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Online social support

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New media are the tools that support human's intellectual functioning. For many people with disabilities they may become the sole opportunity for accessing information, communicating, learning or working. On the other hand, new media also provide a space for social interactions that could affect the process of coping with critical events both, ordinary and traumatic ones. The key concept for the discussion consists in internet-based social support, defined as support available online to a person dealing with a critical event which needs to be overcome with external resources coming from virtual groups comprising people experiencing difficulties of a similar nature, in the past or currently. The author posed the question whether online social support is ubiquitous, and what it manifests itself. To answer this, she conducted quantitative and qualitative research. The data collected then became the basis for analysis and theoretical considerations.

KEY WORDS: social support, Internet, supporting role of the media, compensation

Introduction

In a lifetime, a human being experiences various events, which shape their way of thinking, influence acting and perceiving reality. Some of them, despite significantly interfering with the established scheme of functioning, are foreseeable, inscribed into natural deve-

lopment. Therefore, they are of a normative character. Those events include: birth of the first child in a family, marriage, starting a new job or death of a spouse at the final stage of life. Sometimes, there are also critical events, which cannot be foreseen and occurrence of which results in traumatic stress. Those usually include catastrophes, but also serious diseases, disability, death of someone close. People deal with stress induced by critical events both, developmental and situational, in various ways, among others, by using specific resources. According to R. S. Lazaurus and S. Folkman[1], those include: physical resources (such, as health and energy), psychological (positive beliefs) as well as competences within solving problems and social resources (including social support).

New media constitute, on the one hand, tools of operation. In case of many persons with disabilities they can become the only opportunity to access information, communicate, learn or work. On the other hand, those comprise an area where social interactions take place, which can influence coping in case of a critical event both, in normative (developmental) and traumatic terms. A key concept for my considerations consists in the online social support. I define it as help available online to an individual in a critical situation overcoming of which requires using external resources from virtual groups gathering persons dealing, in the past or currently, with difficulties of a similar character. The aim of such support consists in returning to the person's psychological wellbeing. I have distinguished five basic types of social support, which are also noticeable on the Internet: emotional (extended with so-called: companionship, feeling the presence of others, community), informational, instrumental, material and spiritual[2].

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[1] R. S. Lazarus, S. Folkman (1984), Stress, Appraisal and Coping, Springer, New York.

[2] H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (2004), *Social support – manners of defining, types and sources of support, selected theoretical conceptions (Wsparcie społeczne – sposoby definiowania, rodzaje i źródła wsparcia, wybrane koncepcje teoretyczne)*, in: *Social Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie)*, H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 11–28.

Informational (cognitive) support is one of the most frequently met forms of online social support. Information provided by the Internet users supports better understanding of the problematic situation. It is most often posted on individual websites, portals and vertical portals developed by support groups, associations, organisations and private persons, on fora and discussion groups. Informational support is in its nature practical and includes three basic subcategories: giving advice, direction and teaching[3]. Almost all requests for informational support are direct, universally addressed (usually there is no specific, individual addressee), as they are not related with breaking social barriers: they do not induce fear of stigmatisation, transgressing boundaries of intimacy. "As opposed to the face-to-face contact, people searching for help online have to openly express their request"[4]. The role of the online informational support consists of, first of all, reliable provision of verified, universal information (results of large sample outcome research, expert research) and secondly, sharing individual experiences, which are atypical (individual), strongly conditioned with the situation (context), psychological, physical and emotional conditions.

According to H. Sęk and R. Cieślak[5], instrumental support is aimed at forwarding information on specific manners of proceeding, solving problems, provide necessary guidelines. Therefore, it constitutes a special, specific form of informational support. According to some authors, it comprises an integral part thereof, similarly as the educational support[6]. It answers the question, where should I

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[3] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

[4] P. Wallace (2001), *The Psychology of the Internet (Psychologia Internetu)*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznan.

[5] H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (2004), *Social support – manners of defining, types and sources of support, selected theoretical conceptions (Wsparcie społeczne – sposoby definiowania, rodzaje i źródła wsparcia, wybrane koncepcje teoretyczne)*, in: *Social Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie)*, H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 11–28.

[6] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

go to receive help in a situation I have suddenly found myself in? What can I expect? The charitable activity, that is, a manifestation of the most substantial material support is strongly visible online. It concerns both, group support, that is, foundations and associations dealing with organisation of financial and tangible help for the most needy, as well as individual support. The material support (tangible or financial), next to emotional, constitutes a crucial factor of over-coming stress. Readiness to provide help in the scope of co-financing treatment, help in transport, delivery of medicines, physical help in taking care of the person in need constitute an important compo-nent of coping by persons who found themselves in a difficult situa-tion and significantly influences their psychological wellbeing. Online we come across several types of the material support: 1) group, system organisation of fund-raising and collecting tangi-bles to the benefit of specific persons (most frequently children) or groups and communities, 2) individual appeals for individual support and response thereto, 3) help given *ad hoc* in pro-socially established online support groups.

The most visible form of the online support constitutes emotio-nal support. It is aimed at ensuring the feeling of safety, accompa-nying, supporting, assurance of love and appreciation, demonstra-ting sympathy and understanding[7]. In a stressful or difficult situation it plays a huge role in restoring psychological well-being. Many authors underline the meaning of this support, additionally distinguishing a category of companionship, that is, assuring of accompanying, stressing interest, encouraging sharing basic infor-mation to enter the online community more easily[8]. The emotional support is present in virtual groups (fora, social media), as well as on blogs and in comments written by the Internet users. In strongly stressful situations people often start writing blogs to release the

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[7] P. A. Thoits (1995), Stress, coping, and social support processes: Where are we? What next?, "Journal of Health and Social Behavior", 1995, Spec. No., pp. 53–79.

[8] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

stress. It is a form of autotherapy for them, help given to oneself as well as a chance of obtaining emotional support. Comments on blogs give condolences, many persons wish to help, cheer others up. The emotional support on online fora is manifested with words of understanding/empathy, support, affirmation, showing sympathy and care[9].

A review of research

The research on the phenomenon of online social support includes various areas thereof, most frequently concentrating on the particular diseases. Publications and results of the research on online social support of persons (or families) struggling with neoplastic disease described therein, were analysed by Y. Hong, C. N. Peña-Purcell and M. G. Ory[10]. They collected detailed results from 762 articles on the topic. The authors concluded that in the informational society, which we live in, it becomes obvious to search for emotional or informational social support. Furthermore, the number of persons struggling with neoplastic diseases, who reach for online support is also growing. Y. Hong, C. N. Peña-Purcell and M. G. Ory[11] distinguished several publications, classifying them in accordance with the type of tumour neoplasms, ways of conducting research, taking samples and many other factors. The most numerous group of studies constitute those focusing on virtual support

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[9] N. Walter (2011), *The Internet support culture (Internetowa kultura pomagania)*, in: *Media Culture, Body and Identity – Socialisation and Civilisation Contexts (Kultura mediów, ciało i tożsamość – konteksty socjalizacyjne i cywilizacyjne)*, Jakubowski W., Jaskulska S. (ed.), Impuls, Krakow, pp. 177–188.

[10] Y. Hong, N. C. Peña-Purcell, M. G. Ory (2012), Outcomes of online support and re-sources for cancer survivors: A systematic literature review, "Patient Education and Counseling", 2012, Vol. 86(3), pp. 288–296.

[11] Y. Hong, N. C. Peña-Purcell, M. G. Ory (2012), Outcomes of online support and re-sources for cancer survivors: A systematic literature review, "Patient Education and Counseling", 2012, Vol. 86(3), pp. 288–296.

groups for women with breast neoplasms. Another concern neglect-
ed communities such, as minorities or persons with low economic
status, mainly using English (research concerning groups from re-
gions other than Great Britain or the United States of America is less
frequent). The majority of researchers noted positive effects of
online social support. The qualitative research in detailed described
virtual experiences, whereas, the quantitative research presented
various aspects of psychological and social wellbeing taking into
consideration the quality of life, stress level, coping due to the sup-
port and the access to information regarding neoplasms. Results of
online group research were indicated, participants of which indicat-
ed its meaning in diminishing negative emotions, increasing compe-
tences in the scope of functioning with a neoplastic disease. The
social support, predominantly emotional and informational, in
a virtual group of parents of children with neoplastic diseases was
noted by N. S. Coulson and N. Greenwood[12]. Similar results were
obtained by D. M. Gustafson, M. Wise, F. McTavish et al.[13] studying
a group of women with breast neoplasm, and further: P. Klemm,
M. Hurst, S. L. Dearholt, S. R. Trone[14], M. A. Lieberman, S. Russo[15],
J. Fogel, S. M. Albert, F. Schnabel, B. A. Ditkoff, A. I. Neugut[16], C. F.
van Uden-Kraan, C. H. Drossaert, E. Taal et al.[17], and many others.

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[12] N. S. Coulson, N. Greenwood (2012), Families affected by childhood cancer:
an analysis of the provision of social support within online support groups, "Child:
Care, Health and Development", 2012, Vol. 38(6), pp. 870-877.

[13] D. M. Gustafson, M. Wise, F. McTavish, J. O. Taylor, W. Wolberg, J. Steward
(1994), Development and pilot evaluation of a computer-based support system for
women with breast cancer, "Journal of Psychosocial Oncology", 11/1994, pp. 69–93.

[14] P. Klemm, M. Hurst, S. L. Dearholt, S. R. Trone (1999), Gender differences on
Internet cancer support groups, "Computers Informatics Nursing", 17/1999, pp. 65–72.

[15] M. A. Lieberman, S. Russo (2002), "Self help groups and the Internet: breast can-
cer newsgroups", International Journal of Self-Help & Self-Care, 1/2002, pp. 323–344.

[16] J. Fogel, S. M. Albert, F. Schnabel, B. A. Ditkoff, A. I. Neugut (2002), "Internet
use and social support in women with breast cancer", Journal of Health Psychology,
21/2002, pp. 398–404

[17] C. F. van Uden-Kraan, C. H. Drossaert, E. Taal, B. R. Shaw, E. R. Seydel,
M. A. van de Laar (2008), Empowering processes and outcomes of participation in

Studies conducted by A. Bambina[18], who analysed functioning of the online social group acting on the forum, which she named as SOL-Cancer (SOL = Support Online), have been presented to the largest extent. She examined in depth all conversations between participants of unmoderated group conducted within two selected weeks. She concluded that both, men and women in different age and coming from various places in the world post on the forum. Their mutual feature constitutes an experience related with neoplasm disease; posts are written by ill persons, family members and sometimes even doctors, therapists and carers. The base of posts and logs from the year 2000 was subjected to research aimed at separating the scheme of codes. All 1,149 posts were grouped and classified to particular subcategories. It turned out that the category occurring most often constituted companionship (56.7 percent of posts), then, emotional support (48.2 percent) and finally, informational support (38.6 percent). Studies conducted by A. Bambina[19] indicated existence of the online social support, predominantly of emotional and companionship character on the forum, where indirect communication through the agency of a computer is binding and there are no face-to-face contacts.

Furthermore, there are several studies on online social support functioning in groups of persons suffering from illness, disclosure of which is sometimes difficult in real life. Research conducted by P. K. H. Mo and N. S. Coulson[20] on virtual groups of persons with HIV/AIDS indicated that they constitute an area of social functioning which allows exchanging informational and emotional support by

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online sup-port groups for patients with breast cancer, arthritis, or fibromyalgia, "Qualitative Health Research", 18/2008, pp. 405–417.

[18] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

[19] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

[20] P. K. H. Mo, N. S. Coulson (2014), Are online support groups always beneficial? A qualitative exploration of the empowering and disempowering processes of participation within HIV/AIDS-related online support groups, "International Journal of Nursing Studies", 2014, Vol. 51(7), pp. 983–993.

sharing experience, connecting with other persons (awareness of their presence), finding understanding, helping others. Moreover, it was stated that participating in virtual online groups can reinforce optimism, psychological (social and emotional) wellbeing, facilitate coping with disease, relations with doctors and increase knowledge on HIV.

There is quite a large number of research covering online social support groups for parents of children suffering from diseases, genetic syndromes and/or disabilities. Such studies were conducted by, for example, T. Clifford i P. Minnes[21]. They concerned a virtual support group for mothers of children with autism spectrum. The studies were to verify, if participating in such a group causes changes in mood, level of anger, resentment, parental stress and positive perception. The researchers did not note any significant differences in the enumerated areas, however, they indicated that surveyed parents definitely indicated positive meaning of the online group, which they considered helpful.

In Poland, studies on parents and, specifically on parents interested in foster childcare, were conducted by K. Tomsia[22]. She analysed posts on the discussion forum, divided them into categories: emotional, instrumental and informational. She stated a significant dominance of informational communications (28 percent of posts), instrumental (24%) and emotional (only 8%)[23]. Research conducted by A. Jarzębińska[24] concerning forum for parents in a situation of

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[21] T. Clifford, P. Minnes (2013), Logging On: Evaluating an Online Support Group for Parents of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders, "Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders", 2013, Vol. 43(7), pp. 1662–1675.

[22] K. Tomsia (2009), *The Internet as a source of support for persons interested in foster childcare (Internet jako źródło wsparcia dla osób zainteresowanych opieką zastępczą nad dzieckiem)*, in: *Psychological Contexts of the Internet (Psychologiczne konteksty Internetu)*, B. Szmigielska (ed.), Wydawnictwo WAM, Krakow, pp. 179–193.

[23] K. Tomsia (2009), *The Internet as a source of support for persons interested in foster childcare (Internet jako źródło wsparcia dla osób zainteresowanych opieką zastępczą nad dzieckiem)*, in: *Psychological Contexts of the Internet (Psychologiczne konteksty Internetu)*, B. Szmigielska (ed.), Wydawnictwo WAM, Krakow, pp. 179–193.

[24] A. Jarzębińska (2015), *Internet discussion forum as a source of social support for parents (in case of a lethal birth defect) (Internetowe forum dyskusyjne jako źródło społecz-*

a lethal birth defect led to the identification of social support factors, mainly of emotional and spiritual character. Furthermore, posts of informational and valuation support character were noted. Virtual communities of women preparing to a developmental event, that is, motherhood were studied by K. Barani[25]. She indicated a relation between engagement in a forum and obtaining informational support. Women actively participating in discussions, feeling affiliation to the virtual group more often and more intensively searched for online support than support from other sources. The Internet proved to be the most important, apart from a doctor, source of informational support for pregnant women. The research is supplemented with qualitative analyses of virtual behaviours of pregnant teenage girls, who search for support in the virtual world and do not find it even there[26] as well as a virtual image of parenthood[27] and support in the scope of upbringing[28].

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nego wsparcia rodziców (w sytuacji wady letalnej płodu)), in: *Dimensions of Counselling and Social Support in the Interdisciplinary Perspective (Dymensje poradnictwa i wsparcia społecznego w perspektywie interdyscyplinarnej)*, M. Piorunek (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznan, pp. 177–200.

[25] K. Barani (2008), *Virtual communities of women on the Internet fora as a source of support in preparing to motherhood (Wirtualne wspólnoty kobiet na forach Internetowych jako źródło wsparcia w przygotowaniu do macierzyństwa)*, in: *Whole Life on the Web (Całe życie w sieci)*, B. Szmigielska (ed.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Krakow.

[26] A. Skowrońska-Pućka (2013), *(Non)virtual problems of teenage mothers. The need of support ((Nie)wirtualne problemy nastoletnich matek. Potrzeba wsparcia)*, in: *Family – Youth – Child. Essays on Theory and Practice of Psychological-Pedagogical and Social Assistance (Rodzina – młodzież- dziecko. Szkice z teorii i praktyki pomocy psychopedagogicznej i socjalnej)*, M. Piorunek, J. Kozielska, A. Skowrońska-Pućka (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, Poznan, pp. 231–242.

[27] N. Walter (2012), *The image of parenthood on the Polish Internet, that is, what contemporary mothers read and discuss (Obraz rodzicielstwa w polskim Internecie, czyli co czytają i o czym dyskutują współczesne matki)*, "Biuletyn Edukacji Medialnej", Norbertinum, 1/2012, pp. 16–26.

[28] N. Walter (2013), *Pedagogical support online (Wsparcie wychowawcze online)*, in: *Human – Media – Education (Człowiek – Media – Edukacja)*, J. Morbitzer, E. Musiał (ed.), KTiME, Krakow, pp. 419–427.

Research methods

Having observed various behaviours of Internet users for many years, apart from those strongly visible – unwanted, I noticed productive activities based on the responsibility for other people and altruism. I started wondering and became interested in pro-social attitudes, which are so desirable and needed in the contemporary world. Thus, I asked myself, if the Internet can be used in social support understood as help available online to the individual in a critical situation overcoming of which requires using external resources from virtual groups gathering persons dealing, in the past or currently, with difficulties of a similar character. I made the commonness and availability as well as characteristics of social support present on the Polish Internet in pedagogical understanding, including: reasons, aim, quality of interaction, effectiveness and educational character, the subject of my empirical analyses.

While designing research I used the *ex post facto* model (exploration type), since selected issues have a significative character. The area of research, that is, the Internet indicates methods with which I answer the following research problems bothering me: What is the commonness of online social support? And: How is the online social support manifested? (Each of the questions was attributed to detailed problems). Social support, including the online social support is inscribed in specific personal biographies. Therefore, apart from the initial quantitative research (diagnostic survey method and method of netnographic analysis of existing documents, here: conversations published online and comments posted on online fora, entries made on online journals, that is, so-called blogs and texts posted on websites) I conducted qualitative research.

The initial survey research was conducted among pedagogy students (full-time and part-time studies, postgraduate studies, as well as third age studies), that is, among persons for whom the issue of social support, providing help and pro-social activities, is close. The diagnostic survey was participated by 656 persons. The participants were aged from 18 to 60 years old and they came from

all Polish voivodeships. All studied persons had access to the Internet and used it regularly (in majority, on daily basis).

For quantitative netnographic research I selected 5 online fora (virtual support groups). All of them are devoted to critical events that occurred in lives of the Internet users posting thereon. In total, 5,524 posts included in 344 collective threads were analysed in details. For research purposes, a forum of parents of prematurely born children with 132,804 posts was selected and analysed threads came from the first half of the year 2015. Main participants of the forum constitute women-mothers who share problems regarding children, discuss forms of hospital care, rehabilitation, prognoses, diseases, doctors and emotional problems. Another form is strictly help-oriented, provides material and informational support (163,247 posts). In principle, it is moderated by women-mothers, although, sometimes there are also comments posted by men offering for example legal help. The aim of the forum is to provide specific tangible help (financial, alimentary etc.) to persons who cannot support their families. Third selected forum is devoted to broadly understood health. Since the beginning 357,426 posts were published (analysed posts come from January – February 2015). The idea of the forum consists in discussing health issues experienced by participants or persons close to them. Another from fora selected for research purposes belongs to the group of highly popular parenting "peer" fora, which gather parents of children that are going to be born on a particular month of a given year. For example "July 2007", "April Mums 2011" or "September Mums 2006". Forum selected for research concerns children born in 2008 (113,558 posts), and the analysis covered threads from August and September 2008. The last quantitatively analysed forum is devoted to divorcing persons, who struggle emotionally, search for legal advice or want to share own experience. Posts (389,689) are published by persons who visit the forum one time only, random persons and permanent users, who share their experience and legal, fiscal or psychological knowledge. The idea is to mutually support persons who found themselves in a situation of divorce.

The qualitative research constitutes a significant part of my analyses. They provide answer to some research questions, for which quantitative analyses were not sufficient or gave an incomplete image. The research method used by me consisted in the case study with which I could analyse individual fates of persons in specific, difficult situations. My aim was to accurately describe people's activities online in a situation of a critical event with a consideration of as many aspects thereof as possible, also in the scope of educational influences. While deciding to apply the case study, I have used research techniques such, as a narrative interview and analysis of existing documents. The case study, within which I used expert interview and narrative-biographical interview techniques, covered 8 persons. For the purposes of qualitative netnographic research 5 online fora were selected and subjected to quantitative analyses.

Results of quantitative research

The analysis of online portals, which I have been conducting for many years, and especially with regard to fora, social media and blogs allows formulating a thesis that the online social support is a common phenomenon. Also, the conducted diagnostic survey provides similar conclusions. The question: "have you used online social support during last 12 months", was answered by as many as 41.3 percent of surveyed persons affirmatively. Since I assumed that the question would not affect some of the surveyed persons directly (they have not experienced a difficult situation during last year) I asked, if they would use such a form of support. Almost 50 percent of surveyed persons answered this question affirmatively. The survey did not cover studying subjective features of surveyed persons, which would favour or hinder searching for social support. The need for support is different: "some persons feel better, when they can overcome difficulties by themselves, without help of others

and turn for such help only in an extreme situation. Others feel more dependent and express a stronger need for support"[29]. Some respondents cannot imagine their own reaction in case of a critical situation, this is manifested with 28 percent of persons answering "I do not know".

There are plenty of Polish websites (including fora, social media and blogs) containing manifestations of social support. For example, fora and blogs concerning motherhood – 1.4 million, neoplastic diseases – 0.5 million, psychological diseases – over 0.5 million, disability – 0.6 million, diseases and/or loss of a child – 0.3 million. Analysis of contents of such websites also proves the commonness of online social support manifestations. It shall be discussed in details in another subchapters.

The surveyed persons were asked what they do in case of a critical event or occurrence of a difficult situation (more than one answer was possible). The majority answered that they talk about it to people closest to them (family) – 75% or friends – 58%. 36% of respondents browse the Internet, and only 15% consult specialists in such situations.

Table 1. Age and declared willingness to use the online social support (single factor ANOVA – test F) (*n*=653; *df* intergroup=2; *df* intragroup=653).

	YES n = 322	NO n = 146	I DO NOT KNOW n = 188	Analysis of intergroup effects	Statistics of test F		η²
	M (SD)	*M (SD)*	*M (SD)*		*F*	*p*	
Age	23.38 (3,725)	25.27 (7,685)	23.39 (3,965)	1 > 2	8,242	,000	,0025

Source: own elaboration.

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[29] N. Knoll, R. Schwarzer (2004), *True friends… Social support, stress, illness and death (Prawdziwych przyjaciół… Wsparcie społeczne, stres, choroba i śmierć)*, in: *Social Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie)*, H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 29–48.

The analysis of results of the research in the scope of dependencies between responses of surveyed persons and demographic variables indicated a relation between the age of the respondents and their declared inclination to use online support. Younger persons (aged below 23.4) more frequently declared the willingness to use online support than persons aged over 25.

A similar dependency did not occur in the case of declared use of the online support within last 12 months.

Among factors favouring searching for online social support, the respondents indicated social distance and anonymity (69%), possibility of finding the Internet users struggling with a similar problem (62%), availability of support online (31%) and, to the smallest extent, objectivity of advice given by the Internet users in contrast to the advice given from close persons (13%). Therefore, anxiety and, not seldom, shame accompanying not copying with a given critical event constitutes the most frequent motivator of reaching for anonymous support characteristic for the Internet. Searching for real help can be embarrassing especially for persons seen as invincible, coping in any, even the most difficult situation. Anonymous Internet users do not ask questions, do not interfere too much in privacy, they only concentrate on what has been created, on a fragment of presented identity. They are not emotionally engaged in the problem, therefore, they can support with a distance, without slobbering and sentimentalising. There are probably going to be persons who have experienced a similar problem, even if it is exceptionally rare. Sharing experience with persons who have lived through the same helps in coping with the situation and restoring psychological wellbeing.

Strongly developed online social support network is also available due to various broadly available Internet services. Respondents, who declared that within the last 12 months they had searched for online social support, were asked to indicate and order services such, as blogs of persons describing similar experiences, discussion fora, virtual information portals devoted to a given issue, social media and discussion groups depending on the frequency of use.

The surveyed persons most often search for online social support on virtual thematic portals (14.6% of the total number of all respondents do it frequently, and 12.8% – very frequently) and on discussion fora (frequently – 9.9% and very frequently – 12.3%). They most rarely reach out to blogs (13.3% never do it, and 11.8% very rarely), social media (never – 11.3%, very rarely – 11.6%) and discussion groups (never – 11.4%, very rarely – 10.7%).

The analysis of the selected fora, blogs and social media profiles with regard to used phrases and key words expressing the request for support also indicated the largest popularity of online fora in this respect. Requests for help and support (both, informational, emotional, spiritual as well as material) were the following: 90,961 on selected five fora, 134 on four blogs and 14 on four social media profiles. All analysed websites were of an assistance character or concerned critical events (disease, health, disability, motherhood, divorce). Online fora constitute the largest space for exchanging experiences, thus, the number of requests included there is not surprising. In case of blogs and social media portals with face single, individual fate, therefore, posts published by authors and comments added by the Internet users are respectively rarer and strictly targeted. Another issue constitutes anonymity or a lack thereof. In the case of online fora authors and commenters of threads hide themselves under nicks (pseudonyms). Therefore, asking for help becomes easier, is devoid of the layer of shame and embarrassment. Also providing support is easier in such a situation. It was written about, among others, by P. Wallace[30]: "We know that in environments, which ensure more anonymity, people are more open and this helps especially in therapy conducted online and facilitates the activity of support groups." In case of blogs and especially social media, authors usually provide their real data, since they want to obtain a specific support in this way e.g. financial. It obliges them to certain restraint, thinking over the created image which can in the

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[30] P. Wallace (2001), *The Psychology of the Internet (Psychologia Internetu)*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznan p. 311.

future induce positive reactions of persons wishing to provide support.

Persons who have been subjected to the survey usually search for social support on thematic portals, that is, virtual portals. Depending on the topic, websites maintained by the following entities can be distinguished: 1) foundations and associations, 2) private persons, 3) institutions and private companies.

During research I wondered, if the online social support results from a limited real life support. I assumed that the online support would be used by persons, who have a limited access to experts or their close interpersonal relations are insufficient in the case of difficult situations. For the majority of respondents family, friends and/or co-workers constitute a source of support. For 52 percent of respondents always and for 42.1 percent – often. 4.1 percent of respondents believe that they can rarely rely on persons close to them in this scope, and 0.2 percent – not at all. 11 persons (1.7 percent) do not expect and do not search for support from persons close to them.

An easy access to experts such, as a doctor or a psychologist was declared by the majority of respondents (68.1 percent), whereas, hindered access was declared by 22.7 percent. 60 persons gave other answer (9.1 percent). Among additional answers, respondents the most frequently indicated difficulty with answering the question; some respondents did not face a critical event in their life, which they could not cope with on their own or with a small support of persons close to them. There were also answers concerning too long waiting time for an expert or a high price of private services, difficult access, a lack of trust, a lack of professionalism and not treating the problem seriously. The results of my research did not give an answer to the question regarding the correspondence (or a lack thereof) between using the online social support and using expert services. On cannot explicitly indicate a relation in this scope or a lack thereof.

A crucial issue in case of searching for and using online social support consists in the awareness of threats related with this form

of help. The following threats should be considered: 1) the Internet users more willingly share their negative experiences than positive ones, therefore, their advice can be subjective, 2) advice/information on the Internet comes from unreliable sources – it might be unreliable, 3) shared experience is sometimes not full, a lack of described details can result in improper interpretation and 4) Internet users' comments are sometimes expressed in a manner increasing the stress. In the survey questionnaire respondents selected more than one answer from the list of threats enumerated above. The most frequently indicated was answer 2), unreliability of sources (78%), then, 3) incomplete description of an experience (53.7%), 1) negative character of the Internet users' comments (40.5%) and 4), increasing stress (36.7%). 25 persons (3.8%) indicated other answer. It has been noted that "searching online support can cause closing oneself to the real contact with people, which leads to deepening problems", confabulations (comments given by persons who have not experienced a given problem), purposeful misleading, mean and mocking character of some comments, superficiality, hate, improper interpretation, over emotional character of comments, hidden activity of companies. Some persons noticed that limiting oneself to searching support online can lead to negative consequences such, as a feeling of loneliness, social disorders.

I asked the participants of the diagnostic survey who declared using online social support during the last 12 months of the type of support they had been searching for. Usually the respondents declared searching for informational support (233 persons), then, instrumental (188 persons), emotional (29 persons), spiritual (22 persons) and tangible (17 persons). As far as the contents of specific websites and online groups, the research conducted by other authors shows that the support distribution can vary depending on the characteristics of a given source. And thus, according to A. Bambina[31], studying the forum of persons suffering from neoplasms, the emotional support constituted 34.6 percent of analysed

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[31] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

answers, informational support – 24.8 percent, whereas, companionship (feeling of community, presence) – 40.6 percent. On the other hand, the research conducted by K. Barani[32] on social support groups in the context of motherhood indicates the dominance of informational support over emotional one. Thus, apart from the diagnostic survey, I have also analysed online social support groups.

After two years of observation, I selected five online fora for the research which I subjected to a detailed quantitative analysis. Selected posts were carefully read by me and then, subjected to labelling. I attributed the posts with categories of support in functional understanding. I assumed, similarly as A. Bambina[33] and many other researchers that a supporting post can have an informational, emotional, companionship, instrumental, material or spiritual character. In total, 5,524 posts included in 344 collective threads were analysed. Depending on the type of a forum, its recipients, theme and characteristics of mutual dependencies, the distribution of found social support was changing. Analysed fora differ with the scope and type of given social support. Informational support is offered the most frequently, emotional one is given less frequently; although, there are fora, where the situation is quite the opposite. The diagram below includes a comparison of various forms of support on the aforementioned fora.

Research results. Discussion

It is difficult to explicitly state, if the online social support is common. As results from the quantitative research, almost 50 per-

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[32] K. Barani (2008), *Virtual communities of women on the Internet fora as a source of support in preparing to motherhood (Wirtualne wspólnoty kobiet na forach Internetowych jako źródło wsparcia w przygotowaniu do macierzyństwa)*, in: *Whole Life on the Web (Całe życie w sieci)*, B. Szmigielska (ed.), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Krakow.

[33] A. Bambina (2007), Online social support. The Interplay of Social Networks and Computer-Mediated Communication, Cambria Press, New York.

cent of respondents declared that they would use online support in a critical situation, that is, a situation they would consider to be exceeding their ability to cope with it on their own. If we take into account the age of respondents, who were predominantly students aged up to 26 years old, it might turn out that they have difficulty in thinking of life in categories of critical events that could happen to them. The age of early adulthood is characterised with full of optimism dreams about the future and the thought of possible difficulties rarely occurs therein. Parenthood as well, which is the closest normative critical event in life of young adults appears to be wonderful and full of happiness. Therefore, they are not able to foresee, if in a situation of parenthood stress they would reach for support available online and if they would be willing to participate in virtual support groups. A lack of interest in online support can also result from other issues described in the academic literature such, as: individual manners of coping with the stress, personality features that exclude using external sources, strongly supportive closest circle constituting a type of cocoon, which guarantees safety[34]. Qualitative research, including narrative-biographical interviews, which have not been presented in the article, show that the interest in online support increases. It is especially visible in the blogosphere, but also on fora and social media portals. Thus, although I cannot explicitly state that the social support available online is common, I believe that it is available and broadly present, and attracts huge interest.

Clinical psychologists state existence of individual differences in the scope of the need of traditional support, its perception and acceptance[35]. In the case of online support the situation is similar.

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[34] H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (2004), *Social support – manners of defining, types and sources of support, selected theoretical conceptions (Wsparcie społeczne – sposoby definiowania, rodzaje i źródła wsparcia, wybrane koncepcje teoretyczne)*, in: *Social Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie)*, H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 11–28.

[35] N. Knoll, R. Schwarzer (2004), *True friends… Social support, stress, illness and death (Prawdziwych przyjaciół… Wsparcie społeczne, stres, choroba i śmierć)*, in: *Social*

Apart from the variable, that is, a critical event, one can indicate differences due to gender and age. Quantitative research conducted by me does not provide an explicit answer, if women, as indicated by experiences of clinical psychologies, offer and search for support more often than men.

The quantitative research indicates that online social support is slightly more often used by younger persons below 23 years of age, for whom the Internet is a natural space of social functioning. Persons below 23 years of age usually do not yet form permanent partner relations, yet, their original family relations become more relaxed due to social development typical for this period. Staying in permanent partner relationships constitutes in itself support and facilitates coping with stressful situations. In case of young adults, who do not yet have a strong support coming from a spouse, they more frequently feel the need to use external help, including help found online. However, due to their age and related lack of experiencing critical event they are not the main recipients and offerors of social support.

Persons giving and using online social support, as indicated by the qualitative research, are usually persons with pro-social attitude, open, active, thinking critically. The feature that distinguishes persons providing online social support consists in altruism characterising the Internet users with productive personality. They feel the need to care for others and naturally approach the necessity of selfless help. As proven by the research conducted by L. Price, E. Leong and M. Ryan[36], altruism constitutes a factor motivating to social use of the Internet. P. Wallace[37] notices that "network society

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Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie), H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 29-48.

[36] L. Price, E. Leong, M. Ryan (2005), Motivations for social Internet use, ANZMAC Conference: Consumer Behaviour. Edith Cowan University, Retrieved June 2011, http://www.anzmac.org/conference_archive/2005/cd-site/pdfs/3-Consumer-Beh/3-Price.pdf [access: 7.03.2016]

[37] P. Wallace (2001), *The Psychology of the Internet (Psychologia Internetu)*, Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, Poznan p. 249.

is ready to help each other both, in small and quite large cases. Usually this help includes providing information, and the willingness to help constitutes one of the main reasons why people turn to discussion groups."

What is worth underlining, support occurs when persons providing it find themselves in a stressful situation, which, however, has not been preceded or has not resulted in any psychological disorders.

The basic reason for searching online social support comprises finding oneself in a situation of a critical event that causes a strong stress. As has been proven by both, quantitative and qualitative research, persons, who search for online support, can predominantly rely on their closest circle. For the majority of respondents family, friends and co-workers constitute a source of support. The respondents also declared a usually easy access to experts such, as a doctor or a psychologist. Narrative-biographical interviews also imply that the presence of a partner was crucial in a situation of a critical event and it provided the biggest support. Whereas, in order to cope with the stress it was necessary to contact persons who have experienced similar difficulties. In fact, learning about other persons' history online helped to direct actions and often gave hope. Searching for support online occurred in both, normative and very atypical, extremely rare situations.

As results from the quantitative research, among factors favouring searching for online social support the following can be mentioned: social distance and anonymity (the most frequently indicated reason), possibility of finding the Internet users struggling with a similar problem, availability of support online and, to the smallest extent, objectivity of advice given by the Internet users in contrast with the advice given by close persons.

Another, crucial in many situations reason for using the online social support consists in the possibility of sharing own experience with persons, who found themselves in a similar situation. Moreover, communicating online and speaking through the agency of the Internet about difficult cases is easier and more broadly availa-

ble. Telling a difficult story online allows reaching many recipients, but also allows to put thoughts into order, keep memories. The reason why many persons share their difficult story online comprises the need to obtain material support: financial or tangible. Such requests appear both, on blogs and on fora, as well as social media.

Manifestations of online social support can be observed due to various Internet services. The quantitative research indicates that in a stressful situation the respondents usually use thematic virtual portals and fora, and less frequently blogs, social media and discussion groups. Such distribution demonstrates that in a situation of a critical event it is the most important, first of all, to obtain professional information and secondly, to have an opportunity to discuss the problem with persons dealing with similar difficulties.

In functional understanding, the online social support can have informational, emotional, instrumental, material and spiritual character. As results from the quantitative survey research, the informational support is the one that is most often searched for in a stressful situation with instrumental support in the second place. The need to find emotional, spiritual or tangible support online was indicated the least frequently by the respondents. Netnographic analyses of fora imply that the support provided online depends on the type and theme of a given virtual group. Coming out on online fora of a specific form of support depends on such features of a virtual group as: the aim of its establishment, theme, scope and structure, composition or dynamics. The aim of the forum's functioning can comprise accompanying in a situation of a critical event, exchanging information, sharing experiences, counselling or organising tangible help. Another feature conditioning occurrence of specific forms of support comprises the theme. Fora can concern critical events of normative and therapeutic character, experience of which entails specific needs of support. Aspects such, as: openness of the forum, availability, gender and age of commenters, establishing social networks or a lack thereof, making friends, conflicts, full anonymity or disclosing fragments of privacy are also of great importance. On many fora, along with the development and changes in

the scope of participation of particular users, openness to so-called visitors (not registered users), as well as gradual dealing with a stressful situation by particular persons, various forms of support dominate.

The qualitative research and, in particular, narrative-biographical interviews show that searching for various forms of social support online depends on factors such, as stressful situation, existence of a permanent and certain direct social network (e.g. family, friends), professional help or a lack thereof, as well as individual features of a person, who found themselves in a given situation.

Material, tangible support, which quite often constitutes a reason for sharing own story online, is also worth underlining. A phenomenon, which becomes common is crowdfunding, which, in contrast with traditional forms of fundraising, where a model of several significant sponsors dominates, constitutes a manner of raising small donations from a large number of small donors.

Searching for online social support can be related with a series of threats. As results from my research, the threat consists in: 1) incredibility of advice and information coming from the Internet users, 2) presenting only narrow fragments of experiences, usually only in a text form (a lack of described details can result in improper interpretation), 3) inclinations to share negative rather than positive experiences, 4) Internet users' comments increasing stress, 5) engaging the attention and time consumption (also continuously returning to difficult situations), 6) addiction to the Internet, 7) weakening natural support networks, 8) insulting, vulgar, deriding, falsifying reality and ones that constitute an attempt of various types of fraud.

Finding oneself in a situation of a critical event often becomes a reason for intense education. In compliance with Dewey conception *learning by doing*[38] or later models of D. Kolb[39] and P. Jarvis[40],

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[38] J. Dewey (1933), How We Think, Heath, New York.

[39] D. A. Kolb, R. Fry (1975), Toward an applied theory of experiential learning, in: Theories of Group Process, C. Cooper (ed.), John Wiley, London.

a person learns on individual experiences. They constitute a significant element of life-long education, since they condition transformation of cognitive structures, knowledge and action. They constitute grounds of the so-called "biographical learning", that is, learning that is inscribed both, in individual fates, as well as in social structures and cultural interpretation contexts. Biographical learning covers traditionally understood formal, informal and non-formal education, although in the context of an individual story they are not explicitly outlined and easy to separate[41].

In a lifetime both, during formal and non-formal education, people are involuntarily learning due to the use of held knowledge resources, prior experiences and ability to act. While solving the problem we have to face, we engage all available internal resources, but we also reach for external sources resulting from functioning in a specific environment and culture. Therefore, critical events occurring in a biography both, normative and traumatic, motivate us to act and learn. A good example thereof was given by one of my female respondents by referring to the activity of mothers of children with the Down syndrome, who find support online from other moms being experts of their own children. No professional therapist shall put such intellectual and emotional effort in helping children, as their parents. The qualitative research explicitly imply that certain critical situation make a person who has to face them start learning quickly. They reach both, possessed, internal resources of knowledge, refer to previous experience and finally, call for help, search for support, also online. Dealing with a critical event comprises, among others, learning: finding information on the situation or problem, analysing available sources, structuring possessed knowledge, consulting with others, referring to own experiences and experiences of others. Therefore, an element of biographical processes of

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[40] P. Jarvis (1987), Adult Learning in the Social Context, Croom Helm, London-New York-Sydney 1987.

[41] P. Alheit (2011), Biographical attitude to life-long learning (Podejście biograficzne do całożyciowego uczenia się), "Teraźniejszość – człowiek – edukacja", no. 3(55), pp. 7–20.

learning also comprises establishing relations and social processes[42]. As demonstrated by my research, persons who coped with a critical event, as a result gained knowledge and skills which they later share with others. Thus, they become participants of the learning process of others. Such cooperation at a large scale is possible solely due to the Internet. A special educational role is taken by online social support in a situation of critical events, dealing with exceeds own resources and resources of the closest circle. Numerous examples were provided in narrative-biographical interviews, where both, the roles of the emotional support and above all, informational support of educational character are strongly demonstrated.

The online social support occurs in a situation of a critical event. Similarly, as demonstrated by other research, for example research conducted by H. Sęk and R. Cieślak[43], the need of the online social support depends on the type of stressful situation, individual features and strategy of coping in difficult situations as well as existing social network in the nearest environment. Quantitative research did not indicate existence of an explicit dependency between the access to direct support (among persons who are the closest and specialists) and the need to use the support online. Also persons with whom I conducted narrative-biographical interviews used online support despite supportive presence of the closest persons. Whereas, this is an aspect which cannot be explicitly excluded. A huge meaning is played by the character of a stressful situation, character of the critical event with which a given person copes as well as their personality features and needs, for example of using external resources, verifying hypothesis with other persons, who have similar experiences, sharing own story.

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[42] P. Alheit (2011), *Biographical attitude to life-long learning (Podejście biograficzne do całożyciowego uczenia się)*, "Teraźniejszość – człowiek – edukacja", no. 3(55), pp. 7–20.

[43] H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (2004), *Social support – manners of defining, types and sources of support, selected theoretical conceptions (Wsparcie społeczne – sposoby definiowania, rodzaje i źródła wsparcia, wybrane koncepcje teoretyczne)*, in: *Social Support, Stress and Health (Wsparcie społeczne, stres i zdrowie)*, H. Sęk, R. Cieślak (ed.), Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warsaw, pp. 11–28.

The online social support can fulfil various functions. Apart from the base one, which comprises help in coping and returning to the psychological wellbeing, we can distinguish educational, socialisation, auto-creation and culture creating functions. Providing social support online apart from the aforementioned educational aspect, constitutes a significant element of social exchange and creating cultural resources. Sharing own experience, thoughts, reflections, discoveries and knowledge constitutes a contribution to the development of online resources available to the broad number of recipients. Presenting own biography has an auto-creative, image-related character, which entails a change in self-perception resulting from social interactions both, positive and negative. Anonymity, which is inscribed in the essence of the Internet facilitates talking about oneself, especially on discussion fora. Whereas, blogging, although it is often related with disclosing a fragment of privacy, allows presenting a broader context and highlighting individual experiences and reflections.

Among basic features of online social support one can indicate its availability, indirectness, anonymity (although, it is not always present), text form, variety in the scope of forms. An unquestionable advantage of support provided through the agency of information and communication technologies consists in its availability or even, pervasiveness. Persons, for whom using the Internet is inscribed in everyday functioning, naturally turn to social resources online. It happens both, in a situation of critical events of normative and traumatic character. However, it is burdened with consequences of a lack of directness. Often, in a stressful situation a person needs physical, tangible support: proverbial "serving a glass of water", which is unavailable online for obvious reasons. However, due to the communicative function fulfilled by the Internet, finding a person, who would give such direct support, is becoming possible. Anonymity and showing a selected fragment of biography constitutes a feature, which, on the one hand, favours altruistic behaviours and on the other hand, bigger openness. The online social support is characterised with text form, which can both, facilitate and hinder

forwarding information and talking about emotions. Early research on indirect communication through the agency of a computer indicated its limited character, simplification, artificiality, a lack of intimacy and openness. Nevertheless, it has been later stated that the necessity to comment in a text form devoid of non-verbal aspects contributed to more carefully thought-out and friendly expression of thoughts and, which, in turn, describes the author and constitutes a form of auto-presentation. Writing (and not talking) about a stressful situation favours coping with the problem better, putting thoughts in order and planning constructive actions. Communication based on text can have an enormous meaning for persons, whose appearance differs from generally accepted standards and thus, hinders entering into direct relations. Online conversation partners are also devoid of physical features such, as: gender, age, race or disability, which favours establishing relations and engaging in help or searching for such help[44].

Online social support occurs, as proven by research conducted both, by other authors and by me, in various forms and types. Informational, emotional, instrumental (although only in a form of advice, not as a tangible help), material and spiritual support can be observed. Especially on some online fora and social media acting as virtual support groups companionship is visible, that is, comments that shape a community character of a discussion.

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