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Research Paper

From Screens to Support: A Systematic Literature Review of Female Users' Access to Social Support on Social Media Platforms.

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ABSTRACT

This study systematically reviews existing research on how female users engage with social media platforms (SMPs) to seek, provide, and negotiate social support. It explores the types of support exchanged, underlying motivations, barriers to participation, and the broader psychosocial implications of platform use in gendered digital environments. Following PRISMA guidelines, this review analyzed 31 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2014 and 2024, identified through Web of Science, Scopus, and EBSCO databases. A narrative synthesis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and theoretical contributions. Female users commonly access four forms of support on SMPs: emotional, informational, esteem, and network-based. Their motivations include seeking health information, emotional reassurance, peer solidarity, and sustaining social connections. However, engagement is constrained by risks such as information overload, negative feedback, and privacy concerns. These dynamics reflect both the empowering and limiting roles of SMPs in shaping psychosocial well-being and digital identity. The review is limited to English-language, published studies and may underrepresent research from non-Western or marginalized populations. Future studies should adopt more intersectional, cross-cultural, and platform-specific approaches. Findings inform brand communication, audience engagement strategies, and the development of safer, more inclusive online spaces. They highlight the need for improved platform design, community management, and digital literacy strategies tailored to women's support needs. This review integrates insights from communication, social psychology, and gender studies, offering a valuable framework for marketers and community managers seeking to understand female audience engagement. It provides a conceptual model linking digital support-seeking to identity, emotion, and structural dynamics, which are critical for developing authentic brand narratives and fostering loyal online communities.

Keywords: Social media platforms; social support; female users; systematic literature review; online communities; user engagement

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1. INTRODUCTION

With the growing trend of using social media platforms (SMPs) such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok globally during the past decades, over five billion people are using SMPs (Kepios 2025). People tend to spend more time on SMPs and even more after the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the users' average time spent statistics from 2015 to 2025 (DemandSage 2025). The user engagement on SMPs has attracted the attention of researchers from various fields. Some studies investigated SMPs from the perspective of their technical functions or affordance (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite 2019), while others paid attention to the usage behaviour and motivation of the users of SMPs, such as information-seeking (Hamid et al. 2016). This shift in user behavior is not just a social phenomenon; it is also a central concern for marketing communication and audience engagement (Kumar et al. 2025). As brands increasingly build online communities (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022), effective community management requires understanding the core motivations (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1973) driving participation. This review's focus on female users seeking social support (Tifferet 2020) offers critical insights for these practitioners. Many researchers identified the gendered differences in user behaviour regarding social support. According to the meta-analysis of 30 independent studies conducted by Tifferet (2020), females were comparatively more active and often users of SMPs, as well as the group who provided and received more social support on SMPs. However, there is no further discussion about the motivation of the female users' providing or receiving social support or the specific types of social support that are afforded by the interaction on SMPs. The emergence of the hashtag movement #METOO on SMPs is a significant reflection of women's social support demands for gender equality in various circumstances, like the workplace, school, and even the virtual world. With such an active and frequent user population, the studies that focused on female users' behaviours towards social support are scattered across different research fields. Thus, it is difficult to portray the female users on SMPs when encountering their needs for social support. To comprehensively demonstrate how female users utilize SMPs to access social support, this study is to systematically analyze the previous studies, which were published between 2014 and 2024, about social support providing or receiving behaviours through SMPs among female users.

The first research objective is to identify, based on the literature, the characteristics of the female users who provide, receive, or seek social support on SMPs. The second is to examine the main types of social support that are preferred by female users with different characteristics. The third objective is to identify the motivations and barriers of female users' providing, receiving, or seeking social support on SMPs. The last objective is to identify the gaps that exist within the current studies on female users and SMPs' social support. To achieve the above objectives, this study raises three research questions accordingly: 1) What is the trend of characteristics of the female users who provide, receive, or seek social support on SMPs across research? 2) What are the different types of social support on SMPs that are preferred by female users with different characteristics across research? 3) What motivates and barriers female users to provide, receive, or seek social support on SMPs across research?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework: Social support and uses & gratifications

Digital social support has emerged as a critical extension of traditional social support systems. Social support is the assistance people provide one another, contributing to individual health and well-being. Based on traditional typologies (Cutrona & Suhr 1992), this review focuses on the four key categories of digital social support: emotional support (expressions of empathy), informational support (exchange of guidance), esteem support (feedback that enhances confidence), and network support (a sense of belonging and social integration). To understand why users seek this support, this review employs Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) as an interpretive frame. UGT posits that media users are not passive consumers; rather, they are active, goal-directed agents who select specific media to fulfil specific needs and gratifications (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch 1973). In this context, female users actively select SMPs to gratify needs for information, emotional regulation, or community, which aligns directly with the categories of social support. This review will use UGT to frame the analysis of users' motivations (the "needs") and the social support they find (the "gratifications").

2.2 Platform logics and gendered online environments

The pursuit of social support is shaped by the "platform logics" and "affordances" of SMPs (Kasperuniene & Zydziunaite 2019). Affordances, such as a platform's capacity for visibility, anonymity, and persistence, create a gendered digital environment. On one hand, affordances like

private groups or pseudonymous forums can create safe spaces for women to share narratives and build community (Potnis & Halladay 2021). On the other hand, affordances like public commenting and algorithmic amplification (Noble 2018) can expose female users to risks, including online harassment (Jane 2020), and negative feedback that leads to heightened psychological distress (Valkenburg 2022). This review examines how female users must navigate this dual-natured environment to access support.

2.3 Female users' engagement with social support

While female users are among the most active participants on SMPs (Li and Zhuo 2023), much of the literature examines their engagement through specific lenses, such as the impact of platform affordances on consumption behavior (Macheka, Quaye, & Ligaraba 2024; Kumar et al. 2025), self-presentation (Kidd et al. 2024), and mental health outcomes. For example, fear of missing out has been linked to social media addiction (Brailovskaia & Margraf 2024), while idealized body images contribute to psychological distress (Kidd et al. 2024).

Beyond this, women's active engagement is closely tied to gendered concerns and social support needs (Tifferet 2020). Digital feminist activism, such as the #MeToo movement, illustrates how women use SMPs to share narratives and advocate for reform (Stubbs-Richardson et al. 2024). Women also form virtual communities that offer mutual aid, especially among groups with limited offline networks, such as mothers (Fileborn & Trott 2022; Holtz, Smock, & Reyes-Gastelum 2015), housewives (Hamid et al. 2022; Nurfalah et al. 2020), and migrant women (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022). In sum, women's engagement with SMPs is driven by unmet offline needs and the search for social support, a process shaped by both enabling and constraining platform dynamics (Robinson et al. 2019; Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022). This study addresses this gap by systematically mapping how female users engage with SMPs, with specific attention to their motivations, the benefits sought, and the barriers encountered.

3. METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review is a structured and rigorous method of reviewing existing research on a specific topic by following a predefined protocol. According to Kitchenham and Charters (2007) a systematic literature review is used to summarize the existing evidence about a specific topic or phenomenon and identify gaps, so as to provide future research suggestions. In order to

investigate the female users' access to social support on SMPs, this review follows the guidelines from PRISMA (2020) and tracks relevant papers (Page et al. 2021).

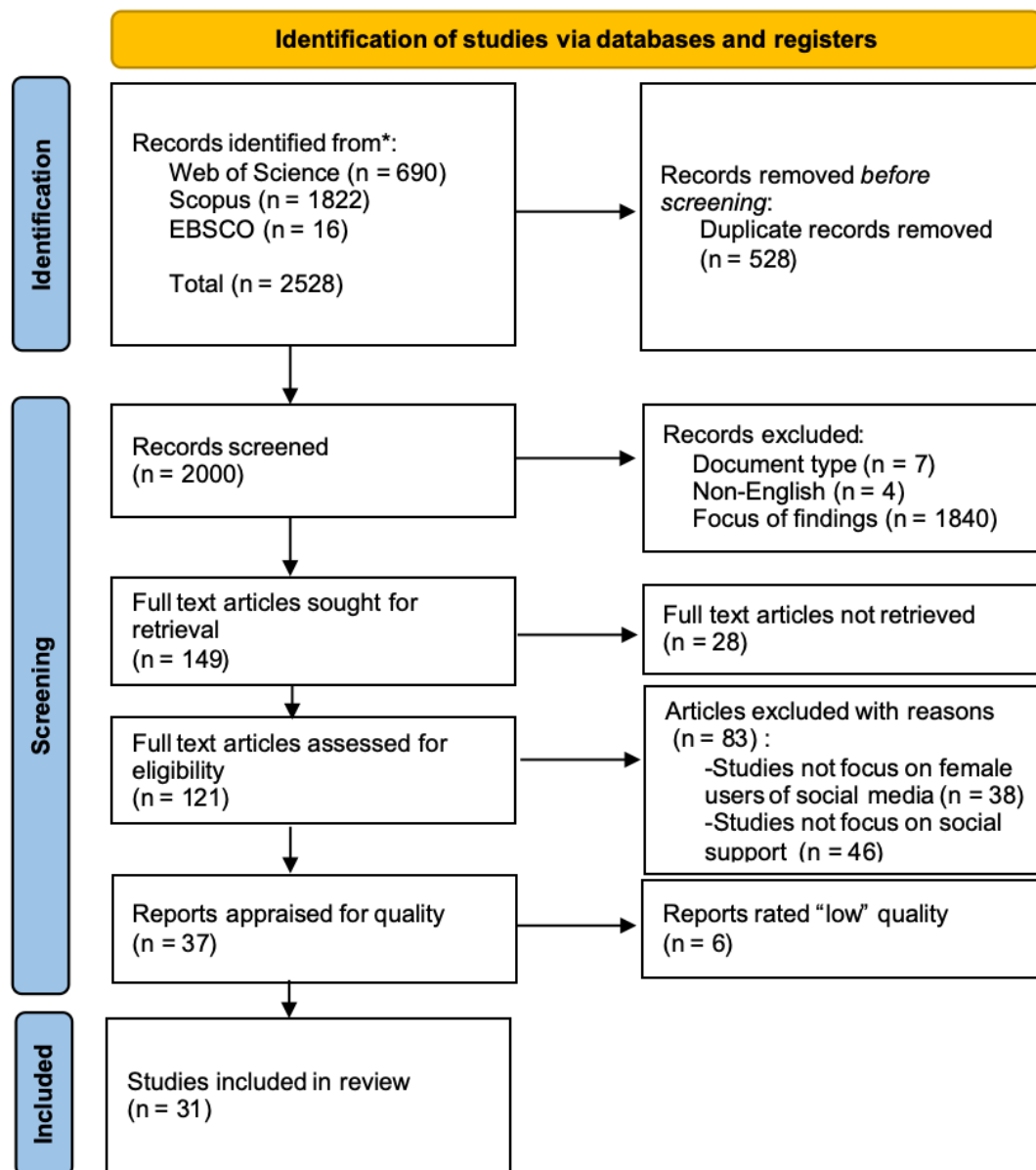


Figure 1. PRISMA Protocol Flow Diagram of the SLR process

Figure 1 illustrates the PRISMA-aligned review process, which encompassed identification, screening, and eligibility phases, culminating in 31 selected articles. The search strategy employed four main concept groups: social media, female, user, and social support. To account for variations in terminology, terms within each group were combined using "OR," while the four groups were

combined using "AND." The primary Boolean search targeted titles, abstracts, or keywords, utilizing the following string: ("social media" OR "social network" OR "social networking") AND ("female" OR "woman" OR "women") AND ("user" OR "users" OR "utilizer" OR "utilizers") AND ("social support" OR "support" OR "help"). Literature published between January 1, 2014, and December 31, 2024, was considered, with searches conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, and EBSCO. This initial identification phase yielded 2528 records. Identified records were then screened based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria presented in Table 1.

During eligibility assessment, 121 studies underwent full-text evaluation to confirm alignment with the review's objectives, including examination of theoretical frameworks, analytical approaches, and empirical findings for thematic relevance. This process led to the exclusion of 83 publications due to insufficient focus on female users' social media utilization for social support access. Subsequently, 37 publications advanced to quality assessment. Methodological rigor was independently appraised by two reviewers (Author 1, Author 2) using Rayyan (blinded mode) and criteria adapted from the QuADS tool (Harrison et al. 2021), focusing on: (1) clarity of research aims, (2) appropriateness of methodology for the research aims, (3) appropriateness of the sampling strategy, (4) rigor in data collection, and (5) rigor and transparency in data analysis. Studies were rated as "High" (minimal concerns), "Moderate" (some limitations), or "Low" (significant flaws). Disagreements (n=5) were resolved by consensus, with a third reviewer (Author 3) arbitrating one unresolved case. This process resulted in 31 articles (rated High or Moderate) being included. The 6 articles rated "Low" were excluded. A detailed breakdown of all 37 appraisals is available in Table 2.

Table 1. Screening Criteria

Search criterion/task	Inclusion	Exclusion
Document type	Journal articles	Proceeding paper, early access, review article, book chapter, editorial material, data paper, book review, retracted publication
Language	English	Non-English
Time frame	2014 to 2024	Other time period
Retrievability	Full text retrieved	Full text not retrieved
Duplicate		Duplicate manuscripts
Focus of findings	Related to research questions	Not related to research questions

Table 2. Quality Appraisal

Author (Year)	Rating	Rationale for Rating	Decision
Wheatley (2024)	High	Rigorous data collection and clear thematic analysis of journalist practices.	Included
Qin et al. (2024)	High	Strong mixed-methods design. Connects mental health and platform use with a clear, validated analytical approach.	Included
Li, Xie, and Kim (2024)	High	Clear focus on collective action and engagement. Appropriate experimental methodology for analyzing platform effects.	Included
Li and Zhuo (2023)	High	Provides a strong conceptual framework. Rigorous qualitative analysis of emotion on social media.	Included
Hamid et al. (2022)	High	Clear empirical study linking platform use to well-being for a specific “Female role”. Good methodological clarity.	Included
Cui, Yamashita, and Lee (2022)	High	Excellent in-depth qualitative study. Strong alignment of RQs with methodology. Rigorous data collection (40 interviews) and analysis.	Included
Potnis and Halladay (2021)	High	Strong conceptual focus. Clear contribution to understanding vulnerable populations.	Included
Wilson, Mogan, and Kaur (2020)	High	Good qualitative study on a specific patient group in a non-Western context (Malaysian). High relevance.	Included
Nurfalah et al. (2020)	High	Clear study linking motives and well-being for a specific “Female role” (housewives) in a non-Western context (Indonesia).	Included
Mercier et al. (2020)	High	Highly relevant study on a specific, stigmatized experience (miscarriage). Clear methodology and significant findings.	Included
Han et al. (2019)	High	Innovative use of a virtual community. Clear methodology and practical implications.	Included
Robinson et al. (2019)	High	Strong quantitative comparison of online/offline support for a specific “Ethnic minority”. Used validated scales.	Included
Maslen and Lupton (2019)	High	Strong qualitative study with clear theoretical grounding and rigorous analysis.	Included
Oviatt and Reich (2019)	High	Clear content analysis with a specific “Female role” focus (pregnancy).	Included
Andalibi and Forte (2018)	High	Foundational study on stigmatized disclosure (pregnancy loss) with a strong theoretical contribution (decision-making framework).	Included
Holtz, Smock, and Reyes-Gastelum (2015)	High	Early, foundational study on Facebook for a key “Female role”. Clear methods and analysis.	Included
Davidson et al. (2023)	Moderate	Good use of topic modeling, but sample from a single platform (Reddit) limits generalizability. Analytical depth is high.	Included
Beyers-Carlson et al. (2022)	Moderate	Clear qualitative study with a specific, well-defined scope (second-time mothers). Good rigor.	Included
Gonzalez et al. (2022)	Moderate	Good use of “Digital Ethnography”. Clear focus on a specific patient group, though analytical description is brief.	Included
Gonzalez et al. (2020)	Moderate	Clear analytics study. Well-defined patient group, but relies on descriptive data.	Included
Crawford et al. (2020)	Moderate	Interesting application of social media analysis. Clear, though niche, focus. Methodology is sound.	Included
Yu and Kim (2020)	Moderate	Clear quantitative study with a specific theoretical focus. Meets all criteria.	Included
Kvardova et al. (2020)	Moderate	Clear quantitative study with a specific theoretical focus (drive for thinness).	Included
Lebron et al. (2020)	Moderate	Good qualitative analysis of forum use for a specific “Female role” (breastfeeding). Clear aims and analysis.	Included
Marcon, Bieber, and Azad (2019)	Moderate	Clear focus on a specific platform (Instagram) and topic (breastfeeding). Good descriptive study, though lacks deep analysis.	Included
Corter et al. (2019)	Moderate	Clear study comparing user wants vs. needs for a “Patient” group. Methodology is sound but sampling is limited.	Included

Asbury, Casey, and Desai (2018)	Moderate	Clear study with a specific intervention focus.	Included
Galpin et al. (2017)	Moderate	Good applied research for a specific "Patient" group. Clear aims and methods.	Included
Hicks and Brown (2016)	Moderate	Clear quantitative study. Findings are correlational, and sampling (self-report, Facebook) limits generalizability.	Included
Bissonnette-Maheux et al. (2015)	Moderate	Clear qualitative study on a specific topic (healthy eating blogs).	Included
Harris, Cleary, and Stanton (2015)	Moderate	Clear study of a specific online intervention for a "Patient" group.	Included
Rajahonka & Villman (2019)	Low	Does not meet the "Focus of findings" criterion. The study's primary focus is "digitalization" and "career paths" for female managers, not an empirical analysis of "social support".	Excluded
Mancin et al. (2024)	Low	Does not meet the "Focus of findings" criterion. The study's primary constructs are "body image", "BDD symptoms", and "appearance comparison". "Social support" is not a measured variable.	Excluded
Dhankar & Katz (2023)	Low	Does not meet the "Focus of findings" criterion. The study's primary contribution is the development of an "AI-enabled pipeline".	Excluded
McCall et al. (2022)	Low	Does not meet the "Focus of findings" criterion. This study provides "design recommendations" for a new mHealth app, not an empirical study of social support on existing social media platforms.	Excluded
Kainat et al. (2021)	Low	Does not meet the "Focus of findings" criterion. The central constructs are "information satisfaction", "information literacy", and "information overload", not "social support".	Excluded
Casares & Binkley (2021)	Low	Does not meet the "Document type" or "Focus of findings" criteria.	Excluded

4. RESULTS

4.1 Result overview

The past 10 years witnessed an overall increasing trend in publications, peaking in 2020 before fluctuating (see Figure 2). Regarding research methodology, the review found a relatively balanced distribution across the 31 studies. Qualitative methods were the most common ($n=12$), typically involving thematic or content analysis of user posts and interviews. This was followed by quantitative methods ($n=10$), such as surveys, and mixed methods designs ($n=9$).

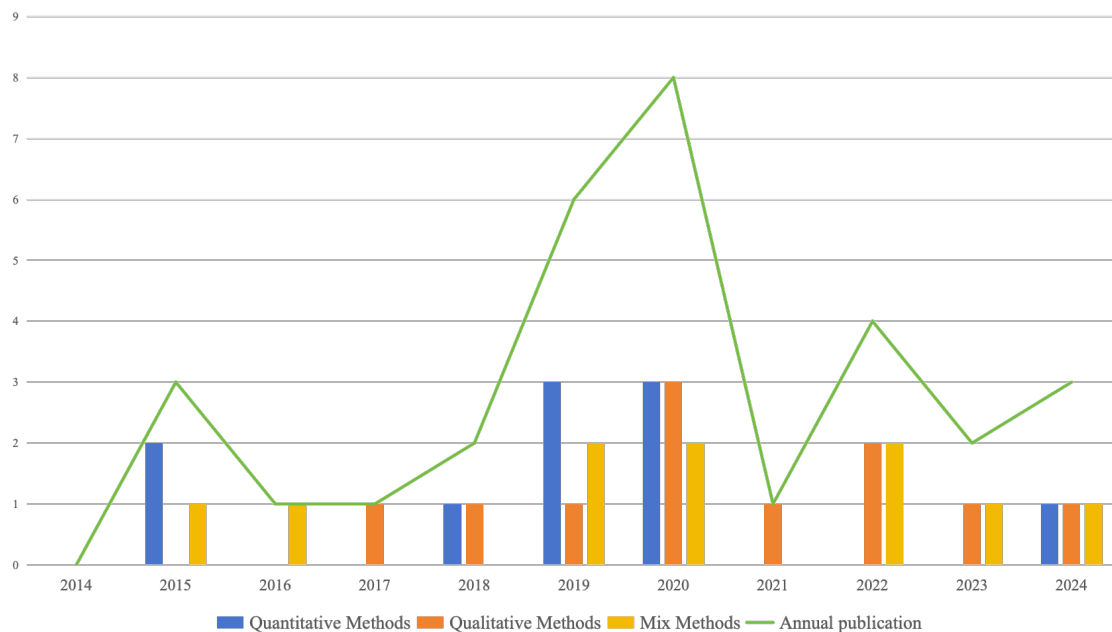


Figure 2. Annual Publication and Applied Research Methods by Year (2014-2024)

Figure 2 illustrates how the application of these different methodologies has evolved, showing a consistent application of all three approaches throughout the review period, with qualitative methods being particularly prominent in the 2020 publication peak. In terms of geographical focus, the 31 included studies were distributed across several regions (see Table 3). The United States was the most common single country of focus ($n=7$). A large portion of the literature ($n=12$) was not region-specific, analyzing general English-language platform data or theoretical concepts without a defined national sample. The narrative synthesis of the 31 articles identified four primary thematic categories in response to the research questions: (1) Characteristics and identities of female users, (2) Social support categories, (3) Motivations for seeking support, and (4) Barriers to accessing support. These themes, along with their 17 corresponding sub-themes, are mapped

across all 31 included studies in Table 4. The following sections discuss the findings from this analysis in detail, beginning with the user characteristics and the types of support they seek.

Table 3. Distribution of Research Population Regions

Geographical Region	Number of Studies
Not specific*	12
USA	7
China	4
Malaysia	2
Europe	2
UK	1
Indonesia	1
Korea	1
Australia	1
Total	31

*Note: "Not specific" refers to studies that did not define a specific geographical sample (e.g., they analyzed general platform data, were theoretical, or involved multi-national samples).

4.2 Types of social support sought by female user groups

The characteristics and identities of the female users on SMPs are related to the types and forms of receiving and providing social support. In this case, the review classified the included research population into five types of characteristics and identities. Identities that relate to female roles (n=13) and those who are patients with physical or mental problems (n=11) occupy the main proportion, followed by ethnic minorities (n=1), gender minorities (n=1), and others (n=6). The following sections explain how the four main types of social support, namely emotional, informational, esteem, and network support, are sought by the five types of female user groups.

Table 4. Main themes and sub-themes

Authors	RQ1					RQ2				RQ3							
	Characteristics and identities					Social support categories				Motivations				Barriers			
	Female roles	Patients (physical /mental)	Ethnic minorities	Gender minorities	Others	Emotional	Informational	Esteem	Network	Gaining information	Peer support	Emotional vulnerability	Social interaction needs	Information overload	Limited access	Negative feedback	Privacy concern
Wheatley (2024)					✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	
Qin et al. (2024)		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Li, Xie, and Kim (2024)					✓	✓					✓					✓	
Davidson et al. (2023)		✓				✓			✓		✓	✓					
Li and Zhuo (2023)					✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		✓	✓			
Beyers-Carlson, Schoenebeck, and Volling (2022)	✓					✓	✓			✓		✓					
Hamid et al. (2022)	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
Cui, Yamashita, and Lee (2022)				✓			✓		✓	✓			✓		✓	✓	
Gonzalez et al. (2022)		✓					✓		✓	✓							
Potnis and Halladay (2021)	✓					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓				
Gonzalez et al. (2020)		✓					✓			✓							
Crawford et al. (2020)	✓					✓		✓	✓			✓					
Yu and Kim (2020)		✓						✓									
Wilson, Mogan, and Kaur (2020)		✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Nurfalah et al. (2020)	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓				

Kvardova, Machackova, and Smahel (2020)		✓				✓					✓						
Lebron et al. (2020)	✓						✓		✓	✓							
Mercier et al. (2020)	✓					✓			✓		✓	✓				✓	
Han et al. (2019)		✓				✓	✓		✓	✓	✓						
Robinson et al. (2019)	✓		✓			✓	✓		✓	✓							
Maslen and Lupton (2019)					✓	✓	✓			✓	✓					✓	
Oviatt and Reich (2019)	✓					✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓					
Marcon, Bieber, and Azad (2019)	✓					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓							
Cortier et al. (2019)		✓					✓		✓	✓	✓			✓			
Andalibi and Forte (2018)	✓					✓			✓			✓					
Asbury, Casey, and Desai (2018)					✓	✓			✓			✓		✓			
Galpin et al. (2017)		✓					✓		✓	✓				✓			
Hicks and Brown (2016)	✓							✓	✓								
Holtz, Smock, and Reyes-Gastelum (2015)	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓			✓				✓
Bissonnette-Maheux et al. (2015)					✓		✓			✓							
Harris, Cleary, and Stanton (2015)		✓				✓			✓			✓					

4.2.1 Emotional support

The emotional support varies among groups encountering different emotional challenges. This is most evident among the groups of "female roles". For example, the females who had painful experiences such as pregnancy loss, sharing personal stories online contributes to their healing process (Andalibi & Forte 2018). Beyers-Carlson, Schoenebeck, and Volling (2022) found that mothers of two children sought emotional support when navigating feelings of frustration, sadness, joy, or excitement. Among other vulnerable populations, such as housewives in Malaysia, emotional support is cultivated through the sharing of daily routines and mutual encouragement (Nurfalah et al. 2020). Support arises when female patients relate to others' shared experiences. Participants Andalibi and Forte (2018) felt less isolated and more secure in sharing their own stories after seeing similar posts; such sharing, particularly about pregnancy loss, served as an emotional healing process. In response to real-life inequalities, female users frequently seek emotional support and simultaneously amplify their collective voice. For gender minorities, Cui, Yamashita, and Lee (2022) observed that LGBT+ female influencers used SMPs to journal their emotions and raise awareness about inequality.

4.2.2 Informational support

Informational support on SMPs represents a shift from traditional search to peer-based knowledge sharing, offering practical, experiential insights that aid decision-making. This support is most prominent among "female roles," particularly mothers seeking information on fertility (Lebron et al. 2020; Holtz, Smock, & Reyes-Gastelum 2015; Beyers-Carlson, Schoenebeck, & Volling 2022; Oviatt & Reich 2019; Marcon, Bieber, & Azad 2019; Potnis & Halladay 2021) and specific challenges like breastfeeding (Lebron et al. 2020). Housewives also use SMPs to gain income and emotional support (Hamid et al. 2022). Similarly, "female patients" rely on peer-to-peer exchanges for health information on topics like breast cancer (Davidson et al. 2023; Harris, Cleary, & Stanton 2015; Corter et al. 2019), for sharing resources (Han et al. 2019), seeking illness management guidance (Wilson, Mogan, & Kaur 2020), and for self-diagnosis (Gonzalez et al. 2022). This peer-to-peer support empowers patient decision-making (Galpin et al. 2017) and functions as a compensatory mechanism, filling informational gaps not met by traditional offline sources.

4.2.3 Esteem support

Esteem support on SMPs contributes to female empowerment among the “female roles” group and female patients. Oviatt and Reich (2019) found that pregnancy posts on Facebook and Instagram aimed to empower women and motherhood. Nurfalah et al. (2020) reported that housewives felt respected through online interactions. Within female patients, Wilson, Mogan, and Kaur (2020) observed that self-esteem improved within support groups as active members modelled positive self-perceptions. This finding indicates that esteem support on SMPs functions as a direct tool for validation and identity affirmation, particularly for roles susceptible to diminished self-worth. It operates by actively reinforcing the value of these female experiences. For “female roles,” this support is explicit, serving to empower motherhood or make housewives feel respected through interaction. For female patients, the mechanism is positive peer modeling, where observing others fosters improved self-perceptions.

4.2.4 Network support

Network support is also commonly needed by various female user groups. Network support acts as a virtual community providing a sense of belonging to the female users who are fulfilling their female roles. Social media helps women balance work and life by maintaining social connections without requiring in-person interaction (Crawford et al. 2020). Positive network support also aided decision-making, particularly in peer-to-peer contexts among symptomatic groups (Galpin et al. 2017). Within the groups of patients, communities on social media allow them to exchange emotional feedback and mutual social care with each other, further enabling them to receive a sense of identity within groups (Qin et al. 2024). In terms of the ethnic minorities, network support gained from the SMPs compensated for the inadequate support within the ethnic group's social networking. According to Robinson et al. (2019) the African American breastfeeding mothers received most support from their Facebook support group. For the gender minorities, network support appears when they try to address the inequality circumstances on personal blogs and strengthen their voices as a group (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022).

4.3 Motivations

Within this review, more than half of the research discusses the motivations for females' social media usage. Four sub-themes emerged to describe the factors that motivate social support exchange: gaining information (n=21), peer support (n=13), emotional vulnerability (n=10), and

social interaction needs (n=6). This section analyzes how each motivation drives the pursuit of specific support types.

Gaining information is the primary motivation for acquiring informational support, used to seek reliable medical advice (Wilson, Mogan, & Kaur 2020; Maslen & Lupton 2019) or low-cost knowledge for those with limited networks (Hamid et al. 2022; Robinson et al. 2019). The desire for peer support and the need for social interaction both converge on seeking network support. Users seek a “sense of belonging” (Maslen & Lupton 2019), safer private groups shielded from hostility (Li, Xie, & Kim 2024; Potnis & Halladay 2021), and relationship continuity (Davidson et al. 2023; Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022). Finally, emotional vulnerability is a key driver for emotional support, enabling users to connect over shared vulnerable experiences (Andalibi & Forte 2018; Harris, Cleary, & Stanton 2015) and illness (Davidson et al. 2023).

4.4 Barriers

In this review, four sub-themes were identified to explain the barriers to accessing social support, including information overload (n=5), limited access (n=1), negative feedback (n=5), and privacy concerns (n=1). Each barrier was found to inhibit specific types of support.

Barriers are not uniform but are specific inhibitors of support types. Information overload acts as a primary barrier to effective informational support (Galpin et al. 2017), compromising professional judgment (Wheatley 2024) and generating user anxiety (Li & Zhuo 2023). Limited access functions as a structural barrier to network support; for instance, intra-community discrimination can marginalize and block users from the network (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022). Furthermore, the fear of negative feedback is a powerful barrier to emotional and esteem support, especially for sensitive self-disclosures like miscarriage (Mercier et al. 2020). **Privacy and identity concerns** also inhibit emotional and network support, leading to passive “lurking” (Holtz, Smock, & Reyes-Gastelum 2015) or preventing necessary self-disclosure (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022).

5. DISCUSSION

This systematic review’s findings demonstrate that for female users, social support on SMPs is not a passive resource but is actively leveraged as a compensatory mechanism to fill specific informational, social, and psychological deficits present in their offline lives. The analysis moves

beyond a simple transactional view of support to affirm its role as a fundamentally psychosocial process. It is deeply intertwined with identity, motivation, and the management of risk.

The findings reveal a clear, identity-driven distinction in support-seeking behaviours, replacing the common notion that all marginalized women seek support in the same way. For women navigating “female roles,” peer support on SMPs primarily facilitates informational support (Lebron et al. 2020; Robinson et al. 2019) and esteem support (Oviatt & Reich 2019). In sharp contrast, for women navigating illness as “patients,” the focus shifts heavily toward informational support for complex decision-making (Galpin et al. 2017) and, most critically, network support to reduce the profound sense of isolation associated with their diagnosis (Qin et al. 2024). This demonstrates that support-seeking is not a uniform activity but is a highly specified behaviour tailored to the primary psychosocial challenges of the user's identity.

This review also crystallizes the central “visibility dilemma” that female users must navigate, which is formed by the direct tension between their motivations and barriers. The primary motivations for engagement, such as “emotional vulnerability” (Andalibi & Forte 2018) and “social interaction needs” (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022), directly push women toward disclosure. However, these disclosures encounter the primary barriers identified, which are “negative feedback” (Mercier et al. 2020) and “privacy concerns” (Holtz, Smock, and Reyes-Gastelum 2015). This forces users into a constant risk-assessment dilemma that weighs the need for support against the fear of exposure. This often results in passive “lurking” and self-censorship, thereby inhibiting the self-disclosure required to obtain meaningful emotional and network support.

These synthesized findings provide concrete validation for the theoretical frameworks of this field. From a Social Identity Theory perspective, the success of network support for “patients” and “gender minorities” confirms that SMPs function as platforms for constructing a collective identity and reaffirming group narratives, which in turn offers individual empowerment. This aligns with Uses and Gratifications Theory, as the results show users are not passive consumers but are active, goal-directed agents. They seek specific gratifications like “gaining information” to fulfil specific needs, and their success is contingent on their ability to manage both the platform's affordances and the significant social “barriers” this review identified.

The findings also carry direct implications for marketing communication and audience engagement. The “visibility dilemma” presents a significant challenge for community management, requiring brands to balance users' need for disclosure against their “privacy

concerns” and fear of “negative feedback” to build loyalty. Moreover, our finding that support needs differ enables marketers to develop more effective, segmented communication strategies.

6. CONCLUSION

Recent literature on female users' access to social support via SMPs highlights how women employ these tools as compensatory mechanisms to navigate life's challenges and adversity. The four main themes identified in this review capture the dynamic processes of receiving and providing support, while also elucidating the motivating factors and tensions that shape these interactions. The seventeen sub-themes further clarify the interconnections among these primary themes. Overall, findings suggest that vulnerable women selectively engage with SMPs to obtain various forms of social support tailored to their specific life circumstances. To advance understanding of the nuanced behaviors exhibited by female users and the cultural influences on their social media interactions, future research should address these gaps.

6.1 Gaps in the literature

Based on the systematic analysis, this review identified three significant gaps in the extant literature that limit the current understanding of female users' social support on SMPs. First, the scholarly focus is imbalanced and lacks intersectionality; research is heavily concentrated on “female roles” and “patients,” while gender minorities and female refugees were rarely represented. Second, a disjuncture exists between the study of support-seeking and online risk, with a notable lack of research connecting the benefits of digital support with the significant risks of online gender-based violence, leaving the “visibility dilemma” underexplored. Finally, the literature remains technologically fragmented, with few studies offering comparative analysis across platforms to examine how specific architectures, moderation policies, and algorithmic structures distinctively shape the access to and experience of social support.

6.2 Recommendations for further research

To address the identified gaps, this review proposes three main directions for future research. Firstly, it is essential to prioritize marginalized and underrepresented groups by employing intersectional frameworks, as populations like gender minorities face compounded barriers in digital space (Cui, Yamashita, & Lee 2022), yet are rarely represented in current studies. Secondly, more attention must be given to the relationship between digital support-seeking and online gender-based violence, as women's disclosures can expose them to harassment and identity-based

attacks. Misogynistic attacks on social media are linked to femicide (Walby 2023), and its identified triggers (Sauer et al. 2021) overlap with the characteristics of women in this review, underscoring the need for inquiry into digital resilience. Lastly, comparative research across platforms is needed to illuminate how differences in design, moderation policies, and algorithmic structures influence users' ability to access support and navigate visibility.

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