Full length article

✎ as social support: Relational closeness, automaticity, and interpreting social support from paralinguistic digital affordances in social media

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Many social media facilitate paralinguistic digital affordances (PDAs): one-click tools for phatic communication to which senders and receivers alike ascribe meaning. This research explores the nature of social support perceived from the receipt of PDAs within social media, seeking to understand how individuals ascribe supportive meaning to PDAs based on (1) their goal in the post to which the PDA was used as a reply, (2) relational closeness with the PDA provider, and (3) the perceived automaticity of the PDA received. A national survey ($N = 325$) explored the receipt of PDAs across five social media, and facilitated cross-platform analysis. Analyses reveal both main and interaction effects among the three proposed antecedents, so that intentional PDAs from relationally close providers to messages seeking social support were perceived as most supportive. Findings reveal individuals heuristically make idiosyncratic sense of the same cue from different senders in different situations.

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1. Introduction

Billions of content items are uploaded to social media to social by individuals every week (Tam, 2012). Once there, this content can be Liked[1] (Facebook), Favorited (Twitter), +1ed (Google Plus), upvoted (Reddit), or otherwise acknowledged through a single small cue associated with the particular content item. Hayes, Carr, and Wohn (2016) referred to these communicative cues within social media and without a specific, predefined meaning as *paralinguistic digital affordances* (PDAs). These content cues are similar in several ways, both technological and social; but may be disparate in other important manners, including in their intended meaning and their interpretation upon receipt (Hayes et al., 2016). Given the substantive communication—both quantitatively and qualitatively—these cues represent in social media, this research explores the use and perceptions of these cues with respect to the

social support received from the relationally-diverse networks media enable individuals to access. As cues without relative or explicit meaning, PDAs offer an opportunity to understand how individuals interpret messages phatically, deriving exchanged meaning in a cue with little innate or denoted meaning.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Social media, support, and networks

2.1.1. Social media

Social media are increasingly the focus of communication research given their unique technical and social characteristics. Carr and Hayes (2015) defined *social media* as, "Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content." (p. 49). Within this definition are social network sites (SNSs), such as the popular Facebook and Twitter services, which allow individuals create profiles, connect with other users, and traverse these complex connections (Ellison & boyd, 2013). In doing so, social media—and more specifically SNSs—have been noted for their ability to enable individuals to maintain and access their social networks,

connecting with family, friends, and acquaintances (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Rozzell et al., 2014). Maintenance of these social networks has been posited as an important means of developing and maintaining social capital: the tangible and social resources to which an individual has access (Ellison et al., 2007; Putnam, 1995).

2.1.2. Social support

Social support refers to information or actions resulting in an individual's perception s/he is, "cared for and loved … esteemed and valued … [and] belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation" (Cobb, 1976, p. 300). An often-researched form of social capital, social support—especially the emotional and informational dimensions of support—are increasingly sought and obtained online (Craig & Johnson, 2011; Rains & Keating, 2011; Wright & Miller, 2010). Moving beyond the anonymous social support of online tools like discussion boards (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright, 2000), SNSs like Facebook and Twitter allow individuals to masspersonally[2] broadcast messages to the diverse members and subgroups that comprise their social networks, potentially receiving social support resources from a variety of known interpersonal relational ties, both strong and weak (Blight, Jagiello, & Ruppel, 2015; Krämer, Rösner, Eimler, Winter, & Neubaum, 2014; Olson, Liu, & Shultz, 2012; Rozzell et al., 2014).

2.1.3. Relational closeness

In his treatise on relational ties, Granovetter (1973) distinguished between two types of dyadic relationships, bifurcating them as either strong or weak ties. Strong ties, or *close relationships*, includes those with whom an individual feels strongly connected, such as family members and close friends (Adelman, Parks, & Albrecht, 1987; Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Wright, Rains, & Banas, 2010). Alternately, weak ties, or *nonclose relationships*, includes those with whom an individual may not be relationally close but whom the individual interacts with in limited capacities or contexts, such as coworkers, neighbors, or clergy (Wright et al., 2010). Though Granovetter (1973) initially conceptualized strong and weak ties based on network structure, recent work has utilized and reframed Granovetter's weak tie theory as relational closeness (e.g., Ballard-Reisch, Rozzell, Heldman, & Kramer, 2011; Rozzell et al., 2014).

In addition to their conceptual differences, Granovetter (1973) differentiated between the types of support strong and weak ties offer, specifying that social support come from primarily close relationships. Research has generally supported the dominance of close ties in the provision of social support even in social media (Rains & Keating, 2011; Wright & Miller, 2010), with a few exceptions (e.g., Blight et al., 2015), particularly within health communication. The increased levels of social support from nonclose relationships online within health-related social media has been explained as a result of the reduction of potential stigmatization and increased objectivity of feedback to support-seeking (see Wright et al., 2010). Again, though, research generally supports Granovetter's (1973) initial assertion that social support is primarily derived from individuals perceived to be a relationally close tie, even within social media, which allow for interactions across broader and more relationally-diverse set of ties than via face-to-face communication.

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[2] Masspersonal communication refers to messages that are (a) interpersonal or one-to-one in nature but accessible to a large audience, (b) mass or one-to-many in nature but intended for a single receiver, or (c) a combination thereof; and are thus readily facilitated by social media (Carr & Hayes, 2015).

2.2. Social support and relational closeness in social media

Individuals often use social media to seek and obtain social support (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Wright & Bell, 2003). In addition to their ability to transcend geographic and temporal boundaries, social media also afford users an opportunity to access diverse relational networks and ties. Unlike offline relationships which may fall dormant due to lack of awareness or interaction frequency, "[SNSs] enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks" (boyd & Ellison, 2007, p. 211), making visual and salient diverse relational ties that may not be as salient offline. Additionally, social media—particularly SNSs—afford users the opportunity to simultaneously interact with relational ties from multiple and potentially disparate relational contexts (Marwick & boyd, 2011), potentially tapping into ties that may not be concurrently available offline. Finally, social media readily enable new communicative processes, converging interpersonal and mass communication to allow users the ability to broadcast messages accessible to their entire social network yet receive personalized feedback that may itself be either private or publicly available (Carr & Hayes, 2015). Given the diverse nature of ties accessible via social media and the channel affordances social media offer, it is unsurprising users use social media to seek and obtain social support from both relationally close and nonclose individuals.

Prior research has explored the social support individuals receive from others via personalized messages and images in social media. Vitak and Ellison (2013) interviewed 18 adults regarding their Facebook use and development of social capital, noting many users used the broadcasting feature of Facebook to cast a wide net in their support-seeking typically resulting in the provision of several personalized reply messages perceived as supportive. Rozzell et al. (2014) asked college students to come into a research lab where the comments and Likes to their most recent support-seeking Facebook post were captured. Analyses indicated that while social support was more likely to come from weak ties (unsurprising, given the preponderance of weak ties in general and thus available via social media), the response was perceived as more supportive when provided by a strong tie. Similarly, a survey of 317 SNS users found that strong ties were perceived as providing more emotional and informational support than weak ties via SNSs (Krämer et al., 2014). Finally, Trepte, Dienlin, and Reinecke (2015) utilized a 2-year study of 327 Germans to determine the types of support obtained via SNSs; finding that a myriad of support needs were fulfilled via SNSs, but that informational needs were better-fulfilled via SNSs than instrumental and emotional support.

Taken together, these findings indicate social media facilitate the receipt of abundant social support, as relationally close and nonclose ties alike provide public and private messages to individuals that are perceived as supportive. Although helpful, these findings are mostly limited to the verbal messages, often of explicit social support, articulated within SNSs. There remains a need to further explore how other social media affordances for communication can convey social support, thus reflecting the broader toolbox of channels available via social media.

2.3. One-click cues in social media

Social media afford numerous channels and tools for communication, often providing several of these affordances within an individual medium (Smock et al., 2011), including the facilitation of text, photographic, audiovisual, phatic (discussed more below) and system-generated cues. Although these tools are numerous and often-used, there has been substantive contention recently around the term affordance (for review, see Nagy & Neff, 2015). The concept (and theory) of affordances can be traced to Gibson's