



Social sharing through interpersonal media: Patterns and effects on emotional well-being



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ABSTRACT

Social sharing is the act of discussing significant emotional events with others. Using a daily diary methodology, this study investigated (1) patterns of media use for social sharing; and (2) effects of mediated social sharing on sharers' emotions. Results show that easily accessible and non-intrusive media (i.e., texting, Twitter) were more likely to be used for sharing positive than negative events, and intrusive and rich media (i.e., phone calling) were more likely to be used for sharing negative than positive events. Highly intense positive events were more likely to be shared via Twitter than low-intensity positive events, and highly intense negative events were more likely to be shared face-to-face than low-intensity negative events. Regardless of the medium used, people experienced increased positive affect after sharing positive events, and increased negative affect after sharing negative events. The results extend the social sharing framework, and advance the media use and effects literature.

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1. Introduction

Social sharing, or communicating with others about significant emotional experiences, is a highly prevalent phenomenon. People share these experiences with relational partners about 90% of the time (Rimé, Philippot, Boca, & Mesquita, 1992), a rate that is strikingly similar across cultures (Singh-Manoux & Finkenauer, 2001; Yogo & Onoe, 1998). This suggests that social sharing may fulfill fundamental human needs related to emotional expression and social connectedness. Additionally, the simple act of social sharing has been shown to have powerful effects on sharers' emotional well-being, amplifying their initial emotional response to the triggering event (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004; Lambert et al., 2013; Langston, 1994; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Rimé et al., 1992).

Due to its prevalence and emotional significance, social sharing has received a great deal of empirical attention. However, the existing body of research has exclusively examined social sharing in face-to-face contexts – a narrow focus that does not reflect the realities of today's communication landscape, where a great deal of social interaction occurs over mediated channels (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012). Interpersonal media, or media used for personal contact between users (e.g., phones, text messaging, email, Facebook), provide access to people with whom one can

share, immediately after the triggering event has happened and across geographical distances. Interpersonal media is therefore likely to be used prominently for social sharing (see Lambert et al., 2013 for a similar suggestion).

This paper is the first to examine social sharing as it takes place via interpersonal media. In this initial examination of the topic, we focus on two issues of theoretical significance: (1) *media selection*, or how people choose media for social sharing, as a function of the type of emotional event experienced; and (2) *psychological effects*, or how sharing through various media impacts sharers' emotional response to the triggering event. We first identify a set of media affordances relevant to social sharing. Then we empirically test how people utilize these affordances to meet the psychological needs elicited by events of varying valence (positive vs. negative) and intensity (low vs. high). For instance, for what kinds of events do people prefer media where messages are visible to large audiences (e.g., Facebook posts), or with limited nonverbal cues (e.g., texting)? With respect to psychological effects, we investigate whether the known effects of social sharing persist when the sharing is done in communication environments that differ substantially from face-to-face. For instance, does the sharing of positive events amplify positive affect even when there is no nonverbal feedback from one's communication partner (e.g., via text)? To address our research questions, we use an undergraduate student population and we consider the most ubiquitous of today's interpersonal media: phone calling, texting, instant messenger (IM), email, Facebook posts, Twitter posts, blogs, and video chat.

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2. Social sharing and media affordances

Social sharing is defined as the process of communicating with others about significant emotional experiences and about the event that triggered those experiences (Rimé, 2009). An emotional experience is an event or issue that elicits either positive or negative emotion (Gable & Reis, 2010; Garrison & Kahn, 2010; Reis et al., 2010). Social sharing is different from mundane sharing in that the latter usually refers to trivial happenings or gossip that have little emotional repercussions. For instance, revealing that one has received a good grade on an exam constitutes social sharing because this event likely elicited a notable emotional response. However, discussing what one had for breakfast likely constitutes mundane sharing, provided that breakfast fare did not elicit a significant emotional response.

Further, it is important to note that social sharing, with its focus on significant emotional experiences, constitutes one specific and narrow type of emotional communication. It is possible to engage in emotional communication that does not constitute social sharing, for instance when expressing emotion that is not associated with a personal event (e.g., “I’m glad it’s sunny today!”), expressing emotion that is associated with a mundane event (as discussed earlier), or expressing mood, which is a low-grade emotion that is not necessarily triggered by an event. While emotional communication, broadly defined, has been investigated in computer-mediated contexts (e.g., Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Guillory et al., 2011; Hancock, Landrigan, & Silver, 2007), this is the first study to investigate the more narrowly defined phenomenon of social sharing.

The social sharing theoretical framework postulates that people engage in social sharing in order to deal with the emotion elicited by the triggering event (Rimé et al., 1992; see also Bruner, 1990; Schachter, 1959). Generally speaking, dealing with this emotion elicits two categories of psychological needs: (1) personal expression, or verbalizing one’s thoughts and feelings; and (2) feedback, or receiving appropriate responses from communication partners (Harber & Cohen, 2005; Rimé, 1995).

By definition, media affordances are features of the media that are perceived by users to impact their ability to fulfill their goals and needs (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Kraut et al., 2002). For example, in the context of deception, relevant affordances include a reduction in nonverbal cues (because people who do not need to manage these cues may find it easier to lie) and recordability (because having a record of the deception may facilitate deception detection, and thus hinder liars’ success) (Hancock, Thom-Santelli, & Ritchie, 2004). In the context of social sharing, relevant media affordances should be those that impact sharers’ ability to fulfill their needs for expression and feedback. Below we identify these affordances.

Consider first media affordances relevant to the need for expression. Since expression facilitates the processing of emotions, individuals typically feel a need to verbalize their thoughts and feelings in close temporal proximity to the event that triggered the emotional reaction (Rimé et al., 1992). For this reason, social sharing often occurs on the same day as the triggering event. The media affordance that can fulfill this need for immediate expression is *accessibility*, or the extent to which media can be quickly and easily accessed for interpersonal contact (Lee, 2010). Highly accessible media are those that are easily portable (such that individuals have them on their person and can access them anytime) and do not require Internet connectivity (such that individuals can access data even in situations where Internet connections are not available). Cell phones meet the portability criterion. Indeed, research shows that 85% of Americans over the age of 18 own a cell phone, but only 45% have Internet connectivity on it (Pew Internet

& American Life Project, 2012). Of the media that can be accessed on cell phones, voice calling, texting and Twitter meet the connectivity criterion, in that they can be accessed even without Internet connectivity (Snow, 2009). As a result, these three media can be conceptualized as highly accessible. Conversely, media such as Facebook, blogs, and video chat require an Internet connection and sometimes access to a computer (which, even if it is a laptop, is more cumbersome to carry than a cell phone), and therefore are generally less accessible.

Another need experienced by social sharers is expressing their thoughts and feelings to an appropriate communication partner. The literature shows that individuals sometimes share indiscriminately, to whomever will listen, whereas other times they seek close and trusted others (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). In response to this need, the media makes it possible to compose messages that are visible to a large and diverse audience of communication partners. Certain media render messages visible to audiences comprising hundreds or thousands of members with varying degrees of relational closeness to the sharer (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, blogs). Other media, such as texting, phone calling, and video chat, restrict message visibility to small groups or just one other individual (who can be targeted to be a trusted person). We label this affordance *message visibility (private vs. public)* (see also Treem & Leonardi, 2012).

Consider now media affordances relevant to the need for feedback. Extant research shows that sharers sometimes seek nonverbal feedback (e.g., a hug, a pat on the back), as these tactile expressions are highly effective at conveying support and encouragement (Dolin & Booth-Butterfield, 1993). The relevant media affordance is *availability of nonverbal cues* (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Walther & Parks, 2002), which can range from (1) full, when all nonverbal cues are present (i.e., face-to-face), (2) partial, when only certain nonverbal cues are present (i.e., vocal cues for the phone; vocal and gestural, but not haptic, cues for video chat), or (3) none (i.e., texting, Facebook, Twitter).

Lastly, just as individuals experience a need for immediate expression, they sometimes also need immediate feedback from communication partners. Immediate feedback can be obtained in media that directly reach a communication partner and command his/her attention through real-time conversation (i.e., the phone, IM). These media are interactive (see also Burgoon et al., 2002) and, importantly for our purposes, they can be used to interrupt the communication partner’s activities (e.g., one must suspend current activities in order to pick up the phone). Hence, we label this affordance *intrusiveness* (see also Nardi, Whittaker, & Bradner, 2000; Setlock, Fussell, Ji, & Culver, 2009), with intrusive media being used to demand immediate feedback through real-time conversation. Non-interactive media (i.e., Facebook posts, Twitter posts, texting) are not intrusive because respondents can answer on their own time.

In sum, we expect the affordances of accessibility, message visibility, nonverbal cues, and intrusiveness to play a meaningful part in media selection for social sharing. The importance of each affordance should vary according to the type of event that triggers the social sharing episode, as described below.

3. Patterns of social sharing via interpersonal media

Extant research shows that the valence (positive vs. negative) and intensity (low vs. high) of emotional events substantially shape social sharing (Uysal & Oner-Ozkan, 2007). For example, imagine that you are a college student and have just found out you got your first job – a highly positive event. Immediately upon finding out the good news, you might call your family and friends. You might post an ecstatic status update on Facebook. You might

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