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The Formation Process of Emotional Support in a Digital Community of Single Mothers: An Analysis of Interaction on Instagram @singlemomsindonesia

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Abstract

Digital communities have become important spaces for single mothers to share experiences, gain recognition, and build supportive relationships through social media. However, studies on emotional support in online communities have primarily focused on identifying types of support, with limited attention to how emotional support develops through user interactions. This study aims to analyze the process of emotional support formation within a digital community of single mothers by examining interactions in the comment section of the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia. The study employed a qualitative approach using Qualitative Content Analysis. The data consisted of 60 communication units purposively selected from five posts published between March and May 2026 and analyzed through coding and recoding based on communicative functions. The findings indicate that emotional support develops as a gradual communication process. Interactions begin with the disclosure of personal experiences and vulnerability, followed by validation through shared experiences, and subsequently evolve into emotional support expressed through empathy, prayers, care, and encouragement. In some interactions, this process continues into reciprocal support exchange. These findings suggest that emotional support in digital communities is better understood as a communication process constructed through interconnected comments rather than merely as categories of supportive messages.

Keywords: Emotional Support; Digital Communities; Single Mothers; Instagram; Qualitative Content Analysis.

Introduction

Becoming a single mother is not only a change in family status but also a change in the structure of daily responsibilities. Caregiving, work, household management, decision-making, and emotional needs can converge in a single experience. For some single mothers, this situation also intersects with the loss of a partner, relationship conflict, social stigma, and the demand to appear strong before their children and those around them. Under pressure, social support becomes an important resource because it can provide a sense of being accepted, understood, and not facing problems alone. In a classic account, Cohen & Wills (1985) explain that social support can act as a buffer against the effects of stress. In the context of single mothers, social networks can also become a "village of support" that helps individuals carry out their roles and adapt to the demands of life (Hartwig, 2016).

However, sources of support are no longer limited to family, close friends, or face-to-face relationships. The development of social media has widened the space for encounters with others who have similar experiences. Users can access stories, express their experiences, respond to others, and receive encouragement without being in the same location. Wright et al. (2003) showed that internet-based support groups can bring individuals together through shared experience and enable both empathic and informational support. In later developments, virtual communities have become increasingly important because support can be mediated through comments, replies, emoji, and other forms of digital expression (Bilqis, 2023).

Digital space holds particular meaning for experiences that are not always easy to discuss in everyday relationships. Users can find people they did not previously know who are able to understand a certain situation, not because of geographical proximity, but because of the similar experiences they face. Husna et al. (2023) show that women's online communities can offer empathy, sympathy, motivation, personal experience, and symbolic responses. Hasanah & Helmi (2023) also show that

online support groups can function both as a space for releasing emotions or complaints and as a space for exchanging support. Thus, supportive communication on social media lies not only in the content of a message but also in the possibility of relationships forming between messages.

In the context of single mothers, a number of previous studies show that online communities serve an important function as spaces in which members interact, share experiences, obtain information, and build and receive support. Zhao & Basnyat (2018) show that online spaces can facilitate the exchange of experiences and support among individuals facing similar life situations, enabling a sense of connection and togetherness even though the interaction takes place without meeting in person. Kopacz (2021) shows that a Facebook group for single mothers is not only a space for interaction but also performs several communicative functions, such as building cohesion among members, expressing emotions, requesting support, and giving support to others. These findings indicate that the shared experience of being a single mother can form the basis of togetherness and closeness among users, even if they did not previously know one another or interact in person.

Nevertheless, the term "emotional support" is often used to cover a variety of expressions that have different communicative functions. Statements of feeling tired, sad, disappointed, or unable to cope are essentially expressions of a person's emotional state and cannot necessarily be categorized as giving support to others. Conversely, responses such as "*peluk erat*" ("a tight hug"), "*semangat*" ("stay strong"), "*aku juga pernah merasakan yang sama*" ("I have felt the same"), or expressions of prayer can have a supportive function when they are directed in response to another user's experience. This distinction between expressing emotion and giving support is important in analyzing interaction in online communities, so that the many emotionally toned comments are not automatically interpreted as a high level of emotional support provision.

Self-disclosure can also be the starting point of support in online interaction. Andalibi et al. (2018) show that when someone shares a difficult experience or their vulnerability, other users may be encouraged to recount similar experiences of their own (reciprocal disclosure). This kind of interaction can then open up space for support to emerge. Thus, self-disclosure and emotional support are related to each other but are not the same. Self-disclosure can initiate an interaction, while the responses of other users show whether the interaction develops into validation, encouragement, or a form of reciprocal support.

At the platform level, comment and reply features allow users to respond to experiences shared by others and to form chains of interaction. However, the presence of interaction does not automatically indicate an exchange of support. Lee et al. (2023) show that self-disclosure, support sought, support given through comments, and user engagement are interrelated aspects, yet they can show different patterns in online interaction. From this understanding, the present study considers it important to attend to the position and function of each message within a chain of interaction. Comments are therefore not identified solely by their emotional content, but are also examined for whether they function as an initial disclosure, a supportive response, validation of another user's experience, a response to support received, or support given in return.

In Indonesia, the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia is one of the digital spaces used to convey messages and experiences related to the lives of single mothers. Noviani & Wijayanti (2022) show that Instagram is used by the Single Moms Indonesia community as a medium for conveying messages to its followers, including messages intended to strengthen single mothers. Meanwhile, Darmaningrum (2023) examines the resilience of single mothers in the Single Moms Indonesia community, while Kuswandari & Legystania (2025) highlight social support, empathic communication, and emotional coping in this digital community. These studies show the importance of digital communities in the experiences of single mothers. However, there remains room for a more micro-level examination of how support is formed through chains of interaction among users, particularly by attending to the relationship between comments and replies as part of the process of exchanging support.

This study originated in findings from the initial coding of user comments, which showed that a number of units of analysis carried emotional content. However, after the comment content and the relationships between messages were reread, this category proved to encompass diverse communicative functions, ranging from accounts of experience and disclosures of vulnerability to validation through similar experience, encouragement, prayer, the use of affective symbols, and support given in return. This diversity raised an analytical problem concerning the boundary between emotional expression and emotional support: whether every emotionally toned expression can be categorized as emotional support, and under what conditions a chain of interaction can be understood as a process of support exchange. The problem matters because previous studies have shown the role of digital communities in

the experiences of single mothers, including as spaces for conveying messages, building resilience, and obtaining social support and emotional coping. However, there remains room to understand at a more micro level how emotional support is formed through relationships between messages within chains of user interaction. The research gap lies in the need to distinguish between messages that merely contain emotional expression and messages that perform a supportive function toward other users. Emotional support is thus understood not only through the presence of emotionally toned words or symbols, but also through the position and function of a message in the context of interaction.

Building on this gap, the present study does not merely identify or count categories of support, but traces how emotional support is formed through the relationship between comments and replies. The analysis focuses on interaction processes that can move from the disclosure of experience or vulnerability toward responses from other users in the form of validation, encouragement, empathy, or other forms of support, as well as the possible emergence of follow-up responses or support given in return. This approach allows emotional support to be understood as a communicative process that develops through relationships between messages, rather than as a category inherent in an isolated comment. Accordingly, this study aims to analyze how emotional support is formed through interaction among users on the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia. The research question is: how is emotional support formed through the relationship between disclosure of vulnerability, shared experience, supportive responses, and replies among users on the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia?

The contribution of this study lies in its effort to understand emotional support as an interactional process formed through relationships between messages. From this perspective, the study not only identifies the presence of emotional support in comments, but also traces how a disclosure receives a response, how shared experience can perform a validating function, and how responses among users can develop into chains of support exchange.

Methods

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand how emotional support is formed through user interaction in the comment section of the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia. A qualitative approach was chosen because the study does not aim to test relationships between variables, measure influence, or produce statistical generalizations, but rather to explore and interpret the meanings that emerge from communication practices in a particular social context. Creswell (2009) explains that qualitative research is used to explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The qualitative research process is interpretive, and analysis develops from particular data toward broader patterns or themes.

This choice of approach suits the character of the research data, which consist of comment and reply texts. The data are not treated as numbers representing all Instagram users, but as communication data that allow the researchers to read how experiences are disclosed, how users respond to the experiences of others, and how emotional support acquires meaning through the context of interaction. In line with Creswell (2009), qualitative research pays attention to the complexity of meaning and context. The frequency of categories in this study is therefore used only as descriptive information to help explain the composition of the data analyzed, not as a basis for statistical testing.

More specifically, this study uses qualitative content analysis. This method was chosen because the research data are in the form of text containing personal experiences, emotional expressions, responses, and relationships between messages. Qualitative content analysis allows the researchers to organize the data systematically while interpreting meaning on the basis of the context in which messages appear. Elo et al. (2014) emphasize that qualitative content analysis requires a transparent process from data preparation and organization of the analysis through to reporting of results. In social media research, the analysis of user-generated content also needs to be adapted to the research objectives and the character of the available data (Fu et al., 2023). For this reason, the analysis in this study does not stop at particular words, but attends to the direction of messages, the position of comments, the relationship of comments to replies, and the communicative functions performed.

Research Context and Data Sources

The digital research site is the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia. The data come from comments and replies on posts published between March and May 2026. This time frame was used to delimit the scope of observation and to help the researchers select data in a focused manner. The main

data source is public interaction in the comment section. The study did not use interviews and does not claim to know the psychological condition of users behind their comments. Interpretation is therefore limited to the communicative functions that can be read from the text and the available context of interaction.

Data Selection and Sampling Procedure

Data were collected in stages using criterion-based purposive sampling. This technique was chosen because the study does not seek a statistically representative sample of all comments, but rather data that are information-rich and relevant to the research objectives. Purposeful sampling in qualitative research is used to select cases that are directly related to the phenomenon under study and have the potential to provide in-depth information (Palinkas et al., 2015). Campbell et al. (2020) also explain that purposive sampling emphasizes the fit between case selection and research objectives, so that data selection decisions must be explained transparently.

The first stage involved identifying posts on the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia from March to May 2026. At this stage, the researchers attended to posts with relatively high comment activity, because a large number of comments indicates the availability of richer interaction to trace. However, the number of comments was not used as the sole basis for selection. After identifying relatively active posts, the researchers read their content and assessed their relevance to the life experiences of single mothers.

Through this process, five posts were selected on the basis of two main considerations: (1) relatively high comment activity compared with other posts observed during the research period; and (2) themes relevant to the experiences of single mothers. The themes of the selected posts relate to caregiving, loss of a partner, social stigma toward single mothers, self-strengthening, and the experience of carrying out dual roles. The selection of posts thus combined considerations of interaction intensity and thematic relevance, rather than relying solely on the number of comments.

After the five posts were determined, the researchers examined the comments and replies on each post. Comments were selected if they were relevant to the research focus, that is, if they contained personal experience, disclosure of vulnerability, responses to other users' experiences, validation, encouragement, prayer, empathy, or other forms of interaction related to the formation of emotional support. Comments consisting of spam, promotion, duplication, or lacking a relevant analytical context were excluded from the research data.

The selection process yielded 60 communication units consisting of main comments and replies that met the research criteria and had a traceable context of interaction. These sixty units are the final result of the purposive selection from the five chosen posts. The number was thus not determined in advance, but was obtained after all selection criteria had been applied. All units were selected on the basis of their relevance to the research focus and their capacity to provide information on how emotional support is formed through user interaction. Data sufficiency in this study was determined by the relevance and depth of the information obtained to meet the research objectives, in accordance with the principles of purposive sampling in qualitative research (Palinkas et al., 2015; Campbell et al., 2020).

Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study is the message contained in main comments and replies on the five selected posts. Determining the unit of analysis is an important part of content analysis because it establishes which portion of the data is treated as a unit for coding and interpretation (Krippendorff, 2022). In this study, each comment or reply was treated as one data unit if it had identifiable content and communicative function. However, the meaning of each unit was not interpreted apart from its context of interaction. For comments that were replies, the researchers traced the preceding comment to understand to whom the message was directed and what communicative function was formed within the chain of interaction.

Establishing comments and replies as the unit of analysis allows the study to distinguish several communicative functions that may all contain emotional content at the textual level. Comments that primarily recount a user's experience, sadness, loss, or exhaustion are understood as disclosure of experience or vulnerability, whereas comments directed at offering empathy, encouragement, care, prayer, or affection to other users are understood as provision of emotional support. Meanwhile, responses that acknowledge or show similarity with another user's experience can function as validation or emotional solidarity. This grouping was carried out systematically by considering the content and

context of the data, as qualitative content analysis emphasizes transparent organization and interpretation of data (Elo et al., 2014).

The context of interaction was an important consideration in determining the function of each message. Coding was therefore not based solely on the presence of particular words, phrases, or symbols. A brief expression such as "*sama banget*" ("exactly the same"), for example, can function as emotional validation when it is given in response to another user's disclosure of experience. Likewise, prayers, emoji, or the expression "*semangat*" ("stay strong") were analyzed according to the direction of the message and the context of the conversation. The unit of analysis was thus set at the message level, while the context of interaction served as the basis for interpreting the communicative function of the message.

Data Analysis and Coding Procedure

The analysis proceeded through several stages. The first stage was data familiarization, involving repeated reading of all 60 units while attending to the context of the post and the relationship between comments and replies where available. This stage was carried out so that the researchers would gain an overall understanding before assigning analytical labels. In line with Creswell (2009), qualitative analysis involves organizing data, reading all the data, coding, developing categories or themes, and interpreting the meanings found.

At the initial stage, the data were grouped using social support categories. However, rereading showed that the "emotional" category was still too broad because it mixed personal expressions of emotion with acts of giving support to others. For example, comments containing sadness, exhaustion, or stories of loss do carry emotional content, but they do not automatically constitute the provision of emotional support. When the focus of a message is on recounting one's own condition, the comment is better understood as disclosure of experience or vulnerability. Emotional support, by contrast, is oriented toward others, for example through empathy, encouragement, care, prayer, or expressions of symbolic closeness.

On the basis of this evaluation, recoding was carried out to clarify the communicative function of each unit. Each comment was reread with three analytical questions in mind: (1) what the user is doing through the message; (2) to whom the message is directed; and (3) what position the message occupies in the chain of interaction. This process helped the researchers distinguish emotionally toned content from communicative acts that actually perform a supportive function.

The recoding results divided the data into disclosure of experience or vulnerability, provision of emotional support, validation or emotional solidarity, reciprocal support, and units outside the focus of emotional support. These categories were used as analytical tools, not as quantitative variables. After recoding, units with similar functions were compared to identify patterns. These patterns were then developed into analytical themes explaining how emotional support is formed through the relationship between disclosure of experience, response, validation, encouragement, and, in certain interactions, support given in return.

Representative quotations were selected to show how each pattern appears in users' language. The selection of quotations was not based on dramatizing experience, but on their capacity to show the analytical character of the category being discussed. The final stage was interpretation, connecting the empirical findings with the concept of online social support and previous research. In this way, the analysis does not stop at the number of categories but explains the communication process that forms the meaning of emotional support.

Trustworthiness and Researcher Reflexivity

Trustworthiness of the analysis was maintained through repeated reading, re-examination of the relationship between comments and the context of replies, and review of the initial coding results. This process was carried out because the initial "emotional support" category still encompassed several different communicative functions. Through recoding, each data unit was reread on the basis of its content, the direction of the message, and the context of interaction, so that disclosure of experience or vulnerability could be distinguished from provision of emotional support, validation or emotional solidarity, reciprocal support, and messages outside the research focus. Elo et al. (2014) emphasize the importance of transparency in the analysis and reporting process for enhancing trustworthiness in qualitative content analysis. In this study, transparency was achieved by explaining the changes in coding logic and presenting relevant data excerpts so that the relationship between data and interpretation can be traced.

The researchers also recognize that qualitative analysis is interpretive. Interpretation was therefore limited to the communicative functions that can be read from the text and the context of interaction. The study does not claim to know the psychological state of users behind their comments. When a comment is judged to be emotional support, this judgment refers to the orientation and function of the message in the interaction, not to an assumption about the psychological effect actually experienced by the recipient.

Ethical Considerations

The research data come from comments available in a public digital space. Nevertheless, public accessibility does not remove the researchers' ethical responsibility, especially since some comments contain personal and sensitive experiences. User identities are not displayed in this article; account names, profile photos, and information that could lead to the identification of individuals have been removed. Quotations are presented only to the extent necessary to support the analysis and are not used to make diagnoses or to draw conclusions about users' psychological conditions.

Ethical considerations were also applied in reporting the results. The findings are limited to the communication practices visible in the 60 selected data units and are not generalized as a picture of all single mothers or all followers of the @singlemomsindonesia account. The study thus discusses how emotional support is communicated in digital interaction, rather than measuring the psychological effects of support on users.

Results and Discussion

The analysis shows that emotional support in the comment section of the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia is not formed as a single, self-contained type of message. After recoding the 60 data units, it was found that comments initially grouped in the emotional category had different communicative functions. Some comments served to disclose personal experiences and vulnerability, others showed validation through similar experience, and others directly gave emotional support to other users. In addition, interactions showing reciprocal support were also found, although their number was relatively limited.

These findings show that emotional content in a comment is not always identical to the act of giving support. Rather, emotional support develops through relationships between comments that form a chain of communication. Users first share a personal experience, then receive a response acknowledging that experience, receive emotional encouragement, and in some interactions give support back to other users. The results of this study therefore not only describe the types of messages that appear in the comment section, but also explain how emotional support is built through a process of interaction within a digital community.

To give an overview of how the data were organized after recoding, each communication unit was grouped according to its communicative function, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Grouping of Communication Units by Communicative Function

Communicative Function	Number of Units	Analytical Meaning
Disclosure of experience/vulnerability	19	Opens a space for interaction
Validation/emotional solidarity	16	Acknowledges and affirms other users' experiences
Provision of emotional support	13	Offers empathy, care, prayer, and encouragement
Reciprocal support	1	Shows an explicit exchange of support
Outside the focus	11	Not analyzed further

Source: Researchers' analysis (2026).

It should be emphasized that Table 1 is not intended to show the statistical dominance of any category, but rather the result of organizing the data after recoding. In keeping with a qualitative content analysis approach, the number of units is used only to help describe patterns in the data, while the main focus of the study lies in interpreting the communicative functions that form emotional support in user interaction (Elo et al., 2014). On the basis of the recoding results, this study identified four main stages that explain the formation of emotional support in a digital community of single mothers: (1) disclosure of experience and vulnerability, (2) validation through shared experience, (3) provision of emotional support, and (4) reciprocal exchange of support.

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Disclosure of Experience and Vulnerability as the Starting Point of Emotional Support

The recoding results show that the earliest communication pattern appearing in user interaction on the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia is the disclosure of experience and vulnerability. This pattern is marked by comments about losing a partner, the difficulty of raising children alone, emotional pressure, and the burden of carrying out dual roles as both mother and breadwinner. Unlike the provision of emotional support, comments at this stage are not yet directed at strengthening other users, but function as a space for users to convey the personal experiences they have been living through. One form of such disclosure can be seen in the following comment.

"Anak saya 5 dan 4 tahun… sering nanya ayahnya. Gk kuat 😢" ("My children are 5 and 4 years old… they often ask about their father. I can't bear it" 😢)

This comment shows that losing a partner is not only related to personal grief but also brings new challenges in raising children. The phrase "*sering nanya ayahnya*" ("they often ask about their father") indicates that an emotional burden arises when a mother has to explain the father's absence to her child. In this context, the main focus of the comment is not on giving support to other users but on conveying an experience that continues to cause emotional distress. The comment is therefore better understood as disclosure of vulnerability than as a form of emotional support.

A similar pattern appears in another comment.

"Anakku yg kecil belum pernah ketemu ayahnya..." ("My youngest has never met their father…")

This comment likewise contains no explicit request for help or invitation to discuss. However, in a brief sentence, the user conveys an experience of loss that affects her family life. The information that the child has never known the father provides a strong emotional context while opening a space for other users to understand the situation the writer is facing. In this study, such comments are understood as a form of self-disclosure, namely the act of sharing personal experience with the community as part of the process of building social relationships in digital space.

Interestingly, not every disclosure of experience ends as a personal story. In some comments, users begin to connect their own experience with other members of the community.

"Hidup rasanya berat setelah suamiku meninggal… peluk untuk semua ibu hebat." ("Life feels hard since my husband died… a hug for all the amazing mothers.")

This comment shows two communicative functions present at once. The first part is a disclosure of the experience of loss, while the phrase "*peluk untuk semua ibu hebat*" ("a hug for all the amazing mothers") begins to move toward an expression of empathy for other community members. Nevertheless, during recoding, this comment remained in the disclosure category because the main orientation of the message still centers on the writer's own experience. The presence of an element of empathy shows that the boundary between disclosure of experience and emotional support is not always clear-cut. In some cases, personal experience actually serves as an initial bridge to the emergence of care for other users.

Besides the experience of losing a partner, the vulnerability disclosed by users also relates to experiences of facing social stigma.

"keluarga yg ngata2in… jadi apapun julukan…" ("family members who insult you… you get called all sorts of names…")

This comment shows that the pressure experienced by single mothers comes not only from changes in family circumstances but also from their immediate social environment. The experience of receiving negative judgment from family shows that vulnerability in this community has a social dimension and is not merely psychological. By sharing this experience in the comment section, the user gains an opportunity to receive acknowledgment from community members who may have experienced similar situations. This shows that the digital community functions as an alternative space when support from the immediate environment has not been fully obtained.

The vulnerability disclosed by users also relates to changes in roles after losing a partner.

"13 tahun jadi ibu sekaligus bapak…" ("13 years of being both mother and father…")

and

"berat krna harus meninggalkan anak…" ("it's hard because I have to leave my child…")

Both comments show that the experience of being a single mother does not end with the event of losing a partner, but continues in changed responsibilities in everyday life. Users recount how they have to carry out caregiving while also being breadwinners, and even face dilemmas when work requires

them to leave their children. This finding shows that the vulnerability appearing in the community is not only an expression of sadness, but also relates to the experience of carrying out dual roles that continue in everyday life.

When these six quotations are read together, it can be seen that the disclosure of experience in this digital community follows a relatively consistent pattern. Users do not merely recount the loss of a partner, but also share changes in roles, economic pressure, caregiving challenges, and the social stigma they experience. The experiences disclosed thus do not stand as individual stories, but form a collective narrative about the lives of single mothers. It is this collective narrative that then becomes the foundation for other community members to recognize shared experiences and respond accordingly.

This finding is in line with the study by Andalibi et al. (2018), which explains that the disclosure of personal experience on social media can be an initial mechanism for forming social support because it opens opportunities for other users to offer acknowledgment, empathy, or emotional help. From the perspective of social support, Cohen & Wills (1985) also emphasize that support can only be given once the condition of the individual under stress is known to others. Self-disclosure therefore has a very important function because it provides the context that makes supportive responses possible.

Nevertheless, this study places a somewhat different emphasis from previous research. The recoding results show that emotional content is not always identical to emotional support. At the initial coding stage, most sad-toned comments were grouped under the category of emotional support. After the comments were reread with attention to content, direction of message, and context of interaction, it became clear that most of them did not yet perform a supportive function. The comments functioned more as disclosures of the self, which then opened the possibility of validation or support from other community members. This finding shows the importance of distinguishing emotional expression from the act of giving support, so that analysis does not stop at identifying emotional words but is able to explain the communicative function performed by each message.

Thus, this study shows that the disclosure of experience and vulnerability is the foundation of emotional support formation in a digital community of single mothers. Before validation, empathy, or encouragement appears, users first share experiences that show their condition. These experiences become the starting point connecting individuals with other community members, so that emotional support develops as a communication process and not merely as a category of comment.

Validation through Shared Experience as Emotional Solidarity

After users disclose their experiences and vulnerability, the next communication pattern to appear most frequently is validation through shared experience. The recoding results show that many of the responses given by community members do not immediately take the form of advice or solutions, but rather an acknowledgment that they have been through the same situation. This pattern shows that emotional support in a digital community of single mothers is built through a process of mutually recognizing experiences before users offer encouragement to one another.

This form of validation can be seen in the following comment.

"Ya Allah mbak sama bgt…" ("Oh God, sister, exactly the same…")

This comment is a response to an experience of loss previously shared by another user. Although it consists of only a few words, the expression "*sama banget*" ("exactly the same") has an important communicative function because it shows that the experience conveyed is not faced alone. In this context, the user is not trying to offer a solution, but is conveying that she understands the situation because she has had a similar experience. This comment is therefore categorized as **emotional validation**, that is, acknowledgment of another user's experience through shared experience.

The same pattern also appears in the following comment.

"keluarga sy jg ada yg seperti itu…" ("there are people like that in my family too…")

Unlike the previous comment, which merely states a similarity of experience, this comment gives a little context about the writer's own experience. Its communicative function, however, remains the same, namely to show that facing stigma from family is not a unique experience. The user seeks to show that she has also been through this situation, so that the writer of the initial comment need not feel she is facing the problem alone.

Validation also appears in the form of agreement with another user's experience.

"Bener sekali moms…" ("So true, moms…")

At first glance, this comment appears simple and offers no new information. In the context of the conversation, however, the expression functions as an acknowledgment that the experience conveyed

earlier is regarded as true and understandable by other community members. Validation is thus not always realized through long stories, but can appear in brief forms of communication that affirm the reality of another user's experience.

A similar pattern was again found in the following comments.

"Ya Allah kita sama…" ("Oh God, we are the same…")

and

"aku jg single mom… berat bgt ya…" ("I'm a single mom too… it's really hard, isn't it…")

Both comments show that personal experience is used as a basis for building closeness with other users. Interestingly, the focus of the comments is no longer solely on the writer's own experience, but on the relationship between personal experience and that of other users. By saying "*kita sama*" ("we are the same"), a user is building a shared identity as someone facing a similar life situation. It is this shared identity that then strengthens the sense of belonging to the community.

The results show that validation through shared experience appears more often than direct advice. During the analysis, very few comments were found that contained instructions on what a single mother should do. Instead, community members more often chose to acknowledge the experiences of other users through expressions such as "*aku juga*" ("me too"), "*kita sama*" ("we are the same"), or "*saya pernah mengalami hal seperti itu*" ("I have been through something like that"). This finding shows that relationships among community members are built on shared experience, not on a position as someone who knows more or is more experienced.

This phenomenon shows a distinctive communicative character of this digital community of single mothers. The experiences of losing a partner, raising children alone, and facing social stigma become collective experiences that allow community members to understand one another without lengthy explanation. Shared experience functions as a source of emotional legitimacy. When a user says she has been through the same thing, other users gain the assurance that what they feel is something others can understand.

This finding supports the study by Zhao & Basnyat (2018), which explains that online communities allow individuals to build interpersonal relationships through similar life experiences. In such communities, social support is not always realized by providing solutions, but also through the acknowledgment that a person's experience is understood by other community members. This acknowledgment can reduce feelings of isolation because users realize that they are not facing the situation alone.

The results of this study are also in line with Kopacz (2021), who shows that online communities for single mothers perform an important function in building a sense of belonging. Through the exchange of experiences, community members not only obtain information but also build solidarity born of similar life conditions. In this study, such solidarity appears through the use of simple words such as "*aku juga*" ("me too"), "*kita sama*" ("we are the same"), and "*bener sekali*" ("so true"). Although brief, these expressions have a strong relational function because they show that a user's experience has received acknowledgment from other community members.

Notably, the results of this study show that validation cannot be equated with emotional support, even though the two are related. Validation functions to acknowledge and affirm another user's experience, whereas emotional support aims to give encouragement, care, or hope to another user. This difference became clear after recoding. At the initial coding stage, almost all comments containing empathy were placed in the emotional support category. However, after the context of interaction was analyzed more deeply, it became apparent that some comments only showed a similarity of experience without directly offering encouragement. This study therefore separates validation as a communicative function in its own right.

This finding is one of the important contributions of this study. Unlike previous research, which generally groups all empathic comments as a form of emotional support, this study shows that validation through shared experience is a communication stage that precedes the emergence of emotional support. Before users offer prayers, encouragement, or care to others, they first build closeness by acknowledging that they have been through the same experience. Emotional solidarity in this digital community of single mothers is thus formed not because users always provide solutions, but because they assure one another that no community member faces such an experience alone.

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Provision of Emotional Support as a Form of Affection in Digital Interaction

After users receive validation through shared experience, the next stage to appear in the interaction is the **provision of emotional support**. The recoding results show that emotional support is realized through various forms of communication, such as expressions of empathy, prayer, encouragement, care, and symbolic affection. Unlike validation, which functions to acknowledge another user's experience, messages at this stage have a clearer orientation toward strengthening, calming, or giving hope to the recipient. The main function of the comment is thus no longer limited to showing that an experience is understood, but seeks to give a sense of being supported to a user facing a difficult situation.

One form of emotional support can be seen in the following comment.

"Peluk erat buatmu…" ("A tight hug for you…")

This expression offers neither a solution nor practical advice. However, the word "*peluk*" ("hug") has a strong affective meaning because it represents emotional closeness and care for another user. In face-to-face interaction, a hug is often understood as a form of nonverbal support when someone is grieving. In digital space, this act cannot be performed directly and is therefore realized through language. The phrase "*peluk erat buatmu*" ("a tight hug for you") can thus be understood as a form of **digital affection**, that is, the use of symbols and language to create a sense of emotional closeness even though communication takes place online.

The same pattern also appears in the following comment.

"Peluk." ("A hug.")

Although it consists of only one word, this comment still performs a communicative function as emotional support because it is given in response to a user disclosing an experience of loss. This shows that the length of a message is not the main factor in identifying emotional support. Rather, the meaning of a message is formed by the relationship between the content of the comment and the context of interaction behind it.

Besides affective expressions, emotional support is also realized through prayer.

"Aamiin… Allah lindungi dirimu…" ("Amen… may God protect you…")

This comment shows that communication practices in this digital community of single mothers draw not only on everyday language but also on religious expression as a form of care for other users. The prayer offered is not intended to resolve the problem being faced, but shows concern as well as the hope that the user will gain strength to face the situation. In the context of Indonesian society, with its strong religious background, prayer becomes a form of emotional support with both interpersonal and spiritual meaning.

Another form of support can be seen in the following comment.

"Jangan baper… semua punya cerita." ("Don't take it to heart… everyone has their own story.")

This comment shows an effort to give psychological encouragement to another user so that she does not become absorbed in the pressure she is experiencing. Unlike validation, which affirms a similarity of experience, this comment directly addresses the recipient's emotional condition with the aim of helping her see the situation more positively. This comment is therefore categorized as provision of emotional support because its main orientation is to give encouragement to another person.

Encouragement also appears in the following comments.

"Ibu hebat… sukses ya nak." ("Amazing mother… wishing you success, child.")

and

"Keep trying ❤️."

Both comments show that emotional support takes the form not only of empathy for sadness but also of good wishes and encouragement for users to keep going through the challenges of their lives. Interestingly, some comments use a heart emoji to complement the message. In this study, emoji are not automatically categorized as emotional support. Emoji are understood as part of support only if they are used in the context of a response to another user's experience. The meaning of support is thus determined not by the symbol used, but by the communicative function performed in the interaction.

These findings show that the language of emotional support in this digital community of single mothers has distinctive characteristics. Unlike face-to-face communication, which allows hugs, touch, or facial expressions as forms of affection, interaction on Instagram relies on words, prayers, and digital symbols to convey care. Affection in this digital community is therefore realized more through linguistic

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representation than through physical contact. This shows that digital media do not remove individuals' ability to give emotional support, but change the way such support is communicated.

The findings of this study are in line with Husna et al. (2023), who explain that online communities become spaces in which members support one another through empathy, motivation, care, and personal experience. Similarly, Hasanah & Helmi (2023) show that interaction in digital communities functions as a medium for releasing emotions as well as a place for exchanging social support. However, this study provides a more detailed explanation of how such support is realized in everyday communication practice. The results show that prayers, words of encouragement, affective forms of address such as "*Bunda hebat*" ("amazing mother"), and digital symbols are forms of communication consistently used to convey emotional support to fellow community members.

Notably, the recoding results show that emotional support emerged only after users had first received validation through shared experience. In other words, support is not given separately from the preceding communication process, but develops after an emotional relationship has begun to form through the acknowledgment of a shared experience. This finding shows that emotional support in a digital community is part of a gradual communication process, not merely a collection of comments containing positive words.

Thus, this study shows that the provision of emotional support in a digital community of single mothers not only provides comfort to individuals facing difficulties but also strengthens social ties among users through the language of affection that develops in digital space. These findings show that care, empathy, prayer, and encouragement are the main sources of emotional support that allow community members to feel heard, understood, and not alone in facing their experiences.

Synthesis of Findings: The Formation Process of Emotional Support in a Digital Community

The results show that emotional support in the Instagram community @singlemomsindonesia cannot be understood solely through the content of an individual comment. Analysis of the interactions as a whole shows that emotional support develops through interconnected relationships between comments. The meaning of support is thus determined not only by what users write, but also by the position of a comment within the chain of conversation taking place in the community.

This finding can be seen in the interaction patterns that recurred during the analysis. Interactions generally begin with a user disclosing personal experiences of losing a partner, difficulties in raising children, economic pressure, or facing stigma as a single mother. This disclosure then receives responses from other community members in the form of acknowledgment of a similar experience. After a user feels that her experience is understood, the interaction develops into the provision of emotional support through expressions of empathy, prayer, care, or psychological encouragement. Emotional support thus does not arise spontaneously, but develops through interconnected stages of communication.

This pattern shows that the function of each comment cannot be understood apart from the context of interaction. For example, expressions such as "*Peluk erat buatmu*" ("A tight hug for you") or "*Semangat ya, Bunda*" ("Stay strong, mother") acquire meaning as emotional support because they appear in response to an experience previously disclosed by another user. Conversely, if such expressions stood alone without context, their communicative meaning could not be fully understood. This finding shows that the analysis of comments on social media needs to consider relationships between messages, not only the content of each comment individually.

Interestingly, this study also found that not every chain of communication ends in an exchange of support. Most interactions stop after a user receives validation or emotional support from other community members. Follow-up responses from the recipient of support to the giver were found in only a small number of interactions. One example can be seen in the following conversation.

User A: *"Sehat-sehat yaa* ❤️❤️*"* ("Stay healthy" ❤️❤️)

User B: *"Aamiin… doa yang sama yaa* 🤲*"* ("Amen… the same prayer for you" 🤲)

This chain of comments shows that the recipient of support not only receives the care given by another community member but also returns the prayer to the giver of support. The shift in position from recipient to giver of support shows that the relationships built in the community are dynamic. Although this pattern was not found often, its presence shows that communication in a digital community allows mutually strengthening relationships to form, rather than merely one-way relationships between giver and recipient of support.

This finding offers a different perspective from previous studies of social support on social media. Most earlier studies identify support on the basis of the type of message given, such as emotional,

informational, instrumental, or esteem support. This approach helps explain the forms of support that appear in a community. However, the results of this study show that understanding message types alone is not enough to explain how support is formed. The relationships between comments, the direction of communication, and the context of conversation play an equally important role in building the meaning of emotional support.

This finding also extends the results of Andalibi et al. (2018), who emphasize the importance of self-disclosure in building social support in digital media. This study shows that disclosure of experience is indeed the initial stage, but emotional support is formed only after other users give validation to that experience. Validation thus functions as a bridge connecting the disclosure of experience with the emergence of emotional support. This process has received little discussion in previous research, which has focused more on identifying types of support.

From the perspective of computer-mediated communication, this finding shows that emotional closeness does not depend on physical presence, but is built through interaction that takes place in stages. Language, prayer, expressions of empathy, and digital symbols are the main means by which community members create a sense of closeness and care for fellow users. In other words, digital technology does not diminish individuals' ability to build interpersonal relationships, but offers new forms of communication that allow emotional support to form even when interaction takes place online.

On the basis of the overall analysis, this study shows that emotional support in a digital community of single mothers is formed through a chain of communication that unfolds in stages. The process begins with the disclosure of experience and vulnerability, is followed by validation through shared experience, develops into the provision of emotional support in the form of empathy, prayer, care, and encouragement, and in a small number of interactions continues into an exchange of support. Emotional support in the @singlemomsindonesia community thus does not appear as a characteristic inherent in a single comment, but is the result of relationships between comments that form a supportive communication process in digital space.

Conclusion

This study shows that emotional support in the Instagram community @singlemomsindonesia is not formed as a characteristic inherent in a single comment, but develops through a communication process that unfolds in stages. The process begins with the disclosure of experience and vulnerability, as community members share experiences of losing a partner, caregiving challenges, dual roles, and social stigma. This disclosure then receives validation through shared experience from other community members before developing into the provision of emotional support in the form of empathy, prayer, care, and encouragement. In a small number of interactions, the process continues into an exchange of support when the recipient responds in turn to the giver of support.

These findings show that emotional support in a digital community is better understood as a communication process than merely as a category of message. Analysis of the relationships between comments shows that the meaning of support is determined not only by the content of individual comments, but also by the context of interaction that shapes relationships among community members. This study thus extends the study of social support in digital communication by showing that the formation of emotional support takes place through interconnected communication stages, namely disclosure of experience, validation, provision of support, and, under certain conditions, an exchange of support.

Theoretically, this study contributes to the development of digital communication and social support studies by emphasizing the importance of understanding the communicative function of each message in the context of interaction, rather than merely identifying types of support on the basis of comment content. This approach shows that analyzing relationships between comments provides a fuller understanding of how digital communities build supportive relationships among their members.

Practically, the results of this study show that digital communities such as @singlemomsindonesia play an important role as communication spaces that allow single mothers to obtain acknowledgment, a sense of being understood, and emotional support from others with similar experiences. Community managers and organizations that assist single mothers can therefore use digital spaces as a medium for strengthening supportive interaction and encouraging a safe communication environment for their members.

This study has several limitations. The analysis was conducted on only 60 communication units from five posts on the Instagram account @singlemomsindonesia, so the findings are not intended to be generalized to all interactions in the community or to other social media platforms. In addition, this study focuses only on emotional support and does not yet address other forms of social support, such as informational, instrumental, or esteem support. Future research is therefore recommended to involve more diverse data, compare several social media platforms, or combine content analysis with interviews with community members so that the process of social support formation can be understood more comprehensively.

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