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"We're living in an era of facebook and blogs. It's a familiar and comfortable space" : exploring the use of virtual support groups by women diagnosed with breast cance.

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ABSTRACT

This research project explores the use of virtual support groups by women diagnosed with breast cancer in South Africa. Through a content analysis of the online forums and eight in-depth interviews with women of various backgrounds (age, race and socio-economic status) it becomes evident that women use these virtual spaces for information exchange, sense of belonging, search for meaning and most significantly support. Various factors within the *illness experience* of breast cancer influence the initial use, continuation, breaks and withdrawal from of these online forums. The analysis of online forums is framed around concepts of *lay consultation*, *gender*, *adaptation theory* and *social capital* to conceptualise and make sense of these virtual interactions. The virtual groups allow women to read and write on breast cancer according to their perceptions and experiences, thereby lessening the dominant medical power to create space for their personal voices. The interactions on the forums foster a sense of empowerment, social support and social engagement critical to their wellbeing and adaptation to the condition.

This study also brings attention to the lack of studies about virtual groups within the South African context which is increasingly becoming significant as more and more individuals use virtual groups as part of health lay interaction and consultation.