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Explaining personality and contextual differences in beneficial role of online versus offline social support: A moderated mediation model

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ABSTRACT

With more than three billion “Netizens” worldwide, online social support obtained through social networking sites (SNS) has a pervasive influence on their users’ affective experiences. Social support generally fosters affective well-being, but such support can also threaten some recipients’ self-esteem that compromises their affective well-being. However, little is known of whether (a) this self-esteem threat varied by the mode (i.e., online vs. offline) of supportive interactions, and (b) such variations were explained by public self-consciousness across distinct modes of supportive interactions. A moderated mediation model was formulated to test these hypothesized personality and contextual differences using a quasi-experimental design. The results revealed that the mode of supportive interactions moderated the relationship between self-esteem and public self-consciousness, indicating that individuals higher in self-esteem are less likely to feel exposed to the potentially unfavorable evaluations in online (vs. offline) supportive interactions. Moreover, the results showed that the heightened levels of public self-consciousness explained the positive link between self-esteem and negative affect in offline but not online supportive interactions, providing further evidence that social support obtained through SNS is likely superior to that obtained through face-to-face interactions.

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1. Introduction

Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp—the most popular social networking sites (SNS)— have attracted more than 900 million active users in recent years (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Facebook, 2015; Statista, 2015). In the present Cyber age, SNS have become a popular platform for engaging in supportive interactions, which involve communication and exchange of social support among people. Social support refers to the emotional, informational, or tangible assistance received from others (Thoits, 2010), and a social interaction refers to an encounter with another person(s) in which both parties attend to one another and adjust their behavior in response to one another (Reis, Nezlek, & Wheeler, 1980; Wheeler & Nezlek, 1977). These psychological constructs have been proposed several decades ago but are still deemed applicable to the Cyber age. As SNS render their users considerable control over when and how to seek help (Pierce, 2009; Tanis, 2007), online supportive

interactions exert a pervasive influence on the users’ affective well-being, which refers to the experience of high levels of positive affect (e.g., joyful, amazed) but low levels of negative affect (e.g., irritable, upset; Davison, Pennebaker, & Dickerson, 2000). Despite the growth of research interest in SNS use and affective well-being, two important research questions remained unanswered: In what ways do the effects of social support on affective well-being differ between online and offline supportive interactions? What psychological mechanisms can explain the potential distinctions in these effects between the two modes of supportive interactions?

To address these important but unexplored questions, the present study put forward a new conceptual model that guides the testing of (a) the hypothesized personality and contextual differences in the beneficial role of supportive interactions on affective well-being, and (b) the underlying psychological mechanisms that accounted for such differences. The hypotheses derived from this new model were tested using a quasi-experimental design. Addressing these timely issues may not only provide insights into the nature and benefits of online social support in the Cyber age, but also have major implications for research and the delivery of social care via SNS to the general public.

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1.1. Inconsistent views on social support effectiveness in offline versus online contexts

Previous studies have yielded inconsistent conclusions regarding the relationships of online and offline supportive interactions with affective well-being, suggesting considerable variations in the beneficial role of social support across distinct modes of supportive interactions. On the basis of the premise that online social support is a mere extension of offline social support, the *supplementary hypothesis* states that social support obtained through online platforms is less effective in enhancing affective well-being than that obtained through face-to-face interactions (Liu & Yu, 2013; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Reisner, 2015). This is because online social support facilitates the recipients' access to more resources in the offline environment, and it is the support obtained in the offline setting that exerts direct effects on affective well-being (Liu & Yu, 2013).

From an alternative perspective, the *threat-reduction hypothesis* proposes that SNS enable their users to remain visually anonymous when exchanging online social support, but such benefits are unique in offline supportive interactions (Pierce, 2009; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). Hence, online and offline social support may play different roles in bolstering the affective well-being of SNS users (Davison et al., 2000; Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013; Tanis & Postmes, 2005). These inconsistent views are yet to be resolved, and some personality and contextual characteristics may account for the inconsistencies.

1.2. Proposal of a new moderated mediation model of social support

A moderated mediation model has been formulated to resolve this controversial issue by proposing that (a) the beneficial role of social support may vary among individuals across distinct contexts (i.e., online vs. offline mode of supportive interactions), and (b) some psychological mechanisms may explain such personality and contextual differences (see Fig. 1). These proposals are derived primarily from the threat-to-self-esteem model, which highlights the role of self-esteem in explaining individual differences in the beneficial role of social support (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982). Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall sense of self-worth (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995), and high self-esteem is generally a psychological resource that protects individuals from having low self-worth that elicits psychological distress (Arndt & Goldenberg, 2002). However, some emerging evidence indicates that high self-esteem can also backfire in certain supportive interactions by exerting adverse effects on the support recipients' affective well-being (Cheng, Chen, & LuoKogan, 2008; Gleason, Iida, Shrout, & Bolger, 2008; Maisel & Gable, 2009).

According to the threat-to-self-esteem model, the self-esteem level of support recipients influences their evaluations of the social appropriateness for enlisting help and their susceptibility to the self-threat derived from securing others' help (Fisher et al., 1982). Specifically, individuals high in self-esteem may interpret the

receipt of support from others as a sign of personal weaknesses (Kernis, 2003; Lepore, Glaser, & Roberts, 2008; Sharp et al., 2015), and such an interpretation threatens their overall self-evaluations and reduces their affective well-being.

The newly proposed moderated mediation model puts forward that the extent of self-esteem threat encountered in offline versus online supportive interactions may be distinct due to some major differences between the two contexts (Fisher et al., 1982). A fundamental contextual difference is that the interlocutors are physically present in offline but not online supportive interactions. Another fundamental difference is that in social support transactions, interlocutors can use a combination of verbal and nonverbal communication mediums (e.g. body language, tone of voice, demeanor, and facial expressions) in offline supportive interactions (Kock, 2004; Taylor, 2007). In contrast, SNS users tend to apply less communication mediums in online supportive interactions (Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011; Wright & Bell, 2003). For instance, these users generally prefer seeking and receiving social support using text messages and graphical representations (e.g., emoticons) instead of video-streaming because text-based mediums involve lower transmission costs and network bandwidth usage than video-based mediums (Lenhart, Smith, Anderson, Duggan, & Perrin, 2015). On the basis of these theories and findings, the threat-to-self-esteem model is predicted to be less applicable to online (vs. offline) supportive interactions, but scant effort has been made to test the relevance of this model to online contexts.

1.2.1. Hypothesized moderating role of mode of supportive interactions

In our new moderated mediation model, the mode of supportive interactions is proposed as a moderator. This notion stems from previous studies, which have identified characteristics that distinguish online supportive interactions from offline ones (Rice & Gattiker, 2001; Walther, 2011). Specifically, the Internet provides users with the option of using minimal visual cues and maintaining anonymity when seeking social support, but this option is almost unavailable in an offline setting (Tanis, 2007). Compared to offline supportive interactions, individuals engaged in online supportive interactions are more likely to avoid inner conflicts between their self-identity and the socially accepted standards (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). To cope with life stress, online social support may thus be an appealing alternative for individuals who receive help because an online environment secures their self-identity without worrying about the evaluations by others (Davison et al., 2000; Idriss, Kvedar, & Watson, 2009; McKenna & Bargh, 1998), thus protecting the support recipients' from experiencing psychological distress such as negative affect.

Such empirical evidence points to the possible contextual differences in public self-consciousness, which refers to individuals' awareness of their public self-aspects or concern over their presentation to others (Scheier & Carver, 1985). With a stronger motivation to maintain or protect their self-worth, individuals higher (vs. lower) in self-esteem tend to be more concerned about whether their behavior is socially acceptable, and thus they are more susceptible to esteem-related stress and pressure (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Deci & Ryan, 1995). Such characteristics resemble those of individuals with heightened public self-consciousness, who tend to adhere to the social expectations of behavior and be more accurate in the perception of others' evaluations (Scheier & Carver, 1985; Walther, 2011). In this light, individuals higher in self-esteem are hypothesized to have higher levels of public self-consciousness in offline supportive interactions because they are more sensitive to the evaluations by others who are physically present.

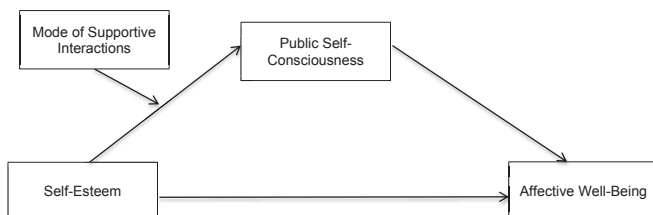


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework of the proposed moderated mediation model of social support.

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