WHAT'S ON MY MIND: USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO DISCUSS STRESSFUL SITUATIONS

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Anecdotes abound cautioning against too much engagement with social media (SM)—fueled by scientific evidence which suggests time spent with SM is positively associated with depression and negatively associated with well-being and life-satisfaction (Kross et al., 2013; Lui et al., 2016). Due to SM users' tendencies to convey idealized self-presentations, people who use Facebook longer believe that life is less fair, and other people have better, happier lives (Chou & Edge, 2012).

However, such studies rarely explore *how* people are using SM in ways that could potentially alleviate depressive symptoms. For instance, depressed adolescents openly disclose their feelings and offer encouragement to others with depression on anonymous sites (Radovic, Blackwood, & Miller, 2015) as well as on conspicuous sites where they are strongly connected to their followers (e.g., Snapchat, AUTHORS). These social support seeking behaviors can alleviate stress by making one feel cared for and validated (Cobb, 1976). SM is well-suited for this since it eliminates temporal and geographical restrictions on interactions and reduces self-disclosure barriers (Blight, Jagiello, & Ruppel, 2015). Extant literature largely ignores that people might use SM to discuss stressors and emotions in order to receive support, in the service of their

mental health. We sought to understand **(RQ1) what types of stressful and emotional situations do people discuss on SM?**

Method

Participants were N = 1,593 college students who responded to a larger online survey about mental health and SM use, and answered an open-ended question: "Can you describe for us the type(s) of stressful or emotional situations that you typically discuss on social media?" Average response length was M = 10.69 words (Mdn = 6; SD = 16.42). Data was cleaned to remove n = 374 blank responses and n = 19 nonsensical responses, resulting in n = 1,200 cases.

Participants were primarily white (n = 893, 74.4%), M = 22.39 years (SD = 6.35), with n = 392 males (32.7%), n = 788 females (65.7%), and n = 20 (1.7%) non-binary gender. Participants reported their most-used SM platforms: Facebook (n = 451, 37.6%), Snapchat (n = 355, 29.6%), Twitter (n = 210, 17.5%), and Instagram (n = 184, 15.3%). Our unit of observation was an utterance (complete thought, marked by punctuation, capitalization, and/or double spaces), and a total n = 1414 utterances were coded. Units were analyzed using emergent thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2014) to assign codes to each utterance, collapsed into categories to develop themes. We coded random subsamples until reaching saturation at n = 104 responses and n = 52 codes; participants' responses were coded with multiple themes if multiple utterances existed.

Results

Codes were combined into 10 unique themes, with their definitions, frequencies, and sample utterances given in Table 1; the distribution of themes differed significantly from random (10% distribution), $\chi^2(9)$ = 113.8, $p < .001$, Cramer's V = .283.

Table 1. Emergent themes for the types of stressful and emotional situations shared via social media

Themes	Definition	Sample Utterance	Freq.
Refrain from Discussion	The person explicitly states that they do not discuss negative emotional situations on Facebook, or only discusses positive emotions.	"I don't like to broadcast my problems."	*n* = 544 38.4% of utterances
School/Work	The person discusses emotional situations related to work or school stressors (e.g., too much work, feeling overwhelmed, issues with coworkers, upcoming exams, failures, etc.)	"If I failed a test or do poorly in school I share it on social media."	*n* = 237 16.8%
Daily Personal Struggles	The person talks about day-to-day issues and unfortunate events that are bothering him or her at the time (e.g., financial struggles, child care issues, random disasters, small annoyances like traffic)	"I talk about being tired or grumpy from waking up early or having to do something I don't want to do."	*n* = 219 15.5%
Relational Conflict	The person discusses relationship issues in the context of romantic relationships, family relationships, or friendships. (e.g., break ups, family issues, friendship drama)	"I've had an argument with my boyfriend."	*n* = 122 8.6%
Large Scale Global Issues	The person discusses current events and crises, or global social injustice issues (e.g., racism, terrorism, politics)	"Feminism- women's rights, internalized misogyny, men's role in women's equality, etc."	*n* = 91 6.4%
Deaths & Illness	The person posts about their own health issues, or health issues that their friends and family are facing (including death).	"Loss of family members."	*n* = 78 5.5%
Humorous complaints	The person discusses small unfortunate events that are funny, embarrassing, or perceived to be relatable.	"somewhat stressful stuff that I think other people will find amusing."	*n* = 49 3.5%
Serious Emotional Struggles	The person posts about deep emotional issues and mental health issues (e.g., feeling inadequate, self-image issues, feeling depressed, anxious, overwhelmed, etc.)	"Domestic emotional abuse"	*n* = 42 3.0%
Missing People & Places	The person discusses missing people and places (e.g., feeling homesick, missing a friend etc.)	"Missing my grandma."	*n* = 18 1.3%
Vaguebooking	Posting lyrics and quotes that have meaning for the stressful situations, or posts a request asking for thoughts and prayers.	"I ask for prayers but don't go into detail of why."	*n* = 18 1.3%
		Total	1414

Discussion

The most common theme was to Refrain from Discussion, as many believe SM are not appropriate venues for discussing stressful situations. This supports the perceived positivity bias that exists on SM, which is key because if people believe negativity is inappropriate on SM, this could diminish social support seeking (Tong & Westerman, 2016). School/Work, Daily Personal Struggles, and Relational Conflict all contained venting—a common motivation for SM use, particularly for people without offline support networks (Baker & Moore, 2008).

Less frequent discussions included Deaths/Illness and Large Scale Global Issues, acknowledging that people emotionally connect on SM during these times (Brubaker, Kirvan-Swaine, Taber, & Hayes, 2012). Humorous Complaint posts turned unpleasant situations into funny ones, potentially to receive support without breaking politeness norms (McGraw, Warren, & Kan, 2014). Serious Emotional Struggles were rare, partially due to relatively low levels of depression in our participants (assessed as a separate project, cf. AUTHOR). Missing People & Places might be prompted by the "fear of missing out" (Alt, 2015). Lastly, Vaguebooking contained ambiguous requests for support, driven by communication privacy management, as some people will not divulge personal details but still want social support benefits (Child & Starcher, 2016).

In light of debates surrounding SM use and depression, it is worthwhile to consider the different ways SM might be used relative to mental health, like discussing emotional situations that could incite depressive symptoms. Our data, while restricted to a college-

aged population, suggests that although many users avoid these discussions, a variety of stressful topics were still shared on SM. Notably, the current study did not explore the impact of these discussions on enhancing (or damaging) users' mental state, so future research could examine the relative impact of these discussions on seeking social support and addressing depressive symptoms like chronic stress. We also encourage a granular look at potential differences in discussions as a function of one's preferred SM platform, or the social structures therein. Overall, this study highlights the importance of examining users' interactions on SM to fully understand the SM-mental health link.

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