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Position Paper Submission
Intersecting Constructs in an Online Community

My recent ethnographic research examined the interactions of an online breast cancer community with the goal of understanding participants' information behavior, the role of social support in participants' lives, how being part of the community influenced health decisions and practices, and how the community is integrated into participants' everyday lives. In doing this study, I drew from scholarship in multiple domains that intersect information science: health communication, psychology, nursing, medicine, sociology, social support, health literacy, and ethics. Each of these domains provides insights into the many different ways that information is acquired and processed, contributing to my analysis of the community.

Of particular note are several social support constructs that in the social support literature are only tangentially described as having a relationship to information. However, these constructs have important implications as to how information is communicated and understood, and had a major influence on how I understood this online community. Within the domain of social support, discussions often describe various types of social support, such as perceived support, enacted support, instrumental support, emotional support, informational support, and tangible support, centering on the ways that each kind of support affects emotional well-being, physical well-being, and the health of individuals. However, missing in many of these conversations is how the enactments and perceptions of social support are information events that affect the psychological and physical wellbeing of individuals as well as how they perceive their worlds.

Additionally, there was an interwoven quality to the ways that participants exchanged information and social support, suggesting an inextricable connection between the two aspects. Within the context of this community, expressions of social support and information exchange occurred both concurrently and in tandem with each other throughout much of the online conversation. While each had a distinct place and function within the communication that occurred in the community, and they were also each integral to the other, together contributing to the creation and maintenance of the community.