



Benefits of a Negative Post: Effects of Computer-Mediated Venting on Relationship Maintenance



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ABSTRACT

Despite abundant literature on the benefits of using social networking sites to map user behavior patterns, limited research exists regarding the effects of negative expression via these sites. Responding to this need, the purpose of this study is to address gaps, in both the relationship maintenance and the catharsis theory literature, by examining the connections among Facebook use, disclosure of negative feelings on Facebook (venting), and relationship maintenance behaviors. A survey study with college students from a university located in southeast United States ($N = 341$) was conducted, and the results from logistic regression analyses indicate that Facebook usage and level of perceived stress are significant predictors for individual's venting behaviors. Further, the results indicated that venting negative feelings on Facebook mediates the effect of an individual's perceived stress on his/her online relationship maintenance behaviors.

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1. Introduction

Online social networking sites (SNSs) have experienced tremendous popularity and raised increased interest within communication research. SNSs refer to a form of computer-mediated communication that shares common characteristics and features, such as providing individuals online places in where they can connect with other users (Lenhart, 2007). Since their emergence, SNSs, such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and MySpace, have become part of users' daily practices (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Facebook, an SNS created in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, was designed to respond to undergraduate students' social needs for connection at Harvard University. Since then, Facebook has become extremely popular among undergraduate students in the United States, with more than 90% usage rates by this group at most college campuses (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008). As a result, Facebook serves as "a rich site for researchers interested in the affordances of social networks due to its heavy usage patterns" (Ellison, Steinfeld, & Lampe, 2007, p. 1144).

The existing literature offers conflicting views regarding the effects of Facebook usage on undergraduate students' health and well-being (Campisi et al., 2012). Research indicates that the use

of Facebook and other SNSs by undergraduate students can increase students' social networks while enhancing well-being (Steinfeld et al., 2008). Another study claimed that Facebook use provides students with larger social networks thereby increasing social support and social capital (Ellison et al., 2007). Additionally, in a study regarding Facebook and loneliness, researchers found that Facebook reduces students' feelings of loneliness (Jin, 2013; Lou, Yan, Nickerson, & McMorris, 2012). Conversely, one study found that Facebook can negatively impact students' physical and emotional health, pointing to an increase of upper respiratory infection, as well as feelings of anger or sadness resulting from a variety of negatively perceived online interactions (Campisi et al., 2012).

Research regarding the use of Facebook by undergraduate students has addressed the impact of Facebook usage on students' social capital. In general terms, social capital refers to the resources acquired by an individual through their relationships with others (Coleman, 1988). These resources, which can be real or virtual, have been linked to positive social outcomes (Adler & Kwon, 2002). SNSs allow users to connect with people who share common interests, irrespective of existing geographic limitations, thereby increasing social capital (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ellison et al., 2007). In this way, Facebook has the potential ability to serve as a tool for the development of social capital, as increased amounts of time spent on Facebook can be attributed to the building, maintaining, and strengthening of social networks (Valenzuela, Park, & Kee, 2009). By allowing a space for users to connect to a larger community

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(e.g., friends, family, colleagues, classmates, and others) and maintain social interactions, Facebook has become a platform for increased opportunities of relationship maintenance (Valenzuela et al., 2009; Williams, 2006). Relationship maintenance refers to activities that "...keep a relationship in existence, in a specified state, in a satisfactory condition, or in repair" (Ellison, Vitak, Gray, & Lampe, 2014). SNSs provide an effective platform for relationship building-based interactions due to their accessibility (low cost), ease of information dissemination (multiple posting features), and their enabling of reciprocal communication (Ellison et al., 2014). Additionally, Facebook has been found to fulfill an individual's need to seek and retrieve information about other users in their circle (Kenski & Stroud, 2006; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001). This behavior, in turn, reinforces existing ties, strengthening newer ones, and overall increasing an individual's social capital (Hargittai, 2007).

Our study aims at understanding the relationship between Facebook use, disclosing negative feelings on Facebook (venting), and relationship maintenance among undergraduate students. Moreover, we also seek to explore whether there are variables that mediate this relationship. In order to explore the effects of expressing negative feelings (venting), our study will examine the relationship between these variables via catharsis theory.

2. Literature review

2.1. Facebook usage

With 1.15 billion users all over the world, Facebook, the largest social networking site in the world, is one of the dominant platforms of social media. Worldwide, around 13% of the population has Facebook accounts, and nearly 530 million of them are daily active users (Madden & Zickuhr, 2011). In the United States, more than 65% of the Internet users use Facebook to share information, follow up friends, and update personal statuses. In general, most college students report for having a SNSs account, and the overwhelming majority, 98%, report Facebook being the most frequently used SNS (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008). A recent study showed that, on average, U.S. college students routinely spend approximately 30 min per day on Facebook (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). With such high adoption rate, Facebook has provided an effective platform for health-related information dissemination and communication. In the U.S. alone, a recent study found that 23% of the Facebook population followed their friends' personal health experiences or updates (Fox, 2011).

In a study of 800 Michigan State University students, results revealed that 94% of the survey participants had Facebook accounts (Ellison et al., 2007), demonstrating that Facebook can be particularly useful in the study of social media usage among college students. In addition to the widespread use of Facebook by undergraduate students, research supports an increase in the average time spent by students on this SNS. In a longitudinal analysis of data, Steinfield et al. (2008) conducted two surveys, one in 2006 and the following in 2007, at a large university in the United States. Findings indicated an increase of nearly double the time spent on Facebook by students, increasing by an average of approximately 21 min per day, leading the authors to conclude Facebook has "become an increasingly important part of students' lives by all measures" (Steinfield et al., 2008, p. 441).

Given that undergraduate students spend a significant amount of time using SNSs, such as Facebook, in order to share information and connect to their online communities, Facebook could be considered an appropriate place for undergraduate students to vent negative feelings. Although there is a great deal of literature on Facebook as a tool for sharing positive information and feelings,

there is significantly less literature in regards to the usage of Facebook for the purposes of venting negative emotions. To fill this gap, we developed our first hypothesis:

H1. Facebook usage is a significant predictor of an individual's venting negative feelings on Facebook.

2.2. Perceived stress

Due to Facebook's high adoption rate, scholars (e.g., Tilton, 2014) have explored how it can serve as a tool for individual development. Given its increased influence in the lives of students, research studies (e.g., Al-Saggaf & Nielsem, 2014; Jalonen, 2014; Song et al., 2014) have examined how health outcomes are impacted by SNS usage. One health-related area of concern among college students is perceived stress leading to numerous studies (e.g., Campisi et al., 2012; George, Dellasega, Whitehead, & Bordon, 2013; Wright, 2012) examining the relationship between the use of Facebook and perceived stress. Within the literature, stress has been defined as a "negative cognitive-emotional state" (Combs, Canu, Broman-Fulks, Rocheleau, & Nieman, 2012, p. 426) that is a result of how an individual perceives the level of difficulty encountered in life events (Taylor, 2006). Potential negative health outcomes, associated with stress include developing illness (Cohen, Tyrrell, & Smith, 1993), decrease immunological function (Kemeny & Schedlowski, 2007), and the development of disease such as cardiovascular or infectious (Cohen, 2005; Goble & Le Grande, 2008). Given the significant impact of stress on individual's well-being, numerous studies have examined the relationship between computer-mediated social support and perceived stress (e.g., Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Campbell & Wright, 2002; Wright, 2000, 2012).

As stated by Jalonen (2014), "social media is not an alternative to real life, but it is a part of it," and as such, individuals act in similar ways online and offline. A study by Costanza, Derlega, and Winstead (1988) found that individuals who engaged in problem-solving talk, a type of self-disclosure, had higher success in reducing stress levels. In their study, Winstead, Derlega, Lewis, Sanchez-Hucles, and Clarke (1992) found that self-disclosure provider greater benefit to the individuals over silence. The reasons why individuals would engage in the expression of negative self-disclosure (venting) have been examined throughout various disciplines. Some of the reasons include: the need to express general dissatisfaction (Thogersen, Juhl, & Poulsen, 2009), the need to share pertinent information with others (Parra-Lopez, Bulchand-Gidumal, Gutierrez-Tano, & Diaz-Armas, 2011), and as a cathartic act. Specifically, Stevens, Humphrey, Wheatley, and Galliher (2011) found that undergraduates used Facebook in order to relieve stress. Other findings (e.g., Livingston, 2008) highlight the growing trend in personal information sharing via SNSs and their effects of alleviation of stress.

Given this significant association between stress and self-disclosure offline, along with numerous studies (e.g., Jones, Aiken, & Boush, 2009) that have examined how individuals engage in negative emotion disclosure online, we proposed the following hypothesis:

H2. Perceived stress is a significant predictor of an individual's venting negative feelings on Facebook.

2.3. Social capital

Beyond the existence of different types of social networks, there are various types of social interactions and social capital (Williams,

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