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Online social support for young people: Does it recapitulate in-person social support; can it help?

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ABSTRACT

As social media websites have grown in popularity, public concern about online victimization has grown as well; however, much less attention has focused on the possible beneficial effects of online social networks. If theory and research about in-person social networks pertain, then online social relationships may represent an important modern source of or vehicle for support. In a study of 231 undergraduates, three major findings emerged: (1) for people with weaker in-person social support, social media sites provide a source of social support that is less redundant of the social support they receive in person; (2) in ways that were not redundant of each other, both online and in-person social support were associated with lower levels of depression-related thoughts and feelings, and (3) the beneficial effects of online social support (like in-person social support) offset some of the adverse effects of peer victimization. The study suggests that augmenting social relations via strategic use of social media can enhance young people's social support systems in beneficial ways.

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Enormous concern has arisen about the dangers of online victimization, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the possible beneficial effects of online social networks. Research and public media have linked online victimization to many problematic and sometimes tragic outcomes, including drug and alcohol use, depression, and even suicide (Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010); however, most interpersonal relationships carry not just the possibility of risk but the potential of reward as well. Support from one social niche can sometimes offset of the adverse effects of social rejection or victimization in another part of one's social network (Bilsky et al., 2013; Maurizi, Grogan-Kaylor, Granillo, & Delva, 2013; Rothon, Head, Klineberg, & Stansfeld, 2011). The Internet now provides many new social niches via a diversity of apps and websites. Therefore, we posit that online social support (1) will be somewhat independent of in-person social support, especially for people with weak in-person social support systems, (2) will be associated with lower levels of depressive thoughts and feelings in ways that complement (and are not completely redundant of) in-person social support, and (3) will offset some of the adverse effects of peer

victimization in a manner similar to the positive effects of in-person social support.

Although definitions of in-person social support vary, most refer to tangible and intangible assistance from friends, partners, family members, and others (e.g., Barrera, Sandler, & Ramsay, 1981; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Within in-person social networks, many subtypes of social support have been described (e.g., Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Cohen & Wills, 1985). Literature reviews suggest that two particular subtypes, esteem or emotional social support and social companionship, have especially strong effects on social, emotional, and cognitive outcomes (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Caplan, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985). These processes have clear analogues in a variety of online social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, etc.). People use online spaces to discuss problems or obtain information that is helpful when coping with particular stressors. Social media sites may fulfill a need for social belongingness, distract people from various stressors, or offer micro-boosts to self-esteem by being "friended," "liked," or "followed" by others.

The first question that we address focuses on the degree of overlap or redundancy between the social support that people receive via their online versus in-person social networks. Do social media sites help people obtain social support that is somewhat different from the social support that they receive face-to-face, or do such sites simply represent a vehicle for the same supportive

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communications that are conveyed in-person? At least two lines of research suggest that online social support might complement in-person social support and not simply replicate it. One set of studies estimates about a 50% overlap between people's online and face-to-face friends. Among high school students, an average 58% (SD = 25%) of the face-to-face friends are also online friends, either via social network sites or instant messaging (Reich, Subrahmanyam, & Espinoza, 2012). The overlap is a bit less among college students, where the average number of face-to-face friends who were also online friends dropped to 49% (SD = 35%; Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008), in part because former high school friends become online friends when they go to college. A second set of studies suggests that even within these populations, the degree of overlap between online and in-person social networks varies enormously from person to person, ranging from nearly zero to almost 100% (Reich et al., 2012; Subrahmanyam et al., 2008). Research suggests that people who are more introverted or socially anxious may be more likely than others to derive social benefit from social media (e.g., Indian & Grieve, 2014; Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009). We suspect that the common denominator underlying these characteristics is having a weak in-person social support system, which can happen for all these reasons and more. Consequently, we hypothesize that the redundancy of online social support with in-person social support reflects a nonlinear relation. That is, for people with *low levels* of in-person social support, online social support will represent a relatively nonredundant resource; however, for people with *high levels* of in-person social support, online social support will be more redundant of what they already have in-person.

Our second set of questions pertains to the incremental healthy effects of online social support over-and-above in-person social support. Conceptualizing social media platforms as new social niches, we anticipated that online social support would supplement the mental health benefits derived from in-person social support. Because adverse social relations have especially strong relations to depression-related outcomes (Barrera & Ainlay, 1983; Caplan, 1976; Cobb, 1976; Cohen & Wills, 1985), we focused our attention on low self-esteem, depressive symptoms, and maladaptive or dysfunctional self-cognitions. Research on *in-person* social relations has revealed that in-person social support is an important predictor of these outcomes (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007; Goodwin, Costa, & Adonu, 2004; Grav, Hellzèn, Romild, & Stordal, 2011). We hypothesized that *online* social support would be associated with these same outcomes but in ways that are not completely explained by (or redundant of) the contributions made by in-person social support.

Related research provides preliminary support for this hypothesis (Indian & Grieve, 2014; Longman et al., 2009; Trepte, Dienlin, & Reinecke, 2015; Trepte, Reinecke, & Juechems, 2012; Ybarra, Mitchell, Palmer, & Reisner, 2015). In diverse samples, individuals' reports of online social support are proportional to their level of engagement in the social network of interest. LGBT youths reported that their online friends were better than their in-person friends at providing emotional support (Ybarra et al., 2015). Among World of Warcraft players, higher levels of in-game social support were associated with greater engagement in the game and fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression; however, the latter effects were not maintained after controlling for levels of in-person social support (Longman et al., 2009). For Facebook users with high social anxiety, online social support significantly contributed to subjective well-being (Indian & Grieve, 2014). Among German social network users, online social support was positively related with satisfaction with social support, although it was less related to life satisfaction than in-person social support (Trepte et al., 2012, 2015). Other research suggests that Internet use is correlated with improvements in loneliness, depressive symptoms, self-esteem, and perceived interpersonal closeness (Shaw & Gant, 2002; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

Constraints upon this preliminary work somewhat limit its generalizability. Some studies have focused on a single social network site, despite the fact that different sites yield opportunities for different kinds of social support (e.g., Indian & Grieve, 2014; Longman et al., 2009). Some studies have dichotomized continuous variables, a practice that can generate highly misleading results (Maxwell & Delaney, 1993). Other studies have measured online and in-person support in such different ways that direct comparisons become problematic (e.g., Trepte et al., 2012, 2015). Some studies assessed online but not in-person social support (Shaw & Gant, 2002). Among studies that did examine both online and in-person social support, results are highly discrepant (e.g., correlations between online and in-person social support range from 0.25 to 0.58; Indian & Grieve, 2014; Longman et al., 2009). Our goal was to examine the relative incremental advantages of online and in-person social support (across diverse social media platforms and using parallel measures) in relation to depressive thoughts and feelings.

Our third set of questions pertains to the ameliorative role that online social support might play vis-à-vis victimization. Previous research on in-person relationships has shown that support in one social niche can offset at least some of the adverse effects of victimization in another social niche (Bilsky et al., 2013; Maurizi et al., 2013; Rothon et al., 2011). In the current study, we addressed the analogous question, does *online* social support also offset some of the adverse effects of victimization, and if so, how does this effect occur? Specifically, we test two models proposed by Cohen and Wills (1985). The first is their *buffering model* in which online support moderates the effect of victimization. Buffering could occur because online support affects the stress appraisal process. That is, online support fosters the belief that resources are available, which then diminishes the perception of stress. Statistical support for the stress-buffering model would consist of a statistical interaction between online social support and victimization in the prediction of psychological outcomes. The second of Cohen and Wills (1985) theories is called a *main-effects model*. This model suggests that social support has a positive effect on psychological outcomes regardless of the level of stress or adversity experienced. Statistical support for this model would consist of two main effects: one, a negative main effect of victimization (perhaps because it constitutes a major source of negative self-relevant information that can erode self-esteem and augment the development of depression; Cole, 1991; Cole et al., 2015; Sinclair et al., 2012); the other, a positive main effect for online social support (perhaps because it conveys positive information about acceptance that can lead to the construction of positive self-cognitions that protects against depression; Harter, 1999, 2012; Cole, 1991; Cole, Martin, & Powers, 1997). Therefore, in the current paper, we tested both the main effects model and the buffering model with respect to the abilities of both online and in-person social support to offset the effects of victimization on depressive thoughts and feelings.

In sum, the current study had three goals. First, we tested nonlinearities in the degree to which online and in-person social support are redundant of one another. Second, we examined incremental utility of online versus in-person social support in relation to depressive thoughts and feelings. The third was to test Cohen and Wills' (1985) two models of mitigation, whether online social support ameliorates the adverse effects of victimization by exerting an offsetting main effect or by moderating the effect of victimization.