

“To Respond or not to Respond, that is the Question”: The Decision-Making Process of Providing Social Support to Distressed Posters on Facebook

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand whether, why, and under what conditions young adults respond to distressed posts on social networking sites (SNSs). Semi-structured interviews with 27 participants revealed a wide range of salient factors that influenced participants' likelihood of responding to distressed posts. By identifying the factors and mapping the conditions under which they are operational, we posit a conceptual framework useful in understanding key features of the decision-making process participants use to decide whether and how to respond to distressed SNS posts. Results suggest that relationship closeness is the first and most significant determinant of likelihood to respond. When relational closeness was high, the responses were likely to be direct and immediate. In the absence of relational closeness between respondent and poster, likelihood of responding depended on (1) perceived acuity and seriousness of content, (2) consistency in posting patterns, (3) perceived capacity to provide efficacious support, (4) history of reciprocity, (5) perceived resonance with poster or posted content, (6) perceived motivations of the poster, and (7) perceptions of other viewers. The findings have implications for understanding social support interactions and bystander interventions in peer networks on SNSs.

Keywords

social support, responses to distressed posts online, social networking sites, young adults

Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) have become a common communication venue for young adults, who use them frequently, and more often than any other age group (Duggan, 2015; Smith, Rainie, & Zickuhr, 2011). Young adults use SNSs most commonly to share everyday experiences and to connect with peer networks (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). Although most online exchanges are neutral or positive in tone, it is not uncommon for posters to also share negative disclosures, known as “distressed posts,” which typically include negative emotions and signal heightened stress, anxiety, and/or depressive symptoms (Egan & Moreno, 2011; Moreno et al., 2011).

These more negatively valenced posts on SNSs are concerning because young adults, especially those who are experiencing transitions (e.g., leaving home and starting college), are at high risk for psychological distress (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2010; Tandoc, Ferrucci, & Duffy, 2015). While some of this distress is transient, some can become chronic

and worsen over time, leaving individuals vulnerable to serious conditions, such as suicidal thoughts and behaviors or other forms of self-harm (Whitlock, 2010). To cope with stress, young adults often turn to peer networks for social support (Galaif, Sussman, Chou, & Wills, 2003; Oh, Lauckner, Boehmer, Fewins-Bliss, & Li, 2013). Although not always helpful in offsetting psychological distress, peer support is an important resource in young adults' daily lives (Wright et al., 2013), and peers are often the first to become aware of another peer's distress. Thus, understanding how young adults perceive and respond to distressed social media

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messages is an important first step in informing prevention and intervention efforts.

SNSs offer new ways of tapping into peer support networks for multiple reasons: they facilitate connections with geographically distributed networks, offer ways to reach many people at once, make it easy to locate similar others, are easily accessible, and are available 24/7 (Caplan & Turner, 2007; High & Solomon, 2011; Rains & Keating, 2011). However, these factors, which are part of the socio-technical environment of SNSs, are very different from those of offline environments where distress may be communicated. How individuals perceive, evaluate, and respond to distressed communication on SNSs is not well understood, but may have very important implications for overall well-being. For example, if viewers fail to notice or respond, it may further exacerbate distress for support seekers, with potentially serious consequences. The goal of this study, therefore, is to examine how social support transactions transpire on SNSs, with a focus on how viewers notice, interpret, and respond to distressed posts in their online networks.

Social Support Interactions for Young Adults on SNSs

Most research on social support exchanges on SNSs focuses on help seekers' behaviors (e.g., Blight, Jagiello, & Ruppel, 2015), their perceptions of social support (e.g., Wright et al., 2013), and the effects of receiving social support (e.g., Wright, 2012). For example, perceived support on SNSs has been linked with perceived offline support (Li, Chen, & Popiel, 2015), and support seekers appear to value social support from all respondents similarly, regardless of the relational closeness between support seeker and support provider (Rozzell et al., 2014).

However, viewers' supportive responses—or lack thereof—are critical to disclosers' satisfaction (e.g., Bazarova, Choi, Schwanda Sosik, Cosley, & Whitlock, 2015), their communication behaviors (e.g., Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011), and their overall well-being (e.g., Reis & Shaver, 1988). Extant research has identified several factors that influence viewers' attention and decision-making process about whether to respond to distressed posts. Several studies point to the link between the technological features used by the poster and viewers' willingness to provide social support to distressed posters. For example, Feng, Li, and Li's (2016) study found that cues to personal identity in a poster's profile—a portrait picture and a first name ID—tend to result in support messages from viewers that are more person-centered and more polite. The number of features used to signal distress in SNSs, referred to as emotional bandwidth (e.g., pictures, posts, and profile information displaying emotional state), also affects viewers' willingness to provide social support to the distressed poster (High, Oeldorf-Hirsch, & Bellur, 2014). Contrary to the authors' expectations, viewers were less willing to provide social support as the number of

features signaling distress in hypothetical Facebook profiles increased, presumably because displaying distress and negative affect was inconsistent with the social norms of positively valenced posts on Facebook (High et al., 2014). It is also possible that viewers did not interpret higher emotional bandwidth as a signal of higher levels of distress because perceived distress tends to elicit more immediate responses compared to distressed posts attributed to attention-seeking motives online (Egan, Koff, & Moreno, 2013).

The number of other viewers and their characteristics influence the likelihood of viewers' responses to distressed posts as well. Drawing on the classic bystander effect (Darley & Latané, 1968), researchers found that the total number of viewers exposed to a distressed post was inversely related to the likelihood of a single individual responding to it (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016), and it took people longer to respond when other viewers were mutual friends of the discloser and the viewer (Robbins & Afifi, 2014). In addition to the number of other viewers affecting viewers' responses, the supportiveness of other people's comments is positively associated with subsequent viewers' perception of the poster and their willingness to respond (Li & Feng, 2015). Moreover, other viewers' comments often influence the viewer and tend to exert greater influence than the content of the post itself (Lee & Jang, 2010). These findings suggest a complex relationship between posts and responses, where features of SNS environments that facilitate support seeking (e.g., access to peer networks, reaching many people at once, and using multiple cues to signal distress) may simultaneously discourage support providers from responding to a distressed post.

Another salient factor influencing viewers' decision to respond to distressed posts on SNSs is their relational closeness to the poster. In general, the more relationally close the poster and viewer are to each other, the more likely the viewer is to respond to a distressed post; but their response is typically delivered via more private and one-on-one channels, such as face-to-face interactions, phone calls, and email, instead of SNSs (Egan et al., 2013). In contrast, viewers are less willing to respond to non-close friends than to close friends because of privacy invasion and social norm concerns (Egan et al., 2013).

Reciprocity also affects a viewer's decision to respond to a distressed poster. Viewers may assume that the more support they provide to someone who is distressed and seeking support, the more support they perceive as available to them as well (Cohen & Lichtenstein, 1990; Cutrona, 1986). Pan, Shen, and Feng (2017) found a consistent reciprocal pattern between users' replies sent to others and replies received from others in a SNS that served as a depression forum. Furthermore, the frequency with which an individual engages in social interactions on a SNS is positively related to receiving and giving support (Li et al., 2015).

Taken together, extant research suggests that social norms and other contextual characteristics, relational closeness, and

audience composition are likely to be important in viewers' interpretations of distressed posts and their subsequent decisions about whether and how to respond. However, although research has broadened our understanding of individual factors that can affect the likelihood of responding, there exists little holistic comprehension of viewers' decision- and meaning-making process when they encounter distressed posts on SNSs. To advance general understanding and lay the groundwork for effective intervention, it is important to elucidate the full array of key factors and the way they work together to shape viewers' reactions to distressed posts on SNSs. This study was designed to address these gaps by answering the following research questions:

RQ1. What key factors influence a viewer's likelihood of responding to a distressed post on SNSs?

RQ2. What is the relationship between these factors, and how do they work together to influence a viewer's likelihood of responding to a distressed post on SNSs?

Methods

To address these two study aims, we employed a qualitative study design intended to elucidate key evaluative factors in determining whether and how respondents reacted to distressed posts they had observed in their own SNSs. Study participants were recruited from a large northeast US university in the Fall of 2014 and the Spring of 2015 in return for extra course credit. Participants were invited into an interview room on campus for a face-to-face semi-structured, in-depth interview. After providing informed consent, they were asked to give as many examples of distressed posts as they could recall seeing in their own online networks. They were then asked to elaborate on their reactions and experiences, such as the particular SNS platform they saw the post in, how often they saw these types of posts, and specific content of the posts. Finally, they were asked several questions from their personal experiences about how people request social support, how they themselves interpret distressed posts, and what kind of responses they provide or do not provide and why. Specifically, they were told to refer to these questions and offer rationales for their decisions in the context of distressed posts that they personally had seen on SNSs.

Semi-structured interviews were used to surface, explore, and probe for key elements in the process, as well as to ask follow-up questions (Spradley, 1979). Building on previous research findings (e.g., Egan et al., 2013), the interviews included items intended to illuminate mechanisms associated with two broad areas: (1) the participant's perception of the poster's motivation for making a distressed post (e.g., "What do you think people are looking for and why do you think they are making these distressed posts?") and (2) identification of the perceived factors which most influenced their responses (e.g., "When you

decide to respond or not, how does your relationship with that person come into play?," "Can you please elaborate why you decided to respond or not to respond to distressed posts?"). Interviews ranged from 13 to 48 min ($M = 23:19$, $SD = 9:02$). They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and edited to remove identifiers and other references that might identify the participants and/or anyone during the interview, and imported into Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis tool.

Participants

Overall, there were 27 participants: 7 male and 20 female, between 19 and 22 years ($M = 19.78$, $SD = .85$). Most (51.9%) were sophomores, 33.3% were juniors, and 14.8% were seniors in college. The sample consisted of 52.22% Caucasians, 22.78% Asians, 4.75% South or Central Americans, 6.3% African Americans, and 13.92% who did not identify their race or ethnicity. Participants primarily referred to Facebook in their discussions of viewing and responding to distressed posts, so the findings of this study are placed in this context. Each category is illustrated with direct quotations from our participants. To protect participants' privacy, we used pseudonyms instead of participants' real names, along with their gender and age following each quotation.

Data Analysis

We conducted data analysis by using iterative and thematic coding (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, & Lofland, 2006) to identify key factors and mechanisms in each area of inquiry described above. The research team met regularly to debrief and code the interviews, and all group members took part in initial readings of the transcripts. In accordance with the guidelines of qualitative data collection (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012), we discontinued recruitment for interviews after we reached data saturation, when there were no new themes emerging from the interviews. This resulted in a total of 27 participants. The first author and a research assistant then independently identified themes and subthemes through several close readings of the transcripts as part of an open and iterative-coding process. The two coders met several times to refine categories and to discuss and reconcile all discrepant cases until agreement was reached. After distinct concepts and categories were identified, extracted, and agreed upon, focused coding was employed where thematic codes were systematically applied to all of the data to analyze the findings (Charmaz, 2014). The inter-rater reliability was strong ($\kappa = .88$). After focused coding, the researchers wrote up in-depth memos. The in-depth memos compared the codes to participants' variations in responses, to theory, to recurring themes, and to possible relationships among major categories. These memos form the basis for our analysis and findings described below.

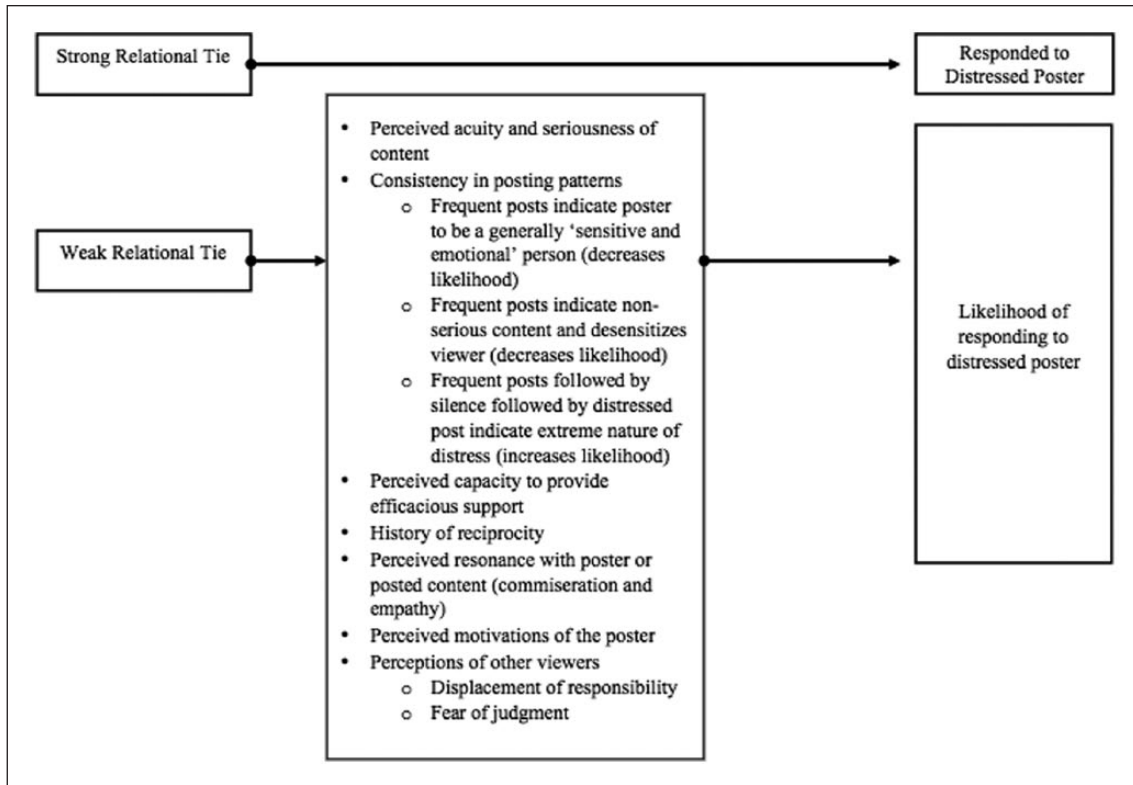


Figure 1. Behavioral explanation of responding to distressed posts on Facebook from the viewer's perspective.

Results

Each theme we identified from the data is an important factor for understanding the decision-making processes of young adults when they encounter a distressed post on a SNS. The data revealed a set of interlocking perceptions that respondents identified as key factors in decisions about whether and how to respond. The factors and the relationships between them are depicted in the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1. What follows is a description of core emergent themes and variations in patterns between these themes. We also present instances where multiple themes co-exist and explain how the clustering of these themes more heavily influences the viewer's likelihood of responding.

Relationship Closeness is Key in Increasing the Likelihood of Responding to Distressed Posts on SNSs

Almost all participants in the study emphasized that the first and most heavily weighed factor underlying their decision about responding to distressed posts was the degree to which they felt relationally close to the poster:

It depends on how close I am with the person, if I talk to them on a daily basis, if I feel comfortable responding to them, um, the closer I am to the person the more likely I'd be to respond, but I

probably wouldn't respond via the actual like under the message (on Facebook), probably send them an individual message to ask if they needed help . . . so yea always respond if I'm really close to them but privately and then think about it a ton if I'm not that close to them. (Ian, M, 19)

Most participants explained that having an existing close relationship with the poster would prompt an immediate decision to reach out, usually by sending a message via a more private platform, such as instant messaging, a phone call, and/or a text message. In cases where viewers perceived a non-close relationship, they weighed a variety of factors to decide whether and how to respond to a distressed post. The next section describes each broad category of factors that respondents found influential in shaping their response decision in non-close relationships, as well as instances in which a confluence of factors made it especially likely or unlikely that they would respond.

Decision-Making Process and Intervening Conditions that Affect the Likelihood of Responding to Distressed Posts on Facebook in Non-close Relationships

From the interviews, we identified several intervening conditions that influenced viewers' likelihood of responding when the viewer and poster were relationally non-close. Salient

factors that affected viewers' likelihood of responding included perception of high or low levels of acute and serious distress in posted content; consistency in posting patterns, where the degree in consistency of posting patterns shifted viewers' likelihood of responding; extent to which viewers perceived that it was feasible and within their ability to provide efficacious support; amount of history of reciprocity between poster and viewer across SNSs; the degree to which viewers felt resonance with the poster or posted experience (experiencing sympathy/commiseration); inferences about a poster's motivation (e.g., attention-seeking); and degree of awareness and worry about other viewers (i.e., worry about negative judgments and evaluations from others in their network).

Each of these factors is elaborated on below and summarized in Figure 1. Beyond categorizing these factors separately, another important finding is that participants can weigh multiple factors (i.e., long periods of no posts prior to the distressed posts, high perceived acuity and seriousness of content, and high levels of efficacy from the respondent), and the aggregation of factors may more heavily influence the likelihood of responding. We specifically highlight instances where some of the factors work together to influence a viewer's likelihood of responding.

Perceived Acuity and Seriousness of Content

The extent to which a post was perceived as acutely distressed was one of the most common factors mentioned by respondents. Most participants said that they were more likely to respond in non-close relationships when they considered a post to reflect an acute or immediate need by the poster. For example, Samantha expressed,

It wouldn't matter if I wasn't close with the person because if it was super serious like if someone was like I'm going to kill myself and nobody responds to this post then I would respond to the post. I think it's hard because on Facebook your name is on everything and everyone sees what you write but when it's serious like this, you have to respond. (Samantha, F, 19)

When the content of the distressed post reaches a certain severity threshold (e.g., medical emergency, contemplation of suicide, and self-injury), the viewer is very likely to respond to the poster in non-close relationships, as the severity of the content of the post outweighs other factors in the decision-making process. Another participant, Paige, disregards relationship closeness when the viewer perceives the situation as extreme:

It definitely depends on the severity and the situation, but in a situation where it's like rape, I don't think my non close relationship would matter about responding because that's the most serious. They definitely would need help . . . or if it's something that's even more severe like they're posting something about suicide, contemplating suicide on Facebook then of course

I would say something. You never want to be regretful it's scary to think about so when it's super serious content like rape or suicide you respond no matter what. (Paige, F, 20)

Viewers are more likely to respond to what seems to them as serious or abnormal posts signaling an acute need because they would not want to regret not helping the poster by responding quickly should a distressing situation worsen.

Consistency in Posting Patterns

In addition to perceived level of seriousness, participants reported considering consistency in posting patterns. Consistency or discrepancy of posting patterns led to different levels of response likelihood, particularly when combined with other factors that might lend support to perceptions of the poster's motivation. Below we elaborate on different interpretations of consistency in frequent distressed posts.

Frequent distressed posts suggest a poster to be a generally "sensitive and emotional" person. The viewer tends to attribute these characteristics to posters who make frequent distressed posts on SNSs. This type of attribution discourages responses because it complicates the interpretation of the content of a particular post, with many viewers mentioning that they did not know how to accurately interpret distress among what they perceived as a perpetual stream of distressed posts. For example, Julie expressed,

If they post all the time and they post and post and post it gets kind of old and people stop wanting to comfort you or respond to you because it's like do you have to say every negative thing in your life? Some people are just sensitive and emo; those are the people I don't respond to because who knows what post of theirs is more distressed or not? (Julie, F, 20)

Frequent Distressed Posts Suggest Non-Serious Content and Desensitize the Viewer. Another inference prompted by frequent posting of distressed posts is signaling non-serious content (i.e., posting patterns influence the interpretation of the post's content). More than half of our participants expressed a decreased willingness to respond because they become desensitized when seeing frequent posting of distressed content by a particular poster:

I always knew she was very weak and sensitive and she was definitely like a feeling- centered person than like logic or reason but then the posts she makes me think is she serious? Like if something is a problem all the time it is no longer a problem . . . so if you post negative distressed posts all the time people take it less seriously . . . it almost becomes like boy who cried wolf. (Maria, F, 20)

I think that sometimes we can all kind of get caught up, if we have one friend who posts on Facebook *all* the time. You can get a little bit um diluted almost where you've seen it so many times you wonder how true it is, or . . . and it could just be them looking for someone to reach out again and again and again but

at some point I do think it can change your perception of someone, through social media, just from pure frequency, it just being so much . . . so I usually don't respond because I think it just kind of feeds the fire. (Alan, M, 20)

Frequent Posts Followed by Silence Followed by an Extreme Distressed Post is Interpreted as a Signal of Real Distress. There is one type of posting pattern that signals the alarm and increases the likelihood of responding. Namely, posters who frequently post and then abruptly deactivate their Facebook or stop posting altogether are perceived to be in serious distress and to, thus, warrant response, regardless of poster-viewer relational closeness. Participants based this interpretation of posting pattern on personal or anecdotal experience of avoiding social media when depressed:

So I remember when I did have depression I didn't like going on Facebook, I was really silent so that's why for me I would take silence or absence from social media as a huge indicator or like a distressed factor so if I see this on Facebook or any social media then I'll understand and at least like it and most likely respond with some type of content. Silence for a while and then a *really* distressed post is a bad sign. So yea respond then. (Maria, F, 20)

As shown by another example below, the inconsistency and discrepancy of the timing of the posts, in particular the total silence followed by a distressed post, are interpreted as signaling a real crisis:

I think it's really common because I see a lot of people even like students who are busy or who have a family crisis and they deactivate their Facebook. That's total silence and that is a sign that something is not going so well so when they come back and post all of a sudden I definitely respond. I would feel so guilty if I didn't and then later found out something really bad happened. (Jocelyn, F, 21)

In addition to frequency interjected by silence, distressed posts interpreted as acute and serious make it more likely for viewers to respond, suggesting that posting patterns and content of posts are sometimes weighed together in helping viewers to decide how to react to distress online.

Perceived Efficacy of Responses

A viewer's perceived efficacy in supporting someone in distress is also a factor in deciding whether to respond to a distressed post. If viewers believed that they would not be able to make a meaningful difference for the poster, they were less likely to respond in non-close relationships. Over half of the participants mentioned that feeling uncertain about the usefulness of their response would stop them from responding to a distressed post on SNSs. For example, Cody discussed,

Well even if I'm not that close with the person but I feel like I can actually help them I would respond, like actually do

something for them that will support them and make them feel less distressed. Like if I went through something similar and it worked for me then I feel like I could give them concrete advice or concrete support that would affect them. So yea, if it was actual help and support that they could receive not emotional support I would respond. (Cody, M, 22)

As demonstrated by this quote, perceived efficacy increases likelihood of response, particularly when the issue resonates with a viewer. Here, we see another case where multiple conditions—a viewer's experience with an issue and his or her perceived efficacy—can jointly affect one's decision to respond to a distressed post.

History of Reciprocity across SNSs

Participants also considered reciprocity when deciding how to respond to non-close relations' distressed posts. If the poster and viewer responded frequently to one another's posts, either by "likes" or by comments on Facebook or other platforms (i.e., Instagram and Twitter), then the viewer was more likely to respond regardless of the content of the post:

I don't respond when they are dramatic. Some posts are a cry for attention because I think people are just dramatic, so I was like okay, these people are exaggerating, I won't respond . . . but sometimes I'll respond anyway because there is expected reciprocation down the road for if I'm distressed . . . you like for likes and comment for comments . . . kind of like an unwritten contract independent of the content on social media. So I guess it's like ugh okay even if you are attention-seeking, maybe I'll respond just because of our unwritten contract. (Darrell, M, 19)

The reciprocity of responding is perceived as an "unwritten contract" between posters and viewers, such that a history of interactions between the poster and viewer across SNSs in some ways commits viewers to being more responsive to posters' content. Darrell's response above demonstrates how certain factors can weigh more heavily than others and can potentially mitigate them. While discontent with perceived attention-seeking is explained as a factor that may decrease the likelihood of responding, some factors such as reciprocity (past or future) and social norms on SNSs can change the calculus to motivate the likelihood of response.

Viewer's Resonance With the Poster or Posted Experience

When viewers could identify with the poster or posted experience, they reported feelings of commiseration and empathy and were thus more likely to respond. Likewise, viewers' inferences about posters seeking commiseration and empathy also made them more willing to respond to distressed posts. Participants explained that sharing a distressed post on SNSs could be cathartic for posters since they could reach many

people simultaneously and look for someone who had similar experiences from a larger pool of people. Kelsey explained,

I think that they're kind of looking for sympathy, I think that the point of posting to people in their social networks is that people in their social networks are like them, they're probably going through similar things, so I think they're kind of just looking for a little bit of like pity or sympathy. Um, when they post things like that they are looking for other people who are just like them, like commiserating buddies. (Kelsey, F, 20)

In sum, attributing a need for commiseration as a posting motive and empathizing with the content can move viewers to respond to distressed posts, even in the absence of a close relationship between the poster and the viewer.

Viewers' Inferences about Poster's Motivation

Consistent with the previous theme, there was a general tendency on the part of viewers to weigh posters' motivations and make response decisions based on their inferred motives. Often, viewers interpreted the very act of posting a distressed comment on a public platform like Facebook as attention-seeking, and therefore, were less likely to respond:

They want attention I think. Um attention in my personal opinion when people post about their heart being broken. I think when people post that stuff on Facebook to make it public to all their Facebook friends, the majority of which are people who they don't even know that well, I think that makes it less serious, and they're not actually that hurt, because if they were I don't think they would want everyone to know. (Kennedy, F, 19)

The attribution of "attention-seeking" or wanting to be "in the spotlight" is especially common with more extreme, hyperbolic, inflammatory, or what posters viewed as "theatrical" statements from viewers:

Some people just need and want attention because it's their personality. So if the content is so outrageous like 'oh my god I should contact the police I don't know what to do' and they are a drama queen and say that at every party then I know they are just calling for attention. I would definitely not buy into that and would feel less inclined to take part and respond. That stuff is so annoying. (Torie, F, 19)

Perception of Other Viewers

When participants perceived that other viewers already "covered" responding to the distressed post, they reported feeling like it was less important for them to interfere:

Well when I usually see a lot of comments, I won't read through them, because there are too many of them which leads me to not answer—other people already covered it. (Tracy, F, 19)

I think the perception I have is that because I'm sure that there are people who do this all the time and other people do respond

so I don't have to . . . like a ton of people respond to statuses and you're like oh I feel like I don't need to do it because other people already got there first and there are so many responses already. (Dominik, M, 21)

Another factor that reduced viewers' willingness to respond was fear of being negatively judged by others for the content of their response. The evaluation apprehension also manifested in how viewers worried about crafting "well-worded" responses because they did not want to be perceived as insensitive. Sometimes they felt safer not responding at all, because they were fearful of negative judgments from the audience:

I'm less likely to post when other people can see my response especially if the distressed post is so intense I don't want other people to judge my response . . . (Ashleigh, F, 19)

I think of what everyone will think of my response, it has to be like really well worded otherwise you just look dumb and you're not adding value to the conversation. Stuff like that, like repercussions, the future so that's why most of the time I don't respond. (Jocelyn, F, 21)

Discussion

Using a qualitative approach, this study sought to identify key factors, as well as connections among them, that affect young adults' reactions to distressed posts on SNSs. The results yield a nascent conceptual framework useful in understanding the relationship between salient factors likely to influence the viewer's likelihood of responding to a distressed post. This model, represented in Figure 1, offers a road map and can serve as a springboard for the next generation of online social support interaction studies. This study also makes a contribution by revealing instances where multiple factors work together to change the viewer's inclinations to respond. In sum, this study helps to better understand whether, why, and under what conditions young adults respond to distressed posts on SNSs, which has both theoretical and practical significance.

One of the primary findings is that relational closeness overrides viewers' other considerations in whether to respond to a distressed post. When the poster and viewer are relationally close, the viewer is likely to immediately respond to the poster, usually via a private communication channel. This may be due to descriptive norms around social support and help (Cialdini, Reno, & Kallgren, 1990), which suggest that everyday helping and giving assistance are both common and important in close relationships (Amato, 1990; Brody & Vangelisti, 2016). Such norms are automatic and may spur action in viewers, prompting them to step in and reach out to close relations who they perceive are in distress. This interpretation is consistent with the finding that the negativity effect of broadcast disclosures adversely affects perceptions of and willingness to help among moderately close and distant ties but not relationally close ties (Rains & Brunner, 2015).

In contrast to the direct and immediate response that characterizes close relations, in non-close relationships, the viewer's likelihood of responding to a distressed post is influenced by several factors: consistency in posting patterns, history of reciprocity between a poster and viewer across SNSs, inferences about a poster's motivation, degree of awareness and worry about other viewers, perceived acuteness and seriousness of distress in posted content, extent of perceived feasibility and efficacy in providing support, and, finally, the degree to which viewers felt resonance with the poster or posted experience. These factors, depicted in Figure 1, represent key influences and their contingencies in the viewer's decision-making process about whether to respond to distressed posts on Facebook.

This emergent framework extends the findings of Egan et al. (2013) by bringing all of the factors to the forefront, which contributes to our understanding of response decisions in cases where relational closeness is low. Furthermore, it can help explain why increased signals of distress may yield fewer responses (High et al., 2014) by illuminating the role of frequency and consistency with which individuals post on SNSs and by showing that frequent or repetitive patterns of posting distress can diminish, rather than amplify, the distress signal. This finding suggests that history of interactions, reciprocity, and different types of posting patterns may play an important role in influencing response decisions, a complex interplay that merits additional study.

The salient factors identified for non-close relationships are also consistent with the theory of normative social behavior (Rimal & Real, 2005), which helps to illuminate the contingencies of viewers' response decisions. The theory of normative social behavior posits that there are three mechanisms through which perceived social expectations influence behavior: injunctive norms, group identity, and outcome expectations. Injunctive norms refer to people's understanding of others' expectations for behavior in a social context and of possible consequences or sanctions for non-conformity (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Rimal & Real, 2005). Group identity stems from the desire to be similar and to aspire to be part of a reference group and causes individuals to follow the norms of others to gain social approval (Christensen, Rothgerber, Wood, & Matz, 2004; Chung & Rimal, 2016; Rimal & Real, 2005). Finally, outcome expectations refer to the belief that actions will lead to benefits to the self and for others (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Rimal & Real, 2005). Our findings align with multiple elements of this theory.

For example, finding that viewers are often reluctant to respond to distressed posts from non-close relations can be reflective of an injunctive norm on SNSs. The reluctance to respond may stem from the viewers' fear of social sanctions for posting on a platform accessible to other non-close relations and broad audiences (High et al., 2014). Indeed, since social norms for Facebook, the SNS most referred to in our study, favor positive posts (High et al., 2014), non-response to distressed posts among non-close viewers may itself be a

form of social sanction against the poster. For example, this study found that viewers' desensitization due to posting frequency, perceived emotionality of the poster, and negatively valenced content of the posts decreased the likelihood of responding. Although individuals find Facebook an attractive venue for self-disclosure, high levels of negativity in disclosures can elicit undesirable responses from viewers or often no response at all (Bazarova, 2012; Forest & Wood, 2012). Moreover, negatively valenced information is more likely to be remembered as impactful than positively valenced information. This is due to the "negativity effect," which refers to negatively valenced information that is more atypical in the context of self-disclosures and is assigned greater weight than positively valenced information (Kellerman, 1984, 1989), especially in non-close relationships (Rains & Brunner, 2015). This may explain why high perceived emotionality and high frequency of distressed posts, often interpreted by viewers as attention-seeking behavior, reduced likelihood of responding to a distressed post. Such a non-response may constitute a demonstration of social sanctions against frequent or attention-seeking distressed posters.

The fear of negative evaluation and social sanctions by other viewers also inhibits helping behaviors (e.g., Karakashian, Walter, Christopher, & Lucas, 2006; Zoccola, Green, Karoutsos, Katona, & Sabini, 2011). Viewers displace the responsibility for responding onto others, as part of the diffusion of responsibility effect where the presence of others heightens non-intervention because of perceived psychological costs (Latané & Nida, 1981). As corroborated by recent findings, viewers take longer to respond to a distressed post when other respondents belong to their own social network. This suggests identity concerns, which cause the hesitation in response decisions, described by the bystander effect and the diffusion of responsibility effect (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016; Robbins & Afifi, 2014). As discussed above, SNS features that encourage and facilitate widespread public sharing may also inhibit social support because of perceived social judgments and sanctions from the audience.

Encouragingly, we identified factors—respondents' efficacy, post acuity, and inconsistent posting patterns—that could help mitigate diffusion of responsibility tendencies and motivate helping behavior despite identity-related fears. For example, outcome expectations, another component of the theory of normative social behavior, can explain why non-close relations in some cases feel compelled to respond to distressed posts. Viewers reported responding if the content of the distressed post was extreme and acute, and when they interpreted it as a sign of mental illness or as a serious call for help (Egan et al., 2013). Participants shared that responding to these posts would put their mind at ease, helping them avoid feelings of guilt should the poster's distress become worse. In these cases, viewers saw responses as benefiting both themselves and the poster, which is consistent with outcome expectations as a mechanism for normative

behavior (Rimal & Real, 2005). Inconsistent posting patterns were also seen as a sign of distress, increasing response likelihood, but only if viewers felt able to provide efficacious support. The importance of self-efficacy in relief efforts confirms the results from Casey and Ohler's (2012) study which found that self-efficacy around taking action and intervening in problematic situations was one of the more influential factors leading to implementing action immediately.

Another theme reflective of outcome expectations is the history of reciprocity between the poster and viewer across SNSs. If such history existed, viewers were more likely to respond, they suggested, because of their desire to assure future social interactions with the poster. Finally, in contrast with negative perceptions of dramatic or attention-seeking behavior, the viewer's impression that the distressed poster is looking for someone with whom he or she can genuinely commiserate elicits empathy and response from viewers. Viewers were more likely to respond based on higher levels of empathy, demonstrating that individuals with similar experiences feel more confident and comfortable in interactions with each other.

Taken together, the themes that surfaced in this study explicate key factors in the decision-making process associated with providing or not providing social support to distressed posts in SNSs. Furthermore, the themes in the emergent framework can be aligned with the theory of normative social behavior, which helps to explain the role of the identified factors in the decision-making process from a social normative perspective. This has implications for theorizing about response decision-making on SNSs, while challenging and illuminating possible new mechanisms that can be tested in the future as predictors of normative social behavior online.

The results of this study can also serve as an important building block for future research into support seeking and providing on SNSs. With the understanding that these decision-making processes to respond or not are layered, complex, and based on historical relationships as well as real-time perceptions of content and form, additional research could eventually inform real-world policies, interventions, and designs to improve communication outcomes for people in distress as well as those providing support. First, this research could help inform SNS policies and practices surrounding identifying, flagging, and moderating distressed posts, which are particularly difficult because certain posts calling for help may fall into the category of self-harm or other banned content. Second, research about the relevant factors motivating response could improve SNS algorithms for people's personal feeds and ensure that people are seeing the posts in the proper context. Third, further parsing out response motivations could help SNSs design posting features that could facilitate help, as well as build in response features that could increase the likelihood of helping (e.g., separating distressed posts from the newsfeed, reminding responders of prior interactions and reciprocity, etc.). Lastly, while this study

attempts to understand how people within the social media environment perceive their friends' posts, identifying gaps in response and perception could prove helpful for others who are trying to successfully intervene, such as guidance counselors, teachers, and parents.

As with all studies, this study has limitations. One notable limitation is the sample size of our study, as well as the non-representativeness of the single-university sample. However, the consistency and saturation of themes across participants suggest that the framework and factors are valid, if still fluid and exploratory. The smaller sample size also allowed us to explicate these key factors in-depth. Future research should quantitatively test the effects and intensity of each decision-making factor, the interrelationship between specific factors, and the influence of these factors across different populations. The findings of this study serve as a starting point for additional study in this area, with larger samples and mixed methods to effectively assess and refine the associations between these identified factors and viewer's likelihood to respond or not. In addition, future studies could benefit from further probing into each of the core themes. For example, there could be further investigation into the perceived motivations of the poster beyond attention-seeking. Furthermore, future research could expand on the forms of social support provided in SNSs (i.e., quality and quantity of responses) and account for history of interactions and response patterns between users. This study only examined the choice to respond or not, so an investigation of the content of responses is called for. Also, in our study, participants repeatedly emphasized that close-tie relationships were the highest predictor of response, and many indicated that they would automatically forego consideration of anything else once distress in a close-tie friend was noted and would simply respond. Whether or not other factors were unconsciously considered prior to actually reaching out is not something our study was designed to probe but is a very important line of inquiry. There may be, for example, some discrepancy in what people reportedly say they do and what they actually do in this context. Longer term factors (e.g., repeated posting and declining closeness) could also play a role in moving a relationship from a close-tie response (automatic) to a weaker tie response (additional considerations needed). This is an important question and one that should be probed in more depth in future studies.

In conclusion, this study offers a comprehensive examination of young adults' experiences of reacting to distressed posts on SNSs. The results of this study shed light on intervening conditions that can be leveraged to develop tools and peer interventions that will allow young adults to better offer social support on SNSs.

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