Abstract

Four threads collected from Reddit were examined as written documents to analyze the pragmatic meaning of the word “support.” The purpose of this study was to assess whether men and women apply the same meaning to the word “support” in the setting of online infertility forums. The target word’s meaning was determined by context and the characteristics of the three basic types of social support: emotional, instrumental, and informational. Results indicated that women asked for and provided more emotional support, especially when interacting with other women. Conversely, men asked for and provided informational support.

Lost in Translation: A Pragmatic Look at the Difference in Meaning of the Word "Support" Between the Sexes in Online Infertility Forums

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1.0 Introduction

Every year, couples turn to in vitro fertilization (IVF), hoping to bring new life into the world. "In 2018, IVF accounted for 2% of all births in the United States," and today, more than 500,000 IVF births occur globally (Yale Medicine, 2026, para. 3). IVF is a complicated and costly reproductive treatment that is emotionally, physically, and financially taxing on those undergoing the process. A majority of the physical demands are usually undertaken by women, but both men and women cope with the emotional experience.

Many factors, such as our social, cultural identities, and adverse experiences may affect how we use and interpret language. It is important to understand those factors so that we're able to interpret other's intended meanings and create healthy relationships. The purpose of this study was to examine the different pragmatic meanings of the word "support" when men and women use it while posting to online infertility forums.

2.0 Literature Review

A systematic review conducted by Grammenou and colleagues (2026) revealed that several studies have reported significant differences in the quality of life and psychological reactions between the sexes while undergoing IVF treatment. "Women consistently reported higher levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and infertility-related stress than men" across all phases of treatment (Grammenou et al., 2026, p. 16). On the other hand, men reported increased stress during certain phases "particularly in relation to financial pressure, treatment uncertainty, and partner distress" (Grammenou et al., 2026 p. 16). While both sexes experienced increased psychological reactions, only women reported ongoing distress throughout the IVF process.

Emotional distress and financial pressures can strain relationships during treatment. Men have been socialized “to suppress emotions like fear and sadness” while women have been socialized “to express and discuss emotions more openly” (Lin et al., 2025, p. 19). Depression and anxiety are emotions that many men and women experience while going through IVF, which may mean that they need higher levels of support from their partners and families.

Because men and women emotionally react differently to IVF, it is within reason to assume that they may require different types and levels of support to cope with the difficult process. According to research conducted by Noller (1993), men and women express caring differently. Men show caring through “sex and practical help” while women, on the other hand, “emphasize affection and expressivity” (Noller, 1993, p. 141). How men and women express their caring may impact how they show support to each other.

This study concentrated on three basic types of social support: emotional, instrumental, and informational. According to Helgeson (2003), characteristics of emotional support include sympathizing with others, reassuring them, and making them “feel valued, loved, and cared for” (p. 25). Instrumental support may be characterized by providing services (such as doing housework, meal prepping, or running errands) and financial assistance (Helgeson, 2023, p. 25). And lastly, informational support may be characterized by providing others with information or advice (Helgeson, 2003, p. 25). The semantic, or literal meaning of the word “support” provides an important foundation of understanding; however, this study focused on the pragmatic meaning. The context in which men and women use the target word will determine its meaning.

3.0 Method

A Google search was conducted in April 2026 using the key terms “IVF forums,” “IVF online support groups,” and “infertility forums.” The search yielded platforms such as Reddit,

BabyCenter, and What to Expect. The target word "support" was searched in these three platforms. The following forums were accessed: r/IVF, r/GUYVF, r/MaleInfertility, and BabyCenter's IVF support group.

A total of four threads were collected from the forums r/IVF, r/GUYVF, and r/MaleInfertility. Only threads exclusively in English and that included the target word in the title or initial post were collected. Threads were then divided into two categories: male and female. If threads did not include the target word within the title or initial post, they were not collected for analysis.

Posters were assigned the category male or female based on self-reporting their sex, referencing sex specific conditions or treatments (e.g., miscarriage and sperm analysis), or posting on gender-specific forums (e.g., r/GUYVF). The context surrounding the word "support" in the initial post was analyzed by applying the established characteristics of each type of social support to determine the poster's meaning. For example, if a poster used emotionally charged words and phrases (e.g., "terrible," "traumatic," or "I feel hopeless"), made encouraging remarks (e.g., "You got this!") or used empathetic language (e.g., offered stories about their own experiences or used phrases such as "I feel you"), then the post was categorized under emotional support. Posts asking for information or advice (e.g., "What should I do?") were categorized as informational. And lastly, if a post mentioned doing certain tasks (e.g., giving someone a progesterone shot, doing housework) or providing monetary assistance, then it was categorized as instrumental support. Responses to the initial post were also analyzed to determine which type of support respondents provided to the original poster. Response posts addressed to other respondents instead of the original poster were not considered in the analysis due to the written document/corpus requirements of the assignment.

4.0 Results

A total of four threads that included the target word within the title or initial post were identified. The threads are analyzed below.

4.1 Women

u/ApprehensiveCrew3665 (2024) expressed that she needed support after an egg retrieval where 20 eggs were recovered but only two eggs developed into embryos. This poster hoped that her embryos would come back normal after genetic testing because she cannot afford another egg retrieval (u/ApprehensiveCrew3665, 2024). She went on to say, “I’m not trying to be negative and hold out hope but not sure how I feel” (u/ApprehensiveCrew3665, 2024). Based on the language choices such as “I’m really hoping”, “I’m not trying to be negative,” and “not sure how I feel,” u/ApprehensiveCrew3665 (2024) was looking for emotional support. The poster was looking for empathy from other women to validate her experiences. There were four replies from other posters on this thread. Three female respondents gave emotional support through sharing their lived experiences (u/Ucsdwtrgrl, 2024; u/bdpr23890, 2024; u/prettydrink23, 2024). One female respondent also encouraged u/ApprehensiveCrew3665 by wishing her luck (u/bdpr23890, 2024). Out of the four female respondents, only one provided informational support by sharing a list of podcast episodes (u/neurodivergent_80)

In another thread u/pisforpnut (2026) explained that she’d had several miscarriages and two traumatic medical procedures within the past year, and her recent egg retrieval recovered 15 eggs, but only six of them fertilized. Throughout the post, u/pistforpnut employed emotional language. She used the following phrases: “a terrible year of 4 losses and 2 traumatic d&cs,” “I’m gutted and feel like I’m being suffocated,” and “no one else understands” (u/pisforpnut, 2026). The use of negatively charged words signaled to others that the original poster needed emotional support. Specifically, u/pisforpnut (2026) was seeking encouragement based on the

phrases “I’ve lost all hope” and “I don’t know how to keep moving.” Three female respondents offered emotional support by sharing similar stories about their egg retrievals. All the respondents provided u/pisforpnut encouragement using the following statements: “keep your head up,” “good luck”, and “hang in there” (u/brooklyn_summer476, 2026; u/angel-girl-A, 2026; u/Tricky-Coyote-9253, 2026).

4.2 Male

In an IVF support forum for men (r/GUYVF), u/Justaguy386 (2021) expressed that he felt helpless after his partner’s embryo transfer, and that he didn’t know how to support her. He went on to explain that the “only thing [he does] is give the progesterone shot every night,” then asked if anyone had “any thoughts” on how to support his partner (u/Justaguy386, 2021). While the poster did use some emotional language (“I feel helpless”), he is asking for informational support in the way of advice. There were four responses from other posters that were replying to the initial post. Three respondents were assumed male while one respondent identified herself as female. One assumed male respondent advised u/Justaguy386 to provide his partner with emotional support by being present, showing affection (cuddling), doing things with her (watching movies), and keeping her spirits up (making her laugh) (u/Asleep_Tangerine_831, 2021). Another assumed male respondent told the original poster that “it either works or it doesn’t”, “to live as normally as possible”, and “to try not to think about it” (u/TinyBreak, 2021). The only female respondent provided the original poster with behavioral insight as to why his partner may want to clean and do chores (u/abalone99, 2021). She also suggested that u/Justaguy386 offer his partner instrumental support by taking on “bigger chores” and emotional support by encouraging her to talk about her thoughts and feelings (u/abalone99, 2021).

In the subreddit r/MaleInfertility, u/RoutineSpinach3871 (2024) asked for "guidance/support" after his semen analysis. The original poster provided several in depth details about his diagnosis (oligioasthenoteratozoospermia), the supplements he took, and other health information like testosterone levels (u/RoutineSpinach3871, 2024). Based on the information included and the phrase "What would you recommend doing next?", the post implied that he is looking for informational support. While there is a total of 15 posts in this thread, only four posts were responding to the original poster. One female respondent provided emotional support by sharing information about her partner who was going through a similar situation (u/browncharlie88, 2024). Another female respondent provided informational support by asking u/RoutineSpinach9871 questions about his health, genetics, stress/cortisol levels, and giving information about deficiencies that can affect sperm health (u/morningstar21191, 2024). The last female respondent offered both emotional support (providing the original poster with a similar story about her husband) and informational support by suggesting an extended semen analysis and asking doctors about abstinence periods (u/Alive_War_, 2024). A male respondent also provided informational support by advising the original poster to get an ultrasound (u/Famous-Arrival8671, 2024)

5.0 Discussion

The study examined the pragmatic meaning of the word "support" by assessing the context surrounding the word. Findings suggested that when women used the word "support", they were seeking out emotional support. Women mostly asked for and gave emotional support when they were responding to other women. There was one female outlier who provided informational support to another woman. Female respondents who interacted with men provided both emotional and informational support. Female respondents also advised men to provide their

wives with instrumental support as well. According to Noller (1993), women are more likely to be “bilingual,” and adapt to the communication of their male counterparts.

In this study, findings suggested that when men asked for support, they were mostly asking for informational support. Men also suggested practical support when others asked for advice. This study did not yield many posts written by men which could be supported by Lin et al.’s (2025) assertion that men do not express their feelings openly or Grammenou et al.’s (2026) findings that men only have emotional reactions during certain phases of treatment.

This study was limited by the small sample of texts. All posts were written within the last six years and collected from Reddit. The sex classification was subjective as it was rare for posters to self-identify their sex. Also, the qualitative analysis was done by interpreting the meaning of the word “support” by the context within a post. The context was interpreted subjectively using characteristics of the basic types of social support and the investigator’s own lived experiences.

Future study could focus on live interviews with participants who are couples. A survey could be implemented to ask participants about how they define “support” and what type of support they’d prefer while undergoing IVF. The survey could also ask how they thought their partner would define the word “support.” Future study could also employ a longitudinal design to capture how the meaning of “support” changes over the course of IVF treatment for the different sexes.

Undergoing difficult experiences such as IVF treatment may shift people’s perspectives. It is important to understand how social identity can impact the way we use language. If couples undergoing IVF understand what their partners mean when they ask for support, then they may be able to endure difficult experiences and foster a stronger relationship.

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