



The impact of daily stress on adolescents' depressed mood: The role of social support seeking through Facebook



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ABSTRACT

This study examined relationships among daily stress (i.e., school- and family-related stress), social support seeking through Facebook, perceived social support through Facebook, and depressed mood among adolescents ($N = 910$). Structural equation modeling showed that daily stress positively predicted adolescents' seeking of social support through Facebook. In addition, when social support was sought on Facebook and subsequently perceived, social support seeking through Facebook *decreased* adolescents' depressed mood. However, when social support was sought on Facebook, but not perceived, social support seeking through Facebook *increased* adolescents' depressed mood. When comparing these relationships with similar relationships in a traditional social support context, results showed that the exacerbating impact of social support seeking on depressed mood exclusively transpires in a social networking site context. The discussion focuses on the understanding and explanation of these findings, and directions for future research.

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is a critical period for depression. Prevalence rates significantly increase among young people (Abela & Hankin, 2008); major depressive disorder is present in 2–5% of the adolescents (Costello, Mustillo, Erkanli, Keeler, & Angold, 2003). A precursor to major depressive disorder is depressed mood, which refers to the presence of sad and unhappy feelings (e.g., feeling 'blue' or hopeless) (Petersen et al., 1993). Community prevalence rates for depressive symptoms, including depressed mood, were observed to be 18.2% for early adolescents (Saluja et al., 2004) and 28.6% for seventh to 12th grade students (Rushton, Forcier, & Schechtman, 2002). Depression during adolescence has been associated with a greater risk for suicide attempts (e.g., Vander Stoep et al., 2011). Furthermore, adolescent depression may also accompany other problems, such as academic failure (e.g., Fröjd et al., 2008) and substance abuse (e.g., Chaiton, Cohen, O'Loughlin, & Rehm, 2009) and is related to depression later in life (e.g., Copeland, Shanahan, Costello, & Angold, 2009). Given this high prevalence and the relationship between depressive symptoms and clinical depression, it is critical to identify factors that may

affect the development of depressive symptoms among young people.

Complex factors contribute to adolescents' depressed mood, including stress (Grant, Compas, Thurm, McMahon, & Gipson, 2004). Various longitudinal studies have found that stress predicted the development of adolescents' depressive symptoms (e.g., Cole, Nolen-Hoeksema, Girgus, & Paul, 2006; Ge, Conger, & Elder, 2001; Hankin, 2008; Meadows, Brown, & Elder, 2006). According to Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress occurs when an individual perceives a situation as threatening, challenging, or harmful and does not have an appropriate coping response. Especially young people experience substantial levels of stress in their daily lives, partly due to the various changes that are typical for this developmental period (Arnett, 1999). Although several studies have used a global measure to assess adolescents' level of perceived stress (e.g., Ge et al., 2001), scholars specifically argue that domain-specific stress predicts adolescents' depressive symptoms (e.g., Kendler, Myers, & Prescott, 2005). The most common everyday hassles, which affect a considerable number of adolescents, are related to school (e.g., academic failure) and interpersonal relationships (e.g., conflicts with parents) (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Donaldson, Prinstein, Danovsky, & Spirito, 2000; Seiffge-Krenke, Weidemann, Fentner, Aegenheister, & Poebblau, 2001; Williamson et al., 2003).

The way in which adolescents cope or respond to these stressors may be of critical importance for their well-being

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(Seiffge-Krenke, 1995). The cognitive appraisal theory of stress and coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) argues that coping is an active, purposeful process, by which an individual responds to stimuli appraised as taxing or exceeding his or her resources. When facing a stressful situation, individuals can rely on a wide range of coping strategies (Compas et al., 2001), which are behavioral, emotional or cognitive attempts to manage stressful situations (Thoits, 1995). Roth and Cohen (1986) have dichotomized coping strategies into two fundamental types. Approach or active coping refers to direct attempts to change a stressful situation, for instance, by seeking social support, whereas avoidant coping consists of strategies to manage cognitive or emotional reactions that are oriented away from the source of stress (e.g., withdrawal). Similarly, other scholars have distinguished between problem-focused and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) and functional and dysfunctional coping (Seiffge-Krenke, 1995).

Regardless of which classification is used, all include social support seeking as an adaptive mode of coping with stress. Social support refers to social interaction through which emotional concerns, instrumental aid, or information is expressed, perceived or received (Dunkel Schetter & Brooks, 2009) and can be considered as a multi-dimensional construct, referring to multiple sources (e.g., family, friends, special person) and multiple types (e.g., emotional, instrumental, informational, appraisal) (Malecki & Demaray, 2002). The present study focuses on emotional social support, which is “information leading the subject to believe that he is cared for and loved . . . esteemed and valued . . . and belongs to a network of communication and mutual obligation” (Cobb, 1976, p. 300).

Social support seeking has been shown to be a frequently used active coping strategy in adolescence; especially the direct seeking of emotional support from friends and other peers increases from childhood to adolescence (Zimmer-Gembeck & Skinner, 2011). This social support seeking has been associated with a number of positive health outcomes (e.g., Clarke, 2006; Compas et al., 2001; Fields & Prinz, 1997). For instance, a recent longitudinal study demonstrated that social support seeking positively predicted adolescents’ global life satisfaction (Saha, Huebner, Hills, Malone, & Valois, 2014). In addition, Murberg and Bru (2005) demonstrated a mitigating impact of seeking support on adolescents’ depressive symptoms.

1.1. Present study

Although several studies have demonstrated that traditional social support seeking protects adolescents against the harmful impact of stress on the development of depressive symptoms (e.g., Murberg & Bru, 2005), no study has yet looked at the role of social support seeking through social networking sites (SNSs) in this process. For contemporary adolescents, however, the notion of seeking social support may have significantly changed due to the emergence of SNSs. Given the growing importance of SNSs, such as Facebook, it could be hypothesized that Facebook has become an important tool for adolescents’ social support seeking. More than 81% of adolescents aged 12–17 years uses SNSs and 94% of these users has a Facebook account (Madden, 2013), thus providing adolescents with a new type of peer relationships and increased access to their peers. Therefore, the current study examines the role of social support seeking through Facebook, as a potential new platform for coping, within the relationship between stress and adolescents’ depressed mood.

Earlier work on this topic has mainly focused on coping with major life events, such as suffering from cancer, through participation in specific online support groups (e.g., Beaudoin & Tao, 2007; Wright & Bell, 2003). Much less is however known about coping with everyday hassles in more general types of online social networks, such as Facebook. The present study aims to fill this

gap of critical knowledge by exploring the impact of social support seeking through Facebook among adolescents who are confronted with school- and family-related stress. If the relationships reported in previous research also tend to occur in this broader context, this would imply a significant expansion of the focus of this field of research.

1.2. Facebook context

1.2.1. Social support seeking through Facebook

SNSs are perceived to have the capacity to facilitate supportive interaction among young users. College students list social support seeking (Kim, Sohn, & Choi, 2011), companionship support (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011) and socializing (Park, Kee, & Valenzuela, 2009) as primary reasons for using SNSs. Content analyses confirm that students make use of Facebook to display stress references and symptoms of depression. Allusions to stress were displayed in 37% of the Facebook profiles (Egan & Moreno, 2011) and 25% of Facebook profiles contained suggestions of depressive symptoms (Moreno et al., 2011). Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, and Purcell (2011) added that Facebook users did experience higher levels of social support compared with other Internet users, demonstrating that individuals do perceive social support from their online social network. Other studies have described a positive relationship between the number of Facebook friends and college students’ perceptions of social support (Nabi, Prestin, & So, 2013), social support on Facebook (Manago, Taylor, & Greenfield, 2012) and companionship support (Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014), suggesting that SNSs offer an additional platform for adolescent social support seekers.

Consistent with these perceptions, most previous studies on seeking online support have argued that the Internet facilitates social support. They have reached this conclusion by focusing on access to online support groups (Eastin & LaRose, 2005; Tichon & Shapiro, 2003; Wright, 2000), which are “electronic venues in which people post topical threads regarding the issues associated with different stressors” (High & Solomon, 2011, p. 124). This online support seeking by, for instance, cancer patients, however, clearly differs from online support seeking by adolescents through Facebook. Whereas online support groups consist of weak ties between people who face similar problems (Granovetter, 1973), an adolescent’s Facebook network consists of strong(er) ties. Friends become increasingly important during adolescence (e.g., Scholte & Van Aken, 2006) and adolescents frequently discuss personal problems with them (e.g., Stone, Hankin, Gibb, & Abela, 2011), resulting in increased perceptions of social support from friends (e.g., Helsen, Vollebergh, & Meeus, 2000) and more reliance on SNSs when social support is needed (e.g., Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Park et al., 2009). Furthermore, while online support groups are characterized by a high level of anonymity, members of SNSs are not anonymous (e.g., High & Solomon, 2011). As adolescents mainly turn to people who they know when social support is needed (e.g., Colarossi & Eccles, 2003), SNSs may thus provide an appealing context for social support seeking adolescents. In addition, while members of online support groups see others as very similar to themselves, users of SNSs are more heterogeneous (e.g., High & Solomon, 2011). Depending on the type of problem (e.g., problem at school), SNSs thus offer the possibility to interact both with friends who are aware of the problem (e.g., classmates), as well as with friends who are unrelated to the problem.

SNSs, in particular Facebook, may thus offer their users a unique context for seeking social support, different from previous online support contexts, such as online support groups, but perhaps also different from a traditional face-to-face context. Based on indications in the literature (e.g., Bryant, Marmo, & Ramirez,

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