



# When Facebook is easier than face-to-face: Social support derived from Facebook in socially anxious individuals



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## ABSTRACT

While the psychological benefits of social support are well-established, it is also clear that for many socially anxious individuals, engaging with face-to-face social networks is problematic. This research examined whether social support derived from an online social network (Facebook) had incremental value in predicting subjective well-being over and above offline social support in socially anxious and non-socially anxious individuals. Individuals with high ( $N = 105$ ) and low ( $N = 194$ ) social anxiety completed measures of perceived social support, perceived social support derived from Facebook, and subjective well-being. For the high social anxiety group, Facebook social support explained a significant amount of additional variance in subjective well-being, with offline social support failing to contribute significantly to the model. For the low social anxiety group, Facebook social support did not explain any variance in well-being over and above offline social support. Possible implications of the utility of Facebook for socially anxious individuals are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Social support is consistently associated with higher levels of subjective well-being (e.g. Cohen & Hoberman, 1983; Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). However, socially anxious individuals may experience difficulty in connecting with others and obtaining social support from social networks (Wenzel, 2002). Given the recent expansion of Internet communities and their role as a new form of social network (e.g. Boyd & Ellison, 2008) the purpose of the current research was to explore social support in online social networking. Specifically, this research aimed to investigate for the first time social support derived from Facebook use, and its relationship with well-being in socially anxious and non-anxious individuals.

### 1.1. Social interactions in the online environment

Early research identified a relationship between excessive Internet use and poorer well-being (e.g. Caplan, 2002). However, later research proposed that the changing nature of Internet use and the rise of social media can facilitate social support and connections (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). This aligns with findings that social networking sites such as Facebook may be used as a tool to

enhance self-esteem and life satisfaction through the generation of social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2008). Indeed, recent research suggests that feelings of social connectedness derived from Facebook use are associated with improved mental health and well-being (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2013).

### 1.2. Social anxiety and the online environment

Morahan-Martin and Schumacher (2003) proposed that the Internet may provide an attractive option to increase social interaction for some individuals due to reductions in social apprehension, suggesting that some individuals may be drawn to the Internet in order to experience the social interaction and social companionship that may be lacking offline. Results were that lonely participants reported more social interaction and social companionship online than non-lonely participants. This aligns with the social compensation hypothesis, whereby Internet mediated communication may be used as an attempt to compensate for poor interactions experienced offline (e.g. Valkenburg, Schouten, & Peter, 2005). Similarly, it has been suggested that shy individuals may prefer communication that does not occur face-to-face (Saunders & Chester, 2008). Pierce (2009) found that teenagers who reported social anxiety were more likely to talk online. Most recently, Hammick and Lee (in press) found that shy individuals felt less apprehensive about online rather than face-to-face communication.

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Moving beyond preferences for and reasons underpinning online communication, Campbell, Cumming, and Hughes (2006) investigated whether online activities could increase social supports, skills and networks for individuals with social apprehension. Results indicated that online activities can be positive for these individuals, providing an opportunity to practice and develop social skills that may otherwise be inhibited in the face-to-face environment. Similarly, Caplan (2007) investigated the relationship between social anxiety and preferred social interaction (online or offline), and concluded that individuals experiencing social anxiety may attempt to meet social needs in the online environment that have proven difficult to fulfill face-to-face.

Together, the research above suggests that online activity provides the opportunity to develop and maintain social capital associated with well-being (e.g. Grieve et al., 2013), and that the online environment may be associated with different outcomes for those experiencing social difficulties (Campbell et al., 2006; Caplan, 2007; Morahan-Martin et al., 2003; Pierce, 2009). While it has been revealed that online and offline social connectedness are distinct constructs (Grieve et al., 2013), to date, it is unclear whether perceived social support can be obtained from interactions on Facebook. Further, the utility of online and offline social support in the experience of well-being as a function of social anxiety is yet to be considered.

### 1.3. The current research

The overarching aim of the current study was therefore to explore for the first time the experience of social support resulting from Facebook use, and the influence (if any) of social anxiety. Specifically, we were interested in determining whether perceptions of social support could be experienced online, and whether this social support would be related to subjective well-being. In addition, we examined the incremental utility of Facebook social support in predicting subjective well-being over and above offline social support. To investigate the role of social anxiety, we considered the utility of Facebook social support separately for high- and low-socially anxious individuals.

Items assessing Facebook social support were developed based on Longman, O'Connor, and Obst's (2009) methodology investigating perceptions of social support in World of Warcraft players. Building on previous research which has shown relationships between offline social support and well-being (Cohen et al., 1983; Haber et al., 2007), we then examined the relationship between Facebook social support and subjective well-being. It was hypothesised that offline social support would predict subjective well-being, and further that Facebook social support would explain significant additional variance in subjective well-being, particularly for those with high social anxiety.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Two hundred and ninety-nine Facebook users were recruited (257 females and 42 males), with an average age of 28.35 years ( $SD = 10.88$  years). The majority of the sample (83.3%) reported being a Facebook member for two or more years. Participants reported on average as having between 200 and 250 'Facebook friends', and using Facebook each day for between 30 and 60 min, however 14% of the population identified that daily usage was more than 3 h. Thus, it seemed that Facebook use was occurring at sufficient levels to allow perceptions of social support to emerge, if present. As we wished to compare patterns of results between both socially anxious and non-socially anxious individuals,

we did not apply any selection criteria in regards to psychological health, however all participants were required to be members of Facebook.

### 2.2. Measures

#### 2.2.1. Social anxiety

The three item mini-social phobia inventory (Mini-SPIN) was used (Connor, Kobak, Churchill, Katzelnick, & Davidson, 2001). A sample item is *Fear of embarrassment causes me to avoid doing things or speaking to people*. Participants respond using a five point Likert scale ranging from 0 = *not at all* to 4 = *extremely*. Internal reliability for the scale is excellent, with Cronbach's alpha at 0.91 (Seeley-Wait, Abbott, & Rapee, 2009). The Mini-SPIN is considered a valid measure of social anxiety in adults, with a cut-off score of six discriminating individuals with a social anxiety disorder (Seeley-Wait et al., 2009).

#### 2.2.2. Offline social support

Perceptions of offline social support were measured using the appraisal subscale of the interpersonal support evaluation list (ISEL; Cohen et al., 1983). The subscale comprises five positive (e.g. *There is at least one person I know whose advice I really trust*) and five negative (e.g. *There is really no one who can give me objective feedback about how I'm handling problems*) appraisals of availability of social support. Participants respond on a 4 point Likert scale where 1 = *definitely false* to 4 = *definitely true*. Negative items are reflected such that higher scores indicate higher levels of support. Psychometric properties of the subscale are sound, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient ranging from 0.77 to 0.86, and with good evidence of convergent and discriminant validity (Cohen, Mermelstein, Kamarck, & Hoberman, 1985).

#### 2.2.3. Facebook social support items

We followed the Longman et al. (2009) methodology to adapt the ISEL appraisal subscale items described above to the online context. As appropriate, item wording was revised to assess perceived social support derived from Facebook use. A sample positive item is *There is at least one person I know on Facebook whose advice I really trust*. A sample negative item is *There is really no one on Facebook who can give me objective feedback about how I'm handling problems*. Participants respond on a 4 point Likert scale with anchors 1 = *definitely false* and 4 = *definitely true*. Negative items are reflected such that higher scores indicate higher levels of support. After generation of the items, a pilot study was conducted with four Facebook users to ensure suitability and readability of the adapted items.

#### 2.2.4. Subjective well-being

The satisfaction with life scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was used to assess subjective well-being. This five item measure assesses perceptions of global satisfaction with life on a Likert scale with the anchors 1 = *strongly disagree* and 7 = *strongly agree*. A sample item is *In most ways, my life is close to my ideal*. Internal reliability for the scale is excellent, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.79 to 0.89, and the scale also demonstrates good convergent and discriminant validity (Pavot & Diener, 1993).

### 2.3. Design, analytical approach, and procedure

A cross-sectional design was used. Data was split into high and low social anxiety groups based on the cut-off recommended by Seeley-Wait et al. (2009). Separate hierarchical multiple regressions were then used to assess the relationship between social support and well-being for both groups. In both cases, in the first step, offline social support was entered. Facebook social support was en-

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