In times of war, adolescents do not fall silent: Teacher–student social network communication in wartime

Yaakov Ophir [a, *], Hananel Rosenberg [b, a], Christa S.C. Asterhan [a], Baruch B. Schwarz [a]

[a] School of Education, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel
[b] School of Communication, Ariel University, Israel

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ABSTRACT

Exposure to war is associated with psychological disturbances, but ongoing communication between adolescents and teachers may contribute to adolescents' resilience. This study examined the extent and nature of teacher–student communication on Social Network Sites (SNS) during the 2014 Israel–Gaza war. Israeli adolescents ($N = 208$, 13–18 yrs) completed information about SNS communication. A subset of these ($N = 145$) completed questionnaires on social rejection and distress sharing on SNS. More than a half (56%) of the respondents communicated with teachers via SNS. The main content category was 'emotional support'. Adolescents' perceived benefits from SNS communication with teachers were associated with distress sharing. Social rejection was negatively associated with emotional support and perceived benefits from SNS communication. We conclude that SNS communication between teachers and students may provide students with easy access to human connections and emotional support, which is likely to contribute to adolescents' resilience in times of war.

Exposure to political violence is associated with a spectrum of psychological disturbances, including depression, somatic symptoms, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Canetti & Lindner, 2015; Joshi & O'Donnell, 2003; Shaw, 2003). These disturbances might continue or appear long after the violence has been terminated (Shaw, 2003; Werner, 2012). The reality of recurring wars and ongoing violence has been documented, especially in the Middle East, to have extensive negative effects on mental health: High levels of PTSD (17.8%) and depression (14.7%) were documented for example in South Lebanon one year after the month-long, second Israel–Lebanon war in 2006 (Farhood, Dimassi, & Strauss, 2013). Similar results (19%) were found in a large survey among 1001 Israelis adults who were exposed to a series of conflicts between Israeli Defense Forces and Palestinian militants, in which thousands of rockets were fired into Israel (Chipman, Palmieri, Canetti, Johnson, & Hobfoll, 2011). The prevalence of PTSD was even greater (more than 25%) among Palestinian adults in the West Bank and in Gaza (Canetti et al., 2010). The severity of distress symptoms is associated with the proximity of the life-threatening event. During the 2014 Israel–Gaza war, Israeli individuals who lived in regions with high rocket fire intensity showed higher levels of PTSD symptoms than those living in low rocket fire intensity regions (Besser, Zeigler-Hill, Weinberg, Pincus, & Neria, 2015). Children's PTSD symptoms were also found to be related to proximity to stressful events. For example, proximity to the 1984 sniper attack on a Los Angeles elementary school predicted severity of students' PTSD symptoms (Pynoos et al., 1987).

Children and adolescents who are exposed to political violence are at risk to develop serious disorders. They are particularly vulnerable to war related stressors and its adverse consequences may influence their biological and psychological development (Davis & Siegel, 2000). Nevertheless, a number of protective factors may moderate the negative effects of war-related stressors and significantly contribute to adolescents' resilience. Among them area strong relationship between children and their caregivers, an availability of additional caregivers, and social support of people in the community, especially teachers and peers, who are exposed to the same stressors and difficulties (Werner, 2012).

School-based trauma intervention programs, such as the Building Resilience Project for children exposed to war-related stress (Baum, 2005), often rely heavily on teacher involvement. Teachers fulfill several roles in such programs: First of all, because of their ongoing daily contact they may detect posttraumatic symptoms or behavioral change among their students and refer children to mental health services (Farmer, Burns, Phillips, Angold, & Costello, 2003). Moreover, teachers can offer actual support by suggesting coping strategies (e.g., distraction from traumatic events and related thoughts), by assisting with emotional processing, and by helping reinstitute familiar roles and routines (Prinstein, LaGreca, Vernberg, & Silverman, 1996). Finally, beyond specific therapeutic techniques, teachers may increase and strengthen human connections with their students in order to prevent later trauma and to help adolescents cope with the stressful reality of war. Resilience, a fundamental concept in the treatment of trauma, depends on the creation of rich and strong human connections (Cohen, 2008). The greater the strength of human relationships, and the greater the accessibility of these relationships in times of security threats, the better individuals cope with trauma and recover from it (Coates, 2003). By strengthening connections with their students, teachers may facilitate 'school connectedness', students' feelings of being accepted, included, and supported in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993). These feelings of belongingness and emotional bonding to teachers and peers are documented to have positive psychological outcomes, including improved adjustment following acts of terrorism (Moscardino, Scrimin, Capello, & Altoè, 2014).

In times of *continuous* war however, schools may close down for prolonged periods and students may be left without the psychosocial support that is typically provided by the school environment and by the teachers. In the absence of face-to-face interactions on school grounds, teachers may search for other forms of contact with their adolescent students, perhaps through online communication technologies. Online social network sites (SNS) seem particularly suited for such purposes. In the course of the last decade, SNS have become a central arena for adolescent social life (Brenner, 2012; Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickur, 2010; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a, 2007b) and teachers have use SNS technologies to communicate and connect with their teenage students (Asterhan & Rosenberg, 2015; Geocartography Knowledge Group, 2011). Since a-synchronous, online communication is free from the shackles of time and space, it offers opportunities for teacher–student interaction even when schools are closed.

The potential advantages of social media communication during times of disaster and crisis have received increasing attention (Palen, Vieweg, Liu, & Hughes, 2009). For example, the use of a popular social network (i.e., Facebook) enabled the University of Canterbury in New Zealand to co-ordinate a response to an earthquake disaster with their over 22,000 students (Dabner, 2012). In another example, the use of Flickr, a photo-sharing website, facilitated 'citizen journalism' in six different disasters (e.g., the 2007 Virginia-Tech shooting), through which eyewitnesses could document and contribute live information. Research showed that this live sharing of information in SNS aided in the preparation, response and recovery from these disasters (Liu, Palen, Sutton, Hughes, & Vieweg, 2008).

To the best our knowledge, studies on SNS communication in times of crises have thus far mainly described its function as a tool for easy information access and sharing, rather than for lending emotional support. Moreover, the current literature does not address the question whether adolescents may receive emotional support from their teachers via SNS communication, especially in the face of a continuous war. By using SNSs, teachers may offer emotional support and provide human connections that improve teenage students' ability to cope with war-related stressors.

The present study

Our overall goal is to examine the extent and nature of teacher–student SNS communication during a continuous period of warfare in an afflicted area. In the present study, we focus on this phenomenon form the adolescent student's perspective (for a complementary study on the teachers' perspective, see Rosenberg, Ophir, Asterhan, & Schwarz, 2015). The research was conducted in the midst of the 2014 Israel–Gaza war (also referred to as Operation Protective Edge), which took place from July 8 to August 26, 2014. This major escalation of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict claimed the lives of more than 2200 people, the majority of which were Gazans, and affected the mental health of both Gazan and Israeli citizens. In the present study, we focus on Israeli adolescents (13–18 yrs) who live within 45 km from the Israel–Gaza border (e.g., the cities of Sderot, Ashkelon, or Ashdod). Among Israeli civilians, this area was exposed to and affected by war-related events most. The overall majority of the 4500 rockets and mortars that were fired from the Gaza strip during this period landed in this area. Whenever a siren warning was heard, civilians in this area had 15–90 s to find shelter, depending on the exact distance from the Gaza border. The two SNSs we focus on are Facebook and WhatsApp,[1] which are the most popular SNS at the time and the location of the study.

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[1] WhatsApp is a free internet-based mobile messaging application. WhatsApp enable its users to "create groups, send unlimited images, video and audio media messages and stay in touch with family and friends" (www.whatsapp.com).