



“Your Life Sucks,” but I think “You Deserved It”: Social approval and disapproval of messages on FMyLife.com



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ABSTRACT

This study used Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) as a lens to understand how dominant societal standards for social support manifest in raters' judgments of postings on a pop-culture website. The pop-culture website, *FMyLife.com* (*FML*) was analyzed to see if there were major themes within the community's norms consistent with those of society. A total of 25,220 posts were analyzed for major themes on how raters rate posts from those looking to commiserate about their situation online. Since generic standards of conduct and norms apply in groups and at the individual level via computer-mediated communication, (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009), examples of common themes that relate to universal norms and ideologies are discussed pertaining to the two options of the *FML* website – “your life sucks” and “you deserved it.” Ten percent of posts for each option were then chosen at random to secure a frequency count for posts found within the themes. Results exhibit how elements of SJT play a role in the rating process of posts, and directions for future research are suggested.

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1. Introduction

Abraham Lincoln said, “He has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help” (Moran, 2011). This quotation highlights the intricacies found within the bright and dark sides of communication because while it may be easy to judge someone else, comments should derive from those willing to assist in times of need. The United States has placed social support on a metaphorical pedestal by deeming it a great virtue, and we can see this through the plethora of volunteer organizations (PR Newswire Association LLC, 2014) and philanthropic work (The Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2013). Social support is not only available in face-to-face interactions, but can also be given and accepted via online communities. Social support is readily available around the clock through the internet; people can log into different websites at any time to talk to individuals using their real names, internet monikers, or anonymously.

Internet communities that provide certain levels of anonymity offer an opportune environment for the emergence of “unusual” support; collectively, individuals that participate in some online communities may begin to “skew” what is typically thought of as

support. For example, while social support websites have emerged to assist people with medical diagnoses (Klemm, Hurst, Dearholt, & Trone, 1999; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005), some, deemed “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” websites, emerged allowing individuals to assist those with eating disorders to continue maintaining unhealthy habits (Van Pelt, 2009). This shows how social support can be considered positive or negative, and this depends on if the support aligns with dominant societal standards.

Societies cultivate social norms and rules that are then followed by members. The “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” websites illustrate how supporting an unhealthy lifestyle stands against the broader societal norms of health and wellness. While the central purpose of social support sites is to foster belongingness and unity, sometimes this is cultivated through the promotion of commiseration. For example, the website www.FMyLife.com (*FML*) is a somewhat satirical website where people can post unpleasant, undesirable, or unexpected interpersonal experiences, and allow others to rate the acceptability of negative experiences (Valette, Passaglia, & Guedj, 2013a). The website name, FMyLife, has been taken from popular culture slang, “f*** my life,” signifying self-pity.

The present study sheds light on societal standards of social support in an online context by investigating postings from the *FML* website (Valette et al., 2013a). Online communities, even those satirical in nature, can hold an element of the dark side of

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communication, yet social norms and expectations are still present. The *FML* website will be analyzed because of its negative undertone of self pity by taking a closer look at how raters decide whether things are worthy of an *FML* posting for amusement, or if the poster is looking for unwarranted sympathy. Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) offers a lens for this study, to evaluate posts from the viewpoint of the rater to explore what types of comments individuals find appropriate or inappropriate. Since individuals have different latitudes of acceptance and rejection, this study uncovers broad patterns from raters' responses indicating that societal norms do exist when passing judgment anonymously online.

2. Social Judgment Theory

In order to make sense of what an individual deems acceptable or unacceptable, SJT (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965) developed from Egon Brunswik's Lens Model through Probabilistic Functionalist psychology (Cooksey, 1996; Doherty & Kurz, 1996). SJT is a socio-psychological theory that helps explain how persuasive messages succeed (Griffin, 2012). With roots in Judgment Theory, SJT aims to understand the decision-making process related to persuasion as it explains how attitudes are expressed, judged, and modified (Miller, 2005). When an individual hears a message, they immediately judge where the message should be placed on their internal attitude scale.

Mallard (2010) suggests that SJT illuminates how individuals compare their own views on matters to the views of others by holding different *latitudes* of what is acceptable. SJT incorporates three *latitudes* having their own continuum since a person's feelings toward acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment can vary within each individual *latitude* (Griffin, 2012). *Latitude of acceptance* is defined "as the range of positions on an issue ... an individual considers acceptable to him/[her] (including the one 'most acceptable' to him/[her])" (Sherif & Hovland, 1961, p. 129). The *latitude of rejection* encompasses what is not acceptable, leading to very little (if any) attitude change. Finally, the *latitude of noncommitment* includes neutral feelings (Griffin, 2012). If the *anchor* falls within the middle of the *latitude of acceptance* (Miller, 2005), if a message matches up with an individual's anchor, it will not lead to any change in feelings, but could reinforce their viewpoint (Miller, 2005).

After understanding the different latitudes, it is important to also understand an individual's ego-involvement. Ego-involvement refers to how important an issue is in a person's life, sometimes established by the group a person is a part of (Griffin, 2012). This concept has individuals questioning how important a topic is by considering things like, is this something constantly thought about? Or does it define who I am? If an individual has a large latitude of rejection, this is often a sign that the topic corresponds to high ego-involvement; whereas low ego-involvement is often linked to more of a *latitude of noncommitment* (Griffin, 2012). If a topic is really important, then an individual already has a hard stance on how they feel about it, and are most likely not willing to stray from their attitude. If a topic is not really important to an individual, they are more than likely indifferent about how they feel about it.

Since communication and points of view cannot always be taken at face value, SJT also highlights the possibility of confusion in individuals' attitudes. Sherif felt that the biases in the judgments that we make in the world parallel how we determine the attitudes of others (Griffin, 2012), and errors arise when judging messages. One example is a contrast error, and explains when individuals decide a message within their latitude of rejection is farther from their attitudinal decision (their anchor) than it actually is (Griffin, 2012). Conversely, an error of assimilation describes when individuals decide a message within their latitude of acceptance

differs less from their attitudinal decision (their anchor) than it actually does (Griffin, 2012).

Individuals subconsciously decide where messages fall within their different latitudes when face-to-face or online. For the purpose of this study, when analyzing the *FML* website, when a rater "accepts" a posters comment, it is as if they are issuing some sort of sympathy and offering support to the poster because the rater feels as though the poster's "life sucks." When a rater decides a poster "deserved" the negative occurrence, it is as if the rater feels the poster's actions were unacceptable in some way, leading to some sort of blame and withdrawal of support. Understanding how online communities function will help shed light on the *FML* website and the decision behind rater attitudes. To better understand how individuals communicate and feel about online topics, it is important to understand how online communities and social networking sites operate.

3. Literature review

3.1. Online communities

As internet usage continues to grow, new tools and functions emerge regularly. The advent of chatting tools have allowed communication to evolve from an asynchronous (e.g., email), to a synchronous process (e.g., instant messaging, video chat). On a broader level, online communities have emerged as a result of the creation of synchronous online chat rooms. In these virtual spaces, individuals with common interests from anywhere can meet to share content and/or opinions at any time (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Jin, Lee, & Cheung, 2012; Preece, 2000, 2001).

Depending on the layout of the online community, members can post material or respond to others. Some online communities allow members to select a preset response, as is the case with *FML*. Since members choose their level of involvement, their sense of community differs, as well as their degree of attachment (Ren et al., 2012). Members may interact with the online community as a whole, a small group within the community, or at the dyadic level (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009), and do not need to contribute regularly to remain a member of the online community (Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2005). Member contributions vary depending on the group's norms. The values within these communities are cultivated through the interaction and dialogue created amongst members (Jin et al., 2012). These values are sometimes understood and reinforced through trial and error from an individuals' interaction with other members.

3.1.1. Online social support

The ability to communicate interpersonally is often what keeps individuals logged-on (Seligman, 2011), and using both online communities and social networking sites (SNS). Also, discussing opinions and providing feedback via SNS can help support the growth of the individuals and the interpersonal relationship (Strom & Strom, 2012). In relation to online social support, members of an online community or those linked to a SNS can communicate to offer emotional support (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005) related to topics like families (Christian, 2005) or health diagnoses/concerns (Coulson, 2005; White & Dorman, 2001). Since individuals do not need to be face-to-face to gather or share information, the set up of an online social support site allows for the discussion of taboo topics (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Coulson, 2005). A majority of individuals visiting social support sites gather and process the information rather than post information related to the topic at hand (Li, 2010). Online social support sites provide an outlet for individuals to discuss topics in a way that is least face threatening. If the topic is unsafe or harmful in some way, participants are perpetuating a harmful cycle.

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