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Julie Dare  
*Edith Cowan University*

Lelia Green  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# **Rethinking Social Support in Women's Midlife Years: Women's Experiences of Social Support in Online Environments**

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## **Introduction**

Women in their midlife years (aged 45-55) encounter a number of challenges: young adult children may move out of the family home; they are likely to experience the ageing and death of one or both parents (Noack & Buhl, 2004; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005); they may be coping with physiological and emotional changes from menopause; and increasing numbers may find themselves single after many years of marriage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Sakraida, 2005). These circumstances tend to increase the importance of networks of social support to women's wellbeing. Indeed, evidence suggests that social support is a critical element in helping women manage such transitions during the midlife period (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002). This research presents a comparative investigation of mediated communication channels through which women are able to give and receive social support, and in doing so the study addresses the factors underpinning women's media choices. Findings indicate that in determining their media selection, women are judging their 'audience' and the social context of their communication in order to select the most appropriate channel through which to offer or seek support.

## **Midlife Transitions**

For many women, the midlife years are manifested by major changes to the everyday pattern of their lives. For women with children, family structures often change as grown children leave home, triggering a renegotiation of the parent-child relationship, and for some women a reassessment of their own identity. At the same time, women are likely to be managing some degree of physiological and emotional change due to menopause (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002). It is also likely that during midlife most women will experience the aging and death of one or both parents (Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005), an event which can have a profound effect on women's lives (Leonard & Burns,

2006; Perrig-Chiello & Hopflinger, 2005). The confluence of such changes can challenge many women's coping strategies, and may trigger a reappraisal of intimate relationships (Howell, 2001; Sakraida, 2005). Both Australian and United States statistics indicate an increasing number of women in midlife are either divorced, or going through the divorce process, with women more often initiating the divorce process than men (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003; Sakraida, 2005). Regardless of whether women view divorce as a welcome release from a difficult marriage, or as a distressing event, it nevertheless represents a transitional process that can negatively impact on a woman's wellbeing (Stewart & Clarke, 1995).

### **Social Support and Transition**

Social support has been defined as 'the companionship and practical, informational and esteem support which the individual derives from interaction with members of his or her "social network", including friends, colleagues, acquaintances and family members' (Cooper, Arber, Fee & Gin, cited in Nettleton, Pleace, Burrows, Muncer, & Loader, 2002: 178). The extensive body of research devoted to this topic suggests there are multiple dimensions to social support. Early research conducted by Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) drew attention to 'the role of social relationships in moderating or buffering potentially deleterious health effects of psychosocial stress or other health hazards' (cited in House & Landis, 2003: 219). Social support also acts at a macro level as a 'continuously positive force that makes the person less susceptible to stress' (Westen, Burton, & Kowalski, 2006: 586). Such support enhances an individual's ability to adapt to changing circumstances and develop new coping strategies (Hirsch, 1980: 168).

Networks of social support appear to perform a significant role in women's lives (Hurdle, 2001), and are particularly important in helping individuals cope with crises, life transitions and role changes (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002; Hirsch, 1980; Stewart & Clarke, 1995). Given that midlife can involve multiple changes in a woman's life, it is highly likely that the availability of social support is particularly crucial during this period (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002).

## **Women and the Exchange of Social Support**

Historically, women's social support has been manifested through networks of familial and social relationships. Prior to the widespread adoption of communication technologies, most notably the telephone, support was exchanged predominantly through personal interactions, and thus was largely constrained by geographical parameters (Young & Willmott, 1962). Significant social changes over the last 50 years, including the women's movement, increasing suburbanisation, and higher levels of global migration, have seen these family and social networks become increasingly diverse and dispersed (Baldassar, Baldock, & Wilding, 2007). Likewise, the rapid development and adoption of a wide range of communication technologies has also altered the conduits through which women communicate and exchange support. As research indicates, mediated communication technologies such as the telephone (Moyal, 1992; Rakow, 1992), and more recently the mobile phone (Rakow & Navarro, 1993) and the Internet (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006; Bonniface & Green, 2007), have come to play an increasingly important role in connecting women's support networks. Indeed, the marked degree to which many women have incorporated their online communication practices within their everyday lives suggests that the distinction between traditional and new platforms for social interaction and support are increasingly blurred (Dare, 2007). Accordingly, as Nettleton et al. (2002) have noted, 'how we both experience and provide social support is changing...the patterns of social interaction within which social support is implicitly embedded ... will also be increasingly mediated by various forms of ICT' (2002: 177).

## **Methodology**

Qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 Western Australian women. The women were recruited through a process of 'snowball sampling'. Participants were required to be women in the 45 to 55 year age group (the average age through which women pass through menopause in Australia (Smith & Michalka, 2006)), who have domestic access to the Internet. Although the 'snowball sampling' technique might risk interviewees being drawn from a single demographic group, the final group of participants represented a diversity of occupations, socio-economic backgrounds, educational levels and life experiences. Interviews, lasting on average one to two hours, were recorded

digitally and then transcribed. The interview transcripts were coded thematically using NVivo qualitative research software to identify salient themes and patterns. Throughout this paper, italicised text is used to distinguish the researcher's questions, or comments to the participants, from the participants' comments. Participants' responses are in plain text. In addition, pseudonyms have been used for participants' names.

### **The Circulation of Social Support through Existing Networks: Current Findings**

Echoing previous research which indicates that face-to-face and telephone communication manifest higher levels of 'social presence' (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976: 65), and are generally considered more appropriate for conveying emotion than text-based communication channels such as email and text messaging using mobile telephones (Dimmick, Kline, & Stafford, 2000; Matzko, 2002), the majority of participants perceived face-to-face and the telephone as superior communication modes for accessing or providing support. Indeed, most of the participants expressed the view that face-to-face communication was the "gold-standard" of communication channels. This hierarchical layering of communication modes was summed up by Dana: 'a phone call is a far more personal communication [than emailing]. You can actually hear the other person, but it's a long shot away from face to face communication where you're reading someone's body language.'

However, where face-to-face communication was not possible, the telephone was valued as an effective conduit for support, particularly during crises when immediate feedback and affirmation was required. Such a dynamic is exemplified in Stella's discussion of her use of the telephone. While Stella was comfortable using a range of communication channels including face-to-face, telephone, email and SMS; during difficult periods her telephone use intensified: 'My phone stuff is usually, as I said, is if I'm in crisis' (Stella). Following a traumatic relationship breakdown several years ago, Stella used multiple communication channels to seek support, but it appears the telephone was most successful in satisfying her needs. Indeed, as the following comments indicate, during periods of crisis the telephone elicited an almost visceral response from Stella:

I relied on the phone, the Internet, everything, cause I was just a mess. And the phone use was extensive.

*More so than using email?*

Oh, yer. Oh yer, yer. I mean, I could be on there [phone] for hours on end. To anybody that would listen. You know, I just really needed that.

*During that difficult period, why did you prefer the phone?*

Cause you need that verbal feedback. You need that affirmation. And you need to hear it instantly. And it needs to be physical. I mean, the written word is great, but the written word can be construed in so many different ways, whereas the voice, you can hear the inflection in somebody's voice. And you need the sympathy. (Stella)

Notwithstanding participants such as Stella's preference for the more immediate connection which telephone communication facilitates, the interviews also indicated that email can be an effective channel through which the women were prepared to discuss sensitive or emotional issues, and access or offer social support. Such was the case with Paula, who had established a close and supportive relationship with a female cousin after visiting her on an overseas holiday several years previously. As Paula noted, 'I could be actually quite explicit with her [cousin] on email, and feel quite comfortable with that' (Paula).

When looked at in isolation, Paula's comments reflect much of the literature on computer-mediated communication, which suggests that the medium encourages individuals to self-disclose more often than they would normally (Joinson & Paine, 2007). However, this technologically deterministic approach to framing online interaction ignores the social context in which communication takes place. Although Paula occasionally talks to her cousin by telephone, she relies more heavily upon email for

their day-to-day connections. When asked if she ever used VOIP (Internet enabled telephone service), she responded: 'I should do but it just becomes then very very long winded, and I'm kind of avoiding it because I know that I'll end up being more and more on the phone, you know?' (Paula).

As is evident in Paula's comment, individuals draw on a range of media in their everyday lives; as such, the nature of their communication using any particular medium is not necessarily driven by particular qualities that may be considered unique to the medium, such as anonymity or the ability to converse without visual cues, but may rather more accurately be read as reflecting 'strategic choices' individuals make when selecting from a range of media (Joinson, 2007). Thus, as Joinson notes, 'Internet behaviour needs to take account of both the user as well as the media itself' (2004: 473). For Paula, the choice to converse with her cousin by email was influenced by the opportunity it presented to manage her time better, and by the fact she could do it at a time that was convenient to her. Given that she spent time with her cousin when they met on holidays, and enjoyed 'heart-to-heart' conversations then as well, it is questionable how pivotal the medium was to the level of self-disclosure and sharing that took place between Paula and her cousin. In this context, Paula was empowered to share her deepest feelings with her cousin not because of any particular quality of the *medium*, but because of the strength of the *relationship* that underpinned their communication, both in online and offline situations.

Similarly, for those participants who reported being comfortable sharing private thoughts and emotions through online channels, the majority immediately qualified their remark by noting they would only do so with certain people. This attitude was summed up by Corinne, when asked whether she felt comfortable discussing personal or intimate issues via email:

Well that friend [overseas] ... yeah, definitely we do. Yeah, you know, like I've told her very much my feelings when mum was first diagnosed and that kind of thing.

*Okay.*

And she has reciprocated 'cause her mother died recently and so yeah, very much intimate....[but] I would certainly sort of pick my audience. So, yeah. Like I know her ability to hear me clearly and I her. (Corinne)

Such a qualification suggests that women need to feel a degree of trust with the person they are communicating with before they will commit themselves to sharing intimate or sensitive thoughts through email. Also related to this is the concern put forward by several of the women that emails could be easily misconstrued, or read by people other than the intended recipient. Indeed, several women expressed a reluctance to convey personal and private information through emails in case they were mistakenly sent to the wrong person. For another participant, Berenice, a reluctance to use email to exchange sensitive information was driven not by a fear that she may mistakenly send an email to the wrong person, but rather that emails may be deliberately searched for and read by her husband. Past marital difficulties had raised issues of trust with her husband, and, as the following comment implies, she was circumspect about sharing private and intimate information online. When asked whether she shared sensitive or very personal information through email, Berenice replied:

No, because it would get read if I had anything to say. Even though I could delete it, I would be a bit worried it could be found [by husband], so I'd be more likely to ring, and discuss that over the phone, rather than the Internet. Unless I knew it was absolutely secure, and I was on somebody else's computer, say, not that I've ever done it, but if I was on somebody else's computer I would probably discuss information like that then.

*So it's not really the medium as such, it's just the privacy factor that would discourage you from doing that?*

Yes, mmm. I think when we were separated it was fine then, 'cause I had my own computer and I could discuss things, probably not that there was anything to hide.  
(Berenice)



Many of the participants described using email in a strategic way to offer support and guidance to their young adult children. In particular, several women who indicated that communicating with sons was sometimes a challenge had found email a useful tool. For Felicity, email provided a platform from which to offer advice at 'arm's length': 'You know, he's nearly 25, and he really doesn't want to hear it, but if I just put a little bit in an email, [he's] got to read it.' Another participant, Ellie, has found offering support to adult children can sometimes resemble walking through a minefield, as concern and guidance can so easily be interpreted as interference or nagging. In these situations, email can provide a 'softly softly' approach which may potentially make the message more palatable to the receiver:

At the moment it's all ok, but I was just even thinking last night, I need to contact him [son]. Now often I'll just ... I'll text him "Thinking of you, catch up with you soon." Email, from work, which will obviously go to his work. I'm a bit reluctant, I'd like to be able to email him more, but I know he's busy at the other end. And because he's not such a communicator, everything's just "Everything's alright."

*Would you phone him?*

No. What I would do though, which I have done in the past....I would find websites, just in my travels around the Net at work or I see things on TV....So I will email those sites, "Just in case you might want to check these out." So that is how I communicate to my kids. Now my son, there was something that I found written on the Net that I wanted to convey to him, and it was on a website about relationships, and marriage, but I'm still a little bit hesitant because I don't want to interfere....So it's a fine line. (Ellie)

Beyond these more targeted messages of support, many women were also using email on an everyday basis to offer a more general level of encouragement and affirmation. As Paula explained, occasional

short emails to her daughter, who lived some distance from home, not only sustained a loving connection, but also conveyed care and support:

*What about emailing your daughter?*

I email her at work....I try not to bombard her at work because she's fairly busy, so every now and again a little one will pop up, and she'll say, "Are you there Mum?" and she just needs to know that I'm there, and you know, I send her one back. (Paula)

Another participant's email correspondence with an older semi-housebound female friend provided an ongoing conversation that appeared to be mutually beneficial:

She [friend] loves the email, she loves the computer. Because she lives on her own, she's in her 70s, and she's retired, her mind's active but physically she's not that well. So that can make [it difficult]....So emailing her, she likes that....Like her other friends, they don't always contact her on the email for a chat as regularly as I do, I don't think....She likes that ongoing sort of communication; it's just like having somebody there for her, in the house, somebody she can go and talk to....Yes, I think she appreciates that a lot. Yeah, it's good actually. I think because you know you can just clock on and just have a chat and if there's anything bothering me I can say and she'll say something reassuring back, you know? (Debbie)

Email can also be a useful conduit through which care and support can be conveyed at critical times. When Katherine was living overseas for several months, email enabled her to continue to offer support to a friend newly diagnosed with cancer:

I was away ... without email I don't know what [I'd have done]. So I would get this email from her [friend], that's how she told everybody, she sent emails, so I was in on that,

saying, “hi guys, I’ve got cancer”, it was like “aargh”, you know?...“Oh, guess what, I’ve got to have both breasts off.” Now the other girls were able to all rally around and go and see her in hospital and ... I felt very far away at that time. But I sent [friend] an email saying, “I’m sending you vibes of, [you] know, sending you all my support down the email line”, kind of thing, and yer, just communicated with her that way, and with the other guys then, behind her back a little bit, how she was going and what they were doing...but being able to email was, yer, really helpful. (Katherine)

Moreover, as the following comments suggest, email enabled Katherine to offer support, in a way that not only minimised her own discomfort, but that also respected her friend’s choice to communicate her diagnosis of cancer by email:

I think she’s probably happier to deal with it by email than by a phone conversation in a way, because she was able to, you know, if you trigger them off they then are upset, you know, and they don’t want you to, they were just getting it together, and you never know the right time to [discuss their illness]. (Katherine)

In this context, arguably the text-based, asynchronous nature of email provided an opportunity for her friend to share her feelings in ways that may not have been possible in a face-to-face or telephone conversation. A similar dynamic was illustrated in Nettleton et al’s research. As one participant in a stillbirth support list noted, email provided the opportunity for people to ‘express exactly what they felt without embarrassment, ... or fear of saying the wrong thing’ (Nettleton, et al., 2002: 185).

The critical link that email can provide during times of crisis was perhaps most clearly illustrated in Corinne’s experiences leading up to the death of her father. As with both Katherine and Paula’s reflections, Corinne found email provided an appropriate level of contact when communicating face-to-face or by telephone was too ‘raw’. When asked what email meant to her, Corinne replied:

It does help keep you in touch. It does, it just creates a little tenuous or not so tenuous, little fine thread that sort of supports the relationship....[during] the last couple of weeks with my dad, I couldn't ... when it was sort of really quite critical ... I'm a bit of a sook and I cry quite easily and I couldn't really talk to anybody face-to-face because I just would've broken down, but I could email friends. And they could email me back just with "just know that we really feel for you and we're praying for you" and all that kind of thing. And it really did help because I got ... because I felt that I just, I just didn't really want to talk to anybody face-to-face and that really brought it home to me that, yeah.

(Corinne)

In this context email, with its low levels of cues, enabled messages of support to be extracted from an otherwise (potentially) overwhelming communication of care and concern.

### **Expanding Social Support Networks Using Online Communication Channels: Current Findings**

While email messages are undoubtedly an effective conduit for the exchange of social support in midlife women's lives, and are used by some women to share intimate information, they are almost universally circulated through established networks of known contacts. The situations discussed up to now describe women's actions in accessing and offering support within relatively limited family and social networks. For the most part the women interviewed as part of this research project were emailing people – either relatives or friends – that they knew offline as well. Within the context of communication with known others in particular social environments, there is a social requirement to present a coherent and recognisable image that conforms to an individual's offline behaviour. As such, the degree to which individuals are willing to disclose aspects of themselves with which they may not be comfortable, or which they may feel awkward sharing with friends and relatives (Palandri & Green, 2000: 635), or which they feel may convey a negative impression (Joinson, 2004: 472), is likely to be limited.

In contrast, online environments such as chat lines and discussion forums present the potential for

anonymous interaction, without the fear of repercussions in offline social networks. This phenomenon is highlighted in early Internet research. According to some researchers, the anonymity inherent in many online environments encourages greater levels of disinhibition and self-disclosure than are evident in offline communication environments (Danet, 1998; Joinson, 2007; Suler, 2004). However, as indicated by Paula's reflections on the merits of email over telephone, individuals' communication choices and behaviours reflect a much more complex dynamic. As Joinson notes, 'the prevalence of intimate communication (as occurs, for instance, in online social support forums) is a product of the motivated choices users make, rather than necessarily an outcome of media use per se' (Joinson, 2004: 472).

Individuals make strategic communication choices every day, based on a number of factors, including their motivation; the communication task; the social context; and the communication tools available. Just as some individuals prefer to use face-to-face or telephone communication to convey sympathy or care, so too is it likely that others will choose particular online environments to seek or provide support and advice, either as an alternative, or in addition to, offline sources of support. In the context of this research, just over 25% (11 women) had used potentially anonymous forms of online communication channels, including chat sites, discussion forums and self-help support sites, to give or receive social support.

Vicki's experiences with an online support group demonstrate how such sites can provide a useful additional source of support to that delivered through traditional channels. Divorced after a long-term marriage, and subsequently involved for several years in an emotionally abusive relationship, Vicki's self-esteem was badly shaken. The difficulties she'd experienced had taken a toll on her support network. Exacerbating Vicki's limited sources of support, the stigma attached to domestic abuse made it difficult for her to reach out for help, and for friends and family to fully understand her circumstances and offer the appropriate support. While Vicki did access professional counselling support, she also looked for her own answers to the dilemma she found herself in. After searching the Internet exhaustively for information that might help explain her ex-partner's behaviour, and the situation she found herself in, Vicki found a support group for people who had suffered similar emotional abuse:

I mean, people [friends and family] can be sympathetic and understanding, but, I mean you know....so to actually have that sort of support. There's some really wise people in there [online forum] that have been through it. And people that really understand what you've been through. And I found it really useful, really helpful. (Vicki)

As Vicki's comments imply, although the anonymity offered on this forum provided a 'safe' environment for Vicki to share her experiences, this was not the chief factor motivating her decision to participate. More importantly for Vicki, the online forum offered the opportunity to share her feelings with others who had experienced similar abuse: 'people in that sort of, who've been through that, are really the only people that really understand what you've been through.' Through this online support site, Vicki was able to develop an ongoing connection with another woman who had also suffered through an abusive relationship. Their communication subsequently moved from the support site to personal emails, supplemented by the occasional text message and telephone call. As such, Vicki's participation in this support site has enabled her to tap into a source of support that was unlikely to be available to her through any other medium; a form of support that not only supplemented support she received through traditional channels, but one which best met her needs at a particular point in her journey of recovery.

A similar dynamic is evident in Paula's experiences. Diagnosed several years ago with a very rare health condition, Paula had been unable to find anybody else who had had to deal with these specific challenges, until she discovered an email-based support group for people with her particular illness. Although she considered herself normally a fairly self-contained person, her feelings on making contact with another participant in this group overwhelmed her:

I'm a fairly private person I suppose....I very rarely look for, I guess, emotional support in that sense from people. What I found with the support group, the first email that came in, "Hi, my name is Bec, I have [health condition] and I've been living with it for about

eleven years”, and I cried for about an hour, I absolutely cried my eyes out. Firstly, that she’d taken the time to email me, and also that she was living with the condition, she was still alive, and she’d had it for eleven years. And all of a sudden I wasn’t all alone. There was somebody out there in the world who had what I had ... who was managing and coping, and had been for eleven years. And I was an emotional wreck for about an hour, and I was thinking, you bloody idiot, stop! And I just couldn’t, because I was just so relieved, all these emotions came up. I couldn’t explain to anyone how that felt, and what I had felt like for the last nine months trying to find somebody, and I guess I didn’t realise myself how important it was for me to find someone. I’m seeing things just so much clearer, a lot differently....I guess I feel at the moment I actually have got a life to go ahead with now, whereas before I really wasn’t sure. (Paula)

The depth of Paula’s feelings highlight the unique role online support can play in the context of an individual’s broader social support networks. Even though Paula had a close and loving network of family and friends, they had not been able to offer the type of ongoing support that she most needed as she came to terms with living with a chronic, life threatening condition. Only through her online interactions was Paula able to connect with others who could truly understand and empathise, and could offer a more targeted form of support (Nettleton, et al., 2002: 187). Perhaps most importantly, this connection empowered Paula by giving her an indication of what might lay ahead in the coming years. The support she received through this group not only offered benefits at a macro level by helping her feel more positive about her future, but also provided her with information and guidance to help her cope with the more critical aspects of her condition on a day-to-day basis, and thus acted as a buffer during times of stress (Westen, et al., 2006: 586). Through this strategic support, Paula felt more able to proactively manage her condition; this enhanced self-efficacy is likely to have positive implications for her ongoing physical and emotional wellbeing.

## **Conclusion**

Numerous studies indicate that social support is an important element in women's lives, particularly during periods of transition such as midlife, when the 'goal posts' of everyday life are changing, and emotional support may be most needed (Bresnahan & Murray-Johnson, 2002: 398; Deeks, 2006: 154). Midlife women are often a primary source of support for close family members, and in turn lend support to each other through close female friendships. Although women still rely heavily on face-to-face and telephone communication to offer and exchange support, they are increasingly utilising online channels. While there is a rich body of research on social support on the Internet, apart from a few notable exceptions (Conforti, 2001; Matzko, 2002), most previous studies have tended to limit the scope of their investigation to the relatively public environments of discussion forums and online communities. Such a methodology tends to construct the Internet as a social space that is to some extent discontinuous from offline life. In contrast, by considering women's online activity within the context of their wider social networks and communication patterns, this research project highlights the conscious and strategic choices women make when communicating in a dynamic and changing social and technological landscape.

To the degree that online communication channels have become normalised within women's social interactions, they have come to play a critical role as conduits for social support. As this research indicates, the Internet both enriches opportunities available for women to enact support, within personal networks of family and friends, and also facilitates the development of new networks of support through more public electronic platforms. Such increased opportunities to share support, care and empathy have positive implications for women's health and wellbeing, both during their midlife years and as they move on to the next phase of their lives.



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