cutrona and Russell (1990) provided a useful framework for explaining how social support operates in interactions. Cutrona and Russell's framework emphasizes matching and stated "social support is most effective when the support needs of the individual are consistent with the type of social support being offered by the support provider" (Robinson & Turner, 2003, p. 228). Six common types of support are most associated with their matching model. *Emotional support* is labeled as feelings of emotional comfort that are a result of an interaction. *Social integration support* is more closely linked with the ideas of social networks, in that it refers to how much an individual feels they are connected into the interaction with other people. *Esteem support* is the result of an individual feeling increased competency as a result of feedback from an interaction. *Tangible support* is directly linked to specific instrumental aid that might be provided in the interaction, such as financial assistance or even letting an individual use a cell phone. *Informational support* refers to information, advice, or direction that is exchanged in

interactions that leads to better comprehension of a situation. Finally, *support of others* represents the good feelings an individual experiences when helping someone else. While this matching model can be used to evaluate the effect of a supportive message, the current study applies it as a typology of support characteristics that may manifest within CMC.

Robinson and Turner (2003) offered the following concerning these characteristics and how they apply to socially supportive interactions:

Successfully socially supportive interactions, then, occur when the type of support desired by the individual is of the same type as the social support efforts of the provider. From the optimal matching perspective, receiving emotional social support will not be of much benefit to individuals in need of informational social support. (p. 229)

The matching framework and these six common characteristics indicate that different interactions call for different methods of social support. What becomes clear through the optimal matching perspective is that it is essential to look at what methods communicators are using and how these might affect perceptions of social support. However, the current study is examining a relatively newer area of social support research, and applies the matching typology to examine spirituality's relationship to existing forms of support in the typology. This is important because spirituality and spiritual support are still areas requiring better conceptualization, and examining their relationship with a pre-existing typology may provide clarification of how spiritual support can be conceptualized.

An important aspect of all studies applying a matching framework or typology is emphasis on the context that brings about the interaction where social support is communicated. The social support messages individuals share are shaped by the larger context of communication. The matching framework has been applied in numerous research contexts. Toller (2011) identified certain communication that was either unsupportive or supportive to bereaved parents following the loss of a child using an optimal matching framework. Keeley

(2004) studied the very difficult and specific context of final conversations with a loved one before death and the specific types of support that were matched with being helpful. Warisse-Turner et al. (2001) examined CMC cancer support communities and applied the matching model typology. Findings identified how individuals using CMC to receive emotional support were able to successfully interact with someone to receive adequate social support. They concluded that other types of stress may not match up as well given the specific contexts of the study (i.e., an online cancer support group). However, Campbell-Eichhorn (2008) applied a similar matching framework in examination of online eating disorder support groups and found support. In addition, other studies have successfully applied the matching framework within CMC contexts (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2009). The current study continues through its examination of how support is expressed in online bereavement support communities and looking for spiritual support as a matching component.

Although there has been support for this matching model perspective of social support, Goldsmith (2004) argued that the matching framework still presents a limit to what is constituted as social support. Understanding how social support is enacted in broader contexts may be an appropriate way of better applying a matching framework. In general, issues of spirituality and religiosity can promote general well-being (Jerome, 2011). Spiritual support contexts may have certain characteristics and themes which may not currently be adequately described using the general typology. Furthermore, the context of bereavement may yield specific types of social support more than others. By considering how social support is enacted when issues of spirituality are involved in bereavement can provide an extension of the matching framework. A discussion of spiritual support can be found in the spirituality section of the literature review. The following section presents an exploration on bereavement studies in social support.

Bereavement. Bosticco and Thompson (2005) stated that losing a loved one is one of the most difficult challenges in life and is “both a psychological and a social and communicative process” (p. 257). As previously defined, bereavement is “the entire experience of family members and friends in the anticipation, death, and subsequent adjustment to living following the death of a loved one” (Christ et al., 2003, p. 554). Balk (2004) explained that bereavement is a multi-dimensional manifestation which has effects on an individual holistically, impacting one physically, emotionally, behaviorally, cognitively, interpersonally, and spiritually. Whereas in the past individuals were more inclined to grieve and mourn in a detachment and solitude, it has recently become more promoted to seek connection through outside sources (Dennis, 2010). Given that bereavement has holistic effects on an individual and that the bereaved are encouraged to seek connection with others, it becomes imperative to understand the role social and spiritual support play in bereavement processes.

Much of the literature on bereavement has focused on how the bereaved cope, as evidenced in numerous studies (Giannini, 2011; Hastings, Musambira, & Hoover, 2007; Jerome, 2011; Toller, 2011; Wood, Byram, Gosling, & Stokes, 2011) and coping as recovery (Balk, 2004; Bonanno, 2004; Paletti, 2008). In general, the study of coping strategies has yielded better understanding of the mechanisms and processes that the bereaved use to recover from the loss of a loved one. Rubin (1999) proposed a two-track model for explaining how individuals process bereavement, with primary focus on one’s daily functioning and relationship with the deceased. Bosticco and Thompson (2005) concluded that storytelling and sharing narratives about their loss are a fundamental way that individuals cope and move through the bereavement process. Given that research has been able to identify coping strategies and models, it becomes critical to examine the role social support messages have within these context strategies and approaches.

Studies have begun to examine the role of support messages in terms of bereavement. Toller (2011) emphasized Cutrona and Russell's (1990) optimal matching framework in examining how bereaved parents experienced both supportive and unsupportive communication. Their research aimed to address which characteristics of the typology were helpful, identifying networking and emotional support as more helpful and information-giving support less helpful. Their findings also supported the claim by Cutrona and Russell (1990) that loss may require different types of support to aid the bereaved. Toller (2011) also indicated that communication which helps honor the ongoing connection a bereaved parent has with their lost child is supportive, which supports Rubin's (1999) two-track model of bereavement. Although the study did not address spirituality directly, the concept of honoring an ongoing relationship with the deceased, known as a 'continuing bond' (Wood et al., 2011), seems to indicate a relationship to the spiritual realm and could explain how spirituality is used to encourage individuals.

As Balk indicated (2004), spirituality is a component that effects bereavement. Wilkum and MacGeorge (2010) studied college students' hypothetical reaction to the loss of a grandparent and included an intrinsic religiosity component. While not directly identified as spirituality, the findings indicated that students preferred coping messages which included God's comforting presence. Their findings also indicated that "when intrinsic religiosity is high, it is a more powerful influence on preferences for religious content than religious coping style" (Wilkum & MacGeorge, 2010, p. 737). In other words, when a bereaved individual is highly spiritual they may be seeking religious and spiritual messages for support. This supports the purpose of the current study's emphasis on continued examination of spiritual support.

Bereavement studies also examine how CMC may influence grief and the channels of support (Hastings et al., 2007). Carroll and Landry (2010) examined how individuals use public

memorials on sites such as Facebook and MySpace to memorialize and grieve the loss of a family member or friend. They concluded that the platform of using online websites may empower or enable those who typically may not participate in memorializing the departed. This gives support to the notion that CMC provides opportunity for those without direct channels of support to express supportive messages. The phenomenon of online social-network grieving was also explored by Wandel (2009) in the wake of the Virginia Tech school shooting. According to Wandel (2009), online communities provide a channel for communication and support about loss and should not be ignored. While much of the focus has been on how the Internet aids coping for the bereaved, it still has not adequately addressed the actual supportive messages that are contained within. The current study extends research in the realm of online bereavement studies by examining how spiritual and social support messages are used within bereavement online discussion boards.

Summary. As reflected in this section, social support is a communication phenomenon that merits ample research. While an immense body of literature has accumulated, advances in technology and theoretical approaches maintain that research continue to examine the types of support enacted. In today's society where issues of spirituality are of importance, it becomes critical to understand the intersection of support and spirituality. Given a basic understanding of spiritual support, the following section provides a deeper examination of spirituality as an area of scholarly inquiry.

Spirituality

In a reflection concerning the place of spirituality in the communication discipline, Heisey (1998) claimed that just as the central thread of humanity is the ability to communicate, so is spirituality central to the essence of communication. In presenting a definition that would

promote communication research, Kirkwood (1994) defined spirituality as “an individual’s or community’s ultimate existential aspirations and the means of achieving these aspirations” (p. 16). According to Kirkwood, spirituality is something an individual or community consciously makes an effort to attain. Spirituality is considered a *human universal*, but is comprehended and communicated differently across cultures (Hegarty, Abernethy, Olver, & Currow, 2011). This is especially important when examining spirituality in any communication interaction because multiple spiritual perspectives may be present. In relationship to the current study of spiritual support in CMC, various forms of spirituality may be present based upon the cultural, religious, or philosophical background of the individuals.

Spirituality also refers to an intrinsic relationship with God or higher power (Marler & Hadaway, 2002). In other words, the spiritually intrinsic relationship with God focuses on an individual’s personal experiences with God. Hall and Edwards (2002) discussed the intrinsic nature of spirituality in terms of two dimensions: the quality of relationship with God and awareness of God. These two dimensions of spirituality seem to represent the deeply personal nature of spirituality in that both of these dimensions will most likely vary depending upon the individual. However, these dimensions are limited to certain views of spirituality and may not explain spiritual beliefs in other contexts. For example, an individual may still have spiritual beliefs and practices but may not have belief in God. The emergence of Earth-spirited faiths, such as Wiccan and Neo-Pagan spirituality are further examples of how spirituality manifests outside the dimension of traditional relationship with God (Jensen & Thompson, 2008). Furthermore, Smith and Horne (2007) state that most conceptualizations of spirituality primarily focus upon Judeo-Christian beliefs and greater attention should be provided towards non-traditional forms of spirituality.

Due to the variation in how individuals experience spirituality, it has led to consideration of spirituality as a multi-dimensional construct, much like cognition and personality (Johnstone et al., 2012). MacDonald (2000) summarized the construct of spirituality with the following assumptions:

(a) spirituality is a multidimensional construct that includes complex experiential, cognitive, affective, physiological, behavioral, and social components; (b) spirituality is inherently an experiential phenomenon/construct that includes experiences labeled spiritual, religious, peak, mystical, transpersonal, transcendent, and numinous; (c) spirituality is accessible to all people and qualitative and quantitative differences in the expressions of spirituality can be measured across individuals; (d) spirituality is not synonymous with religion but reflects a construct domain that includes intrinsic religiousness; and (e) spirituality includes paranormal beliefs, experiences, and practices. (p. 158)

MacDonald (2000) highlighted a number of important points about spirituality. The first is that spirituality is an experiential construct, which might be observed through behaviors that can include communication. For example, spirituality can be observed through an individual talking about a particular experience that brought one to understand the divine more intimately, or it might be observed by one's willingness to talk about one's struggle to develop a relationship with God. Furthermore, MacDonald did not believe the constructs of spirituality and religion should be used interchangeably, but that spirituality represents the more deeply intrinsic aspects of being religious. In other words, the construct of spirituality is represented more by an individual having felt the presence of God while at a particular service, and represented less by the extrinsic observation that church attendance equates to religiosity. Perhaps this alludes to some of the territorial overlap engrained in the nature of spirituality and religiosity that creates confusion.

Another definition of spirituality that illustrates the overlapping themes with religiosity is provided by Campbell (2005). Spirituality is understood as a "‘holy space’ that is set apart for

religious use” (Campbell, 2005, p. 111). Key to this explanation is the term “religious,” which once again can be seen as a construct of its own. What is rooted in this definition is that spirituality can be a concept within the construct of religiosity. If spirituality is considered the intrinsic relationship with God, then religiosity refers to more of an extrinsic relationship with God. The concept of religiosity seen extrinsically is observable more through commitment and orientation to a religious faith and ritual than an individual experience relating to God. In general, religiosity is viewed as more socially constructed by organized denominations and structures than spirituality, as indicated in various measures (Egbert et al., 2004). Mockabee, Monson, and Grant (2001) explained that researchers have taken various approaches to observing religion as a separate construct, with one of the distinguishing factors being that one ‘belongs’ to a particular religion. In terms of spirituality, one is seldom first associated with belonging to an organized structure as then primary emphasis in on the relationship with the divine and existential phenomenon.

Spirituality as an indicator of health. The exploration of spirituality has contributed to the discussion of human communication in various contexts. Spirituality has often been examined as a factor within health communications. Dyess (2011) associated spiritual faith with four common attributes found in the literature: focusing on beliefs; living according to those beliefs; relationship with the self, others, and the divine; and having an understanding of the foundational meaning of life. These are attributes that when expressed in messages, may express an individual’s spirituality. Furthermore, these attributes are seen as contributing factors to one’s overall health and lifestyle. Kohls, Walach, and Wirtz’s (2009) examination of the connection between health and spirituality further conclude that lack of spiritual practice should indicate a general health risk.

Anderson (2004) examined parish nurses in faith-based organizations as communicators of spiritual well-being. By conducting and analyzing interviews with Catholic and Christian parish nurses, Anderson observed that the nurses' socially supportive messages incorporated a holistic message of health, which included spirituality. Furthermore, data revealed that the socially supportive messages offered by the parish nurses were "motivated by intrinsic values associated with the role of spirituality" (pp. 125-126). The nurses' spirituality was able to contribute to communicating a more authentic and powerful message. Although the findings are limited in their scope to parish nurses, future research can examine the role spirituality plays in other forms of interpersonal social support communication.

In an examination of final conversations with loved ones before their death, Keeley (2004) demonstrated how both spirituality and religiosity are strong themes in final communication. By conducting retrospective interviews with a surviving relational partner, Keeley observed how spirituality was used at various times by both individuals to validate the relationship and comfort the loved one. Keeley cited one of the retrospective interviews:

Participant 7: He said, "You don't need to worry about me." He said, "I'm going to heaven . . . And that Jesus is my savior, and he is yours, too. And you don't ever forget it." . . . that was the thing he wanted us to know most of all (Lines 61-68) . . . that was his final and most important opportunity to be a witness to his faith, to his family. And especially to my brother and I. (p. 97)

This particular exchange illustrates Kirkwood's (1994) concept of spirituality in that the dying loved one used the opportunity to communicate his or her ultimate existential aspirations both for family and himself or herself. Furthermore, it illustrates how the deeply intrinsic nature of spiritual support can be communicated in situations considered difficult, how spirituality is used as a form of comforting and supportive communication, and how spirituality can have a lasting

impact upon the receiver of the message. The following section provides a closer examination of spiritual support.

Spiritual support. Research has shown that spirituality has been identified as a correlating contributor to mental health, general health and prevention of risky lifestyle choices (Dyess, 2011). Peterson (2011) indicated that spirituality is not only relational, but has supportive functions which help an individual cope with stressors. One way spiritual support has been conceptualized is “the perceived, personally supportive components of an individual's relationship with God” (Maton, 1989, p. 310). Maton argued that spiritual support can influence in two positive ways, by either adopting cognitively positive beliefs about negative experiences or emotionally feeling loved and cared for. This conceptualization of spiritual support places a primary emphasis on support being provided by the divine and existential on an intrapersonal level. Krause, Ellison, Shaw, Marcum, and Boardman (2001) conceptualized spiritual support on an interpersonally beneficial level, stating that it is assistance shared between individuals that helps “people maintain and deepen their faith, as well as apply their religious beliefs in daily life” (p. 639). According to this conceptualization, when a spiritual message is expressed for the perceived benefit of another individual, spiritual support is communicated. Therefore, when considering spiritual support there is both an intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomenon that appears to occur. Given these conceptualizations, it is important for research to identify what message characteristics are perceived as supportive and clarify what is spiritual support. For the purposes of the current study, spiritual support is conceptualized as channeling through communication power that is divine or beyond the natural realm to meet the need of self or another.

Spiritual support has been the primary focus of a number of studies examining the impact of living with serious health concerns or disease, each providing direction for the current study. Roff et al. (2009) identified four sources that transmitted spiritual support to breast cancer survivors: God, religious communities, family members and friends, and health care professionals. While most of these sources are a result of traditional interpersonal relationships, it is of interest to observe spiritual support in non-traditional settings such as in CMC.

In a study examining postpartum depression following childbirth, Zittel-Palamara, Cercone, and Rockmaker (2009) identified several categories of spiritual support. Among those highlighted were participation in spiritual support groups, prayer support, and spiritual guidance. Their findings conclude that spiritual support is necessary in providing holistic care for those encountering difficult life experiences. Furthermore, the categories of spiritual support identified (i.e., spiritual guidance and prayer support) may inform what characteristics spiritual support messages in CMC may contain.

Peterson (2011) examined how issues of spirituality were interconnected with the social support that women living with HIV experienced by using an optimal matching approach. While not directly labeled as spiritual support, women experienced spirituality within the framework of emotional, network, esteem and appraisal support. This research is critically vital to establishing the connection that there are links between spiritual and other forms of social support. The current study can build upon this work by examining the specific characteristics of spiritual support found within a support framework.

There has been researching exploring spiritual support concepts outside of studies examining those afflicted with illness or disease. Underwood and Teresi (2002) examined the practice of everyday spiritual experiences (ESE) as a measure of how individuals cope with daily

stress. Certain daily spiritual practices within their inventory, such as feeling the presence of God, feeling strength and comfort from one's spirituality, and being spiritually touched by the beauty of creation provide example of how spirituality may support an individual. Whitehead and Bergeman (2011) extended the research on ESE by examining how they helped older adults cope with the stress of their daily lives, concluding that they are an effective coping strategy and has a buffering function against negative experiences. While the work on ESE is not directly identified as spiritual support and is more focused on self-awareness, when ESE are expressed to another person they may be perceived as supportive and considered.

Prayer, defined by Baesler (2003) as spiritual conversation between a believer and God, has routinely been associated with spiritual support. Baesler (1997, 1999) stated that the functions of prayer are multi-faceted and can be for such purposes as adoration, petition, thanksgiving, meditation, and contemplation. Studies such as the aforementioned Zittel-Palamara et al. (2009) observed that individuals considered prayer a category of spiritual support. Prayer as spiritual support was observed as a coping mechanism in the aftermath of the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001 (Ai, Tice, Peterson, & Huang, 2005). Baesler and Ladd (2009) revealed that prayer, whether in close personal relationships or routine table blessings, were associated with higher spiritual well-being. Baesler and Ladd also indicated that the general health of the other is benefited when prayer takes place interpersonally, mainly because it provides an "other-centered" perspective revealed through disclosure. It would seem very beneficial for communication research to consider how spiritual support, seen through the lens of prayer, is characterized in communication.

Exploration of CMC prayer is beginning to garner interest, as indicated by research exploring the technological mediums individuals use for prayer (Baesler & Chen, 2013) as well

as how social networking sites were used to share prayers and coping upon the passing of Michael Jackson (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). The current study can add to the literature by examining how prayer is communicated and used as spiritual support in CMC.

While commonly associated with positive health outcomes, it should be noted that spiritual support has been associated with negative outcomes. Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez (1998) examined religious and spiritual coping methods, finding that individuals apply “differing configurations of religious thought, feeling, behavior, and relationships in their efforts to deal with major life stressors” (p. 720). They indicated that negative religious and spiritual coping methods are associated with an unclear relationship with God or spiritual struggle among other things (Pargament et al., 1998). In these circumstances, spiritual or religious themes would not be appropriate as a way to offer support. Sanderson and Cheong (2010) discovered that not all of the spiritual themes present in online memorials are positive, as spiritual support can be observed as critical or angry. Kohls et al. (2009) examined a similar phenomenon to ESE, identified as spiritual practices, noting that focusing only upon positive spiritual practices is limiting. They contended that negative experiences may influence how individuals use spiritual practices. In other words, when an individual experiences a major life stressor like bereavement, they may not always seek aspects commonly associated with spiritual support.

In summary, spiritual support offers a unique type of support because it expresses a supernatural element into the support framework that may not adequately be explained by other types of support (Johnstone et al., 2012). While it has been explored in health communication, spiritual support still warrants broader examination beyond studies coping with cancer or illness. Examining the characteristics of spiritual support as found in CMC is one such area.

Furthermore, exploring spiritual support within an appropriate context, such as bereavement, merits attention because it is a context that may naturally manifest spiritual support.

Examination of spirituality in other areas. It should be noted that the study of spirituality is not limited to health communication. At a theoretical level, Chase (1993) advanced Giddens's structuration theory and the work of adaptive structuration theory (Poole, Seibold, & McPhee, 1985) by providing a spiritual revision of the theory. According to Cohen (1989), Giddens sought to provide theoretical account through structuration theory for the "constitution of social life" by observing how social structures and systems come to shape prior to their acceptance into society. Examining how structuration theory has been applied to small group decision-making situations, Chase (1993) wrote: "The human management industry will use the results of structural research to promote materialism and to disregard the intrinsic value of non-materialistic pursuits" (p. 10). Chase argued that a better decision may be reached through the more intrinsic nature of spirituality. Chase's spiritual revision of structuration theory fits well with the arguments of interpersonal scholars (Lannamann, 1991) who claimed that interpersonal research needs to be more concerned with how communication authenticates power in social order.

Sass (2000) explored the themes contained within spirituality in organizational contexts, concluding that one of the most recurring themes is "common ground":

The central concept in the literature on spirituality is 'connectedness'. Throughout the literature, there is an emphasis on connection and integration rather than differentiation and separation. This trend is best summarized in a definition of spirituality . . . the basic feeling of being connected with one's complete self, others, and the entire universe. These three foci of connection—self, others, and something greater—run throughout the literature. (p. 196)

These three foci in the study of organizational spirituality provide an interesting basis for observing and operationalizing spirituality. Observing spiritual messages that either promote or

disregard connection and common ground amongst individuals could provide valuable insight into the power of those messages.

Summary. For the purposes of the current study, spirituality is a construct rooted in the intrinsic relationship one has with the divine or a power beyond the natural realm. It has been operationalized to be observable through the communication one shares with others about their ultimate aspirations of intimacy with the divine and as communication that seeks to unite and connect individuals. Additionally, spiritual support is communication that merits further exploration in various contexts.

Research Questions

Based upon the review of literature, the present study explores the following research questions:

RQ1: Does computer-mediated communication (i.e., text messages in an online support community) manifest itself as spiritual support and if so, how?

The use of CMC for spiritual support warrants attention for a number of reasons. As previously discussed, there are a wide variety of uses for CMC. Spiritual support has been identified in supportive online relationships, but the characteristics of spiritual support messages found in CMC needs clearer explanation. The present study seeks to explain how CMC is used for spiritual support in the messages exchanged between members of an online support community. It is expected that members of an online community are at some stage of relational development and that their messages will be supportive in nature. Exploring the use of spiritual support messages will add to the general understanding of the utility of CMC as a means of communication and help identify characteristics of messages that aid computer-mediated relational processes. Currently, research which explores CMC's spiritual support messages and

usage is limited; therefore it is difficult for communicators to identify whether a message they are sending or receiving is spiritual in nature. The closer examination of spiritual support messages in online support communities contributes to building a better understanding of how it is enacted in relational process.

RQ2: Are spiritually supportive messages related to the matching framework (i.e., the typology of tangible, informational, emotional, esteem, integration and support of others) concerning socially supportive messages and if so, how?

The matching framework advanced by Cutrona and Russell (1990) provides a useful typology for examining how individuals support one another and can be identified through content analysis of computer-mediated communication messages. While there are critics of this framework (see Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Goldsmith, 2004), it has utility as a typology for exploring this form of CMC. General matching frameworks include six common message types individuals use in matching their message to the current need of the recipient of the message. However, support may come in other forms that may not best explained through these commonly used message types. While initial construction of the matching framework omitted spirituality as a distinct category (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002), it would be of interest to explore which types of support spirituality is more commonly associated. Examining the connections with the six general matching types is helpful in identifying the specific messages used to convey spiritual support through CMC.

RQ3: Is the use of a spiritual support message dependent upon the online community's context (i.e., spiritual or non-spiritual)? And if so how?

An underlying assumption contained within RQ3 pertains to the role of where CMC actually takes place online. Walther's SIPT currently does not overtly address context as one of

the four immediate influential factors for relationships in CMC. The current study aims to compare two different online communities and observe how the context of the type of community may impact the messages found within them. There are a number of reasons for exploring how communication may differ in spiritual online communities and those that are not specifically identified as spiritual. First, spiritual support should be expected to be observed in situations that are not overtly spiritual. According to the definitions of spirituality discussed previously (see Kirkwood, 1994; Sass, 2000), spirituality is a construct that transcends mere religiosity and can be inherent in everyone. In other words, just because someone is not in a church, synagogue, or spiritual online support community does not necessarily indicate they may express spiritual support. Second, sharing spiritual support through CMC might be more openly discussed when there is less threat of being judged or evaluated for spiritual beliefs. Certain individuals may feel more apprehensive sharing their spiritual views in openly spiritual communities for the fear of lack of spiritual wisdom or of judgment.

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Research Rationale

While there has been increasing interest in spiritual support, social support, and CMC, closer examination of how spiritual and social support messages are expressed in CMC relationships is an opportunity for communication research. SIPT (Walther, 1992) provides a theoretical framework for establishing that CMC establishes and maintains relationships. A key advancement of SIPT is that individuals will adapt their communication given the limited cues available in CMC. Given that an online community is a group of individuals with a common interest who engage in moderated and ongoing interaction (Rodgers & Chen, 2005), SIPT offers explanatory power over how members of an online support community use support messages. Members will use the cues available, such as what they have in common (e.g., bereavement), the element of asynchronous communication and an interface of threaded discussion to adapt their messages and better relate with other members. The current study provides explanation for how CMC spiritual and social support is used within online bereavement communities.

The discussion boards contained within online communities were selected for analysis because they are commonly one of the most utilized forms of CMC. Virtually all online news sources, communities, and blogs have the capability for users to post, reply, and exchange ideas. Social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace also enable users to communicate in similar threaded discussion manner. Discussion boards contain the type of CMC originally posited in SIPT, which is communication that is asynchronous and contains limited cues. Therefore, discussion boards provide a practical and accessible medium for analysis in the current study.

The current study made use of two methodological approaches to accomplish its purpose in analyzing discussion boards: grounded theory and content analysis. Aspects of grounded theory (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were applied to develop the codebook, coding procedures, to train coders for the content analysis and derive inter-coder reliability and to uncover themes present in the data to answer the first research question. Since many support messages are present within a single discussion board, content analysis provided a methodology for analyzing the message content. Using aspects of these different methods created a mixed methods approach that provided a framework for examining the various themes and characteristics of spiritual and social support messages put forth by the research questions. The following sections outline the general background concerning the methodologies consulted and the procedures the researcher followed in conducting the investigation of supportive CMC messages.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory inductively categorizes data from its rawest form in an effort to develop theory and concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In essence, the researcher works from the “ground up” to answer their questions and to conduct inquiry. Grounded theory is especially practical for developing coding categories for concepts not routinely studied within CMC. While grounded theory “begins with an area of study and what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23), the present study used some previously derived concepts as a starting point (e.g., definitions for Cutrona & Russell’s [1990] matching framework of social support) to develop the codebook information.

Grounded theory has been used in previous communication research pertaining to CMC and supportive communication. Wen, McTavish, Kreps, Wise, and Gustafson (2011) utilized

grounded theory in detailing the factors influencing one woman's experience of breast cancer. Analyzing the messages the woman shared in an online discussion board, the researchers provide explanation for how her online disclosures of interactions illustrated the progression of disease. Message themes of online hate groups were explored by McNamee, Peterson, and Pena (2010) using grounded theory. Their inquiry established the identification of the characteristics of messages for 21 online hate groups and the ramifications for how CMC enables hate groups. Kleman et al. (2009) uncovered socially supportive themes in the faith communication of women using a grounded theory approach. Xie (2008) examined the types of social support exchanged in different types of CMC using grounded theory as an approach. The findings of the study explained how the inherent features of a mode of CMC may lead to specialized communication. Becker and Stamp (2005) used grounded theory to explore impression management between chat room interactions. Their usage of grounded theory produced a comprehensive understanding of how individuals use CMC to establish relationship and make sense of the impressions and misrepresentations of others due to the use of chat rooms.

In summary, grounded theory provides a credible framework for inquiry of spiritually supportive CMC. Used as a method, grounded theory opportunity to identify themes which influence communication. Given its history and the recent use of grounded theory in other studies of CMC, its application in the current study is warranted.

Content Analysis

Perhaps one of the most common research tools that can be used to understand textual messages such as CMC is content analysis. The roots of content analysis as a research instrument date back to the late 19th century when the method was used to analyze muckraking in New York daily newspapers (Sumpter, 2001). Since that time, content analysis has been used as

a research tool in various studies, ranging from media representations of minorities on television (Dixon & Linz, 2000), homelessness (Shields, 2001), interpersonal accounts of violence (Wood, 2001), and long distance relationships (Sahlstein, 2004). Furthermore, scholars such as Weber (1990), Bos and Tarnai (1999), and Neuendorf (2002) offer an overview and development of content analysis as a research methodology in both empirical social research and communication. Exploring CMC for spiritual and supportive communication using content analysis, therefore, is appropriate, given that this approach has been utilized to explore such a wide cross-section of subjects.

According to Bos and Tarnai (1999), a broad sense of social reality can be understood and analyzed through the assumptions of content analysis. At its core, “content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from a text” (Weber, 1990, p. 9). Content analysis provides the researcher with a systematic method for organizing and categorizing data that may lead to very relevant findings through the coding of message content. Neuendorf (2002) defined content analysis as

Summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing) and is not limited as to the types of variables that may be measured or the context in which the messages are created or presented. (p. 10)

Content analysis is a method that is meant to be quantitative, objective, and wide in its use and application.

Content analysis is an appropriate research method for examining computer-mediated communication. As Holsti (1968) explained, content analysis is a procedure “whereby one makes inferences about sources and receivers from evidence in the message they exchange” (p. 601). As long as the focus remains on the message communicated, as is suggested in the current

study, problematic issues concerning overgeneralizations and sweeping assumptions can better be avoided.

Assumptions and Limitations of Study

There are, however, a number of assumptions and limitations concerning the methodologies utilized in the investigation. One assumption is that content analysis procedures are designed only for observing archival texts which can be gathered without manipulation. Content analysis is an unobtrusive method which does not intrude into the personal lives of subjects by asking questions as typical survey research does. This is also a result of the non-manipulation of any variables in the study. For those reasons, this study analyzed the messages gathered from public discussion boards that may be observed without solicitation or membership to a private group. There was no interference or manipulation by the researcher regarding the messages collected and analyzed. In essence, messages that were analyzed are equivalent to any other publicly accessible archived text on the Internet. Therefore, if high levels of spiritual support are reported in the results, it is not a result of any manipulation by the researcher; it is simply latent or manifest in the content. Second, the data examined in content analysis may be more accessible than other areas of research, mainly because the researcher is dealing with pre-existing or pre-written texts such as transcripts, news reports, or testimonials. In the case of the study conducted, messages contained within pre-existing online discussion threads were analyzed. Content of this nature is readily available and accessible for analysis, but must be carefully selected to ensure it is as representative as possible. The current study also made use of aspects of two different methodologies, which may be considered a limitation. However, just as surveys, ethnographies, and experiments have their own distinct methods for conducting

research, so did the present study. Those methods which should provide rigorous and replicable procedures are therefore outlined in the following pages.

Sampling Rationale and Sampling Procedure

The current study seeks to make generalizations concerning the use of messages contained within CMC for spiritual and social support. Therefore, it is critical to sample CMC from sources that represent the larger population. Accessing very large samples of CMC messages through the Internet was not problematic. What was problematic, however, was identifying those sites and communities that were appropriately representative for examination. Various studies examining CMC have dealt with similar issues (see Christian, 2005; Mohammed & Thombre, 2005; Scharer, 2005). While initially exploring potential online communities through searches on databases, it became increasingly apparent that larger amounts of people turn to online communities as there an immense number of online communities exist. Also, it became apparent that there is much parity and variation between communities. For instance, whereas one community may be very direct in stating the purpose for the discussion (e.g., support for those with eating disorders), it did not mean that there were frequent enough posts and users to analyze it. Further review of sites often revealed the opposite as well, as a high frequency of discussions and users did not always mean that the discussion contained within pertained to the thematic nature of the online community (e.g., spiritual support discussions focusing upon theological debate or off-topic discussion of political issues).

Specific criteria were followed by the researcher to select appropriate online communities and discussion boards for analysis. First, only discussion boards taking place within online communities were considered. For the purposes of the current study, an online community was defined as a group of individuals with common interest who use CMC for rule-governed and

ongoing interaction and togetherness (Rodgers & Chen, 2005). Discussion boards were defined as the online interface used to share typed asynchronous messages that members can read and respond to (Rodgers & Chen, 2005). The second requirement for selection was the public accessibility of the discussion board of the online community. Although many online communities require membership to view, post or participate in discussion boards and forums, only communities not requiring membership to view the discussion boards within the site were considered. This was done to allow the researcher opportunity to observe communication messages expressed as naturally as possible without being a participant. To accommodate for any other ethical considerations, only older discussion threads posted from before the study began were collected. Human subject approval was waived. A third criteria used for selection was the purpose of the discussion board and their similarity. Specifically, it was essential for the online community to be supportive in nature and have a group for bereavement support. Through the identification process there also had to be a highly similar and comparable online community whose purpose also included spirituality. Finally, discussion boards had to demonstrate they were active and that interaction among members was routine.

With these considerations, the researcher conducted a web search for online support communities. The researcher used a spreadsheet to compile characteristics of online support community website characteristics. After examining numerous sites and communities, two discussion boards from separate online communities were selected for analysis: DailyStrength and Beliefnet. Only two discussion boards were selected as both DailyStrength and Beliefnet's bereavement discussion boards provided ample messages for analysis. The following is description of each particular online community.

DailyStrength (www.dailystrength.org). From the online community of DailyStrength, the bereavement support group was selected for analysis. DailyStrength is an online community with opportunities for users to create profiles, seek expert advice and provide or solicit free, anonymous support in any of the over five hundred communities and discussion boards it offers. As indicated by the DailyStrength website:

DailyStrength was created by internet veterans with more than 20 years of experience conceiving, building, and running the largest communities on the web, including Yahoo Mail, Yahoo Photos, Yahoo Personals, Yahoo Groups, GeoCities, Facebook, My Yahoo, Yahoo Message Boards and more. Currently, DailyStrength is operated by some very passionate and dedicated people that get great satisfaction knowing that our site can be a positive force for everyone who faces challenges in their lives. (“DailyStrength” website)

While DailyStrength provides opportunity to use the community much like a social networking site, it also allows users to read about different treatments for ailments and conditions, with the capability to comment freely. Support groups range from those with food allergies and parents of children with ADHD to women’s health issues and personal challenges. For the current study’s final analysis, a convenience sample of 200 consecutively posted messages was collected from discussion threads of the Bereavement support group. This support group was selected due to its numerous users, open access to view the discussion boards, a high frequency of postings, and discussions with an overt connection back to the supportive purpose of the online community. The sampled messages came from a six month time period prior to the start of the study in effort to better analyze archived discussion. Sampled messages from the Bereavement support group were compiled into one master file where each message was numbered according to the thread (as indicated by numerical number) and its placement within the thread (as indicated by an alphabetical numbering). The only threads that were omitted from this sampling procedure were those that have not generated replies. The reason for omitting these threads is the fact that since there is no discussion taking place in the thread, there truly has been no

completed process of communication interaction. The personalized avatar of the messenger and any information that would compromise the confidentiality or identity of an individual was omitted.

Beliefnet (www.beliefnet.com). Beliefnet is very similar in form and content to that of DailyStrength, with options of discussion boards, social networking, advice, and article. The additional caveat of Beliefnet is an intentionally spiritual basis for the community, which is made abundantly clear through the website's mission statement page:

Our mission is to help people like you find, and walk, a spiritual path that will bring comfort, hope, clarity, strength, and happiness. Whether you're exploring your own faith or other spiritual traditions, we provide you inspiring devotional tools, access to the best spiritual teachers and clergy in the world, thought-provoking commentary, and a supportive community. Beliefnet is the largest spiritual web site. We are independent and not affiliated with any spiritual organization or movement. Our only agenda is to help you meet your spiritual needs. ("Beliefnet" website)

The overt spiritual tone of the online community in correlation with the presence of all the essential criteria for selection made Beliefnet an appropriate selection for analysis in the study. Furthermore, the online community focused upon various faith backgrounds coming together in community to discuss issues ranging from theology and pop culture to support groups of various purpose. A convenience sample of 200 consecutively posted messages from the Loss and Grief discussion threads were collected for the final analysis. This group was targeted due to its similarity in purpose to the Bereavement support group on DailyStrength, its numerous users/posters, open access to view the discussion boards, a high frequency of postings, and discussions with an overt connection back to the supportive purposes of the online community. The sampled messages came from a six month time period prior to the start of the study in effort to better analyze archived discussion. All sampled messages from Loss and Grief discussion threads were compiled into one master file where each message was numbered according to the

thread (as indicated by numerical number) and its placement within the thread (as indicated by an alphabetical numbering). The only threads that were omitted from this sampling procedure were those that have not generated replies. The reason for omitting these threads is the fact that since no discussion was taking place in the thread, there truly has been no completed process of communication interaction. The personalized avatar of the messenger and any information that would compromise the confidentiality or identity of an individual was omitted.

Unit of Analysis

Necessitated in any content analysis is the identification of a unit for analysis and the unit for observation. For the purposes of the current study, the unit of analysis took place at the level of posted messages within a threaded discussion board in an online community. A posted message is considered any shared response to threaded discussion's main post. The level of observation was each individual support message that was shared in a posted message. A support message is considered any observed type of support identified within any given post.

Procedures

Any scientific inquiry requires carefully documented procedures. The following section provides detailed explanation of the procedures undertaken to analyze spiritual and support messages.

Initial codebook construction. The researcher constructed an initial codebook based upon inductively derived definitions for the following types of previously established support: spiritual, tangible, informational, emotional, esteem, integration, and support of others. The initial codebook included a category for no support present as well. The researcher inductively established examples for each type of support. Following instruction, a student coder used the initial codebook to code 10 posts that were selected from the Beliefnet bereavement discussion

board and to identify the type of support which best describes the post. During this preliminary testing time, basic percent agreement between the researcher and the student coder was calculated at 60% (i.e., 6 of the 10 posts were mutually identified as the same type of support). Due to the ambiguity reported in the definitions provided by the student coder, the researcher revised the initial codebook to include more detailed instructions and used operational definitions provided by Cutrona and Russell (1990) for the types of support identified in their matching framework (i.e., informational, tangible, emotional, esteem, integration, and support of others). Spiritual support was defined using the definition of spirituality provided by Kirkwood (1994). Furthermore, separate categories were included to identify messages in posts that were both spiritual and one of the six types of support. Ten separate posts were then coded, with basic percent agreement at 80%. With the awareness that there would be further revisions, the researcher deemed this a suitable threshold to move forward to the next stages of coder selection, training, and pilot coding.

Coder training and revision of codebook. Following the initial development of the codebook, two separate coders were recruited for the study. Coders were compensated at the culmination of the project through a stipend for their effort and contribution to the project. Training of coders included two 3-hour sessions where the researcher discussed the project, operational definitions, research questions, and codebook. During the first training session, coders were asked to code 10 posts, with basic percent agreement calculated at 80%. Through this coding it was discovered that individual posts may contain multiple support messages and thereby required a coding procedure that allowed for such identification.

Following the first training session, the codebook was revised to permit open coding of posts. The revised codebook included an adjustment that matched each type of support being

observed with a corresponding color. This adjustment allowed coders to highlight every identified support message contained within a post. The definitions within the codebook for each support type remained the same, but detailed examples were added. Furthermore, a major coding distinction was revised by adding hybrid combinations of spiritual support and another type of support from the typology. Spiritual support was still provided as a separate type of support; however, it could also be identified as a hybrid type of support (e.g., emotional and spiritual support). This was done to provide clarification as to how spiritual support has unique supportive qualities as well as shared qualities with other types of support.

During the second training session, the coders and researcher conducted open coding of sample messages taken from Beliefnet. Each coder and the researcher coded an electronic copy of the sample on a different computer by highlighting any support message with the corresponding color identified in the codebook. Open coding was conducted to familiarize the coders with identifying and differentiating the different types of support messages in the current study as well as the revised codebook. No calculations for inter-coder reliability were made as this coding was completed for the purposes of training and open coding. . However, discussion following this round of open coding yielded definitive examples of support to be added to the codebook as well as clarification to coders as to how to identify different types of support.

Pilot Test. Following training, coders were supplied an electronic document containing 50 posts from the bereavement threaded discussions on Beliefnet. The coders and the researcher independently coded the data. If any type of support was observed that indicated one of the codes in the codebook, coders were to highlight electronically the word, specific phrase, or message within that post with the corresponding color of that type of support. Spiritual support was a separate category; however, it could also be identified as a hybrid type of support (e.g.,

emotional and spiritual support). This was done to provide clarification as to how spiritual support has unique supportive qualities as well as shared qualities with other types of support. Upon completion of this open coding, the researcher met with the coders and discussed each highlighted type of support contained in every post. The researcher and coders discussed each observed support message until there was consensus on what types of support were present in the post. This was accomplished when disagreement regarding the type of support in any post was identified, which resulted in discussion until consensus was reached among the researcher and coders. This technique has been used in research before (see Kleman et al., 2009). As this transpired, a master document of the 50 posts was highlighted with the corresponding colors of the consensus driven support messages identified, the result of which provided a complete data set of observed support messages. No calculations for inter-coder reliability were made as a result of open coding and the consensus driven final coding. Following this pilot test the codebook was finalized for the study by revising examples that best illustrated each type of support.

Final codebook. The codebook (see Appendix A) provides definitions, examples, and instruction for coders to highlight phrases and sections of a posted message text, which represent different expressions of supportive communication. The final operational definition for each type of matching framework support (tangible, informational, emotional, esteem, integration, support of others) was provided, based upon the definitions provided by Robinson and Turner (2003). The operational definition of spiritual support was based upon conceptualizations of spirituality and spiritual support such as Maton (1989), Kirkwood (1994), MacDonald (2000), Krause et al (2001), and Marler and Hadaway (2002). As stated in the codebook, spiritual

support is defined as “support which alludes to comfort, direction, knowledge or aspirations connected to a higher power, one’s personal ultimate existential aspirations or the divine.”

Following the definitions for each code, examples of code were provided. Early versions of the codebook provided inductively derived examples of each type of support, with later versions and the final version containing examples based upon excerpts of text identified during coder training and pilot coding. Furthermore, each type of support was assigned a different color that was then used to color code text, which represented the type of support represented. Since the current study is interested in how spirituality interacts with support messages, those messages that contained both a particular type of support (i.e., information) that also contained an element of spiritual support were identified using a separate color.

Final coding procedure. Following coder training, revisions, and the pilot test, final coding of data was prepared. A convenience sample was collected from each online community of 200 consecutive posts from the appropriate discussion board. To ensure that no duplicate posts were used from the pilot testing, posts were collected from a specific time range that took place prior to the study and were no longer active discussions.

Coders were supplied two separate electronic documents, one containing the sampled posts from Beliefnet and the other containing the sample from DailyStrength. It was not withheld from the coders as to which online community was spiritual and which was not. Each post was numerically identified for further classification. The coders and the researcher independently coded each data set. Following the procedures designated during pilot testing, if any type of support was observed that matched one of the codes in the codebook, coders were to highlight electronically the specific phrase or message within that post with the corresponding color of that type of support. Upon completion of the open coding for each data set, the

researcher met with the coders and discussed each highlighted type of support contained in every post. The researcher and coders discussed each observed support message until there was consensus on what types of support were present in each post. As this transpired, a master document containing the posts for each data set was highlighted with the corresponding colors of the consensus driven support messages identified.

The result of final coding provided two master data sets of observed support messages. No calculations for inter-coder reliability were made as a result of open coding and the consensus driven final coding. Upon completion of final coding, a separate file was created for each different type of support for tabulation and analysis. Following the creation of files, the researcher met with coders to discuss and examine major themes and interrelationships among types of support.

Analysis

Because a content analysis is inherently descriptive in nature, a number of considerations must be taken into account when analyzing the data. Beyond reporting the reliability of the findings, additional analysis is required. Analyzing data for the content analysis begins with reporting the frequencies of the categories found through the coding of the text. Fraenkel and Wallen (2006) noted that if a content analysis is conducted where scores and ratings are computed, it is appropriate to use correlation coefficients and averages in the statistical reporting; but this is often not the case since content analyses deal mainly in categorical data. When statistically analyzing the categorical data from a content analysis, it is imperative that the researcher employs statistical procedures that are therefore descriptive in nature. Heeding the advice of Fraenkel and Wallen, the results provide a cross-break table which illustrates any relationships between categorical variables.

One of the most reliable and widely used tools for analyzing the descriptive data found in a content analysis is the chi-square test of independence (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006; Neuendorf, 2002). A chi-square test is a logical choice for the current analysis, as it analyzes categorical data. The chi-square test of independence examines whether or not two categories are independent of one another. In terms of the current study, a chi-square test of independence was conducted on each final data set (i.e., Beliefnet support messages and DailyStrength support messages). A chi-square test of independence is an appropriate choice for data analysis of how spiritual support is related to the current typology of support examined in RQ1. The following provides further explanation of how each research question is analyzed in the current study.

Research Question 1. The first research question addresses the use of CMC as a means for spiritual support. The specific data examined for analysis of this question were the messages identified in Beliefnet and DailyStrength as spiritual support. To answer the research question, basic frequencies and percentages are provided. Frequencies were collected by the coding of exclusively spiritual support messages. For example, direct responses such as “I will pray for you,” “God is always with us,” and “may you find healing and peace during this difficult time” that had overt spiritual meaning were identified as spiritual support messages. Indirect spiritual messages discussed through training and the codebook were also coded. For example, indirect references to spiritual texts (e.g., the Bible, Koran, etc.) or themes (e.g., desire to connect with higher being or the supernatural) also denoted a spiritual message. Each individual observation of spiritual support was counted to report frequencies for Beliefnet and DailyStrength. Furthermore, the researcher examined the themes and relationships found within spiritual support messages. Identification of spiritually support message themes occurred through an inductive

grounded theory approach to the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), discussion and consensus among coders and the researcher.

Research Question 2. The second research question explores the relationship between spiritual support messages and a typology of different support set forth by Cutrona and Russell's (1990) matching framework of socially supportive messages. To answer this research question, coders highlighted support messages contained within online posts matching the provided definitions of the typology in the codebook. Furthermore, separate categories were included in the codebook if a support message was a hybrid of a particular type of support and spiritual support. For example, coders identified both informational support and informational support that contained spiritual themes. This resulted in data sets for Beliefnet and DailyStrength, which were used to analyze the relationships between the typology and spiritual support through the chi-square test of independence. Separate chi-squares were conducted for each data set as well as a grand chi-square for the combined frequencies of both data sets. The frequencies for each type of support are reported and discussed through the chi-square. This information was used to discuss how different types of support are associated with spiritual support in Chapter 4.

Research Question 3. The third research question simply examines how context may play a role in CMC, specifically within the use of spiritual support messages. To answer this question, the chi-square test of independence was used to examine whether spiritual support messages are found to be chance or not in both data sets. Through examination of the cross-tabulations of the two data sets it should be evident where spiritual support is used. Thematic similarities between spiritual support in both contexts were also discussed with the coders. Answering this question helps provide further insight for how context of CMC may be one of its features that empowers relational development and processes as posited in SIPT.

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

This chapter reports on the data collected and analyzed to answer the research questions. The final coding process resulted in two data sets, one for the coded messages from the website Beliefnet and one for the coded messages from the website DailyStrength. A total of 200 posts contained within 17 threaded discussions were collected from the bereavement forums on Beliefnet. As a result of the coding process, 517 messages within the posts were identified as supportive. Two hundred posts from 28 threaded discussions were also collected from the bereavement forums on the DailyStrength website. The coding process identified 432 messages as support within the threaded discussions. This chapter reports the results of chi-square analysis, and summarizes the frequencies of the different types of support messages that were coded and the support themes initially identified as they pertain to each research question.

Research Question #1

The first research question addressed whether spiritual support would be manifest in CMC and how. As a result of coding, 101 messages (19.5%) were coded as exclusively spiritual support from Beliefnet and 60 (13.9%) from DailyStrength. In other words, these support messages were exclusively identified and coded as only spiritual support. In addition, a total of 127 hybrid support messages contained some other type of support and spiritual support identified within Beliefnet, whereas DailyStrength yielded 41 hybrids. While these results provide indication that individuals do use CMC as a means for spiritual support, how individuals use CMC as spiritual support also required results. Therefore, the primary researcher and the coders identified various spiritual support message themes, which emerged in the coding

process: prayer support, spiritual blessings, spiritual presence, and spiritual support narrative. Each theme is briefly identified below and is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

Prayer support. The theme of *prayer support* commonly emerged in messages stating a prayer or offering the support of prayer. Messages such as “I will keep him in my prayers” or “My prayers are with you” overtly offer prayer in the message. Examples of prayers which represented implied prayer support include “I just pray that we all get through our losses and have the strength to get through each day” or

I am praying for you: Lord Almighty Father, please be with XXXXX (name omitted for privacy) in her time of sorrow. Send, we pray, Your blessed Holy Spirit to comfort and reassure her of Your love, Your grace, and Your mercy. We ask this in the name of the blessed Saviour- Amen.

Spiritual blessings. The *spiritual blessings* theme referred to invoking of divine protection or favor upon another individual. Spiritual blessings were found in simple references such as “God Bless” or “Shalom.” Oftentimes blessings were offered as salutations or as a sign-off within a message.

Spiritual presence. The *spiritual presence* theme emerged as messages that indicated either encouragement or stories of a supernatural presence that guided one through bereavement. Messages such as “your Dad will watch over you from Heaven” and “God hold you and yours in the hollow of His hand” provide indication of spiritual guiding presence in one’s life. In addition, there were longer narratives identified which include thematic elements of a spiritual guiding presence which indicate contact with either a dearly departed one or some presence beyond the physical realm.

Spiritual support narrative. Coders detected the theme that spiritual support was expressed through the relaying of a personal spiritual narrative. A spiritual support narrative was

identified as a generally unsolicited narrative story of an intrinsically personal spiritual experience that is shared as spiritual benefit to another. The theme of *spiritual support narrative* emerged as a result of individuals disclosing stories concerning their spiritual experience, their loss of a loved one, and their coping with that loss.

Research Question #2

The second research question focused upon how spiritual support messages and other types of support were related. To answer this question, the researcher established codes for hybrid forms of support that included one particular type of support and spiritual support. For example, there were separate codes for informational support and for spiritual informational support.

Chi-square analysis. A chi-square test of independence was completed on the combined data provided from Beliefnet and DailyStrength to examine the relationships between the types of support in the general matching typology and spiritual support. To meet the assumptions of the chi-square test of independence, types of support which had either zero or less than five observed instances were omitted from the analysis (i.e., tangible and support of others). The results and cross-tabulation for the grand chi-square are available in Appendix B (Grand Table). The findings of the chi-square ($\chi^2 = 80.482$, $df = 3$, $p < .001$) indicate significance related to the distribution of frequencies.

Additionally, a separate chi-square test of independence was completed on each data set (i.e., Beliefnet support messages and DailyStrength support messages) to examine any additional relationship not identified in the grand chi-square. The results and cross-tabulations of the analysis for each data set are available in Appendix C (DailyStrength) and Appendix D (Beliefnet). For both DailyStrength ($\chi^2 = 31.680$, $df = 5$, $p < .001$) and Beliefnet ($\chi^2 = 56.457$, df

= 5, $p < .001$) multiple types of support had lower observed and expected frequencies than five, which invalidates any statistical findings in the chi-square. However, examination of the cross-tab frequencies and percentages provides insight into how spiritual support is used within a matching framework of support. The following briefly reports upon pertinent frequencies, percentages, and themes of each type of support and their hybrid counterpart.

Tangible support. Of the total 35 messages coded as tangible from both data sets, no messages were jointly identified as spiritually supportive. A total of 12 messages (2.9%) were coded as tangible support from Beliefnet and 23 messages (6.2%) from DailyStrength. Tangible support included phrases or words that directly were an offer of specific instrumental aid.

Informational support. A grand total of 260 messages (35.1%) were coded as informational support in both data sets while 138 messages (18.6%) were coded as informational and spiritual. A total of 134 messages (32.2%) were coded as informational support and 104 messages (25%) were coded as informational and spiritual support from Beliefnet. In the DailyStrength coded data, there were 126 (33.9%) messages coded as informational and 34 messages (9.1%) coded as informational and spiritual. Informational support included things such as advice, information, or direction offered by the message sender. Informational support therefore could include information about what helped someone else through bereavement (such as grief counseling, God, support groups, medication, crying) with the perceived intent to support the receiver of the message. Informational support and informational and spiritual support accommodated for both the largest type of support observed in both data sets.

The most recurrent theme within the supportive messages was spiritual information. One example was informing others of the supernatural presence of the dearly departed. Examples include, “I also believe that our loved ones are able to be near us. I find comfort in that” and

“know your son is still with you.” Another spiritual theme common in the messages was that of directly imparting spiritual knowledge, as evident in coded messages such as “just pray for guidance,” “trust that God does not leave you alone. He is there to comfort you and give you peace,” or “you will hold him again in the resurrection.” There was also a large volume of informational support messages directed toward providing general advice. For example, messages such as “talking and writing about your grief and pain is helpful,” and “hang on to the memories, remember the good times and all she did for you” indicated practical advice to support the individual in need.

Emotional support. A grand total of 161 messages (21.8%) were coded as emotional support in both data sets while 7 messages (.95%) were coded as emotional and spiritual. A total of 77 messages (18.5%) were coded as emotional support and 5 messages (1.2%) were coded as emotional and spiritual support from Beliefnet. In the DailyStrength coded data, 84 messages (22.6%) were coded as emotional and 2 messages (.5%) were coded as emotional and spiritual. Emotional support was defined as messages during the interaction offering emotional comfort, and included manifest words/phrases such as “feelings of sorrow for you” or “I offer my sympathy” and latent content that referenced expression of feelings. While there was not a significant portion of the spiritually emotional support messages, one emergent theme observed was conveying an everlasting and supernatural love. An example of this type of message is “perhaps it is also a blessing . . . God’s way of letting you know that the love you share is real and deep.” Since the focus of the online community was bereavement, one common emotion that was supported was grief, as evident in representative messages such as “to lose a life partner after 23 years is a sad event; it must feel like a big part of your foundation has been ripped out from underneath you” and “I am so sorry for your loss. There is nothing in the world harder than

losing a child.” Another theme which emerged in expressing grief is empathy with the individual experiencing grief, as represented in messages such as “sorry for your loss, I too lost my mom. It will be 2 years next month” and “I certainly understand the feeling of loss, and of course nothing I can say can take that pain away from you now.”

Esteem support. A grand total of 85 messages (11.5%) were coded as esteem support while 7 (.95%) were coded as esteem and spiritual support in both data sets. A total of 44 messages (10.6%) were coded as esteem support and 6 messages (1.4%) were coded as esteem and spiritual support within the data set for Beliefnet. A total of 41 messages (11%) were coded as esteem support and 1 message (.3%) was coded as esteem and spiritual support in DailyStrength. Esteem support involved perceived supportive words, phrases, and messages that could result in an individual feeling an increased sense of competency. One theme identified within the esteem and spiritual support messages was that of a supernatural presence providing esteem support, whether it was from God or from the spirit of the departed individual. Supernatural presence was represented by messages such as “your mom wants you to be happy” and “you received this gift because you are a special person.” A common theme contained within the esteem support messages was validation. Messages such as “You are a good mother,” “you should be very proud of yourself for getting off the anti-depressants; it isn’t an easy thing to do,” and “you appear to be doing instead of stewing and that is positive” seem to commend the individual’s actions or state of mind.

Integration support. A grand total of 69 messages (9.3%) were coded as integration support within both data sets and 13 messages (1.8%) were coded as integration and spiritual support. A total of 17 messages (4.1%) were coded as integration support and 10 messages (2.4%) were coded as integration and spiritual support within the data set for Beliefnet. A total

of 52 messages (14%) were coded as integration support and 3 messages (.8%) were coded as integration and spiritual support within the data set for DailyStrength. Integration support messages included messages that emphasized the connection into a larger network or affiliation, which would result in benefit for the individual. The most common theme evident within the messages was inclusivity; that the individual was part of something beyond himself or herself, sometimes of a spiritual nature. Representative messages that contained a theme of spiritual inclusivity include “so many others truly care about you and are praying for you and your family,” and “you will be in my prayers and I’m sure in a lot of other people’s prayers here.” A second spiritual theme evident is that of prayer as a communal act in which people join together. One additional message exemplifying this theme states that “I pray that God be with us all that has lost a child. To help us get up each day to put one foot in front of the other and to help us maintain our face of normalcy.”

Support of others. By far, the smallest type of support observed was support of others. Of the 13 total messages coded as support of others, only 3 were identified as both spiritual and support of others (2 from Beliefnet and 1 from DailyStrength). Due to the low frequency of appearance of this type of supportive message, no relevant themes emerged within the coded messages.

Research Question #3

The third research question addresses how the context of the online community may influence the use of spiritual support. A grand total of 228 messages (44.1%) were coded as either exclusively spiritual support or some combination of spiritual and other type of support in the Beliefnet data set. Within the DailyStrength data set, a grand total of 101 messages (23.4%) were coded as either spiritual support or some combination of spiritual and other type of support.

This clearly indicated that spiritual support was more evident in a spiritually based bereavement online community than one that is not overtly spiritually based.

Due to the low frequencies of hybrid spiritual types of support, conclusive chi-square comparison is unattainable. However, the category of informational and spiritual support was one of the most frequent ways individuals in either community expressed spiritual support. Furthermore, informational and spiritual support was found in greater frequency on Beliefnet. In regards to the use of spiritual support on DailyStrength, due to the lower amount of frequencies in other categories, it could not be determined if the use of spiritual support was due to anything else but chance.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The use of the Internet for a variety of purposes has grown exponentially as newer communication technologies have become increasingly accessible. Individuals use computer-mediated communication (CMC) to fill voids in their personal lives, which, for a variety of reasons, cannot be fulfilled in face-to-face interactions. This study examined CMC use of both social and spiritual support messages. In an attempt to explore these areas in CMC, this study analyzed messages in spiritual and non-spiritual support oriented online communities. Specifically, posts from threaded discussion boards for coping with bereavement were analyzed in the online communities of Beliefnet and DailyStrength. The purpose was to build on what is known about how online communication operates, specifically in the areas of spiritual and social support. This study was designed as a mixed method approach of content analysis and grounded theory to examine how social and spiritual support messages are used in CMC. This chapter answers and discusses the three research questions. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of the research, future research, and the limitations of the study.

Research Questions

The findings of this study are particularly relevant and contribute to the ongoing examination of social and spiritual support in CMC. The way spiritual support messages operate, especially in the online world, has needed more attention. Findings for each of the research questions are provided below, followed by discussion of their implications.

Research Question #1. The first research question specifically addressed whether computer-mediated communication manifests itself as spiritually supportive communication and, if so, how. As defined in the codebook, spiritually supportive communication is support that

alludes to comfort, direction, knowledge, or aspirations connected to a higher power, one's personal ultimate existential aspirations, or the divine.

Overall the findings support the conclusion that not only will spiritual support be found in computer-mediated communication, but will manifest in specific ways. The current study operationalization of spiritual support was able to observe its use as a mutually exclusive type of support in an online setting. It previously has been assumed that aspects of spirituality manifest themselves through pre-existing elements in the matching (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). While spiritual support shares certain characteristics with other types of support (Maton, 1989), they are worthy of distinct classification in typologies due to their unique characteristics. Isolating specific spiritual support themes and messages provides greater clarity for support research that seeks to examine the holistic effects of support (Jerome, 2011; Peterson, 2011). The current findings can guide future research examining the utility of online spiritual support communication. The following provides explanation of the spiritual support type. The second research question explores spiritual support messages that are hybrids of spiritual and some other form of support.

Spiritual support offers a spiritual story. A defining characteristic of what makes spiritual support is how individuals use it to share stories of their own spiritual journey as support, forming what was identified in the data as a "spiritual support narrative." A spiritual support narrative is a generally unsolicited story of one's spiritual experience that is shared as support for another individual. According to Bosticco and Thompson (2005), storytelling about loss is one way individuals cope with bereavement. Spiritual storytelling can provide an additional benefit when seen as support. Wimberly (2011) studied spiritual storytelling following traumatic events, concluding that "health and spirituality in the face of trauma are at

work all around us through narrative and healing resources of resiliency” (p. 56). In the current study, spiritual support narratives provide a way to offer healing and recovery to those who are bereaved by sharing how the spiritual is part of the process.

A spiritual support narrative may be seen as a message of informational support; however it is used in a way that sharing mere informational support cannot. The spiritual support narrative imparts an individual’s intrinsic knowledge, understanding, and experience of the divine in story form for the purpose of helping another individual cope. As Wimberly (2011) indicated, a narrative can be one’s personal experience. When that experience includes spiritual experience, it is argued that it transcends mere information. Furthermore, when considering that a spiritual support narrative was shared in a bereavement discussion board thread, this “story” most often seeks to convey that there is an afterlife and that there is still a connection between the living and the dead. It can seek to reassure that there will be a reunion at some later point that is a result of some supernatural force. Taken in this light, the spiritual support narrative can be seen as having its own unique characteristics separate of other forms of social support. By sharing one’s spiritual narrative, individuals convey a story that may help others better understand how spirituality may aid the present situation. In doing so, support is offered that is not best described within the current matching framework.

The spiritual support narrative is better understood through the connection to elements Walther (1992) discussed in Social Information Processing Theory. Given that someone communicates a spiritually supportive narrative via CMC, they have the nonverbal element of time to construct the proper message they feel adequately offers their narrative and conveys spiritual support. Further, as individuals disclose their spiritual narrative, others potentially relate with the narrative for similarities, dissimilarities, and other aspects that can be seen as

supportive to their own current situation, aiding the support process. Thus, these types of messages may be understood as more purposeful and intentional. A spiritual support narrative can become a strategic device employed by a sender to convey spiritual support when thoughtful time is taken to construct and express a coherent and relatable story.

Spiritual support offers blessings. There were also specific themes found within the data that warrant further discussion. In both data sets, spiritual support was used as a way to offer spiritual blessing to another person. Offering a blessing is a practice commonly associated with spirituality. Whether directly stated in phrases such as “May God bless” or “God bless you and yours,” spiritual support is a way that the sender makes an indication that they are a spiritual person and that they wish to invoke divine support to the recipient of their message.

While blessings may seem mundane in nature, they can serve purpose. In Sanderson and Cheong’s (2010) exploration of how individuals used social media to cope following the death of Michael Jackson, they concluded that the common language found in mundane religious discourse (e.g., “God be with you”) helped individual expression. It seems logical to assume that using blessings becomes a simplistic and straight-forward way to express that comfort and aid comes from spiritual forces as well. While it may be ritualistic communication in other mediums, the limited cues available in CMC can make phatic types of communication (i.e., language used for general social interactions) more supportive in nature.

Robinson, Warisse-Turner, Levine, and Tian (2011) provided a positive association between online phatic communication and increased health-monitoring in healthcare situations. The more phatic exchanges in CMC between healthcare providers and patients led to increased monitoring of the patient’s blood-sugar. There is potential for blessings to serve in a similar manner regarding their ability to encourage the recipient to consider being spiritually blessed.

Often, blessings are used in place of greetings or farewells, which is rather unique to this form of communication. Whereas at times people offering religious or spiritual advice may be perceived as imposing a set of beliefs or values upon someone, the gesture of offering grace, mercy, or blessings from the divine seems less harsh. In other words, offering a blessing is to spiritual support as what stating “I love you” is to emotional support. While the current study did not examine what happens when the blessings become more specific (such as including direct references to a particular deity) or the impact of offering a blessing, identifying blessings as a strategic form of spiritual support is important for understanding its utility.

Spiritual support offers prayer. The sharing of prayer was another way in which spiritual support was enacted. Individuals use prayer as a way of sharing praise, thanksgiving, and supplication, oftentimes on behalf of another person, to a higher power. As previously discussed, prayer is both associated as an indicator with spiritual well-being (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010) and has been identified as integral to spiritual support found in face-to-face interaction (Zittel-Palamera et al., 2009). Identifying prayer as spiritual support provides extension of previous attempt to place prayer within online contexts (Baesler & Chen, 2013). As prayer is seen as a conversation with the divine (Baesler, 1997), typing your prayer in a discussion thread that is intended to be a prayer for someone else is clearly a form of spiritual support. No other type of support better describes what prayers found within spiritual support provide because they are expressed with the intent of intervention of a higher power.

Just as prayer may take various forms in different contexts (Baesler, 1997, 2008; Baesler & Chen, 2013), online prayer support may take many different forms. While there are the general petitions of “prayers for all” or “you are in my prayers,” prayers can also be more elaborate and detailed in format. Prayers may also be found in the format of a sender sharing a

pre-existing prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer or the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi. In any case, a prayer is used as a strategic form of spiritual support. The sender is indicating they are seeking the intervention of the divine to aid the person in need through prayer. Sharing a prayer in a discussion post is an intentional effort by an individual for divine comfort, presence, and guidance for someone else. A prayer found in Beliefnet stated, "I'm just going to pray that the pain, suffering and sorrow that you are going through will be eased by God and you get a miracle of your own someday the way that we did." This example of prayer support illustrates how the prayer's intent is for the divine to offer comfort, release, and ultimately provide an intervention that goes beyond human capability (e.g., a miracle).

Whereas blessings are seen as less imposing and threatening towards a receiver, there is potential for prayers to be seen more imposing. Another prayer offered in Beliefnet stated, "Dear Lord Jesus wipe away every tear. Let your peace fall upon this couple. I pray that the Spirit of the living God fall afresh on you and your husband." When prayer support becomes more dogmatic, there can be a greater chance the recipient may feel threatened if they do not share the same beliefs. Furthermore, some attempts at prayers may be shared with the intent to curse or 'damn' an individual (Sanderson & Cheong, 2010). While the current study did not examine the reactions of the offered support, individuals must exercise caution when sharing prayer to avoid potential misconceptions.

Spiritual support offers spiritual presence in one's life. The theme of spiritual presence was another way spiritual support was enacted. When messages alluded to divine or supernatural manifestations, it was followed by statements indicating that this presence would be calming, uplifting, and supportive. In sharing this type of spiritual support, the sender indicates spiritual support can come from a place that is immaterial, intangible, and supernatural. Most commonly

associated with statements that God, angels, martyrs, or deceased loved ones are nearby and omnipresent, presence is intended to make the recipient feel less abandoned and alone. The theme of spiritual presence demonstrates how bereaved individuals feel encouraged to use continuing bonds (Toller, 2011; Wood et al., 2011) to remain connected with those they lost. This type of spiritual support demonstrates how spiritually supportive messages can be exclusive of other forms in the matching framework in that the intended comforting presence being offered will come from a source not humanly possible.

Summary. Overall, the results clearly indicate that spiritual support messages are manifest in computer-mediated communication and can be seen as a distinct form of social support. Moreover, these messages have some distinguishable themes. However, it is important to acknowledge that spiritual support messages also have shared characteristics with pre-existing types of support found within an optimal matching framework. Therefore, the second research question more directly addresses the issues of how spiritual support overlaps with the matching framework.

Research Question #2. The second research question examined how spiritual support messages are related to different types of support (i.e., tangible, informational, emotional, esteem, integration, and support of others). Spiritual support was embedded in messages identified as other forms of support as indicated by the cross-tabulations (see Appendixes B and C). Due to the lower expected and observed frequencies in some categories, findings based upon the chi-square were limited. However, examination of the frequencies reported and additional relational analysis provide insight towards explaining certain relationships between spiritual and other types of support. Primarily, there was a strong presence of informational and spiritual support messages.

Spiritually informative support messages. Offering spiritually informative support appeared the most frequently and provides explanation as how spiritual support is related to other types of support. The current findings indicate that spiritual messages are expressed as informational support more so than other types of support. As indicated in previous studies (Pargament et al., 1998; Zittel-Palamara et al., 2009), spiritual information has been considered useful when communicating with those with varying health concerns. A spiritually informative support message aims to provide specific information concerning spirituality for the benefit of the other. Furthermore, as bereavement impacts an individual holistically (Balk, 2004), seeking spiritually informative support messages is more likely. While research has shown that information about spirituality may have been helpful if provided when dealing with a serious health crisis (Hegarty et al., 2011), the current study identified actual spiritually informative messages within bereavement contexts. Such information included advice, resources, and beliefs with the specific intent for spiritual benefit of the other.

Observed spiritually informative support transpired in an online bereavement support community, which due to the features of CMC enables individuals to carefully and strategically express themselves in a manner which may be a result of over-attribution of similarity suggested by SIPT (Walther, 1992, 1996). Since members have bereavement in common with one another, there is a likelihood that as one individual shares information that may be spiritual in nature, it will be reciprocated by the other. The same could be true if a message does not contain information that is spiritual in nature. This is further explained in the third research question.

Finally, spiritually informative support messages can begin with general information and then progress towards becoming more spiritually specific in nature to prevent negative evaluation in CMC. Previous research (Keaten & Kelly, 2008) has illustrated that increased

communication competence with CMC may reduce the fear of negative evaluation when using online channels. Therefore, when a communicator wants to share spiritual information and is concerned with the potential risk of negative evaluation with their spirituality, offering the hybrid of spiritual and information support may buffer the risk associated with making spirituality just one part of the larger supportive message.

Contribution to the spiritual support narrative. Another way spiritual support messages are related to the other types of support concern their contribution to the spiritual support narrative. When a spiritually informative support message is shared, it often is within a spiritual support narrative. As spiritual support narratives contain information, they are a direct way that individuals use spiritually supportive and information support messages. Previous studies examined the role of narratives and support (Anderson, 2004; Keeley, 2004); however the current findings illustrate that spirituality, when embedded with other characteristics of the matching framework, create a more holistic supportive narrative. Various characteristics of support are demonstrated by relaying one's personal story and experience to the other (Giannini, 2011). A narrative may have several support messages contained within it. When spiritual support is embedded within that narrative, support is offered that goes beyond providing information, emotions, or esteem. A spiritual support narrative utilizes the various characteristics of various types of support to create a more holistic support narrative. Through embedding messages concerning spiritual themes, individuals relay not just how earthly channels supported them, but also how spiritual channels were of support.

Other types of support not as prominent. While other studies (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2011; Toller, 2011) were more successful identifying types of support such as tangible, integration, and esteem support in online support CMC, the present study did not

identify these types as prominent. This resulted in low frequencies in hybrid support categories outside of spiritually informative support. While informational support is used to embed spirituality, tangible support and support of others were examples of support that spirituality was not clearly embedded within. While individuals appear adept at sharing spiritually informative support, appropriately expressing tangible support through CMC seemed more difficult. One explanation is that since individuals were using CMC and had no direct contact with other individuals, they were less likely to solicit or express tangible support.

Another explanation for why other types of support were not prominent may be the result of the exclusive spiritual support category. A number of support messages which may have been identified as spiritual support and some other type of support may have been now considered exclusively spiritual support. Previous studies examining similar typologies (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Toller, 2011) did not have an exclusive spiritual support category and thereby could not account for how spiritual support may have been used.

One final reason could be that the characteristics of the support expressed in an online community may be influenced by the context of the online community, resulting in certain types of support being used more or less. For example, bereavement (Wood et al., 2011) is a particular context whereby individuals cope and seek particular types of support. This phenomenon is explored in greater detail through the third research question.

Research Question #3. The third research question addressed whether the context of an online community influenced the structure of a spiritually supportive message. In general, how spiritually supportive messages were used did not change upon the context of the community, but their overall usage increased when the community was spiritual. Consulting the cross-tabulations (Appendix B and Appendix C), it is apparent that when the context was an overtly

spiritual online community, spiritual support messages were used more frequently. Spiritual support messages were also present within a non-spiritual context, but with less regularity and more discreetness in the form of embedded spiritual support.

The more specific the online community is, the more specific type of support will be offered (Peterson, 2009, 2011; Toller, 2011). While members of an online bereavement community cannot perform certain supportive gestures such as physical embrace or cooking a meal, they can share about the main sources of stress related to grief and loss. Discussion boards and posts within an online community dealing with bereavement issues will rely upon messages supportive in nature (Carroll & Landry, 2010). However, a bereavement discussion board within an online spiritual community will enable individuals to specifically address spiritual themes more so than in a non-spiritual community.

The presence of spiritual support messages in non-spiritual online communities indicates that CMC offers a safeguard when sharing spiritual information. As SIPT (Walther, 1992) states, there are limited cues present in CMC to which individuals must adjust when communicating. Regardless of the online context, these limited cues can actually be beneficial for a communicator to reveal and share particular types of disclosure (Antheunis et al., 2012), particularly spiritual support. Furthermore, online communicators can be anonymous or “faceless,” therefore they are transparent in both what they share and how they state it. The limited cues present provide opportunity for messages that may commonly be avoided.

The overall findings support that context may influence the use of spiritually supportive messages. One factor influencing computer-mediated communication not initially considered by Walther’s (1992) SIPT is that of context. While many of the supportive categories examined in this study were observed in relatively equal occurrence, spiritual support was present more in

Beliefnet than in DailyStrength. This is a clear indication that the context of the online community did influence support. This observation indicates that context of the online community wherein supportive CMC takes place may influence how a message is used for a relational process. In other words, the context may determine whether an individual employs a particular type of social support. For instance, whereas it may be more acceptable in a spiritual context like Beliefnet to offer more spiritually emotional support, it may not be as appropriate to offer it in a non-spiritual community like DailyStrength.

Discussion

The availability for social support in online support communities is widespread throughout the Internet (Campbell-Eichhorn, 2008; Peterson, 2009). Spiritual support is also important for understanding the ways individuals support one another via CMC (Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2011). Spiritual support messages as found in CMC also identify a more holistic way that communicators support one another, especially when circumstances limit other channels of support. Therefore, there are numerous contributions for communication research regarding the findings.

Contributions regarding spirituality and communication. The current study contributes to the ongoing development of spirituality as a concept in communication inquiry. As noted in chapter one, communication scholars have begun exploring spirituality but these investigations are still in their initial stages. Framing and documenting spirituality as a form of social support within CMC expands the discussion of how spirituality and communication are interconnected. The identification of spirituality within specific contexts such as CMC and social support provides a more holistic understanding of communication phenomenon for those examining spirituality's utility. Furthermore, the current study expands upon previous claims

that a central component of spirituality is connectedness (Sass, 2000) as well as aids coping processes (Pargament et al, 1998). Spirituality, observed as communication within the current study, was a message characteristic that was intended to allow bereaved individuals to connect and cope with their loss.

However, the current investigation demonstrated that the concept of spirituality needs further development and refinement. Due to the various and sometimes conflicting conceptualizations of spirituality (Kirkwood, 1994; MacDonald, 2000; Krause et al, 2001; Marler & Hadaway, 2002), certain aspects pertaining to spirituality are not clear when operationalized. Specifically, as spirituality is considered a human universal (Hegarty et al, 2011), it is difficult to make spirituality operational in a manner which encompasses the multitude of spiritual perspectives that exist. The predominant Judeo-Christian undertone of previous conceptualizations of spirituality has been noted as a research concern (Jensen & Thompson, 2008; Smith & Horne, 2007). For example, to observe spirituality only as a connection to a higher power eliminates the potential to observe spirituality in more Earth-spirit based faiths. However, to not include the divine in observing spirituality also poses a threat to those spiritualists who do believe in a higher power. While the current study approached spirituality broadly, the results indicate that the scope still needs expansion.

The current findings provide direction for future exploration of how communicators express their spirituality. An ambiguous aspect related to previous conceptualizations of spirituality concern how it is enacted or expressed (Egbert et al, 2004; Parrott, 2004; Polzer-Casarez & Engebretson, 2012). The current study provided clarification for how spirituality is expressed for supportive purposes on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level. Through the examination of spiritual support messages, spiritual themes which can offer support individually

and interpersonally were identified (i.e. spiritual blessings, prayer support, spiritual presence, and spiritual support narrative). As indicated in the findings of the current study, spirituality is expressed through themes invoking a third party that is based upon spiritual, religious, or philosophical beliefs. Expressing spirituality through thematic supportive messages to another person affirms one's personal spirituality by publicly stating a spiritual belief or conviction and seeks to aid the other by invoking the spiritual. While not exhaustive, these spiritual themes indicate that spirituality is expressed for both personal and interpersonal purposes.

In the current study, spirituality is expressed by invoking the powers of some third party which are beyond the human realm. As indicated by the present inquiry, when communicators state they hope for eternal peace, miracles, blessings, divine intervention, or the continued presence of the departed it is implied that a third party intervenes. While the concept of spirituality is ambiguous and broad in scope, it is speculated that expressing spirituality will include invoking the powers of a force or third party that is beyond the human realm.

As a result of the findings of the current study, it is suggested that spirituality may more effectively be conceptualized as an individual's sense of connectedness with a force or power outside of the natural realm of existence; which when invoked provides guidance for the benefit of self and others. This conceptualization requires further examination and support, but provides a broad enough scope to encompass a breadth of spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, this conceptualization provides a foundation for also understanding the contributions to spiritual and social support provided in the current study.

Contributions regarding spiritual and social support. The current study makes one major contribution concerning social support in general. Spiritual support should be more strongly considered for the characteristics it possesses which may influence holistic well-being.

This has been highlighted in previous research in multiple disciplines (Dyess, 2011; Jerome, 2011; Whitehead & Bergeman, 2011); however until spiritual support is more fully incorporated into the lexicon of social support as having distinct supportive qualities the argument remains. While the current study provided some clarification as to how spiritual support is related to other types of social support, the implication is that spiritual support is its own distinct type of support requiring careful examination and study. Furthermore, due to the complexities involved when examining spirituality within social support, there needs to be continued development of the spiritual support concept.

There are a number of implications for spiritual support research. Although there are a number of sources which can transmit spiritual support (Roff et al., 2009), online support communities traditionally have not been considered. The purpose of the current study was to examine spiritual support as found within online bereavement support communities. The implication is that in today's society, non-traditional channels and contexts convey spiritual support. Those who study and who value spiritual support's merits should continue to explore how it is expressed in such non-traditional places. Distinctly CMC relationships and communities are becoming more commonplace and should be better embraced for their social and spiritual support potential.

The current study contributes to the growing body of research on spiritual support, however the concept of spiritual support still necessitates further development. The current study continues the examination of what spiritual support looks like (Maton, 1989; Coulson & Greenwood, 2012; Peterson, 2011; Zittel-Palamara et al., 2009). While the current study identified such forms as storytelling, spiritual information, prayer support, spiritual presence, and spiritual blessings to be vital to what spiritual support looks like, there needs to be continued

identification of its characteristics. Other defining characteristics do exist and their identification will better define what spiritual support is and how it is enacted in multiple contexts and cultures. For instance, the characteristics of spiritual support may be different in contexts which may identify less with traditional Western Judeo-Christian spiritual and religious beliefs such as Wicca and Earth-spirit faiths (Smith & Horne, 2007). The current study provides a broad conceptualization of spiritual support which may assist future studies of these less examined contexts and cultures.

Another contribution is that the current study points toward a unique conceptualization for the exploration of spiritual support's purpose. Specifically, when spiritual support is conceptualized as the communicative channeling of power that is divine or beyond the natural realm to meet the needs of self and others it performs two purposes. Spiritual support is unique in the respect that it provides support for the one expressing a message (Maton, 1989) as well as the recipient of the message (Krause et al, 2001). This is accomplished by invoking an existentially spiritual third party, or power of force. By invoking the powers of the spiritual, an individual strengthens his/her personal spiritual convictions while providing spiritual strength for another individual. In other words, when a third party shares spiritual beliefs about the afterlife with someone who is mourning the loss of a loved one, they reaffirm their own beliefs about the afterlife while attempting to help someone else by providing spiritually informative support to another individual. Future conceptualizations of spiritual support should recognize both purposes that occur when the spiritual and divine are invoked. However, conceptualizing spiritual support in this manner will require future validation and confirmation through continued inquiry.

There are contributions for the continued study of prayer as related to spiritual support. The health benefits of prayer have been examined (Baesler & Ladd, 2009) as well as their functions (Baesler 1997, 1999). Baesler and Chen (2013) have called for the examination of how prayer is used in CMC. The current study builds upon this by identifying prayer as part of a distinctively spiritual support message used in interpersonal CMC. While prayer is considered conversation with a higher power, it is also used for interpersonal use as identified in the current study.

Contributions regarding bereavement. The current study provides implications as to how bereavement can better be seen as a holistic experience. Balk (2004) indicated that part of the holistic experience of bereavement is spiritual in nature. The current study helps explain how spiritual characteristics are used as support to aid others through the bereavement process. Furthermore, the current findings support Wilkum and MacGeorge's (2010) claim concerning high intrinsic religious beliefs equating to preferences for more religious oriented content. When seeking or using an online bereavement support community, an individual who is highly spiritual will be drawn to spiritual content for support. The current findings may also inform future examination of the use of spiritual support messages within online memorials.

Contributions regarding the nature of CMC use. The current study implies that individuals who cannot secure social and spiritual support messages in a face-to-face relationship can find them via CMC. CMC is a medium that provides sufficient social and spiritual support for a number of reasons. Individuals seeking support via CMC receive encouragement specifically through the message content itself, without other communication factors interfering. CMC provides a medium where certain relational factors that may typically prohibit disclosure about stress are eliminated due to the limited cues present (Keaten & Kelly, 2008). Individuals

at various stages of relational development can communicate within an online community of like-minded individuals and share spiritual support with little resource investment.

The risk associated with disclosing spiritual beliefs is still present, but it is alleviated due to a number of factors. First, the ability of an individual to select an online community context that fits an individual need for support alleviates the risk of disclosing about personal stressors. If an individual has need for spiritual support, the Internet offers the ability to intentionally seek and join a community without having to wait for an invitation to join. Since online communities can be highly contextualized, individuals can feel a sense of empathy with other members of that community and share appropriate support. In other words, if an individual has chosen to join a bereavement discussion board in a spiritual online community, they expect that others have joined the community with the same intent. Second, CMC in discussion boards can be anonymous, which provides the opportunity to disclose messages without the emotions associated with personal judgment. Even in online communities, the need for anonymity may be what someone either seeking or soliciting spiritual support needs to share it. The ability to be anonymous or “faceless” in a discussion board is a characteristic that face-to-face support groups do not have, which may be why an individual turns to CMC for spiritual support. Finally, even when CMC in discussion boards is not anonymous, the conversation is considered public to all members, resulting in the larger potential for someone to respond to the message. The discussion may take place initially with just two individuals, but it may be joined by countless others due to the fact it is in a virtually public space. In turn, this may lead someone to solicit or share support more in an online context. Again, this is a unique characteristic for those using CMC for spiritual support. The ability for the supportive conversation to be joined by countless others is one that generally does not occur in face-to-face interactions.

However, the expression of spiritual support messages may lead to problematic miscommunication. Even though the limited cues of CMC provide a safeguard for discussing spiritual support, caution must still be exercised. As in face-to-face interactions, individuals should consider how much disclosure of their spiritual beliefs is needed when providing spiritual support. While online discussion boards provide a medium for individuals with little relationship to gather and communicate, disclosing too much too quickly may still result in avoidance, the lack of reciprocity due to dissimilarity or disagreements due to different beliefs. Given the asynchronous quality of CMC in discussion boards, individuals should benefit from the passage of sufficient time by constructing thoughtful and mindful spiritual support messages. The ability to not respond immediately and use time to reconsider a message's phrasing, tone, and sentiment is a defining characteristic of CMC (Walther, 1996) which in turn may lead to better enactment of spiritual support. However, this does not always occur, as illustrated by the problematic rise of volatile online debates concerning controversial issues such as politics, economy, and religion.

Another implication for individuals who are using CMC for support is that offering spiritual support is not limited to specifically spiritual online communities. Someone seeking or receiving spiritual support does not only participate in overtly spiritual communities, as they have been shown to manifest in non-spiritual communities. This was shown to be the case in the current study, as spiritual support was evident regardless of the spiritual nature of the community. However, context is still important when communicating spiritual support. Expressing spiritual support would be considered acceptable communication behavior within a bereavement discussion board, but potentially less acceptable in other types of context. This is important because as more contextualized supportive online communities emerge, the context will not prohibit how individuals enact support. Therefore, individuals may seek support online

for a specific purpose, but will still encounter all types of supportive messages. However, it should be considered that the more specific the community's purpose, the more specific the type of supportive messages may emerge.

Contributions regarding SIPT. Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992) suggested that passage of sufficient time and message exchanges influence impression and relational development. Ramirez (2007) further advanced that the initial impressions can actually be vital in predicting future interactions between online communicators. The current study advances this research by adding context as a feature that may influence those initial impressions, which may lead to future interactions of online communicators. When online communicators converge initially in a context that they have similarity, such as bereavement in the current study, it may lead further message exchanges, influence impression and develop the relationship. Furthermore, Walther's (1996) notion of hyperpersonal communication may also be influenced by context as well, as it provides opportunity for communicators to see deeper similarities with one another. In the current study, spiritual support messages in bereavement discussion contexts represented an attempt to more deeply connect and support someone in a holistic manner, which in turn may be seen as hyperpersonal by the other. Warisse-Turner et al. (2001) focused on online cancer support groups and found that deeper connections formed with those providing support on the listserv because of certain similarities, such as being cancer patients. While not the focus of their study, perhaps the ability to join an online community based upon a shared understanding of its context that leads communicators to feel more deeply connected with one another. Individuals can self-select the online contexts where they connect with one another, and this should be considered an influencing factor for how computer-mediated communication operates.

There has been some examination of the use of support mechanisms in online contexts (Campbell-Eichhorn, 2008; Peterson, 2009, 2011; Robinson & Turner, 2003). The current study offers provision of some specific themes and characteristics of spiritual support in computer-mediated messages. Given the limited cues of CMC, the implication is that communicators consider thematic elements (such as spirituality) to convey support when writing a message. While these themes may be very similar to those present in face-to-face conversations, CMC necessitates more strategically selected themes. In other words, even though socially supportive communication takes place both off-line and online, being online may require more attention to the message. Examining how spiritual themes are manifest in support message addresses just one way online communicators may accommodate for having fewer cues present in this context.

Contributions regarding other theoretical perspectives. Theoretical perspectives other than those that guided this inquiry may also contribute to the explanation of how spirituality is used as social support in CMC. As briefly discussed earlier, Scott (1998) advanced a theoretical perspective of anonymity which could provide explanation for why individuals may reveal certain types of support more so in CMC than face-to-face. Qian and Scott (2007) examination of anonymity in CMC conclude that future research should examine why users of CMC identify themselves in particular ways. The current study contributes to the discussion by identifying spirituality and spiritual support as a message characteristic which may be more easily expressed in CMC due to limited cues.

Another perspective not initially considered by the current study is Reicher, Spears, and Postmes' (1995) social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE). SIDE provides a framework for explaining how individuals relate with one another in online settings where they are deindividuated and less aware of themselves as individuals (Carr, Vitak, and McLaughlin,

2013). Lee (2008) states that SIDE explains how the removal of certain social context cues via text based CMC impacts social influence between individuals. The examination of how spirituality is used as social support through CMC could contribute to the ongoing discussion concerning deindividuation, depersonalization and group identity within the SIDE literature. For example, whereas expressing spirituality and spiritual support may likely have little influence on an interaction in an online forum discussing fantasy sports, it would more likely have influence within a bereavement discussion board because of the possibility of involving the group identity of a spiritual community. Furthermore, when the context becomes even more specific, the influence of sharing spirituality may have greater impact. Future research could explore the connections between spirituality and SIDE

Contributions regarding health communication research. Indirectly linked throughout the current study is the field of health communication research. As indicated in a growing body of health communication literature, spirituality is an important component for holistic social support (Anderson, 2004; Musgrave, Allen, & Allen, 2002; Peterson, 2011) and can provide a framework for healthcare providers and interventions. As identified in the current study, there are certain spiritually supportive themes and characteristics contained within messages that can aid not only online communicators, but professionals who deal with providing spiritually supportive communication. Furthermore, the use of spiritual support messages need not be limited to contexts that are specifically identified as spiritual/religious, as this type of support can transcend context.

Limitations

A number of limitations need to be considered when interpreting these results. Of primary concern are the scope of the study, the sample used for analysis, and the mixed

methodology. Each of these limitations are discussed in detail below and can also be assumed to inform future research.

The scope of the study included individual support messages shared within online discussions. While there is need and merit in understanding individual computer-mediated supportive messages, the current study was unable to make any inferences or draw conclusions about the influence of the supportive message. The messages contained in the data set were observed as intended to be supportive messages, but there was no way of evaluating whether they were *received* as a supportive message. In other words, the scope of the study did not examine the conversation taking place between two online communicators; it focused upon the individual message. The effect of the supportive message was not analyzed; however, it was not the primary purpose for the study to address the message's effect. Unless one was to place the message back within the larger discussion and also analyze the messages following the observed supportive message, there was no manner in which to estimate whether the message was perceived supportive. This is further complicated by the limited cues available within computer-mediated communication, such that unless one addressed that they were supported or comforted by the message, it could be that the message was not supportive.

The second limitation concerns the sample used for the study. The ability to generalize from this sample is limited. While the study used a non-random sample that did yield an adequate sample for examining supportive messages, it did not include any procedures for random or probability sampling. Therefore, conclusions drawn from the results should be generalized to only the current data set and not generalized to a larger population, including other online support groups. Additionally, the sample came from users who willingly chose to use an online bereavement support group. It is likely that the amount of supportive messages found

within the sample is a direct result of this self-selective procedure and again not to random chance. Finally, there is no way of knowing that specific supportive messages were more prominent in these groups due to whether it was a bereavement group or not.

Another limitation is the lower observed and expected frequencies in the chi-square analysis. While the coding procedures resulted in ample data for analysis, certain types of support were not observed (i.e. spiritually tangible support) and weakened the generalizations that the chi-square test of independence can make.

A final limitation concerns the mixed methodologies used for the study. Using grounded theory and content analysis can potentially be seen as a weakness in that the study used elements of both. While still based upon previous usage of content analysis and grounded theory, it is likely that future researchers would employ different approaches. Therefore, the ability to replicate any similar results may be limited. However, the coding procedures provide rigorous detail as to how others may attempt doing so. Although the codebook designed for the current study was a result of careful research and revision, it is also highly likely that other investigators may interpret codes differently.

Future Research

Future research should continue to develop and refine the concept of spiritual support. Given previous conceptualizations and the one used by the current study, it is clear that spiritual support is a concept in need of future clarification and theoretical perspective. Spirituality is a complex concept, however it provides a holistic view of communication practices and phenomenon. Clearly, many communicators use spiritual support and communicate that support to others. Future research can explore how spiritual support performs a dual purpose on both an intrapersonal and interpersonal level at the same time by invoking of a spiritual or divine power.

One of the most important directions for future research pertains to context. The findings of the current study indicate context (i.e., spiritual online community and bereavement support groups) potentially impacted the use of spirituality and spiritual support. Since spirituality is considered a human universal it is imperative for research to reflect the universalism that is central to spirituality. Future research should examine the use of spirituality and spiritual support by broadening the scope to more universal contexts. Specifically noteworthy are contexts and cultures where spirituality may not be predominantly demonstrated through Judeo-Christian ideology. In doing so, a clearer understanding of what spirituality and spiritual support looks like can be provided.

While the current study examined spiritual support characteristics within CMC, it is important for future research to explore additional characteristics. The current study identified characteristics of spirituality and spiritual support found in archived CMC. Future research should ask communicators how they express spiritual support. In doing so, a more comprehensive understanding of spiritual support message characteristics can be provided. Furthermore, asking communicators how they express spiritual themes in various contexts can contribute to clearer explanations of how spirituality is expressed.

Another important area for future research pertains to the perceived effect of spirituality and spiritual support and when it is appropriate. The question of when a spiritual support message is expected or desired should be examined to properly provide connection with an optimal matching framework of social support. This would not only help address some of the current studies limitations, but build upon the body of literature on both spiritual and social support. Furthermore, as spiritual support is seen as having both intrapersonal and interpersonal support purposes, it is important to understand what an effective message that accomplishes both

purposes looks like. In general, one study will not warrant spiritual support's inclusion in all social support studies; however it is proposed here that future research continue to build a case for this inclusion.

Even as the body of literature builds concerning computer-mediated communication, it is clear that future research will need to continue examining its viability. CMC is becoming more common and used for an increasingly wide array of purposes. Any aspect of face-to-face interactions may require further inquiry when pertaining to newer communication technologies. As the current study has demonstrated, there is a need for additional research to examine how areas such as spirituality manifest within computer-mediated communication. In addition, the need for longitudinal studies examining the use, effect, and viability of computer-mediated communication will be needed as society embraces newer technologies.

Closer examination of prayer should examine any perceived difference there is when prayer is offered online. Furthermore, what characteristics of a prayer are seen as more supportive is an area that requires additional study.

Finally, future research should more closely examine the link between the expression of spirituality and other theoretical perspectives. As previously discussed, theoretical perspectives related to anonymity (Scott, 1998) and SIDE (Reicher et al, 1995) further provide heuristic explanation to how and why individuals use spirituality in online contexts. Specifically, future research should fully examine whether spirituality is an area that individuals more comfortably disclose anonymously. Furthermore, it is of interest the role of depersonalization in CMC when it comes to disclosing spirituality and spiritual support.

Conclusion

This research provides support for spiritual support messages as posted in CMC. Furthermore, it advocates for the continued and expanded inquiry of spirituality in communication research. In the course of life, individuals encounter times that require additional support, comfort and strength. Individuals can choose any number of ways to cope with that stress they encounter. Some may turn to friends and family; others to more detrimental and harmful routes (Dyess, 2011). Others may simply face isolation and feel as if there is nowhere to find support. However, with the growth and accessibility of the Internet, this can no longer always be the case. Furthermore, more people are seeking and identifying themselves as spiritual. The common denominator with both CMC and spirituality is that they both offer an individual an outlet that will alleviate isolation and can provide a system of support. Therefore, as a new age of communication technology is dawning, and as more people identify as spiritual, it is imperative that the scholarly world of communication continue help understand and explain these phenomenon.

Understanding spiritual and support messages found in CMC is one way of moving communication research forward in a time when there is much examining the negative and not the good. As contrast to examining how detrimental or negative aspects of both the Internet and issues of spirituality/religion can be, now is a time for a new enlightenment—an enlightenment that recognizes the good that comes from newer communication technology, and the wholeness that spirituality can provide through it.

APPENDIX A

Codebook

Please use the following definitions, instructions and examples to identify socially supportive messages for each message being coded.

Spiritual Support: Defined as support which alludes to comfort, direction, knowledge or aspirations connected to a higher power, one's personal ultimate existential aspirations or the divine.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message that indicate spiritual support in **yellow**.

Examples that are spiritual support include:

- I don't feel my Dad around me either and I am beyond jealous of those that do. Oh I look for signs everywhere but nothing. I've had a family friend who is a nun promise me one day I will absolutely feel his presence but she said it may take years because the pain is so bad....maybe we somehow block it. I [hope](#) every single day and night that he's right by my side...he has to be, I can't cope or comprehend that he isn't. Someone else said "they never [leave](#) us, they just support us in a different way." I want all that to be true.
- A person's wealth isn't measured by assets, money, land, possessions. They are measured by the friends they left behind and the impact they made on others lives. Life is to be enjoyed not just endured. As humans, we are blessed to be created as social creatures who learn to love and to be loved. We may not always get things right but, we constantly strive for happiness, and fulfillment in Life.
- Please know that God loves you and so do I. There will be a peace that is beyond all understanding which will encompass you.
- Keep us posted on your brothers condition and know that we might not be with you in body we are in spirit.
- I'll be praying for you throughout this time.
- God's peace be with you all.

Tangible Support: Defined as support directly linked to specific instrumental aid that might be provided in the interaction, such as financial assistance or letting an individual use a cell-phone.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate tangible support using the following code:

Green: Tangible Support

Bright Green: Tangible and Spiritual

Examples of tangible support include:

- That is so horrible! Can I help give you a ride to the funeral?!
- I am a grief counselor and would be willing to offer my services to you.
- I remember how awful this time felt for my whole family. I would love to be able to bring a meal to your family to make things easier for everyone.

Informational Support: Defined as support referring to information, advice, or direction that is exchanged in interactions that leads to better comprehension of a situation.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate informational support using the following code:

Blue: Informational Support

Dark Blue: Informational and Spiritual

Examples of informational support include:

- I am sorry for your loss. Words can't describe how you must feel or what you are going thru. There is a nice group out there it is called Compassionate Friends. It is a support group for parents who have lost their children and it gave me strength during the 1970s. A minister started it. There are now several chapters. But join this group and you will get friends and you need it now.
- To live life as much as we can, and ensure that when we do die we die in the company of loved ones. If that's not meaning enough, then it's always good to take time to find your own reasons to live.
- I hope you begin to feel better soon. I talked to a grief counselor when my husband died and it really helped me a lot. Perhaps it's time you did that too. You can contact one thru Hospice even if you didn't use their services prior to this.
- It took ten years for me to get over my mother's death. It is not easy at all. Every anniversary of my mom's passing away, I would cry or get really depressed. After ten years, I do not do that any more but do remember my own mom. This is how I have dealt with my mom's passing away. You have to do what is best for you.

Emotional Support: Defined as feelings of offered emotional comfort which are a result of an interaction.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate emotional support using the following code:

Red: Emotional Support

Pink: Emotional and Spiritual

Examples of emotional support include:

- I know what you mean when you say that the color in life is gray- I feel that way, too ever since my sister passed. She died suddenly just 2 months ago- and everything has changed. I find myself feeling like I am in a fog. And have heard myself say that everything is gray. i know exactly what you mean by that
- I am so sorry for your loss. Words can't describe what you must be going through. Your son is now an angel and he will be watching over you.
- I have got so much comfort from your wise words of wisdom. It's only been 3 weeks since my Rich passed away, I feel as though I'll never be able to move on. With your encouragement and suggestions I will be able to keep my head above water though.
- I identify with the relationship you had with your mother. My aunt and I were also very close. I thought I was prepared for her passing. She was very private about it, too.

Esteem Support: Defined as support that is the result of an individual feeling increased competency as a result of feedback from an interaction

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate esteem support using the following code:

Gray 50%: Esteem Support

Gray 25%: Esteem and Spiritual

Examples of esteem support include:

- Im so sorry for your loss and Bless you for being there for him. You were strong for him and thats what he needed. Of course you are going to be sad. Allow yourself to grieve. It will take time.
- I know that everyone is always looking for new resources for help. Thanks so much for posting this!! Hugs
- I'm glad you're going to the event. Those first ones are always difficult... but these are baby steps. I'm glad you're reaching out here.

Integration Support: Defined as support which emphasizes links with social networks, in that it refers to how much an individual feels they are connected into the interaction with other people.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate integration support using the following code:

Dark Red: Integration Support

Dark Yellow: Integration and Spiritual

Examples of integration support include:

- The point is that you came here and that is a reward to each and every person who reaches out.. Knowing that GRIEF is a shared experience; I too lost my parents my DAD to cancer in 2002 my Mother in 2009...
- WE both have some thing in common. My husband died of cancer and I care for him in treatment, chemo, rad. and physician appointment etc.
- to all thank you and I have decided after talking and reading the posts it would be bad for me to meet her.I have to let Brad go.It will be a year and i am struggling with money problems as usual.Things are little better now and the fantastic advice that I have gotten shows that wonderful people who are on this web site.I love all of you.Cheerio.....
- But, I can safely say, I am at a much better place than I was when I joined this board. Being on DS really helps. The fact that I'm not alone in this gave me great comfort. I found a good therapist who helped me take one step at a time. I still don't have many good days, but occasionally when I do, I enjoy the moment. Please come here, talk to us, share your pain and walk with us. You're not alone in this. Take care sweetheart.
- God bless, and please keep us posted on your progress. Peace, Lee
- Thank you very much for all your comments and consideration. I really appreciate it. It helps to know that people understand. I am sorry for all that you have suffered and wish healing and closure for all of us.

Support of Others: Defined as support which refers to the good feelings an individual experience when helping someone else.

Highlight words and/or phrases from the message which indicate support of others using the following code:

Turquoise: Support of Others

Teal: Support of Others and Spiritual

Examples of support of others include:

- We are placed here for a reason. We are given a chance to see, breathe, experience, touch, love, touch others lives, companionship, fellowship, and to make a difference in

the lives of others. I could list a whole page of people who have now passed, that touched my life in one form or another, Friends, relatives, childhood buddies, high [school](#) classmates, Sunday [School](#) teachers, old preachers, and those who taught me about life in general. A person's wealth isn't measured by assets, money, land, possessions. They are measured by the friends they left behind and the impact they made on others lives. Life is to be enjoyed not just endured. As humans, we are blessed to be created as social creatures who learn to love and to be loved. We may not always get things right but, we constantly strive for happiness, and fulfillment in Life. Life is a treasure that money can never buy.

- The group I attend is just a nice place to meet others who have lost loved ones, and they too have gotten signs. I started off with just a few friends, and we have grown to over 137 members. I try and send out a thoughtful poem at least twice a week to everyone and just chat.. keep people going. We have interesting chats. A lot of chats about signs people have gotten, and we of course celebrate our "angel days" by announcing them, and placing them in permemnt memory on our page, and saying a little someting about the person on their day.. .
I [hope](#) it is a place you can find lots of friends and support. They are all so kind.

APPENDIX B*Grand Table Chi-Square Cross Tab*

	Informational Support	Emotional Support	Esteem Support	Integration Support	Total
Spiritual	138 (18.6%) 83.6% / 34.7% <i>88.74</i> (27.34)	7 (.95%) 4.2% / 4.2% <i>37.46</i> (24.77)	7 (.95%) 4.2% / 7.6% <i>20.51</i> (8.90)	13 (1.8%) 7.9% / 7.6% <i>18.28</i> (1.53)	165
Non-Spiritual	260 (35.1%) 45.2% / 65.3% <i>309.26</i> (7.85)	161 (21.8%) 28% / 95.8% <i>130.54</i> (7.11)	85 (11.5%) 14.8% / 92.4% <i>71.49</i> (2.55)	69 (9.3%) 12% / 84.1% <i>63.72</i> (0.44)	575
Total	398	168	92	82	740

$x^2 = 80.482$
 $df = 3$
 $x^2/df = 26.83$
 $p(x^2 > 80.482) = 0.001$

Key:

Observed values are displayed at top of cell

Overall percentage of messages are displayed in (%)

Row and Column percentages are displayed in Row % / Column %

Expected values are displayed in *italics*

Individual x^2 values are displayed in (parenthesis)

Note: 161 additional messages were exclusively coded as spiritual support but were not included in the chi-square analysis. Additionally, categories of support which had less than 5 observed instances of support were omitted to meet the assumption of the chi-square test of independence.

APPENDIX C

Daily Strength Chi-Square Cross-Tab

	Tangible Support	Informational Support	Emotional Support	Esteem Support	Integration Support	Sup. Of Others	Total
Spiritual	0 (0%) <i>0%</i> 0% <i>2.53</i> (2.53)	34 (9.1%) <i>82.9%</i> 21.3% <i>17.63</i> (15.19)	2 (.5%) <i>4.8%</i> 2.3% <i>9.48</i> (5.90)	1 (.3%) <i>2.4%</i> 2.4% <i>4.63</i> (2.85)	3 (.8%) <i>7.3%</i> 5.5% <i>6.06</i> (1.55)	1 (.3%) <i>2.4%</i> 16.7% <i>0.66</i> (0.17)	41
Non-Spiritual	23 (6.2%) <i>6.9%</i> 100% <i>20.47</i> (0.31)	126 (33.9%) <i>38.1%</i> 78.7% <i>142.37</i> (1.88)	84 (22.6%) <i>25.4%</i> 97.7% <i>76.52</i> (0.73)	41 (11%) <i>12.4%</i> 97.6% <i>37.37</i> (0.35)	52 (14%) <i>15.7%</i> 94.5% <i>48.94</i> (0.19)	5 (1.3%) <i>1.5%</i> 83.3% <i>5.34</i> (0.02)	331
Total	23	160	86	42	55	6	372

$x^2 = 31.680$
 $df = 5$
 $x^2/df = 6.34$
 $p(x^2 > 31.680) = 0.001$

Cross-Tab Key:

Observed values are displayed at top of cell

Overall percentage of messages are displayed in (%)

Row percentages are displayed in *italics* %

Column percentages are displayed in %

Expected values are displayed in *italics*

Individual x^2 values are displayed in (parenthesis)

Note: 60 additional messages were exclusively coded as spiritual support but were not included in the chi-square analysis.

APPENDIX D

Beliefnet Chi-Square Cross Tab

	Tangible Support	Informational Support	Emotional Support	Esteem Support	Integration Support	Sup. Of Others	Total
Spiritual	0 (0%) <i>0%</i> 0% 3.66 (3.66)	104 (25%) <i>81.9%</i> 43.7% 72.66 (13.52)	5 (1.2%) <i>3.9%</i> 6.1% 25.03 (16.03)	6 (1.4%) <i>4.7%</i> 12% 15.26 (5.62)	10 (2.4%) <i>7.9%</i> 37% 8.24 (0.37)	2 (.5%) <i>1.6%</i> 28.6% 2.14 (0.01)	127
Non-Spiritual	12 (2.9%) <i>4.2%</i> 100% 8.34 (1.61)	134 (32.2%) <i>46.4%</i> 56.3% 165.34 (5.94)	77 (18.5%) <i>26.6%</i> 93.9% 56.97 (7.05)	44 (10.6%) <i>15.2%</i> 88% 34.74 (2.47)	17 (4.1%) <i>5.9%</i> 63% 18.76 (0.16)	5 (1.2%) <i>1.7%</i> 71.4% 4.86 (0.00)	289
Total	12	238	82	50	27	7	416

$x^2 = 56.457$
 $df = 5$
 $x^2/df = 11.29$
 $p(x^2 > 56.457) = 0.001$

Key:

Observed values are displayed at top of cell

Overall percentage of messages are displayed in (%)

Row percentages are displayed in *italics* %

Column percentages are displayed in %

Expected values are displayed in *italics*

Individual x^2 values are displayed in (parenthesis)

Note: 101 additional messages were exclusively coded as spiritual support but were not included in the chi-square analysis.

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ABSTRACT**EXAMINING THE USE OF SPIRITUALITY AS A FORM OF SOCIAL SUPPORT IN
COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

by

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Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 1992) suggests that individuals can develop and sustain relationships in online contexts even with limited cues present. With more individuals using computer-mediated communication (CMC) for relational processes, there is an increased need for examination of how communication is used with fewer cues present. Due to its contributions to holistic health, spirituality is a dimension of support which also necessitates increased examination as well. The present study examines how CMC can be used for the relational purposes of spiritual and social support in online communities. Messages from two separate online bereavement communities were analyzed to discover themes for how social and spiritual support messages are used in an online bereavement context. Findings from the results suggest that spiritual support is a unique form of social support and can be found in CMC, regardless of the context. Spiritual support is used to share spiritual narratives, blessings, awareness, and prayers with others for the purpose of comfort and encouragement. The relationship to other types of support is also discussed, with results indicating that spiritual support is often shared as information. Conceptualizations for future examination of spirituality and spiritual support are offered.

AUTOBIGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Kristopher M. Paal received his B.A. in Communication from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania in 1998 and worked on his M.A. at the University of Akron. Over the course of his career, he has served within multiple congregations developing their youth programs. Upon beginning doctoral work at Wayne State University, he began teaching at the university level. Deciding to take the long road towards completing his dissertation, he served as an Assistant Professor at Malone University from 2006-2011. Kristopher's main research interests include the intersection of spirituality/faith and how it is communicated. He is also interested in oral history and looks forward to collecting spiritual support narratives as a way to further examine some of the findings from his dissertation.