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Predictors of mobilizing online coping versus offline coping resources after negative life events[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study drew upon the social compensation/social enhancement hypotheses and weak tie network theory to predict what kind of people supplement offline coping resources with online coping resources more than others. Using a large, representative survey the authors found that low self-esteem, lonely, and socially isolated individuals add more online resources to their mix of preferred coping strategies than their counterparts. These groups benefit from the fact that online coping resources are not as strongly entangled with online social ties as are offline coping resources with offline ties, and from the fact that online coping resources can sometimes be mobilized without any social interactions. In contrast to offline coping, the researchers also found that men mobilize more online coping resources than women. The authors discuss the implications of these findings in terms of the social compensation hypothesis and online weak tie networks.

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1. Introduction

The advent of the Internet and social media provides individuals with numerous online resources (via online communities, social media, websites, etc.) which may serve an important function in terms of helping them gain access to additional sources of information and support as well as the ability to develop relationships with others in ways that may be different from or supplement offline support when coping with stressful life events (Damian & Van Ingen, 2014; Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013; Rains & Keating, 2011; Rossetto, Lannutti, & Strauman, 2015; Van Ingen, Utz, & Toepoel, 2015; Wendorf & Yang, 2015; Wright & Rains, 2013a).

Online coping can be defined as thoughts and behaviors facilitated by the Internet that help to manage stressful situations (cf. Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). There are several indications that the Internet is of rising importance when it comes to dealing with

stressful situations (See Wright & Bell, 2003). Furthermore, scholars have suggested that some of the mechanisms of coping are different online, which implies that more research and theory development in this area is needed. Additionally, it appears that many individuals cope with stressful life events using *both* offline and online social networks (Vergeer & Pelzer, 2009). In the current exploratory study, we attempted to gain a better understanding of factors that predict online versus offline coping.

In addition, previous research that has focused on differences between online and offline coping has tended to examine coping behaviors within specific contexts, such as online support groups or specific Facebook and Twitter groups (See Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Wright & Rains, 2013b). Moreover, these studies have explored a somewhat limited range of coping strategies within these contexts, such as informational or emotional support-seeking. In the current study, the researchers took an exploratory approach to examining how people cope with stressful life events by investigating several dimensions of coping within both online and offline domains. This simultaneous assessment of both online and offline mobilization of resources supporting different coping strategies enabled us to analyze the relative importance of online (versus offline) coping, something that few previous studies have explored. Furthermore, previous studies have tended to focus on specialized populations, such as online communities targeting

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specific health concerns for student populations. In the current study, the researchers were interested in exploring how individuals engage in online and offline coping strategies following stressful life events among members of a more general population.

Although other theoretical frameworks may also explain this phenomenon, the current study drew upon the social compensation/social enhancement hypotheses (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005; 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008) and weak tie network theory (Granovetter, 1973; 1983) as a starting point to explore online coping. Toward that end, it examines predictors of how individuals from a general population (a randomly selected sample of individuals from the Netherlands) mobilize a broad range of online versus offline coping resources following stressful life events. These include mental disengagement, active coping, seeking social support, and other psychological responses people use to cope with stressful situations. Specifically, the study examines the influence of extraversion, self-esteem, loneliness, social isolation and gender on online and offline coping resource mobilization choices. Although it is unlikely that individuals who are socially disadvantaged will establish the largest online networks and spend most time socializing online, it is likely that they will draw a relatively large share of their coping resources from the Internet. In the next section, we argue that the main reason for this is that online coping resources are less entangled with online social interactions than are offline coping resources with offline social interactions.

2. Review of literature

2.1. Online and offline coping strategies

The Internet provides a wealth of information about almost every imaginable topic, increased opportunities for connection with others, and access to information related to specific problems or issues (Wright & Bell, 2003). One advantage of using online networks over offline social networks for coping with a stressful life event is that online networks provide access to a larger number of weak ties, many of whom may offer the specific type of support individuals are seeking to help them cope with their situation effectively. This support from weak ties can help make up for deficiencies in terms of support in face-to-face social networks. Moreover, individuals who tend to cope with problems in a certain way, such as seeking additional information or practicing new skills, are more likely to gain access online to individuals who will provide them with the type of support that facilitates their preferred coping style (Wright & Rains, 2013b). Therefore, we contend that online versus offline coping choices are to a large extent trait-like in nature (cf. Seckin, 2013).

2.2. Social compensation/social enhancement hypotheses, close and weak-tie support, and (online) coping

The ability to successfully mobilize coping resources, such as information and social support, following a stressful life event has been linked to reductions in mental and physical health symptoms, reduced depression and stress, and increased well-being (Lett et al., 2007). Although only a few studies have applied the *social compensation hypothesis* (Peter et al., 2005; 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b) to how people mobilize online resources, there are several findings that suggest that this framework may be helpful for understanding how individuals with high levels of social anxiety may mobilize more coping resources if they use computers to replace or supplement their social networks to a greater extent than their peers who do not use computers to replace/supplement their social networks. Studies have found that socially anxious

individuals report they compensate for their social anxiety by engaging in online communication (Baker & Oswald, 2010; Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2006; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007b). Social interactions that occur online primarily consist of on-screen text (except when individuals use webcams, Skype, and similar applications), and therefore a large amount of visual information typical of traditional face-to-face interactions is concealed during online communication. This has been found to increase relational development in cases where the lack of visual information (especially disconfirming nonverbal cues) leads individuals to develop idealized perceptions of online relational partners (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). Moreover, this can lead to a more comfortable social situation for socially anxious individuals who are coping with a stressful life event in comparison to traditional face-to-face interactions, supporting the case for social compensation.

In contrast to the social compensation hypothesis, the *social enhancement*, or the *rich-get-richer*, hypothesis posits that individuals who already are comfortable in social situations may use the computer, either in person or online, to seek out additional opportunities to socialize with others (Peter et al., 2005; Zywicki & Danowski, 2008). In other words, online communication with others tends to increase the overall number of social interactions a person has rather than replacing more traditional means of interactions.

Online social networks tend to consist of weaker, more heterogeneous network members than are typical of offline, close-tie social networks, and this provides individuals who are coping with stressful events greater opportunities for social comparison, increased sources of social support, and a greater diversity in terms of life experiences and knowledge than what is typically available in offline, face-to-face social networks (Wright & Miller, 2010). These characteristics of online social networks may influence both the social compensation hypothesis and the social enhancement hypothesis depending on individual needs.

In some cases online networks provide opportunities to communicate with others more easily/comfortably. For example, individuals may be reluctant to disclose certain problems or issues with members of their traditional face-to-face social networks in cases where they feel they will be judged by others due to the nature of the problem (e.g. substance abuse, having an affair, divorce, etc.), or if they are coping with a problem that is difficult or embarrassing to talk about (Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014; Wright & Miller, 2010).

In an attempt to explain this phenomenon, Granovetter (1973; 1983) proposed that when individuals feel that their close interpersonal ties are unable to provide adequate or satisfying social support, they will be more likely to turn to weak ties for social support. Weak ties are often able to provide greater heterogeneity of information regarding a stressful situation, are less likely to judge an individual due to his or her problems, and make it less risky for people to disclose sensitive information (Wright & Miller, 2010).

In the age of the Internet, the multitude of potential weak-tie relationships online via social media has grown exponentially. Several researchers have found research on weak ties to be applicable to explaining why some individuals prefer to obtain social support online instead of (or in addition to) using traditional offline networks (Green-Hamann & Sherblom, 2014; Wright & Rains, 2013b; Wright & Miller, 2010). When members of traditional offline social networks have limited knowledge about a stressful situation, there is evidence that individuals often turn to online sources of information and social support (Wright & Miller, 2010), despite the fact that they may feel less close relationally to the people with whom they interact online. Coping resources accessed via online networks may be particularly valuable when offline

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