



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

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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.

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-

tered in the second step. The outcome variable was subjective well-being.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the university ethics committee. Potential participants were invited to participate in an anonymous survey investigating Facebook use via postings on Facebook. After providing informed consent, participants completed all measures via an online data collection service. To minimise order effects, questions about online and offline social support were counterbalanced.

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

As the sample was predominantly female, we deemed it prudent to check for systematic effects of gender. There were no significant effects evident as a function of gender on any of the variables (p values were between 0.13 and 0.69). Relevant multivariate assumptions were also checked and all were met for the subsequent analyses.

3.2. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics for the high and low social anxiety groups and for the whole sample are presented in Table 1. With or without Bonferroni corrections for multiple comparisons (with alpha set at $0.05/4 = 0.0125$), as would be expected, the high social anxiety group reported significantly greater social anxiety, $t(297) = -25.88$, $p < 0.001$; significantly lower levels of satisfaction with life, $t(297) = 5.10$, $p < 0.001$; and significantly lower perceptions of social support experienced offline, $t(297) = 2.87$, $p = 0.004$, than individuals in the low social anxiety group. Notably, there was no significant difference in perceptions of Facebook social support between the two groups, $t(297) = 0.14$, $p = 0.89$.

Internal reliability for the social anxiety scale was good, though somewhat lower than that reported by Seeley-Wait et al. (2009). The offline social support scale had similar internal reliability as reported in previous research (Cohen et al., 1985). Items for the Facebook social support scale showed good internal reliability. The satisfaction with life scale had excellent reliability, in line with previous research (Pavot et al., 1993).

Bivariate correlations for both the low and high social anxiety groups can be seen in Table 2. Fisher's r -to- Z transformations revealed no significant differences in the correlations as a function

of anxiety level (p values between 0.09 and 0.35). Offline social support and social support derived from Facebook were strongly and positively correlated, though not to the point of multicollinearity. This suggests that social support derived in online and offline contexts are related, but distinct constructs.

3.3. Low social anxiety group

The hierarchical multiple regression for the group low in social anxiety is presented in Table 3. In the first step, offline social support significantly predicted subjective well-being, $R = 0.35$, $adjR^2 = 0.12$, $F(1, 192) = 25.98$, $p < 0.001$, accounting for 11.9% of variance, and representing a medium effect, $f^2 = 0.14$ (Cohen, 1992). The addition of Facebook social support in the second step explained no additional significant variance in subjective well-being, $F_{change}(1, 191) = 0.01$, $p = 0.93$. Overall, the final model remained significant, predicting 12.25% of variance in well-being, $R = 0.35$, $adjR^2 = 0.12$, $F(2, 191) = 12.93$, $p < 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.14$. This was a medium effect (Cohen, 1992). However, only offline social support was a significant individual predictor of well-being.

3.4. High social anxiety group

Table 4 shows the full details of the hierarchical multiple regression for the high social anxiety group. In step 1, offline social support explained 9.6% of variance in subjective well-being. This was significant, $R = 0.31$, $adjR^2 = 0.09$, $F(1, 103) = 10.98$, $p = 0.001$, and indicated a small to medium effect, $f^2 = 0.10$ (Cohen, 1992). Adding Facebook social support in the second step significantly improved the model, $F_{change}(1, 102) = 4.01$, $p = 0.048$. The overall model explained 13% of variance in well-being, and was

Table 3
Hierarchical multiple regression predicting well-being in the low social anxiety group.

	<i>B</i>	Std. error	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Step 1</i>					
Constant	10.31	3.13		3.29	
Offline social support	0.46	0.09	0.35	5.10	<0.001
<i>Step 2</i>					
Constant	10.35	3.19		3.25	
Offline social support	0.46	0.11	0.35	4.28	<0.001
Facebook social support	−0.01	0.085	−0.01	−0.08	0.93

Table 1
Descriptive statistics and internal reliability.

	Low social anxiety group (<i>N</i> = 194)		High social anxiety group (<i>N</i> = 105)		Whole sample		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Cronbach's α
Social anxiety	2.62	1.65	8.04	1.85	4.53	3.11	0.80
Offline social support	34.45	4.72	32.75	5.18	33.86	4.95	0.76
Facebook social support	30.56	6.00	30.47	5.40	30.53	5.79	0.78
Subjective well-being	26.12	6.28	22.02	7.24	24.69	6.90	0.91

Table 2
Bivariate correlations for low and high social anxiety groups. Correlations for the low anxiety group are presented below the diagonal, correlations for the high anxiety group are presented above the diagonal.

	Offline social support	Facebook social support	Subjective well-being
Offline social support		0.61***	0.31 ^a
Facebook social support	0.56***		0.34***
Subjective well-being	0.35***	0.19**	

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

^a $p = 0.001$, two-tailed.

Table 4

Hierarchical multiple regression predicting well-being in the high social anxiety group.

	<i>B</i>	Std. error	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Step 1</i>					
Constant	7.82	4.34		1.80	
Offline social support	0.43	0.13	0.31	3.31	0.001
<i>Step 2</i>					
Constant	4.81	4.54		1.06	0.291
Offline social support	0.23	0.16	0.17	1.43	0.155
Facebook social support	0.31	0.16	0.23	2.00	0.048

significant, $R = 0.36$, $adjRsquare = 0.11$, $F(2, 102) = 7.65$, $p = 0.001$, $f^2 = 0.15$ This was a medium effect (Cohen, 1992). Within the model, only Facebook social support contributed significantly as an individual predictor, with higher levels of perceived Facebook social support significantly related to improved well-being: offline social support was no longer a significant predictor of well-being.

3.5. Additional analyses

The unexpected finding that offline social support was no longer significant within the model in the high social anxiety group, suggested that Facebook social support might be acting as a mediator of the social support–well-being relationship. Thus, a post hoc test of possible mediation effects was undertaken. Analysis was conducted using the Baron and Kenny (1986) four step method with Sobel test. Results indicated that Facebook social support mediated the social support–well-being relationship for individuals with high social anxiety. However, the Sobel test suggested that the mediation was only marginally significant at a traditional alpha level of 0.05, $Z = 1.93$, $p = 0.053$. Given this result and mindful of potential issues with the Sobel test in terms of lack of power (MacKinnon, Warsi, & Dwyer, 1995), additional mediation analyses using bootstrapping was undertaken. Using this method, the mediation remained non-significant when considering 95% confidence intervals (Lower CI = -0.0015 – Upper CI = 0.4587).

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore social support derived from Facebook. As predicted, for both the low- and high- social anxiety groups, the combination of offline and Facebook social support significantly predicted well-being. In contrast to predictions, Facebook social support did not explain any variance in well-being over and above offline social support for the low social anxiety group, suggesting that the social support derived from Facebook has limited utility in contributing to well-being for these individuals. However, as predicted, for the high social anxiety group, Facebook social support explained a significant amount of additional variance in subjective well-being over and above offline social support. Of particular note was that with Facebook social support included in the model, offline social support was no longer associated with well-being in this group.

While the current findings are in line with previous research suggesting that social support can be derived from online sources (Longman et al., 2009), this research highlights that for individuals with social anxiety, online social support (specifically that derived from Facebook) may have a distinctive role. This has several implications that warrant consideration.

Access to the Internet is increasing rapidly, with Facebook currently ranked first in Internet traffic (Alexa, 2013). In addition, people can now readily access sites such as Facebook using mobile media devices such as smartphones “anytime, anyplace, anywhere” (Quinn & Oldmeadow, 2013, p. 238). One inference of this

(and in light of the current findings) is that Facebook interaction may readily facilitate improved well-being in socially anxious individuals, thereby improving their functioning and experience. However, an alternative interpretation and corollary of this notion exists. Specifically, if socially anxious individuals turn to the online environment for social support, while avoiding social interaction in the face-to-face environment, this might subsequently perpetuate their social anxiety.

This consideration notwithstanding, given that there is an increasing utilisation of virtual therapies, the current findings must be considered within this context of potential treatment options. In particular, the use of virtual therapies in the treatment of anxiety is supported (Powers & Emmelkamp, 2008). It is possible that social networking sites may have a role in enabling access to online therapy.

4.1. Limitations

Of course, the cross-sectional nature of the current study means that causality cannot be inferred. While the current research builds on existing findings that face-to-face social support predicts well-being (e.g. Haber et al., 2007), it should be noted that it is possible that an individual's level of subjective well-being may influence their social engagement when online, in turn affecting their opportunities to access online social support. A longitudinal design to confirm whether the causal direction for the social support–well-being relationship seen offline translates to the online domain would be valuable.

The use of self-report is both a strength and a limitation of the current research. While self-report allowed participants to report on their own, subjective appraisal of their on-line social experience, including behavioural measures may also provide additional understanding. For example, including an analysis of social support-related timeline posts and comments may provide a rich source of insight into the types of interaction that facilitate the appraisal of social support in the online environment.

In addition, the fact that only existing Facebook users were recruited for the current study should be considered. This has two particular implications. Firstly, for individuals who are high in social anxiety but who are not already Facebook users, it cannot be assumed that starting Facebook will automatically facilitate social support. Secondly, it is not clear whether social support derived from Facebook might be similar or different to social support derived from other online sources, such as discussion forums.

It should also be noted that the proportion of males in the sample was relatively small. Although no systematic effects of gender were evident in preliminary analyses of measure scores, it would be prudent not to overgeneralise the current findings.

4.2. Directions for future research

While the potential utility of online social support for socially anxious individuals is intuitively clear and now supported empirically here, it is also possible that the benefits of social support derived online may extend to other anxiety related disorders. We would recommend that this possibility be examined in future research. For example, individuals with post traumatic stress disorder who may avoid stimuli related to trauma may find it useful to obtain social support online. Similarly, for individuals experiencing obsessive compulsive disorder with obsessions around contamination, going online may be helpful in order to maintain or to develop social connections, within an environment that is perceived to be safe. However, until additional research is conducted to investigate these possibilities, the current findings should not be extended beyond social anxiety.

More broadly, and in line with suggestions made by Grieve et al. (2013) in regards to social connectedness derived online, the findings presented here may also have implications for those who are unable to engage socially in face-to-face environments for other reasons that are not related to anxiety. Mindful that the current data suggests that online and offline social support are related but distinct concepts, it is feasible that individuals who are, for example, geographically (or otherwise) separated from their face-to-face social networks may find that the online environment might be a fruitful source of social support. Future research might like to consider this possibility in specific, isolated populations.

5. Conclusion

Social support is related to improved well-being (e.g. Haber et al., 2007), however, it can be difficult for individuals with social anxiety to engage with traditional social networks (Wenzel, 2002). This research therefore investigated the relationship between social support derived from the use of Facebook and subjective well-being in socially anxious and non-socially anxious individuals, highlighting that for individuals with social anxiety, online Facebook-derived social support may have a specific role. While these findings suggest that Facebook may serve as an effective platform for the perception of social support in socially anxious individuals, the nature of social anxiety and possible perpetuating factors means that the implications of this research should be considered within a broader clinical context.

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