

# Using online support group to Cope During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review

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## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on people's activities and mental health due to long-term quarantine and lockdown (Xiong et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to find an effective solution. Online Support group and communities not only provide opportunities for people living with mental conditions to exchange knowledge and social support (Naslund JA et al., 2016), but also create a virtual space for individuals to seek informational support and emotional support during public crisis (Li et al., 2022). Current studies are clustered in quantitative analysis on the emotional function of online support groups and their effects on mental health and well-being. This presents a challenge and a need to conduct qualitative studies and explore features of online peer support group that promote informational support and improve academic and professional performance.

## Key Findings

- Majority of studies were done in the US (7/15)
- 12 out of 15 used a quantitative study design
- The purpose of online groups is to improve mental wellbeing

## Methods

This study had two aims: first, to conduct a systematic literature review of current literature about online support group during pandemic, and to examine the different aspects of online peer support group.

Second, to examine the research gap of current literature and promote engagement with (in)accurate health information to design better corrective interventions, and to explore additional benefits of the online support group.

## Analyses

We searched with the keyword (online support group or online peer group) and (covid or pandemic) in three databases - Communication & Mass Media Complete, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and PubMed from 2020 to 2023, resulting in 15 number of articles. Our research team systematically reviewed each paper and excluded irrelevant studies, leading to a total number of 15 studies.

## Results

The information extracted from the 15 studies includes county, target group, platform, purpose of the group, study design, measure, and results. The majority of the studies were done in the US (n= 7). The 15 studies showed a diverse target group including children, adolescents, college students, moms in employment, and faculty members. The platforms varied from Facebook, Zoom, and other app-based platforms. The majority of the purpose of these online groups is to improve mental wellbeing and promote a social support environment with peers during the pandemic. Specifically, there are two studies talking about decreasing vaccine hesitancy and combating misinformation. Among the 15 studies, 12 out of 15 used a quantitative study design. In particular, 2 studies used systematic review, and 5 studies were RCTs. Among all the studies, they found the online support group helped to reduce stress, depression, anxiety, and provide a space for expressing mental health troubles and informal emotional support.

## Conclusions

This systematic review showed that with different participants and different orientations, online support groups played an effective role in reducing psychological distress and increasing connectedness during the pandemic. This study contributes to the understanding of the effectiveness of the online peer support group during a public health crisis. Our findings also revealed some literature gaps. There are no or limited studies using a qualitative design to understand online support group and its effects. The majority of the studies in this review focused on mental health and psychological wellbeing, which require the investigation of new dimensions for informational support to combat misinformation through online support group. Additionally, this current review encourages re-thinking the benefits of an online support group on belongings, cohesion, and job/academic performance. This will allow us to picture the complexity of components and effects included in the online support group and to highlight additional benefits of this online communication format.

## References

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