Recommendations for Online Support Group Platforms in China

Expanded Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations

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Date:
December 2020

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Over the last forty years, China has rapidly evolved to push itself onto the world stage, averaging 10 percent GDP (gross domestic product) growth per year since 1978 and lifting 850 million people out of poverty (World Bank, n.d.). Now boasting the world's second largest economy, China has been enjoying the benefits of modernization and urbanization, but has inadvertently left issues of emotional well-being largely unrecognized and unaided. Surveys in China have revealed a glaring problem with people feeling unmotivated and unhappy with their lives, unsupported and unloved by others, or unsafe in their communities (Statista, 2015). Support for emotional well-being in China is still in its infancy and has the opportunity to draw from the successes and failures of other countries, such as the United States, to develop new resources. In particular, our project sponsor, the Xin Foundation, is interested in how the United States' approach to online support groups can be actualized as a new resource in China.

Methodology

To create a comprehensive framework of recommendations for the Xin Foundation, our team established three main objectives. First, we examined support groups in the United States and why they have been so successful. To accomplish this, we interviewed support group members and facilitators, and distributed surveys to a wide variety of organizations. We knew that this information was only a piece of the puzzle—what works in the United States will not necessarily work in China. Therefore, our next objective was to evaluate China's sentiment towards support groups. To achieve this, we collaborated with our teammates at Hangzhou Dianzi University to create and distribute surveys inquiring into the perceived value of support group practices in China. Finally, we analyzed existing online support group platforms in the United States to find ways that the Xin Foundation can innovate. Here, we studied common features and examined public message boards to understand how platforms like these can best serve their users. Completion of these objectives produced valuable key findings which informed our recommendations and our mockups of a new, innovative platform.

Key Findings

From our research, we developed an in-depth understanding of how support groups benefit individuals, the concerns they may pose to their members, and in what ways they may need to be transformed to fit into China's cultural context.

Benefits of Support Groups

To better understand the purpose of support groups, our team conducted a survey, as well as numerous interviews of support group members and facilitators to determine benefits that may arise from involvement. From this data, we determined there to be five main benefits from participating in support groups.

1. **Support groups give members a community and help improve their social lives.** In a survey of 135 individuals, 96.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that support groups fostered connections. This data is particularly telling that support groups are an effective means at improving individuals' sense of community and their social lives, which help in boosting their overall well-being.

2. **Support groups help members realize that they are not alone.** Across 11 interviews of support group members and facilitators, many interviewees stated that support groups served as an important reminder that they weren't alone. Support groups are a method of connecting individuals with similar interests and or struggles who might have never met in other circumstances.

3. **Support groups give members a place to find help.** In our survey, 81.2% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that support groups are a place for them to find help. These communities allow individuals who are seeking out help, guidance, or support, are able to locate others to help them through their process of growth and exploration. This

4. **Support groups can help members find valuable resources.** Data from our survey showed that 78.7% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that joining a support group has given them access to previously inaccessible resources. This is a more specific form of aid, but support groups have historically served as a means for the dissemination of information. Becoming more educated is one way of improving one's sense of purpose, another important category within well-being.

5. **Support groups empower members and improve their self-confidence.** All four of the previous main benefits of support group participation help in improving one's self-confidence. More concretely, 74% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that support groups have empowered them. Having a strong support network and the opportunity to learn and grow alongside others not only helps one's overall well-being, but instills them with a better sense of confidence to take control of their life and to move forward in ways previously thought not possible.

These benefits all supplement and improve one's well-being by bolstering an individual's sense of purpose, their social life, and their sense of community. By having a community of people that are facing similar struggles or have similar interests, individuals are able to grow alongside one another and achieve a common goal. These five key benefits should be prioritized by the Xin Foundation and any new support group platforms to ensure a positive and meaningful experience.

Concerns for Support Groups

These surveys and interviews were also used to determine concerns in regards to support group participation. Although experiences were largely positive and benefited individuals, there were still several concerns posed by support group participants. We were able to consolidate these into three main concerns.

1. **Support groups have the potential to spread misinformation.** When asked if support groups had the potential to spread misinformation, 23.3% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Although this group is in the minority, it is still important to acknowledge this concern, as the spread of misinformation could be potentially harmful, especially to vulnerable members of a group.

2. **Support groups can become controversial or inflammatory in nature.** In our survey, 27.2% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that support groups can become controversial or inflammatory in nature. This toxic environment undermines the true goal of support groups: to include and to support. Because of this, controversial/inflammatory content should be carefully monitored and handled in order to maintain a safe environment for all participants.

3. **Support groups need to have transparency in their administration.** In regards to administrative policies and decisions, 43.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that transparency needs to be improved. Transparency is important in maintaining trust within a community, and for a group where vulnerability and honesty are necessary for a group's survival, it is particularly important that individuals feel confident enough within the group to speak their mind.

Although these concerns were not widespread, they can threaten a support group's ability to provide a fulfilling environment. It is important to recognize the shortcomings of existing support group models, so that stronger communities can be developed going forward. These concerns should be carefully addressed by the Xin Foundation and other new platforms that want to ensure the sustainability and efficacy of their support groups.

Cultural Considerations for Chinese Support Groups

Our team made several considerations for adapting American support group models to better fit China's unique cultural landscape. These include:

1. **The social concept of "face" is prevalent in Asian cultures.** Many people want to preserve face, which is like maintaining a good reputation. However, such behavior may create apprehension towards joining support groups. This is because sharing personal issues with strangers can be scary and embarrassing. When asked if they would like to share stress or joy with others, 54% of survey respondents answered they would not. However, 78% said they would share their frustration and sadness with others who have the same troubles. These results indicate there is less resistance towards sharing personal matters with people who are dealing with the same problems than complete strangers.

2. **China's cultural collectivism.** People living in collectivist societies like China are more likely to prioritize group success over individual success. This is reflected by our survey results where only 34% of respondents ask for help on a usual or regular basis, but 68% offer help to others on a usual or regular basis. The disparity between asking for help and offering help supports the idea that individual success is less prioritized in a collectivist society.

3. **The importance of family in China.** In the United States, many support groups are focused on helping family members of struggling individuals. However, in China, family members are often the only support network people have. This can place a large burden on family members and even make them the victims of "affiliate stigma."

Based on the considerations above as well as survey data collected from China, our team believes these four recommendations would benefit support groups in China:

1. **Chinese support groups should emphasize peer support.**
2. **Chinese support groups should be hosted online.**
3. **Chinese support groups should emphasize being a place to offer help.**
4. **Chinese support groups should cater to family members of struggling individuals.**

These suggestions would help reduce apprehension towards support groups caused by social stigma and the fear of losing face. They would improve member privacy and accessibility. They would also alleviate the burden of many family members who are affected by "affiliated stigma." The Xin Foundation should take these suggestions into account when developing new support groups in China.

Recommendations

After studying existing online support group platforms and taking into account the key findings of our research, we created a set of recommendations for how we think future platforms of this type should be designed. A series of mockups were also created to coincide these recommendations and give a concrete example of our proposed platform. The platform recommendations we propose span four main areas:

1. The structure of sustainable online support groups.
2. The features available to online support groups.
3. The moderation of online support groups.
4. The features available to platform users.

Structure of Sustainable Online Support Groups

Maintaining activity and fostering long-term sustainability can be a difficult task for new online support groups. A significant part of an OSG's utility is the repository of past interactions that build up over time; these exchanges let new members reap passive support and learn how they can actively participate. Because it takes time to build up this repository, it can be very challenging to kickstart a group's growth and keep it sustained. Looking at existing platforms, it was not uncommon to find groups that had experienced years of inactivity or had only a handful of active members. These were groups that lacked leadership that could stimulate an active community and take the proper steps to make it sustainable. Because of this, we recommend three things for how new platforms should structure their support groups:

1. We recommend support groups only be created by approved organizations. These would be organizations that have the resources, the understanding, and the motivation to lead a support group to success. Founding organizations would be responsible for fostering community growth, promoting active participation, and maintaining long-term activity. To underpin this structure, the platform would have the obligation to educate organizations on how to properly stimulate new support groups.

2. We recommend the platform provides informational resources about support groups. The platform has the responsibility to educate users and group administrators about support groups and the function they serve. The platforms we looked at often provided user resources through FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) sections and tutorials that we found to be extremely useful in learning the platform. These types of resources help give background to what support groups are and help users learn how they can utilize support group features. Going a step forward, we recommend providing administrative resources that could help organizations operate a successful support group. These resources would include guides on using admin support group features and strategies for growing and maintaining support group communities. See Mockups 1 and 2 for examples of a "Resources" page that serves this function.

3. We recommend users be able to find support groups by category and by searching. It is important the platform makes finding and participating in support groups as easy and enjoyable as possible. The OSG platforms we studied often used alphabetical list structures for viewing support groups, but we found this to be a consequence of outdated design practices. Due to these platforms being operated by non-profit entities, most lacked noticeable

commitment to maintaining updated user interfaces that reflect modern design theory. In our opinion, categorized list structures offered a more natural way to find support groups covering a specific topic. Additionally, we found searching mechanisms to be extremely useful in quickly finding common support groups such as those focusing on anxiety and depression. This contemporary structure would make strides in rectifying the dated user interfaces of existing OSG platforms to improve usability. See Mockup 3 for an example of a "Groups" page that uses this structure.

Features of Online Support Groups

For the functionality available to each support group, we recommend three core features: an asynchronous group forum (commonly referred to as a message/discussion board), synchronous group events (events where members can meet together), and storage for group resources. In our study of existing platforms, we distinguished that sites either provided group forums or hosted group events, but never both. The merging of both synchronous and asynchronous means of connectivity would open more ways for groups to interact and provide a more flexible support group environment. The third feature was rarely present in the OSG platforms we studied, so we think it would be a significant step forward for letting support groups build up a communal supply of relevant resources. Mockups 4, 5, 6, and 7 show examples of a support group page with sections for each of these respective features.

1. We recommend a group forum. On a support group's forum section, users would be able to post text content with a title that others could reply to with comments or emojis. These forum posts would act like typical forum threads where users could reply to each other's comments. Available emojis would be chosen by the group administrators to prevent inappropriate emotes. The platform could also provide custom emojis—as seen in many other OSG platforms—to reflect specific emotions such as "stay strong" and "thanks for sharing." Users would also be able to share posts with other people on the platform to encourage interpersonal connections. The box that enables users to post would have placeholder text that reflects what OSG members most often like to talk about (how they feel and what they are going through); this would implore more users to interact with the forum. Users would be able to search forum posts for specific content that is more relevant to their situation or is something they are interested in. This implementation of post searching would be more simple and functional than search boxes provided by current platforms. The forum page could also provide

other systems like group polls and useful information like community guidelines. Mockup 4 shows an example of the "Forum" section of a support group.

2. We recommend group events. Group events would be created by group administrators and could be about anything members would like. Events could be hosted in-person, through systems like Zoom or Dingtalk, or directly through the site. Users would have the ability to sign up for events, but we recommend it not be a requirement to attend. In support groups, it is acceptable to passively lurk in meetings and leave at any time, so any new OSG platform should encourage this type of inactive participation. Mockup 5 shows an example of a support group's "Events" section with their past and upcoming events. Mockup 6 shows how on the day of a group event, users could join through the "Forum" section.

3. We recommend storage for group resources. A resources section would give support groups a place to collect convenient resources they accumulate over time. This area would allow group members to have quick and easy access to a group's tribal knowledge all in one place. These resources could be things like pinned forum posts, useful links, and relevant articles. Mockup 7 shows an example of a "Resources" section with these types of items.

Moderation of Online Support Groups

Effective moderation strategies are crucial to the success of online support groups. Moderators maintain order and ensure safety in the group by removing inappropriate or misinformed content and reminding members of the group's rules. It is important that moderators are efficient, transparent, and considerate. Additionally, any platform that supports a wide range of organizations must offer flexibility in moderation. To meet these expectations, we recommend the following four features:

1. We recommend allowing users to report and block posts. By allowing users to report troublesome posts, moderators can spend less time sifting through benign content and more time addressing posts that are problematic. Because this review process is not immediate, we recommend giving users the ability to hide posts and block other users. These functions will provide a safe environment with minimal labor investment.

2. We recommend listing group rules in a forum sidebar. In order to maintain maximum visibility and moderation transparency, we recommend displaying group rules in a sidebar on every forum page. The following rules are supported by our research:

- Treat others with respect.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Welcome others.
- No talk of illegal activity.
- No self-promotional content.
- No spam or misinformation.

Mockup 4 shows an example of this sidebar on the "Forum" section of a support group.

3. We recommend muting users that violate group rules. Those that violate rules may be the most in need. Temporary suspension from posting minimizes the harm they can cause others while ensuring they can still reap the rewards of silent participation.

4. We recommend allowing organizations to create custom roles. Since this proposed platform can support organizations with a wide variety of facilitation and moderation techniques, we recommend allowing the creation of custom roles in every support group. With this system, group administrators could enter a name for a role and toggle their privileges from a predefined list. Roles could then be given to trusted individuals, allowing for a wide range of responsibility delegation hierarchies. Mockup 8 shows an administrative "Roles" section of a support group with this functionality.

The following tables contain two potential role structures:

Role Name	Privileges
Super Administrator	Modify roles, change rules, modify organization, mute users, remove posts, make posts
Administrator	Change rules, modify organization, mute users, remove posts, make posts
Facilitator	Start synchronous events, mute users, remove posts, make posts
Moderator	Mute users, remove posts, make posts
User	Make posts

Table 1. A standard role layout for a peer or social support group.

Role Name	Privileges
Super Administrator	Modify roles, change rules, modify organization, mute users, remove posts, make posts in all message boards
Administrator	Change rules, modify organization, mute users, remove posts, make posts in all message boards
Moderator	Mute users, remove posts, make posts in all message boards
Non-brain injured Facilitator	Start synchronous events, mute users, remove posts, make posts in all message boards
Survivor Facilitator	Start synchronous events, make posts in discussion message board
Class Instructor	Start synchronous events, make posts in discussion and class resources message boards
User	Make posts in discussion message board

Table 2. A role layout for a Brain Injury Alliance group.

The differences in complexity between these tables indicates the necessity for custom roles and role editing: the Brain Injury Alliance (BIA) employs both brain-injured facilitators and non-brain injured facilitators. Naturally, all facilitators should have the ability to start synchronous meetings, but only trained non-brain injured facilitators have the cognition to complete moderation tasks such as post removal. Additionally, the Brain Injury Alliance holds several educational classes, each with their own instructor. This individual must be able to start their own events and post resources in a dedicated "class resources" message board. This

example demonstrates the importance of flexibility when supporting a wide variety of support group organizations.

Features of User Accounts

Finally, we considered the features present in user accounts and the affordances given for user interactions. Here, we prioritized allowing users to preserve anonymity and confidentiality, but also giving users access to a host of social networking mechanics. This was to preserve the anonymous factor inherent in support groups, while also maximizing the ways users can consume content and connect with others. As such, our three recommendations for user accounts are as follows:

1. We recommend only an anonymous username is required to create an account. Users should be able to post in group forums and join group events with only an anonymous username to identify them. This minimum requirement was common in many other platforms and shows how online environments can increase the privacy provided by support groups. See Mockup 9 for an example of an anonymous user account.

2. We recommend an extensive suite of social networking features. We believe that the closer the platform gets to functioning like a social networking site, the more appealing it can become to everyday people and the less stigma there can be associated with using it. As such, we compiled a list of common user account features that we thought fit this type of platform best. These features are arranged in no specific order as we think each one has its role in a modern social networking site.

- *User avatar and banner.* Graphical elements like an avatar and banner give user's a high range of flexibility for visual self-expression.
- *User bio.* User biographies provide self introductions that let other members immediately get to know a person.
- *Online status.* Online status gives a sense of real-time presence that many support group platforms often lack.
- *User activity.* User activity shows how a user has been participating in support groups, giving another way of understanding who they are. It also lets friends keep up with how a user is doing.

- *User blog.* User blogs give user's a flexible system for self-expression that is not connected to any support group.
- *Private messaging.* Private messaging between users is a fundamental feature for users to build personal connections between one another.
- *Friending.* Allowing users to friend one another creates a concrete connection between users and would provide a way for users to keep up to date with each other.

To permit as much confidentiality as possible, users would have the option to privatize or ignore as many of these features as they would like. Mockup 10 shows an example of a user account using these features.

3. We recommend a comprehensive user feed. This feed would aggregate posts and events from joined support groups, and posts and blogs from friends. Content aggregation like this is a fundamental part of social networking sites, providing a centralized location for users to consume curated content. Some of the platforms we looked at implemented similar user feeds, but were often clunky and confusing. A good user feed would work to bring together all core platform functionality and give users greater accessibility to support groups and the friends they have made in them. Mockup 11 shows an example of a user's personal feed.

Appendix - Online Support Group Platform Mockups
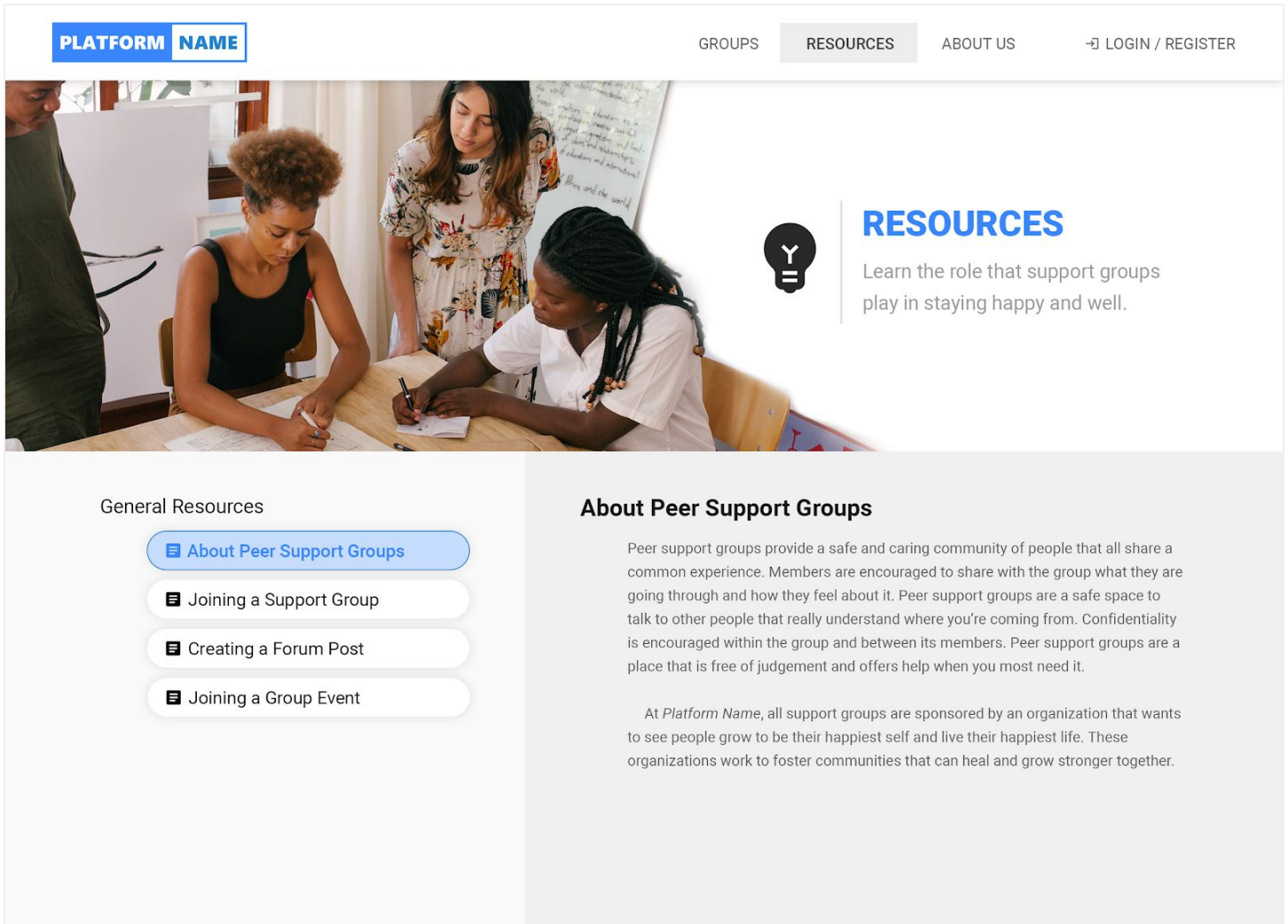
Mockup 1. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Resources" page with the
"About Peer Support Groups" resource selected (not signed in).

General Resources

- 📄 About Peer Support Groups
- 📄 Joining a Support Group
- 📄 Creating a Forum Post
- 📄 Joining a Group Event

Admin Resources

- 📄 Creating a New Support Group
- 📄 Moderating Support Groups
- 📄 Creating an Admin Forum Post
- 📄 Creating a Group Event

Creating a New Support Group

New support groups can only be created by approved organizations—orgaizations that have the resources, the understanding, and the motivation to see their group succeed. Founding organizations must be ready to undertake the responsibility of fostering growth and promoting participation within their community. By building up a community of active members, the support group has the ability to become self-sufficient and sustainable into the future.

Promoting Active Participation

Although lurking is a welcomed form of participation in peer support groups, active participation is important to stimulate communal growth. Below are a few ways a founder can encourage members to participate.

1. Create positive posts that prompt users to engage with the community.
   What makes you guys feel happy?
   Tell me about your day!
   How are you guys feeling today?
2. Provide words of encouragement and solidarity.
   You are not alone.
   You are loved and appreciated by many people.
3. Let members know they are welcomed to interact.
   This group is to help people like you heal and grow. Everyone here knows how you are feeling, we would love to hear your story.

These types of posts implore members to interact by showing that they are in a caring and understanding environment. Another way to promote participation is to gather dedicated, active members to kickstart the group's growth. Organizations can do this by finding people that apply to the group topic and would like to help grow the community. These people would be encouraged to post fairly often and reply to posts from other members.

Mockup 2. Online support group platform mockup showing a scrolled view of the "Resources" page with the "Creating a New Support Group" resource selected (signed in as group admin).

Mockup 3. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Groups" page.

PLATFORM NAME

GROUPS   RESOURCES   ABOUT US   iceseal44

College Stress
846 members   2 online

College can be a stressful time for many students. You do not have to deal with it alone. You are welcome here in our community.

Forum   Events   Resources

How are you feeling?

POST

🔍 Search forum posts

Finals week is going to kill me
Posted by minnymint3 12 minutes ago

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet elit! Cum sociis natoque penatibus et magnis dis parturient montes, sagittis id consectetur purus ut faucibus pulvinar elementum. Pellentesque pulvinar pellentesque habitant morbi tristique senectus et netus et nulla facilisi etiam dignissim. Egestas sed tempust!

💬 1

We can do this guys!
Posted by maninthecorner 4 hours ago

Arcu odio ut sem nulla pharetra diam. Donec ac odio. Ultrices in. Augue mauris augue!! Nec feugiat nisl pretium fusce id velit ut. Tristique et egestas!

💬 1   ❤️9

just venting
Posted by snowcr3st 2 days ago

Community Guidelines

Rule 1. Treat others with respect.   ⌄
Rule 2. Maintain confidentiality.   ⌄
Rule 3. Welcome others.   ⌄
Rule 4. No talk of illegal activity.   ⌄
Rule 5. No spam or misinformation.   ⌄
Rule 6. No self-promotional content.   ⌄

Future Events Poll

What type of events do you want to see more of in the future?

○ Social events
○ Study nights
○ Game nights
○ Topic discussions
○ Seminars

VOTE

Mockup 4. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Forum" page of a support group.

Mockup 5. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Events" page of a support group.
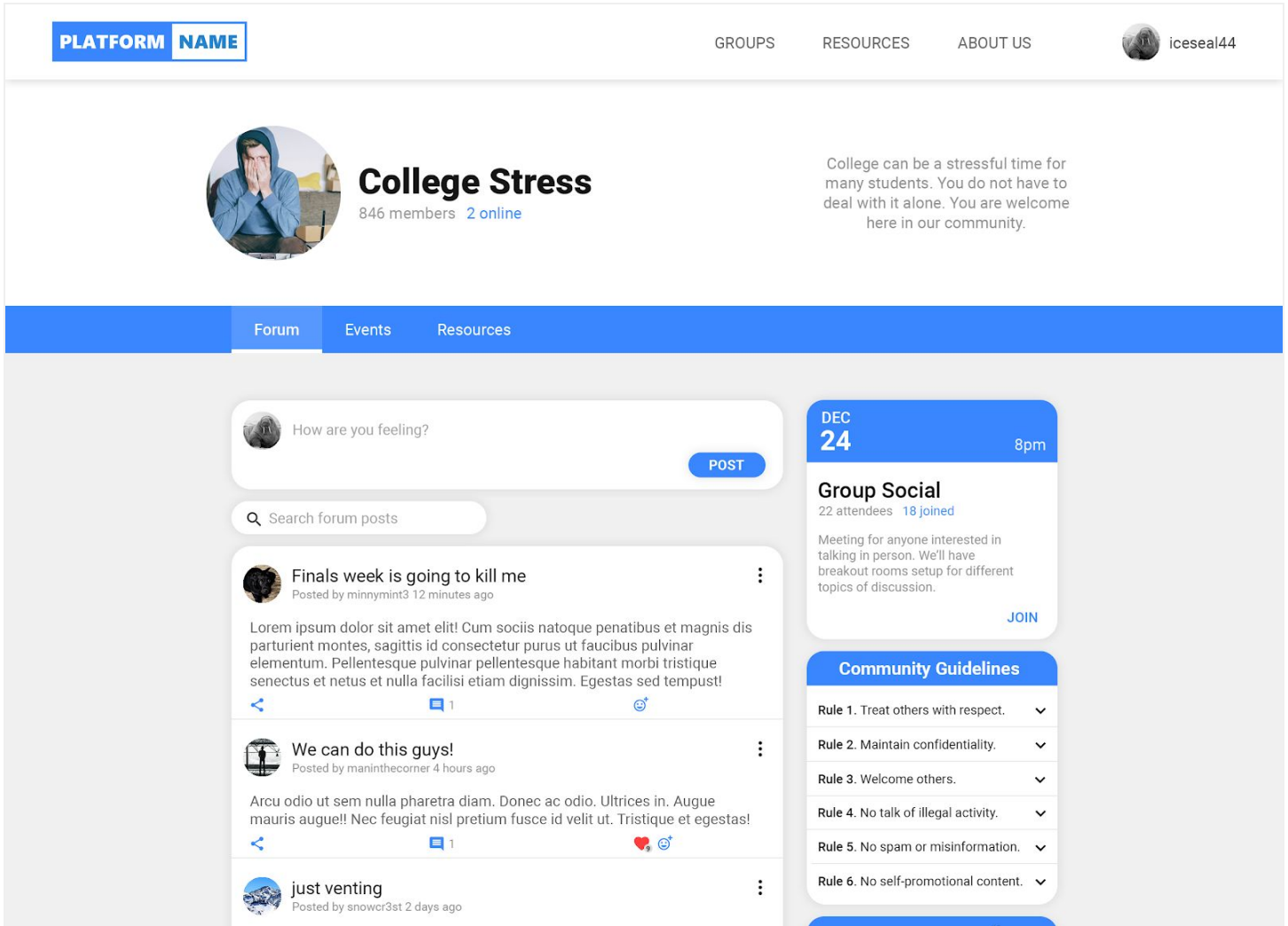
Mockup 6. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Forum" page of a support group on the day of a group event.
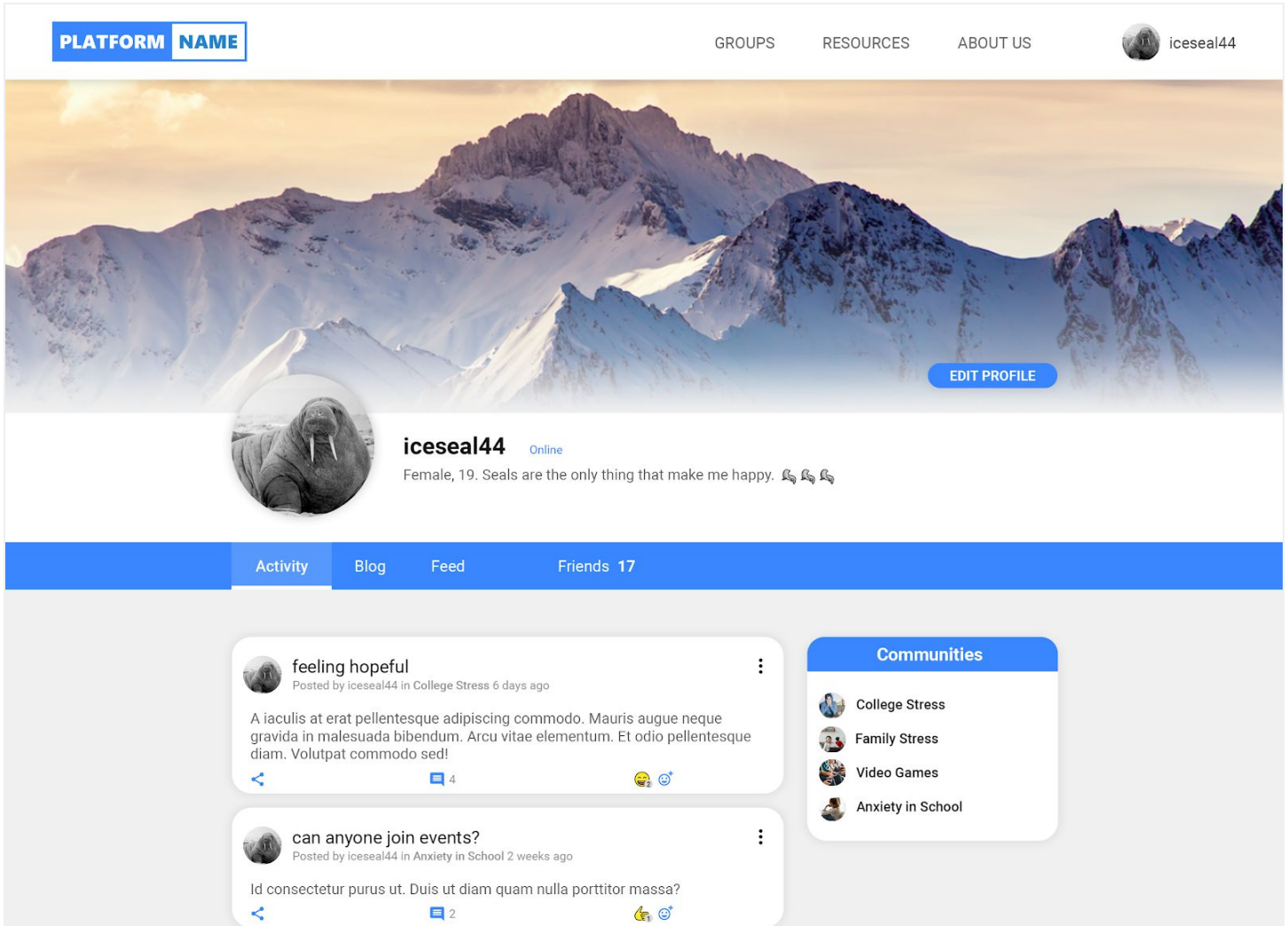
Mockup 7. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Resources" page of a support group.
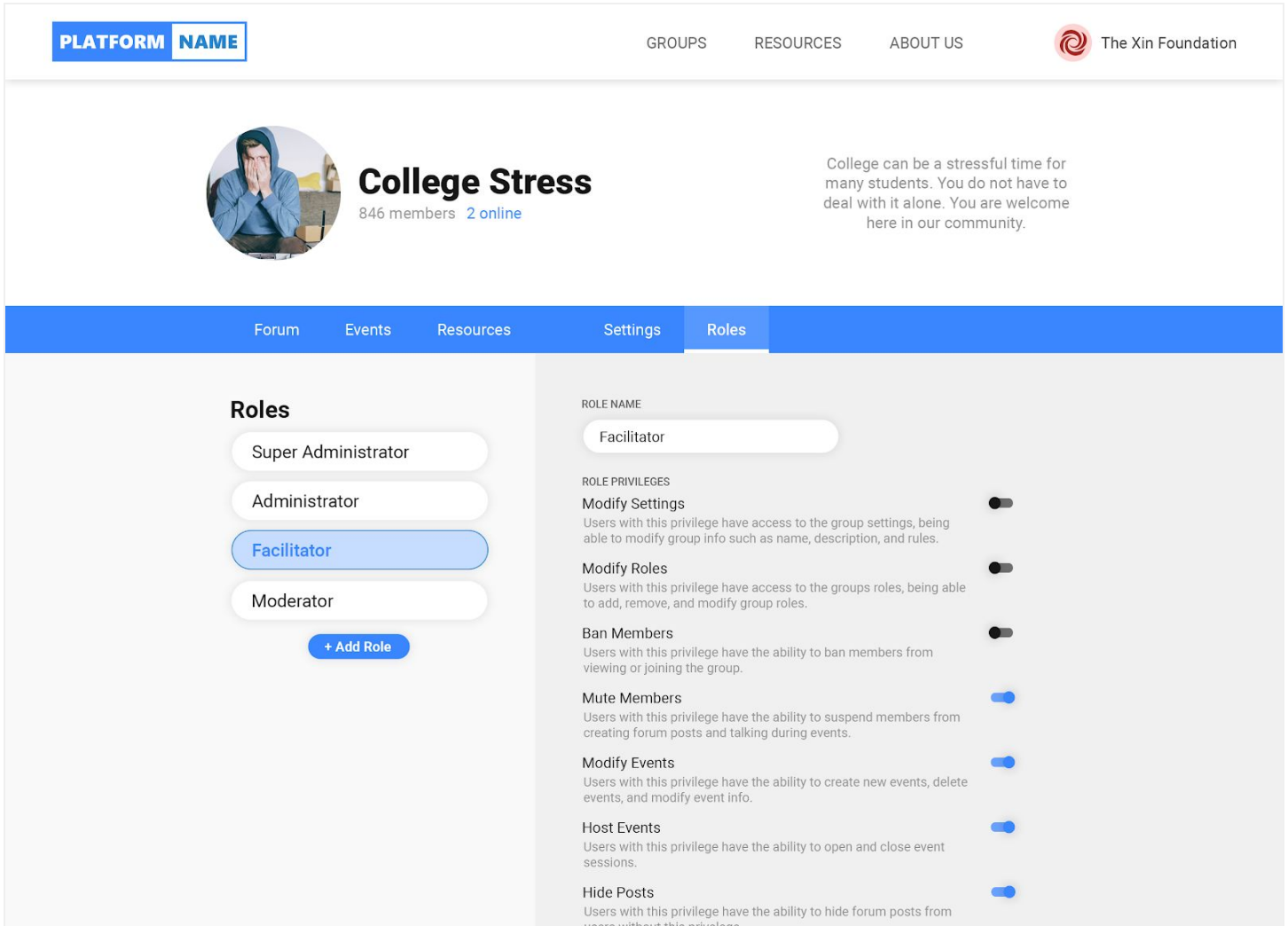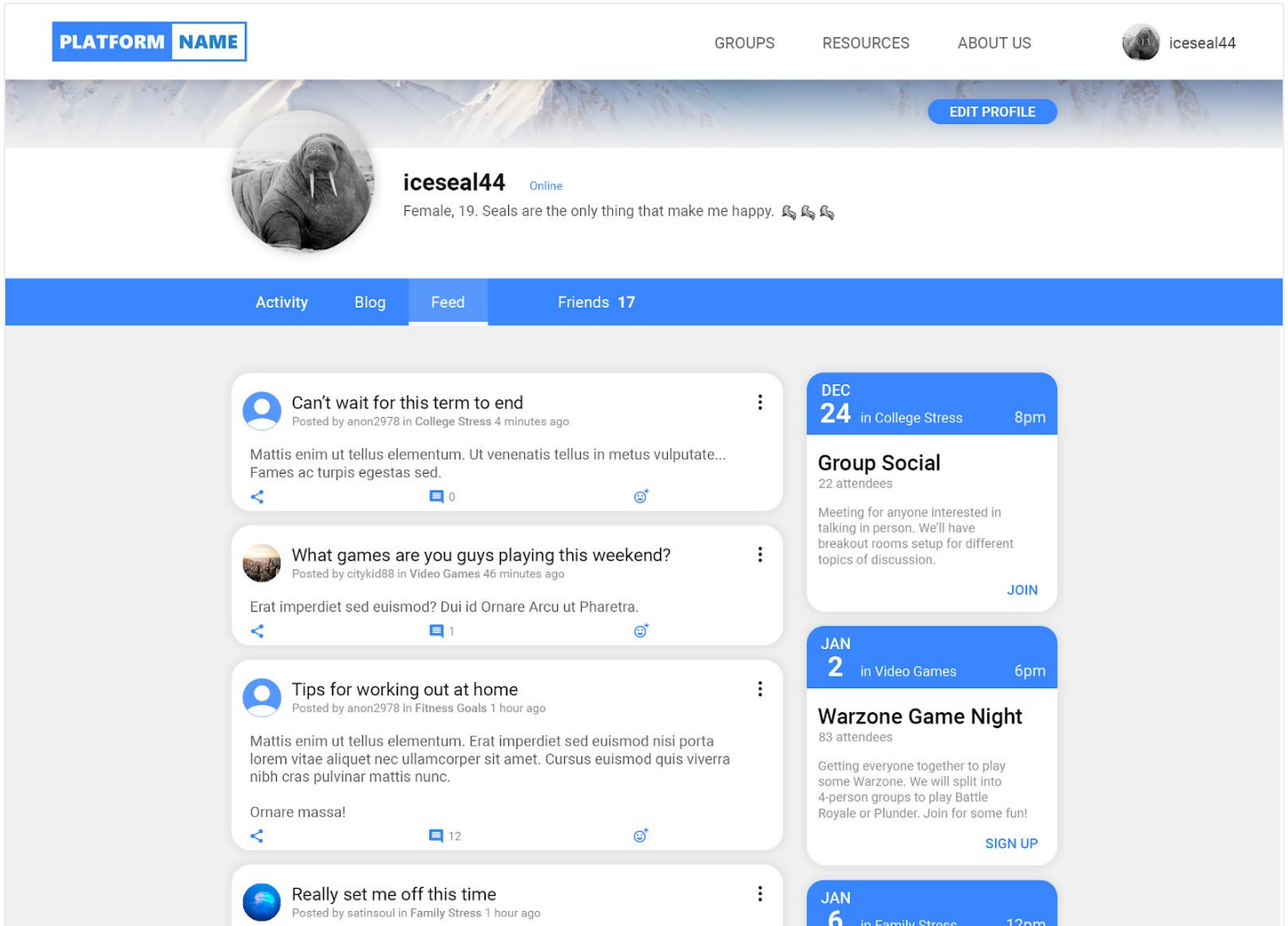
Mockup 8. Online support group platform mockup showing the "Roles" page of a support group (signed in as the group admin).
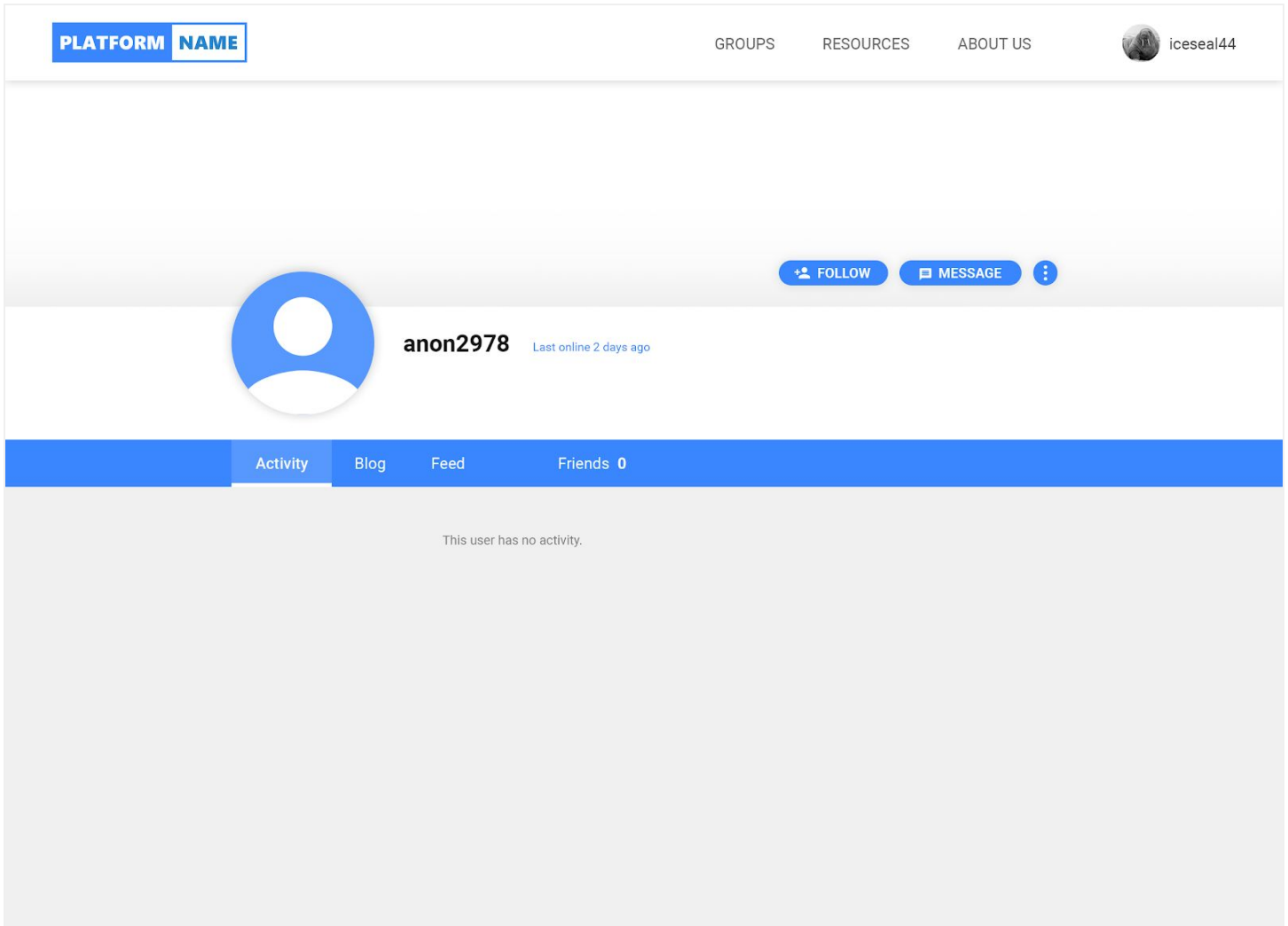
Mockup 9. Online support group platform mockup showing a user account page with the minimum amount of information (signed in as a different user).

Mockup 10. Online support group platform mockup showing a user account page with full account information (signed in as the user).

Mockup 11. Online support group platform mockup showing a scrolled view of a user account page on the "Feed" section (signed in as the user).