With a little help of my peers. The supportive role of online contacts for the unemployed

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ABSTRACT

Unemployment is an unfortunate reality, whose overcoming often depends on social support, among other factors. Online social media, such as social network sites and communities, may offer an additional source of such support for unemployed people. This paper posits that online social support plays an important role in unemployed people's ability to cope with unemployment and search for new employment. The paper develops and tests a structural equation model of the influence of online-mediated, enabling and caring social support on job search self-efficacy, which may foster the job search behaviour of unemployed persons. In addition, we control for gender, age, user experience, and attitude towards the Internet. Based on 1322 telephone interviews with unemployed individuals in Germany, we find that online social support drives job search behaviour. Our results show that social support derived from new information and communication technology counteracts the adverse effect of being unemployed to a certain degree. Enabling support and caring support experienced through social media both lead to higher job search self-efficacy, which, in turn, fosters job search behaviour. Furthermore, our model shows that these relationships differ by gender, age, user experience, and attitude towards the Internet.

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1. Introduction

Unemployment is generally an unpleasant life experience (Jahoda, 1982; Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). In addition to the obvious loss of income, unemployed individuals may lose contacts with work colleagues and thus leave social networks and risk becoming socially isolated (Kronauer, 2010). Moreover, the loss of income and social networks from unemployment may have adverse effects on individuals' social and psychological well-being (Wanberg, Zhu, Kanfer, & Zhang, 2011). For the unemployed and their families, social support thus plays an important role in their ability to cope with unemployment and search for new employment (Hanisch, 1999; McKee-Ryan et al., 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Research shows that social support improves both job search intensity and quality and provides the unemployed with social capital to open up access to information and career opportunities (Wanberg, 2012, p. 377). Friends, family, and acquaintances in one's social network may provide enabling and instrumental social support, such as giving advice, information, assistance, and feedback on job search activities, enhancing job search quality (Van Hooft, Wanberg, & van Hoye, 2013). Social networks help a substantial number of job seekers find (re)employment (Franzen & Hangartner, 2006). Furthermore, social support increases the likelihood that individuals serendipitously find work through social connections (McDonald, 2010). In addition to providing instrumental assistance, social contacts also offer caring and emotional social support, such as encouragement and psychological nurturing (Blustein, Kozan, & Connors-Kellgren, 2013, p. 263). Social support can thus increase self-esteem and self-efficacy (Ellis & Taylor, 1983; Mallickrodt & Fretz, 1988). According to the literature review of McKee-Ryan et al. (2005), core self-evaluations ameliorate adverse psychological symptoms during unemployment and allow the unemployed to better cope with unemployment.

The Internet has led to a large number of changes and innovations related to the experience of being unemployment. With the arrival of user-generated forms of Internet communication technologies, such as blogs and microblogs, social networking sites, virtual worlds, peer-to-peer file sharing sites, and wikis, which require noticeably less technical expertise to (actively) participate in than previous iterations of the Internet, the Internet has become a focal point for most human activities and interests. Social media have changed how we search for information and communicate with relatives and friends (Ross et al., 2009; Walther, Van Der Heide, Kim, Westerman, & Tong, 2008). The Internet has altered

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how people seek employment, which has made using Internet technologies essential to avoid 'falling behind' in the employment search (Boswell, Zimmerman & Swider, 2011; Van Rooy, Alonso, & Fairchild, 2003, p. 173). The most successful job search methods combine formal and informal job search strategies (Kuhn & Skuterud, 2000; Van Rooy et al., 2003), a finding that has become more important with the social evolution of the Internet (Wanberg, 2012, p. 381). Social networking sites provide bridges for job searchers to reach valuable embedded resources and distant parts of their social networks that might contain unique and valuable job information (Fountain, 2005).

The help from other people, mediated via the Internet, may also provide caring social support for the unemployed in the form of websites, message boards, online communities, and personal, mediated interactions, which enhance self-acceptance and self-efficacy and reduce social isolation. The online space has several advantages, such as accessibility, anonymity, invisibility, neutralised statuses, multiconversing capabilities, and archival search capabilities, as well as greater individual control over the time and pace of interactions, which complement more traditional forms of support (Barak, 2007; Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 2000; Meier, 2004). Some individuals may prefer silent lurking, whereas others may receive additional benefits by actively interacting with others (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011).

In summary, various Internet applications may offer additional sources of social support for the unemployed, which may contribute to the social (re)integration of individuals in danger of social isolation and despondency and facilitate the search for new employment. Online-enabled social networking may thus foster individuals' psychological stability by enhancing feelings of belonging and efficacy. To be able to actively search for new employment, individuals must feel able and motivated to face the challenges and frustrations of the job search process. Participation in and support from social media can therefore form a linkage between personal encouragement (the belief in self-capabilities) and life-situation improvement (in the form of employment).

In this study, based on social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1999), we hypothesise that contextual, online-mediated, enabling and caring social support influences job search self-efficacy, which fosters the job search behaviour of unemployed persons. We are interested in the question of how online social support influences unemployed individuals' job-search self-efficacy and how this self-efficacy, in turn, affects their job search behaviour. By postulating that social support affects unemployed individuals' job search behaviour, which is mediated by job-search self-efficacy, we expand current research on unemployment by including the role of online social media. We see considerable potential to extend research into the role of social media in balancing the negative consequences of unemployment. Both academics and practitioners should find it relevant to understand the role of social media in relation to the job search process and to identify ways of reducing and buffering the adverse effects of unemployment.

2. Literature review and research model

2.1. A social support perspective on coping with unemployment

Becoming unemployed and living through prolonged periods of inadequate financial means and diminished social networks and social contact is experienced by many as a time of deep personal crisis (for a review see Wanberg, 2012). Research shows that social support helps people cope better with suffering and sorrow and that social support networks offer special support resources (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Wills & Shinar, 2000).

Previous research identifies a wide range of potential types of support offered by the Internet. In particular, socially disadvantaged persons can benefit from participating in social media. If desired, the anonymity that social media provide, the high level of control that participants have over their social interactions, and the simplicity with which one can find like-minded people contribute to this potential (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Barak, 2007; Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997; McKenna & Bargh, 2000). In their research on virtual support groups, Ben-Ze'ev (2003) and Davis, Flett, and Besser (2002) show that online media can strengthen the perception of emotional proximity and openness. Accordingly, social media can become a protective environment in which disadvantaged persons can find new social contacts, experience social support, and partake in other online activities (Amichai-Hamburger & Furnham, 2007; Attard & Coulson, 2012). Online social contacts may prove particularly useful when existing networks are unable to provide sufficient support (Chung, 2013; Heaney & Israel, 2002; McLaughlin et al., 2012). A number of studies examine the motives for user participation in online support groups, such as to exchange information and advice (Buchanan & Coulson, 2007; Meier, Lyons, Frydman, Forlenza, & Rimer, 2007; Rodgers & Chen, 2005) or to exchange emotions (Buchanan & Coulson, 2007; Rodgers & Chen, 2005; Welbourne, Blanchard, & Wadsworth, 2013). Enabling social support helps individuals solve or rectify problems causing distress. By contrast, caring support offers encouragement and comfort without any direct effort to solve the problems causing discomfort (Cutrona, 1990; Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Wills, 1985).

2.1.1. Enabling social support

Enabling support typically includes informational and instrumental support. Informational support consists of the communicative process of conveying knowledge and advice that is useful for solving a problem (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). In the context of unemployment, informational support might include the mediation of information about various job opportunities and resources and competences required for the job search process. Instrumental support includes practical or material help, and related to unemployment, might entail help writing a resume or an application, financial help, or training.

Research shows that enabling support can diminish the negative effects of the job search process and unemployment by mitigating or eliminating the effects of low self-efficacy and self-esteem on individuals (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lackovic-Grgin & Dekovic, 1996; Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Eden and Aviram (1993) report that jobseekers who receive supportive resources through a two-month training program have higher self-efficacy than jobseekers who do not receive such training. Holmstrom, Russell & Clare, 2013 similarly focus on the effects of enabling support on unemployed people and show that informational support can lead to higher job search self-efficacy. In turn, high self-efficacy also exerts a positive influence on behavioural intentions, leading to more active job search behaviour.

2.1.2. Caring social support

Positive relationships improve the experience of unemployment because some of the most difficult aspects of being unemployed include losing opportunities to socialise, losing large portions of social networks, and feeling disconnected from society (Blustein et al., 2013, p. 260). Research indicates that social media is instrumental in individuals' ability to maintain and, to a lesser degree, create relationships, virtual friendships, and communities (Brandtzæg, 2012; Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008). Furthermore, a positive relationship also exists between the use of social media and the perception of social support (Leimeister, Schweizer,