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Impression management concerns and support-seeking behavior on social network sites

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A B S T R A C T

This study investigates whether and how impression management concerns shape ways people seek social support on social network sites (SNS). The data from a laboratory experiment ($N = 176$) show that the importance of impression management goals change depending on the publicity of the message, and that the amount of effort in message composition increases as the severity of the problem increases. This relationship becomes greater when people use a public as opposed to a private SNS channel to communicate a stressful situation. The more effort people put into message composition, the more likely they are to produce a sophisticated support-seeking message that serves an additional goal of impression management. This study contributes to understanding supportive communication occurring on social network sites.

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Social network sites (SNS) are communication platforms where people can form and maintain a wide network of social connections (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011). Studies have indicated that SNS users receive multiple types of support from their SNS friends (Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Oh, Lauckner, Boehmer, Fewins-Bliss, & Li, 2013). Although existing SNS studies suggest that people emotionally benefit from having many SNS friends and engaging in various networking activities on social network sites, most of these studies focused on the receiver's perception of available social support or positive outcomes of having such perception (e.g., Lee, Noh, & Koo, 2013; Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013). There has thus far not been a study examining how people compose the messages they post on social network sites.

Moreover, previous studies have suggested that people manage their impression on social network sites by disclosing positive aspects of themselves (e.g., Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012; Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). Since humans constantly manage the impression they make on others in order to maintain an ideal self-image (Goffman, 1959; Leary & Kowalski, 1990), it is natural that people are concerned about the impression they are making, especially when they reveal their problems to others (Albrecht &

Goldsmith, 2003). However, it remains unknown how the general motivation of impression management on social network sites shapes ways people seek social support on social network sites, and how features of computer-mediated communication (CMC) facilitate deliberate composition of the support-seeking messages.

People pursue more than one goal during interpersonal communication (Caughlin, 2010; Samp & Solomon, 2005), and different goals are likely to emerge depending on the context of communication and the primary goal of an interaction. Focusing on a specific type of communication that aims to gain support from others, the present study addresses a simple question: How do people communicate their needs for support on social network sites? More specifically, this study tests whether the severity of the stressful situation motivates people to strongly pursue the support-receiving goal, and whether the expected publicity of the support-seeking message further motivates people to pursue the impression management goal in addition to the support-receiving goal. By using an asynchronous CMC channel that allows more time for message production and edits than do face-to-face or synchronous channels (Walther, 2007), this study also examines whether individuals put more time and effort into CMC message composition when they are motivated to pursue multiple goals as opposed to when they are not motivated to do so, and whether such effort leads to the production of sophisticated CMC messages that effectively address those goals.

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The present study will contribute to the theoretical advancement of social support and supportive communication by providing a theory-grounded explanation of support-activating behavior on social network sites. Although existing studies on supportive communication have examined the quality of supportive messages and the characteristics of providers and situations associated with the quality of those messages, little is known about how people solicit support from others (Lim, Teo, & Zhao, 2013; Taylor et al., 2004). It is often considered natural that people will automatically seek support when they need it. An overlooked fact is that support seekers can also frame and communicate their problem differently to receive optimal support. By examining how multiple goals shape the way people present stressful situations and seek support on social network sites, this study will contribute to a better understanding of how support seekers can influence the quality of supportive interaction.

Findings from the present study will also contribute to the body of knowledge on how people utilize social network sites to maintain psychological well-being. Although SNS researchers have advocated the benefits of online social networking in promoting psychological well-being, there have been few theoretical explanations of the unique nature of social network sites pertaining to sharing everyday stressors and exchanging social support. A majority of SNS studies on social support have associated the characteristics of social ties or relationships with perception of social support and psychological well-being. This simply reflects an untested assumption of sociological studies that "merely having these ties may have benefits" (Taylor et al., 2004, p. 355). Exploring how people represent stressful events on social network sites and examining how affordances of those sites highlight certain communication goals may help us better understand the unique opportunities and constraints of social network sites in delivering needed emotional support.

1. Computer-mediated social support on social network sites

The concept of social support has been widely studied among social psychologists due to its key role in alleviating the negative impact of stressful events on physical as well as psychological health (see Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010 for a recent meta-analysis). In general, social supports are resources exchanged between individuals with the purpose of helping each other (House & Kahn, 1985).

With the emergence of online platforms built for social networking, researchers have revealed how people utilize social network sites to exchange social support (e.g., Kim & Lee, 2011; Oh et al., 2013). Social network sites are communication platforms that offer various communication technologies for forming and maintaining "a wide network of social connections" (Ellison et al., 2011, pp. 875–876). A recent report showed that SNS users perceived a greater level of social support than did general Internet users (Hampton et al., 2011). The perception of social support has been associated with positive psychological outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem, self-efficacy, and subjective well-being (Oh et al., 2013; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014; Phua, 2013).

Despite a wealth of studies on support-related benefits of online social networking, only a few exploratory studies have examined how people actually solicit help on social network sites (e.g., Ellison, Gray, Vitak, Lampe, & Fiore, 2013; Jung, Gray, Lampe, & Ellison, 2013). There is a need to develop a theory-driven framework to understand the support-seeking behavior on social network sites and predict features of the messages people post on those sites to activate support from their SNS friends.

2. Support seeking behavior on on social network sites

A considerable body of literature on supportive communication has suggested the characteristics of providers, seekers, and situations that are associated with accomplishing desirable support outcomes. Most of these studies focused on either understanding communication elements of effective comfort (e.g., Burleson, 2003; High & Dillard, 2012; MacGeorge, Lichtman, & Pressey, 2002) or exploring provider characteristics or situations associated with the support-providing behavior (e.g., Burleson, 2003; Jung, 1988; MacGeorge et al., 2002).

While many studies were conducted to understand support-providing communication, only a few attempts were made to understand support seekers and their support-soliciting communication. Although support is more likely to be given to those who actively seek it (Eastin & LaRose, 2005), existing studies treated support seekers as either passive processors of supportive messages or ineffective communicators whose support-seeking attempts are often hindered by other concerns. A relatively small number of studies have investigated the motivations or concerns behind support-seeking behavior (e.g., Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Derlega, Winstead, Oldfield, & Barbee, 2003).

Moreover, new communication technologies and affordances now available on social network sites provide new or previously rare contexts for exchanging thoughts and feelings (Yzer & Southwell, 2008). Especially, social network sites provide users with instant opportunities to publicly share their everyday hassles and mild-to-moderate problems with a large audience. Although daily stressful events have a less significant impact upon individuals than negative major life events (Flett, Blankstein, Hicken, & Watson, 1995), they occur more frequently and therefore are often the primary determinants of mood and psychological well-being (Blankstein & Flett, 1992). Daily hassles and negative feelings are also less visible to others, and therefore elicit less support from others, unless people actively express their need for support (Flett et al., 1995).

Unlike traditional CMC support groups that are oriented to particular illnesses or problems, people can share a wide range of daily stressful stories in a way that satisfies their needs and concerns using social network sites. Broadcasting through social network sites also allows users to share their small moments and minor stressors with a large and diverse audience, which in the old days was only possible through mass media (i.e., appearing on national television). Minor hassles and difficulties can be publicly communicated on social network sites in a more casual way without overburdening the audience who might feel obligated to comfort their distressed friend if they were communicating about it privately or face-to-face.

This opportunity to easily and casually reaching a large, diverse, and "ill-defined" audience, on the other hand, can also constrain users' support-seeking behavior. On social network sites, the characteristics or the size of the audience is less likely to be certain as they are no longer identifiable by space and time (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013). Thus, SNS users are likely to form expectations and perceptions of the audience based on the channel and affordance they select for communication, and this also happens when people seek social support on social network sites. In other word, the context of public communication would trigger impression-relevant concerns and make the participants carefully produce a support-seeking message. Unlike intimate contexts of sharing emotions, such as crying or yelling at a friend about how stressed and upset one is, public representation of a stressful event is a more complex task requiring more care, particularly in times of stress. This may lead people to reframe their story, rationalize their feelings, and in turn, makes their message more "sophisticated,"