Notification pending: Online social support from close and nonclose relational ties via Facebook

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has often assumed social support as a unique affordance of close relationships. Computer-mediated communication alters the availability of relationally nonclose others, and may to enable additional sources or social support through venues like social networking sites. Eighty-eight college students completed a questionnaire based on their most recent Facebook status updates and the comments those updates generated. Items queried participants' perception of each response as well as the participants' relationship closeness with the responder. Individuals perceived as relationally close provide significant social support via Facebook; however, individuals perceived to be relationally nonclose provided equal social support online. While SNSs has not eroded the importance of close relationships, results demonstrate the social media tools may allow for social support to be obtained from nonclose as well as close relationships, with access to a significant proportion of nonclose relationships.

1. Introduction

The ability and benefit of one's social network to provide social support has been well-established. Earlier studies indicated the benefit of having nearby family and close friends (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987; Griffith, 1985), while more recent research has identified the value of family and close friends for emotional well-being even at long distances (Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Becker, Craig, Gilchrist, & Haigh, 2009). However, the Internet has radically increased access to and exchange of social support (Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002), and scholars have increasingly sought to understand how computer-mediated communication (CMC) can facilitate social support processes for individuals, particularly via online support groups (e.g., Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright, 2000) and personal blogs (Rains & Keating, 2011).

Yet relatively little attention has been given to social support processes occurring in social network sites (SNSs). Though nascent research has indicated individuals can receive social support via SNSs (Olson, Liu, & Shultz, 2012), questions remain regarding the meaningfulness of this social support. Unlike traditional, static media, SNSs like Facebook and Hyves give an individual the ability

to access disparate and geographically distant social networks for support (Marwick & boyd, 2011). On SNSs, friends can have varied degrees of closeness ranging from someone the user has never met to the closest relational partner (e.g., spouse, child, or parent; boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Given SNSs allow individuals to readily communicate with large swaths of their personal relationships at low costs, new questions emerge regarding how and from whom social support is obtained via social media. Though early work into social support predicted close relational ties were most effective at providing support (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Granovetter, 1973), recent literature has emphasized the accessibility and utility of relationally nonclose partners for social support (Rains & Keating, 2011). Given SNSs allow individuals to easily traverse their social networks (boyd & Ellison, 2007) and seek resources from a broader audience in their network relative to face-to-face interactions, SNSs may increasingly change how individuals access their personal relationships, thereby allowing individuals to seek and receive social support from nonclose relationships as well as close relationships.

This research sought to explore how and from whom social support is sought and received via a SNS (Facebook), and in doing so helps revisit and reconsider conceptualizations of social support and relational closeness. As SNSs connect individuals to both relationally close and relationally nonclose ties (Valenzuela, Park,

& Kee, 2009), sites like Facebook afford a unique opportunity to empirically assess how individuals are contacting their broad networks for social support. Exploring social support in a popular SNS also presents a means to explore how and from whom social support is received online—an area scholars (Wright, Rains, & Banas, 2010) have noted merits further research. Examining social support receipt and seeking behaviors on SNSs presents implications for understanding the effect relational closeness has on social support and its resultant health benefits.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social support

Social support is a critical element and goal of human interaction. *Social support* can be defined as information and actions that cause a person to believe she or he is "cared for and loved... esteemed and valued... [and] belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation" (Cobb, 1976, p. 300). Cutrona and Suhr (1992) conceptualized two broad categories of support encompassing five types of support. *Action-facilitating support* involves helping solve problems for the stressed person through advice, facts, or feedback (informational support) and/or providing needed goods or services (tangible support). *Nurturant support* provides comfort and consolation through expressions of caring and concern (emotional support), providing a sense of belonging with those of similar concerns (network support), and/or expressing the distressed person's value to others (esteem support). Social support research within the field of communication has been particularly interested in informational and emotional support due to their frequency in support groups and communicative nature (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999).

Vaux (1988) suggested social support is not only a set of behaviors but also a process of seeking, offering, and evaluating supportive behaviors, often reflected in the communicative exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages. Whether understood as behaviors, a process, or both, it is clear social support is arbitrated through personal relationships (Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010). Recent research has emphasized the strength of interpersonal relationships and the varying social support offered.

2.1.1. Relational closeness

Recent work has noted the differences in social support offered based on the strength of an interpersonal relationship, often drawing from Granovetter's (1973) weak tie theory to conceptualize dyadic relationships as either weak or strong. Though weak tie theory focuses on the structure and effects of relational networks, recent studies investigate social support framed in Granovetter's use the level of relational closeness. Strong ties, or *close relationships*, are conceptualized as individuals with whom is strongly connected, often including family members and close friends (Adelman et al., 1987; Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Wright et al., 2010), and are distinguished by high levels of trust, relational intimacy, and support (Granovetter, 1973). Contrarily, weak ties, or *nonclose relationships*, are conceptualized as, "individuals who are not interpersonally close, but with whom people interact in a somewhat limited way within certain contexts, such as neighbors, service providers, and counselors" (Wright et al., 2010, p. 607), often distinguished by low levels of trust, relational intimacy, and support (Granovetter, 1973).

As evidenced in these conceptualizations, relational closeness is best-determined idiosyncratically for each relational dyad; but close relationships generally include intimate friends and family members while nonclose relationships typically include acquaintances and a broader friend network (Ballard-Reisch, Rozzell, Heldman, & Kramer, 2011). As noted by MacGeorge, Feng, and Burleson (2011):

> Support can come from a wide variety of sources, including everyone from close friends and relatives to acquaintances ... However, given that close relationships are generally seen as the locus of intimacy and care (McConatha, Lightner, & Deaner, 1994), it is not surprising to find that immediate family members, friends, and romantic partners are reported as the most frequent sources of support across cultures (e.g., Cortina, 2004) (p. 330).

We examine ties that have traditionally been considered close and nonclose and their social supportiveness in emergent media, specifically the SNS Facebook. Thus, the present study focuses on analyzing the level of relationship, thereby focusing on social support seeking and provision while following Sawhney's (2007) suggestion to avoid putting new technology in the foreground.

2.1.2. Social support via close relationships

To date, most research on social support has focused on strong ties (Rains & Keating, 2011; Wright & Miller, 2010), operating under the assumption that strong ties are uniquely able to provide social support. These close relationship partners have been repeatedly indicated as the primary providers of social support (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003; Griffith, 1985). Access to and social support from those whom we are close to has been empirically associated with reduced loneliness (Serovich, Kimberly, Mosack, & Lewis, 2001) and reduced depression (Metts, Manns, & Kruzic, 1996). Wellman and Gulia (1999) noted, "strong, intimate ties can be maintained online as well as face-to-face" (p. 181), acknowledging the ability of computer-mediated communication tools in allowing individuals to access strong ties for social support. Our close relational partners provide meaningful social support; however, weaker relationships are increasingly seen as sources of support as well.

2.1.3. Social support via weak/distant relationships

Though weak ties may represent connections to others outside of one's immediate social network, they can be identified by their lack of relational closeness to an individual (Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 1995). Originally, Granovetter (1973) suggested that these weak relationship partners were able to offer only low levels of support. More recently, several scholars have noted the ability of these nonclose relational partners to provide social support, regardless of network structure, particularly online (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright, 2000), altering our understanding of the role and abilities of weak ties. Specifically, research has shown that online support groups, comprised of geographically distant individuals brought together based on a common ailment, affliction, or interest, often provide significant social support to members (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wellman, 1997; Wright & Bell, 2003; Wright et al., 2010).

Four factors have been suggested to explain why weak ties have evolved beyond their initial explication to provide social support (Wright et al., 2010). Weak ties support may reflect greater heterogeneity over strong ties, facilitating support from more diverse individuals who may therefore be able to offer support for unique problems (Adelman et al., 1987) or serve as a greater means of social comparison than an individual's homogeneous strong ties (Helgeson & Gottlieb, 2000). Additionally, weak ties may reduce the risk associated with seeking social support, as individuals may disclose stigmatizing information or conditions to seek support, thereby influencing the relationships and future interactions expected of strong ties (Brashers, Neidig, & Goldsmith, 2004).