

A Socio-cultural Model Examining the Co-construction of Online Social Support

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Abstract

This paper proposes a novel model, based on a socio-cultural perspective, to examine the social support process online. A common underlying principle behind the current conceptualisations of social support is that it is a particular thing given by one person to another. Conceptualising social support as a thing undermines the complex process of social support. Viewing social support as a co-constructing activity, this paper brings together three relevant theories - Community of Practice, Discourse Community and Affinity Space - into a unified theoretical framework. This paper argues that for a comprehensive examination of the online social support process, three elements - the discursive construction of desired identities to fit into the community or to gain access to community space, the discursive practices in the co-construction of social support, and the impact of social support on self-development - need to be scrutinised across Community of Practice, Discourse Community and Affinity Space.

Keywords: affinity space, community of practice, co-construction, discourse community, social support, Facebook, repairing meaning, meaning-making

1. Social Support as a Co-constructing Activity

Social support is a concept that emerges in studies related to various aspects of well-being, including occupational stress and mental health (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Zulkarnain & Jan, 2019; Bavik et al., 2020). Despite being an extensively researched concept, there is little agreement on a single operational or theoretical definition (Williams et al., 2004; Asghar et al., 2021; Huang et al., 2024). Cohen and McKay (1984) introduced the idea that social support is a buffer against stress, particularly in work-related environments, providing emotional and instrumental resources to help individuals cope (Rashid et al., 2024). However, conceptualising social support merely as a resource that one person gives another—whether material or emotional—oversimplifies the complexity of how support works. Viewing social support as a co-constructed activity allows for a more nuanced understanding, emphasising its dynamic nature as something negotiated between individuals.

The idea of co-construction, introduced by Taylor et al. (1998), shifts the focus from social support as a 'thing' to be exchanged to support as a collaborative process. Co-construction views support as an ongoing negotiation of meaning between individuals working together to cope with a shared experience. In this sense, support is not simply given or received but co-created in a discursive interaction, where each person contributes to creating meaning surrounding a particular event. Jacoby and Ochs (1995) defined co-construction as the joint creation of meaning through interaction, which covers a range of activities from collaboration to the creation of shared stances, actions, or identities. This perspective aligns well with the socio-cultural approach, which views human activity, including social support, as mediated by language and other semiotic tools (Vygotsky, 1981).

Taylor et al. (1998) explore social support as a co-constructed process, focusing on how shared meaning is negotiated through discourse. In their view, social support is achieved through the back-and-forth exchange of gestures, talk, and other communicative actions that individuals use to construct satisfying social relations. This framing is consistent with

a socio-cultural view, where meaning-making is not an individual act, but an interpersonal process mediated by semiotic resources (Gee & Hayes, 2011). In this framework, a person does not simply "give" or "receive" support; instead, they collaborate actively with others to construct shared understandings of their challenges (Taylor et al., 1998). This social interaction helps individuals reframe their perceptions of challenging experiences, such as work stress or personal crises.

Botschner (2000) extended this perspective by focusing on the levels of directness individuals use to initiate support. His analysis of face-to-face supportive conversations revealed various strategies people employ to seek help, from indirect disclosures of distress to more direct requests. His findings are particularly relevant for understanding online social support, where people often seek help through subtler cues, such as status updates or comments, without explicitly asking for assistance. Botschner's analysis provides insight into individuals' discourse strategies to navigate social relationships and manage how they ask for support.

Taylor et al. (1998) and Botschner (2000) offer complementary perspectives. Taylor et al. (1998) provide a broad theoretical framework for understanding support as a co-constructed, discursive process, while Botschner highlights the practical conversational tactics people use to engage in supportive interactions. These insights are crucial for analysing how social support works online, where communication is largely text-based and interactions are often asynchronous. More recent studies in online spaces (e.g. Jolly et al., 2021; Yan-Li et al., 2022; Warran & Wright, 2023) emphasise that co-construction remains vital to understanding how individuals create and sustain social ties digitally, as online platforms become the primary medium for interaction.

Conceptualising social support as a co-constructed activity underscores its dynamic, collaborative nature. Rather than seeing support as a one-directional exchange, it can be viewed as an evolving meaning-making process between individuals. The combination of Taylor et al.'s (1998) socio-cultural framework and Botschner's (2000) micro-level analysis provides a comprehensive model for understanding how people build and maintain social support systems through discourse. Recent studies continue to affirm that this approach is especially relevant for digital contexts, where social ties and support are mediated by online communication (e.g. Jolly et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2024).

2. Community of Practice

The concept of Community of Practice (CoP) introduced by Lave and Wenger (1991) emphasises the social nature of learning. It suggests that learning does not solely occur within the individual but is rooted in a community's social interactions and shared practices. The central process within CoP is *legitimate peripheral participation* (LPP), where newcomers gradually acquire knowledge and skills by engaging with established community members. Over time, these newcomers evolve into full participants, transforming their identities and the community's shared practices (Wenger, 1998).

While the original CoP framework was groundbreaking, it has been challenged and expanded by recent studies. Rashid (2016a; 2016b; 2018) noted that in online environments, the roles of newcomers and old-timers often reverse, as experienced community members sometimes learn from newcomers who bring fresh perspectives or new digital literacy skills. This shift challenges the traditional view of LPP and suggests that knowledge flows in multiple directions rather than just from experts to novices.

Harris and Simons (2008) similarly found that in workplace-based learning communities, senior members often rely on the insights of newer members, especially in fast-evolving industries such as technology and healthcare. This dynamic of mutual learning reshapes how CoP is understood, highlighting that participation can be multi-directional and flexible, particularly in digital or rapidly changing environments. Recent studies emphasise that learning within CoPs often depends on the specific context of the community and the interactions between its members. These findings suggest that CoP is more adaptable and less hierarchical than originally conceptualised, especially in modern professional and online learning communities (Taylor, 2014; Pyrko et al., 2019).

Despite these modern shifts, Wenger's (1998) three core dimensions of CoP—mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire—remain relevant in understanding how communities function. Mutual engagement refers to the sustained interactions between members of a CoP, where relationships are built and maintained through collaborative practices. Joint enterprise is the shared understanding of the community's purpose, which binds its members together. In contrast, shared repertoire refers to the communal resources, such as language, tools, or symbols, that members use to communicate and solve problems.

In online contexts, where CoP members are often geographically dispersed, trust becomes a crucial factor in mutual engagement. Moule (2006) argued that developing trust is particularly challenging in virtual environments, where face-to-face interaction is limited or absent. However, trust can still develop through consistent, meaningful participation in the community's practices. Additionally, Mills (2011) emphasized that online CoPs can cultivate a shared repertoire that includes digital artifacts, shared narratives, and discourse, aligning with Vygotsky's (1981) theory of semiotic mediation, where meaning is negotiated through tools and symbols, even in online settings.

In light of these developments, the traditional CoP model has been criticised for its rigidity in defining the roles of newcomers and old-timers. Recent studies such as Nicolini et al. (2022) and Mar et al. (2023) have explored how digital platforms like social media have led to more fluid participation patterns, where members can move between the periphery and center of the community based on the expertise they bring to specific discussions or tasks. These studies found that members' participation can vary depending on the task, challenging the idea that newcomers must always follow a linear path toward full participation.

Moreover, Pellicone and Ahn (2014) examined how CoP functions in affinity spaces such as gaming communities. They found that while many features of CoP are present, such as mutual engagement and shared practices, these communities often lack the strict hierarchical structure associated with traditional CoP models. This finding supports the view that CoPs can exist in more informal, flexible structures, especially in online and digitally-mediated spaces where participants engage voluntarily based on shared interests rather than formal membership.

More recent empirical work has continued to investigate the adaptability of CoPs in various contexts (Nistor et al., 2020). For example, Noar et al. (2023) studied professional learning communities within the healthcare sector and found that experienced professionals often turned to newcomers for advice on technological innovations. This mirrors findings from earlier studies on the reversed roles within CoPs, further supporting the claim that participation is increasingly reciprocal. Likewise, Nkambule and Tang (2024) explored how CoPs operate in academic settings where students and faculty collaborate, highlighting that the CoP model must adapt to diverse environments to remain relevant.

In light of these findings, the CoP model's relevance in online spaces and professional settings has become more flexible and inclusive. Mutual engagement and shared repertoire still anchor CoP, but recent studies have shown that participation is often reciprocal, with members alternating between peripheral and central roles depending on their expertise and the context. The shift toward reciprocal learning underscores the adaptability of the CoP framework, especially in environments where rapid knowledge sharing and technological innovation are paramount.

3. Affinity Space

Affinity space, as conceptualised by Gee (2005), extends the notion of learning beyond the confines of structured communities like Community of Practice (CoP). While CoP emphasises the roles of membership and belongingness in learning, affinity spaces focus on the interactions and activities occurring within a shared space, where individuals participate based on shared interests, goals, or practices. Gee's concept highlights the flexibility of participation in affinity spaces, where members—novices or experts—can engage with varying degrees of involvement without being confined to hierarchical structures. This idea is particularly relevant in online environments, where individuals can freely choose their level of participation and learn from each other based on shared activities rather than formal membership.

Unlike CoP, which tends to have clearly defined roles for newcomers and old-timers, affinity spaces are more fluid. Individuals may move between the periphery and center of activity based on their interests, competencies, and the particular activities they are engaged in. Gee (2005) emphasized that participation in affinity spaces is more about the space itself and less about the individuals occupying fixed roles within the space. Affinity spaces also encourage the development of both intensive knowledge—specialised content—and extensive knowledge—broader, generalised understanding—allowing members to gain and spread knowledge flexibly.

Over the past decade, the concept of affinity spaces has been expanded and further developed by a variety of scholars. For instance, Vindigni (2023) explored the role of affinity spaces in online gaming communities, finding that participants engage in both learning and socialisation without a need for formalised group structures. These spaces allow for flexible interaction, where participants can “lurk” or passively engage, as well as take on more active, central roles based on their preferences and expertise (Na & Staudt Willet, 2024). This finding aligns with Gee's original assertion that affinity spaces allow for diverse levels of participation, depending on the user's comfort and engagement level.

More recent studies, such as those by Brevik and Holm (2023), have examined how affinity spaces operate on social media platforms. They found that affinity spaces often form organically around shared interests, with participants contributing to discussions and content creation in ways that reflect both their personal identities and community goals. Unlike traditional learning spaces, these online affinity spaces allow for more inclusive and participatory dynamics, where knowledge is shared horizontally rather than vertically.

One key distinction between affinity spaces and CoP lies in the fluidity of membership and the type of learning that occurs. While CoP is bound by membership and belonging, where learning is viewed as a process of becoming more central to the community, affinity spaces emphasize interaction without the need for formal membership. As Gee (2005) pointed out, affinity spaces are places where individuals can freely engage based on shared practices, without committing to becoming a central community member. In this sense, learning in an affinity space is more flexible and less structured than in CoP, allowing individuals to move fluidly between different levels of participation.

Research by Brevik and Holm (2023) suggests that this fluidity is especially important in educational settings, where students engage with course content in formal classroom settings and through informal online spaces such as discussion forums and social media. These spaces provide students with opportunities to interact with their peers, share resources, and learn in a less formal, more organic manner. Such spaces often function as affinity spaces where students engage with content based on shared academic goals but without the rigid structures in formal learning environments like CoP.

Affinity spaces have also been studied in fields beyond gaming and education. In recent research, Sharma and Land (2019) explored affinity spaces in healthcare, where patients and healthcare providers interact in online forums. These spaces allow patients to share experiences, seek advice, and discuss treatments and symptoms, facilitating learning and social support in a less hierarchical environment. Similarly, Noonan (2019) analysed how affinity spaces function within professional development, particularly in online communities where professionals share best practices, collaborate on projects, and engage in informal mentorship. In these cases, affinity spaces provide a venue for reciprocal learning, where professionals and novices contribute and learn from each other based on shared interests.

Despite their flexibility, affinity spaces are not without their challenges. Lundgren et al. (2024) argued that while affinity spaces often appear open and inclusive, underlying power dynamics can limit participation. For example, in online gaming communities, experienced players sometimes exclude or marginalise newcomers, particularly if they are perceived as violating unspoken community norms. This finding highlights that while affinity spaces promote open interaction, they are still subject to issues of inclusivity and gatekeeping, which can impact the quality and depth of learning that occurs.

Additionally, while affinity spaces allow for flexible and voluntary participation, this same flexibility can result in some participants lacking sustained engagement or deep learning (Halaczkiwicz, 2020). Brevik and Holm (2023) noted that some participants in online affinity spaces engage only superficially, often contributing minimally or consuming content without deeper involvement. This suggests that while affinity spaces offer valuable opportunities for participation, they may not always foster the same level of commitment or sustained learning that is found in more structured environments like CoP.

Affinity spaces represent an evolving framework that holds significant relevance in online and professional contexts. By allowing flexible participation and facilitating diverse forms of learning, they offer a counterpoint to the more rigid structures of CoP. However, their success depends on how inclusivity and sustained engagement are managed.

4. Discourse Community

A discourse community, as defined by Swales (1990), consists of individuals who share common goals, engage in communication through recognised mediums, and use specific discursive practices that distinguish them as a group. This concept has been widely adopted in understanding how communities interact, especially in professional, academic, and online contexts. Discourse communities differ from traditional communities, such as CoP and affinity spaces, in that their primary focus is on the shared discourse rather than the social structure or interactional space. Members of a discourse community engage in specific communicative practices, such as specialised vocabulary, genres, and rhetorical conventions, that allow them to participate in meaningful exchanges within the group.

According to Swales (1990), six key characteristics define a discourse community: 1) a set of common public goals, 2) mechanisms of intercommunication among members, 3) participatory mechanisms primarily in the form of communication, 4) shared genres of communication, 5) a specific lexis, and 6) a threshold level of expert members. These characteristics distinguish discourse communities from other social or professional groups and emphasize the role of language in creating and maintaining community boundaries. The common goals of the community, often related to the group's specific purpose or function, bind the members together, while the specialised discourse facilitates communication and accomplishing these goals.

In the context of online communities, these characteristics remain relevant. For example, in social media groups or professional forums, the shared goals might be to exchange professional advice, discuss common interests, or solve problems collaboratively. The communication mechanisms, such as posts, comments, or threads, act as the medium for interaction, while the shared genres of communication—such as discussion posts or technical reports—serve as a standardised way to convey information.

While there are some overlaps between discourse communities and CoP, the two concepts differ in important ways. CoP focuses more on participation to gain membership and move from peripheral to central involvement in the community. In contrast, a discourse community places more emphasis on the shared discourse as a key factor in creating a sense of belonging. As Swales (1990) noted, the focus in a discourse community is not necessarily on the relationships between members but rather on the communicative practices that allow members to accomplish shared goals. For example, in online discussion forums, participants might not need to form personal relationships or participate in a structured learning trajectory as in CoP. Instead, their participation is defined by their ability to engage with the discourse—whether that

involves using appropriate jargon, adhering to the group's rhetorical conventions, or contributing to shared communication genres. Johns (1997) expands on this by pointing out that while members may engage deeply with the discourse, they might not always fully identify with the community. This flexibility in participation contrasts with the more rigid structures of CoP, where identity formation and belonging are central to the learning process.

Recent studies by Lima and Pessôa (2023) have shown that the fluidity of participation in discourse communities makes them particularly adaptable in online settings. In virtual professional communities, for instance, participants engage in discussions around shared tasks, but their engagement often centers more on the exchange of information than on forming personal ties. This aligns with Swales' (1990) assertion that discourse communities operate based on shared discourse, rather than social relationships.

A key element in distinguishing discourse communities is their use of a specific lexis, which includes community-specific jargon, abbreviations, and acronyms (Swales, 1990). In discourse communities, language is a powerful tool for gatekeeping and inclusion, as mastery of the specialised lexis often marks one's status as an expert or a novice. For instance, academic discourse communities require precise disciplinary language, which serves both to clarify meaning and signify membership in the group.

Recent research highlights the role of specialised lexis in creating and maintaining boundaries within professional discourse communities. For example, Halimi et al. (2021) examined how healthcare professionals in online forums use specialised medical terminology to engage in problem-solving discussions. Their findings suggest that while this lexis facilitates efficient communication among experts, it also serves as a barrier for newcomers, highlighting the hierarchical nature of expertise in discourse communities. In this way, mastery of the community's lexis becomes not only a tool for communication but also a marker of one's status within the group.

Additionally, Pogner (2005) suggests that discourse communities are not conflict-free or devoid of power dynamics. Within any discourse community, certain members often exert control over acceptable discourse, which can lead to authority conflicts and challenges to community conventions. This dynamic of authority and control becomes particularly important in digital spaces, where moderators or long-standing members may influence what types of discourse are permissible. The recent study by Burhan-Horasanlı (2022) confirms this, showing that senior members in online academic communities often guide discourse patterns, while novice members must carefully navigate these discursive expectations to be accepted.

The concept of discourse community remains highly relevant in today's increasingly digital and globalised world, where the ways in which individuals communicate, collaborate, and share knowledge have been transformed by technology. As more professional, academic, and social interactions shift to virtual spaces, understanding how discourse shapes community dynamics is becoming more crucial. In these digital environments, discourse communities transcend geographic boundaries, enabling members from diverse backgrounds to connect and engage in meaningful exchanges. Specialised language, shared goals, and discursive practices continue to serve as the backbone of these communities, reinforcing membership and creating a sense of belonging, even in settings where members may never meet face-to-face.

Discourse communities are evolving in response to new forms of communication, such as artificial intelligence-generated content and automated discourse systems. As AI tools become increasingly integrated into professional and academic settings, the ways individuals participate in discourse communities are undergoing significant changes. AI-generated reports, articles, and responses are already altering traditional genres and communicative norms, raising important questions about authorship, credibility, and the role of human participants in these communities. Discourse communities are adapting to these shifts, with varying degrees of acceptance of AI-generated content. This integration of human and AI collaboration influences the creation and negotiation of meaning within these spaces, where the boundaries between human-authored and machine-generated discourse are increasingly blurred (see Annamalai et al., 2023).

Additionally, the rise of hybrid workspaces, which combine digital and in-person interactions, is reshaping how discourse communities function across different modes of communication. In hybrid environments, participants engage in discourse synchronously, through face-to-face meetings or live online discussions, and asynchronously via emails, forums, or shared documents. These different forms of communication influence how communities are constructed, how shared knowledge is developed, and how individual and collective identities are negotiated. Hybrid workspaces are fostering the emergence of new discursive norms as individuals strive to maintain coherence in their communicative practices across both digital and physical spaces.

5. Synthesizing Community of Practice, Affinity Space and Discourse Community

The interrelationships between Community of Practice (CoP), Affinity Space, and Discourse Community can be synthesised into the theoretical model illustrated in Figure 1 below.

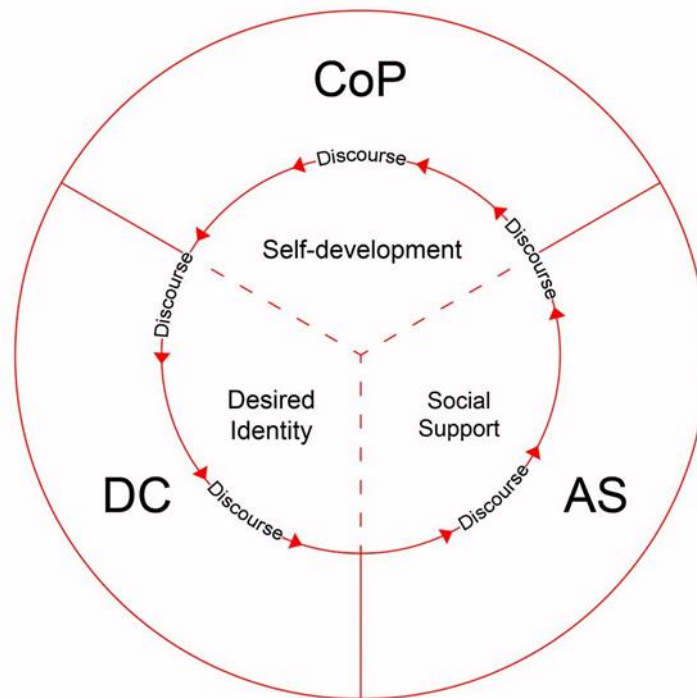


Figure 1. A socio-cultural model for examining the social support process

As depicted in Figure 1, the co-construction of social support occurs across CoP, Discourse Community (DC), or Affinity Space (AS). Despite their distinct emphases and defining characteristics, all three frameworks converge around a shared focus on interpersonal engagement, which serves as the foundation for the co-construction of social support (Rashid et al., 2016a; 2016b). Interpersonal engagement, whether through shared activities, flexible participation, or specialised discourse, is critical in enabling individuals to build and sustain social support within these communities.

In a Discourse Community, the primary focus is on the discursive construction of desired identities. This process involves adopting the specific lexis, genres, and communicative practices that define membership and active participation within the community. These discursive practices not only enable individuals to fit into the community but also facilitate the exchange of support as members collaborate toward shared goals.

In a Community of Practice, the central element is self-development, expressed through the concept of 'becoming,' where members evolve from peripheral participants to full-fledged community members by engaging in shared practices and learning from others. The CoP framework highlights the transformative nature of participation, where identity is continuously shaped through collaboration and mutual learning, contributing to both personal and collective growth.

In an Affinity Space, social support is co-constructed through flexible participation, where individuals can engage at varying levels of intensity based on their interests, needs, or expertise. Affinity Spaces, unlike the more structured environments of CoP or Discourse Communities, allow for more fluid and diverse modes of engagement. Individuals are not bound by formal membership but rather by shared interests, enabling them to participate in ways that best suit their circumstances while benefiting from the social support offered within the space.

As the model demonstrates, the construction of desired identities, the co-construction of social support, and self-development are continuous, interrelated processes that are all mediated by discourse. Individuals seeking to engage in the co-construction of social support utilize discourse to shape and project their desired identities. This process allows them to gain access to the community or space, interact with others, and build relationships that enable them to receive and offer support. As they establish their identities and engage in these discursive practices, they actively contribute to their self-development while simultaneously reinforcing the social fabric of the community or space.

For a comprehensive examination of the social support process, it is essential to scrutinise these three elements—the discursive construction of desired identities, the discursive practices involved in co-constructing social support, and the impact of social support on self-development—across CoP, Discourse Community, and Affinity Space. By examining the interplay between these frameworks, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how individuals navigate complex social environments to create, maintain, and benefit from social support in both formal and informal settings.

6. Conclusion

This paper has synthesised three influential theories—Community of Practice (CoP), Affinity Space, and Discourse Community to offer a comprehensive framework for examining the co-construction of social support, knowledge sharing, and identity formation in structured and informal communities. Each model brings unique insights to understanding how individuals engage in collaborative activities, whether through shared practices in CoP, flexible participation in Affinity Spaces, or language-driven interactions in Discourse Communities. Integrating these models provides a robust perspective on how different types of communities function, especially in digital environments where boundaries between formal and informal participation are increasingly blurred.

Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) emphasizes how newcomers learn and evolve within a structured community, highlighting the gradual transformation of identity through legitimate peripheral participation. This approach is particularly useful for understanding professional or educational settings, where members engage in shared tasks and gradually move toward full participation.

Affinity Space (Gee, 2005) offers a contrasting view, focusing on the flexibility of participation in informal communities. In Affinity Spaces, individuals can contribute based on their interests without the need for hierarchical roles or formal membership. This model is particularly applicable to online environments, where participants can engage in various activities at different levels of intensity, from lurking to active participation. Affinity Spaces provide a more fluid understanding of how people interact, learn, and collaborate in digital spaces.

Discourse Community (Swales, 1990) brings language and communication to the forefront, emphasizing how shared goals, genres, and specialized lexis define the community and facilitate interaction. This model is especially relevant in professional and technical contexts, where precise communication is necessary to achieve community objectives. Discourse Communities allow for a detailed examination of how language both includes and excludes members based on their familiarity with the community's specialized discourse.

Together, these models offer a powerful lens for analyzing social support, learning, and collaboration across different types of communities. The integration of CoP, Affinity Space, and Discourse Community into a unified framework addresses the complexity of contemporary online environments, where individuals often participate in multiple overlapping communities simultaneously, each with different modes of engagement and levels of formality.

While this paper has provided a theoretical synthesis, future research should focus on applying this framework in empirical studies, particularly in online learning and professional development contexts. Understanding how these models operate in real-world digital spaces will deepen our insights into how individuals navigate complex social and professional networks.

Moreover, this unified model highlights several practical applications. For instance, in designing online learning platforms or professional development programs, educators and administrators can draw on the structured learning pathways of CoP, the flexible engagement possibilities of Affinity Spaces, and the importance of clear communicative practices from Discourse Communities. These insights can help create more inclusive, adaptive environments where participants feel empowered to contribute, learn, and grow at their own pace.

In conclusion, the synthesis of CoP, Affinity Space, and Discourse Community provides a valuable framework for understanding the collaborative construction of social support, learning, and identity. By considering the unique and overlapping contributions of each model, this paper offers a nuanced perspective on how individuals engage in communities across both formal and informal contexts, with broad implications for digital interaction in the modern era.

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Authors contributions

RAR and OAA developed the study concept, led the initial manuscript drafting, provided critical revisions, synthesized insights across sections, and oversaw the final manuscript edits. MHA, RAA, and AES conducted the literature review and initial drafting of the manuscript. All authors contributed to the writing, reviewed the manuscript for intellectual content, and approved the final version for submission.

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No additional data are available.

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