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Bits of emotion

The process and outcomes of sharing emotions online

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Publication date

2018

Document Version

Other version

License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Rodríguez Hidalgo, C. T. (2018). *Bits of emotion: The process and outcomes of sharing emotions online*. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

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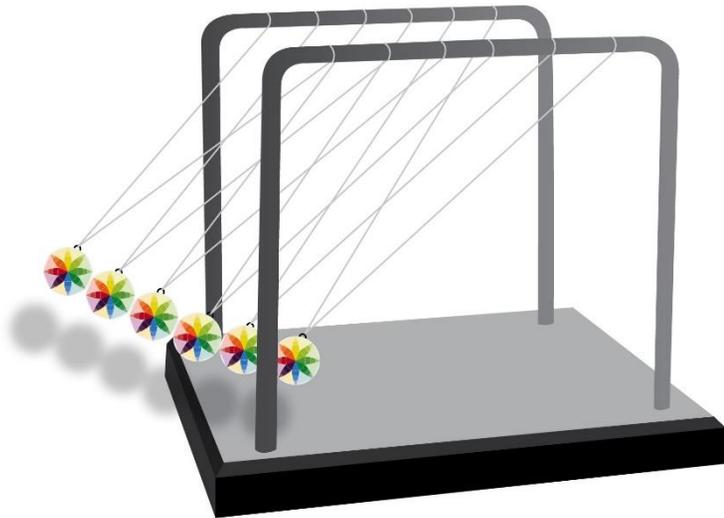
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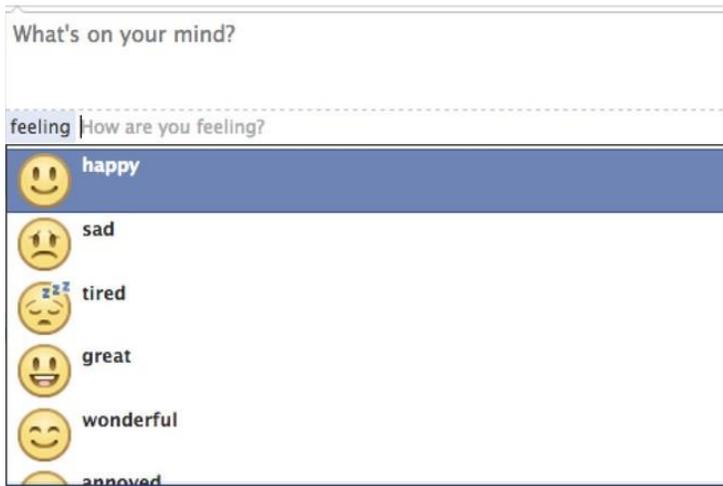
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Chapter 6

General discussion and conclusion





'Feeling' options, Facebook status update

Google print screen, July 30, 2018

Emotion sharing is nowadays ubiquitous in online life. Online communication can shape and change behavior (Walther, 1996), lead to self and interpersonal effects (Valkenburg, 2017) and alter our emotional states (Choi & Toma, 2014; Bayer et al, 2017). This dissertation studied the outcomes of sharing emotions online by investigating both structural and functional aspects of emotion sharing. In terms of structure, the focus lay on the prevalence and process of online SSE, providing a three-steps sequential model. As to the functions, an emotion regulation lens (Gross, 2007) was used to investigate both immediate and long-term interpersonal emotion processes. In particular, the dissertation analyzed the regulation of stress caused by an important life event that extended over a period of weeks.

Whereas each chapter of this dissertation already discussed the main findings of the four reported studies, this discussion highlights the implications of its empirical results for the five main questions which inspired it, presented in the general introduction. Lastly, we present main limitations of the work.

Answers to main questions

As stated in the introduction, two main contrasting views about the emotional consequences of sharing emotions online seem to coexist. On the one hand, a more pessimistic view argues that postings on Social networking sites (SNSs), and social media in general, foment shallow communication of little emotional consequence (for a summary, see

e.g., Donnerstein, 2009). The same view emphasizes ego-bolstering functions of SNS use, to the degree of arguing that it may even promote narcissism (Choi, Panek, Nardis & Toma, 2015). On the other hand, a more optimistic view posits that frequent and intense use of social media can alleviate unpleasant affect (e.g. loneliness, Seo et al., 2016), and that through active SNSs use, people's well-being may benefit from honest self-presentation in SNSs (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Moreover, it has been found that frequent and intense SNS use may enrich access to social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe & 2011) and getting closer to existing friends (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007).

The scope of this dissertation narrows this debate to the emotional consequences of disclosing emotions through SNS, nuancing both the optimistic and pessimistic views towards more specific questions and answers.

1) A theoretical conceptualization of online SSE

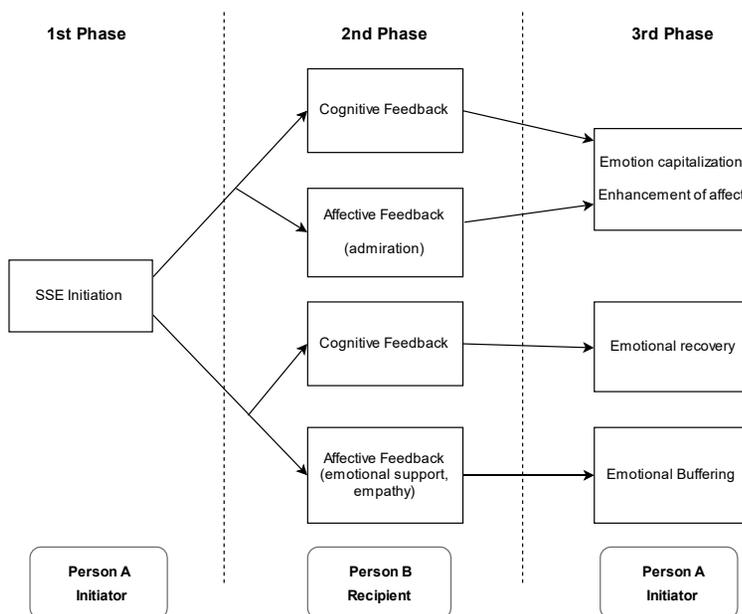
The theoretical conceptualization of online SSE summarizes its functional potential. At the start of the research, elements of the SSE framework (Rimé, 2009) were specified to include first, a definition of online SSE, and second an explicit distinction of its phases as part of an interpersonal interaction. From this, a theoretical definition resulted of what constitutes online SSE as a three-phased sequential process, namely: SSE initiation, feedback to SSE, and the initiator's reaction to this feedback (Rodríguez-Hidalgo, Tan & Verlegh, 2015), as displayed in Figure 1. This model is justified, as so far, communication research assessing motivations and effects of online social sharing lacked: (a) a model of online SSE, and (b) differentiation of effects of sharing and feedback (i.e. Choi & Toma, 2014). These conceptualizations are important if we are to analyze the process and outcomes of sharing emotions online.

Importantly, during the course of the empirical work of this dissertation, the conceptualization of the process and elements constituting online SSE were broadened to include three other frameworks. First, it was found useful to broaden the concept of SSE to encompass not only emotion utterances with the intention to share emotions, but also cover a complete emotional situation, plus its associated feeling responses. In sum, to include general emotional expressions and disclosures as studied by media effects research (i.e., Choi & Toma, 2014).

Second, as part of this theoretical broadening, emotion regulation (Gross, 2007) was explicitly taken as an interpersonal process (Rimé, 2007; Zaki & Williams, 2013). This framework was included because of its emphasis on the specific mechanisms which may lead to possible emotional effects, which could explain empirical results. Third, the concept of feedback in SSE, mainly consisting on affective and cognitive feedback, was extended to a

broader notion of social support (Cohen & Wills, 1985). This decision was made to account for a greater variety of feedback possibilities, as it commonly happens in real-life occasions, instead of more controlled experimental environments.

Figure 1. A theoretical model of three-phased online social sharing (SSE)

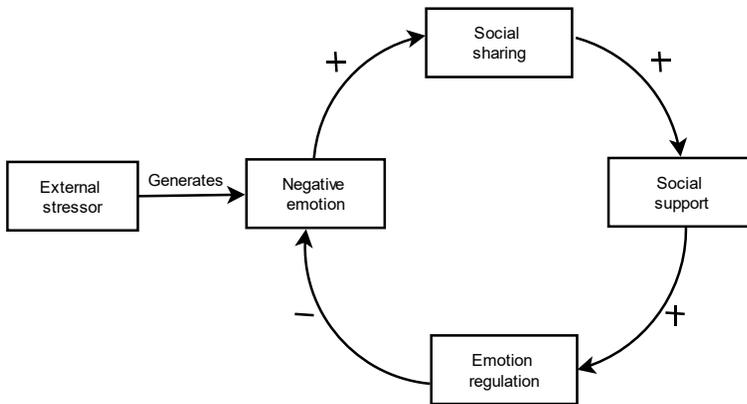


The mentioned theoretical broadenings resulted on a new model of the process of online SSE and its outcomes, similar and inspired to the model proposed by Tichon & Shapiro (2003), displayed on Figure 2. This broadened model is explicitly presented here with the goal of guiding future research around social media and emotion. The sequencing of the model is as follows: (a) a negative emotional event impacts on the individual, triggering negative emotion intensity, which is proportional to the intensity of the negative event, leading to; (b) social sharing, or telling about the emotional experience to others, for intensity triggers sharing (Rimé, 2009). A more or less complete narration of the feelings and emotional experience would in turn trigger; (c) receiving social support, as others who are recipient to emotional self-disclosures readily attempt to make others feel better (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Zaki & Williams, 2013). Importantly, because this model concerns online interactions, multiple individuals could be the source of this social support, which (either affective or informative/ cognitive) would

elicit (d) interpersonal emotion regulation, or the management of the negative emotion due to the influence of a second person (Zaki & Williams, 2013; Rimé, 2007), bringing a decrease of the negative emotion intensity.

This theoretically-broadened model proposes that the cycle of sharing and regulation are iterative, therefore this process would repeat itself as long as necessary to downregulate or decrease emotion intensity to zero, one of the definitions of emotional recovery (Rimé, 2009). The cycle would repeat depending on whether negative emotion intensity is still present, and on the dynamics of the emotional stimulus, that is the emergence of a new stressor event or situation, or a significant event within a greater current episode.

Figure 2. Extended model of online emotion sharing, including social support and interpersonal emotion regulation



Altogether, the reported studies initially support the positive functionality of this extended model of online emotion sharing. Chapter 2 reports positive prevalence of full sharing of emotions online, followed by beneficial feedback, which is emotional in its expression, as Chapter 3 shows. Further, the findings of Chapters 4 and 5 bring evidence as to intra and interpersonal emotion regulation effects. Future research is encouraged to further test this model, assessing and following users' emotion sharing and regulation behaviors over the course of negative, as well as positive, events. These effects could be furthermore specifically studied assessing the effect of different social media actions (i.e. public posts versus private messages) and considering different emotions. It is also encouraged to further test the proposed impact of specific social media affordances in this cycle, compared to FtF situations.

A major and urgent extension would be to investigate the emotions of the receiver to instigate his or her social support. In the online world, the distinction between initiator and receiver may diminish over the course of SNSs “threads.” Moreover, such a model should be expanded to include “third-party” contributions, i.e. person C responding to both A and B’s exchanges. This snowballing of SSE has been theorized in Rimé (2009) and deserves further attention in online contexts.

2) Effects of online emotional expressivity within the process of online SSE

Previously, it has been observed that computer-mediated interaction at large lacks the multimodal richness of FtF communication. The findings in this dissertation (Chapter 3) question this assumption, showing that people include a wide array of auditory, tactile, visual and kinetic symbols to enhance their communication. Supporting Walther (1996), paralinguistic symbols were adapted to the characteristics of the medium to communicate emotions and social support. The findings also supported the notion that TPC are used in contextual (Derks, Fischer & Bos, 2008) and in supportive ways. Future research is encouraged to replicate Chapter 3 findings in other social media platforms and could further study the effectivity of paralinguistic symbols in feedback provision. For instance, what is the role of congruency between linguistic and paralinguistic symbols in making the feedback more effective in terms of emotion regulation, i.e. upregulating or downregulating the negative emotion of the initial sharer? A desirable extension is to investigate non-textual communication, e.g. the potential of photos, videos, or the more recent ‘emotion reactions’ afforded for instance by Facebook and Instagram, to instigate online or offline feedback and emotion regulation. This dissertation made a start by focusing on text-based communication by means of blog SNSs (Chapters 2 and 3).

3) The intra and interpersonal emotion regulation effects of online SSE

Findings of Chapter 4 contribute to clarify how the actions of sharing and receiving feedback, as part of the SSE cycle, impact emotion intensity. The experimental studies open the door to the conception that social media actions can positively impact users’ emotions at the intra and interpersonal level. In particular, self-disclosing emotions and providing feedback online may benefit from the social media affordance of controllability, which may be the source of greater interpersonal effects, for instance in the activation of emotion regulation strategies, such as reappraisal. Further, social media affordances such as asynchronicity, implying thinking ahead of posting and a reply, together with accessibility, or the possibility to broadcast

to sources of very different backgrounds and experiences, may lay at the core of how online interactions may bring forth emotion regulation.

Another main contribution of this work is that online interpersonal regulation was found to be associated with relational closeness. On Chapter 4, it is reported that relational closeness strengthened feedback effects on emotion stabilization. The idea that closeness reinforces social effects of online communication is not new, see for example studies on the role of close friends in online relationships and well-being (Burke & Kraut, 2013; Seo et al., 2016; Valkenburg & Peter, 2007). However, the notion that closeness is relevant for online emotion regulation processes is novel.

Remaining questions on the effectiveness of online interpersonal emotion regulation concern, first, the impact of cognitive replies to downregulate different negative emotions, for instance anger, contempt, or disappointment. Second, whether and which types of replies could upregulate positive emotions is still unknown. Third, it is necessary to further disentangle to what extent the downregulation of emotion from online interactions could be in part an effect of the passage of time.

4) Assessing dynamic time-effects of social media support on emotion regulation

This dissertation brings forth experimental and naturalistic evidence regarding the dynamic time effects of social media support on emotion regulation. First, the experimental findings of Chapter 4 suggest that both posting and receiving supportive replies online may bring an immediate alleviation of sadness. Second, the naturalistic findings of Chapter 5 point to the conclusion that online supportive feedback can exert a downregulating effect on stress, depending on the phase of an important life event. Because this dissertation found both immediate and longer-termed effects of online prosociality, its findings are in line with previous studies which found both immediate and short-termed effects of social media use up to 30 minutes later (Bayer et al., 2017), and three-weeks after online social sharing (Choi & Toma, 2014). Particularly, the results of Chapter 5 pave the way to new research focusing on longer-term effects of social media feedback, as the study measures a time frame of three months. Further, what is novel in these findings, is having investigated these time-effects within the context of online supportive interactions.

Another greater implication suggests that future social media research could focus on the nature of the emotional event to gauge effects. Though studies have assessed the situational context in studies of online support (i.e. Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011), research could benefit from analyzing the role of social media during important life events as they naturally

unfold over time, rather than isolating a single moment as the main event. Ultimately, the findings of Chapter 5 signal that the effect of feedback prosociality on emotion regulation varies not just as a result of time passing, but rather as a result of the dynamic development of the emotional event.

Further avenues to disentangle time-effects of supportive exchanges, which could expand the work of the present dissertation, include the naturalistic testing of real-life events with greater time-lags, for instance during bereavement, to see whether online support could help users throughout this process, one, three or six months after the event. Regarding experimental settings, replications are encouraged which consider greater time lags after the manipulation, such as for instance 10 or 20 minutes later, and that could include different negative emotions. In addition, the influence of receiving supportive interactions online in the case of positive emotions could be as well studied in different time lags, such as 30 minutes, one week, and one month after an important positive event. Lastly, following the topic of Chapter 5, future studies could assess the interplay between online emotion regulation and academic achievement, as emotions have been shown to affect both study motivation and academic performance (Cooper & Bright, 2001).

5) The interplay of emotion regulation effects through face-to-face and SNSs

Studies have already assessed that communicating online could foster offline interactions offline six months later (Dienlin, Masur & Trepte, 2017). However, the particular interplay between online and offline contexts in the provision of supportive messages, together with their possible regulation effects, had not been sufficiently addressed. To our knowledge, this dissertation presents one-time evidence that online feedback prosociality served to downregulate stress on a different way than FtF prosociality. Albeit modest, this finding supports the affordance approach adopted by recent scholarship, as the greater accessibility of social media postings allows for feedback from many different sources, some of them possessing key knowledge, which in itself could have instilled regulation. Further, the asynchronicity of the online environment could have fostered users' to better reflect on the content of beneficial replies. Altogether, the findings of Chapter 5 give support to the established idea that social media feedback may be useful for its informational value (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007; Trepte, Dienlin & Reinecke, 2015). What is new however, is that this informational value was found useful in the emotional context of an important life-event, with evidence suggesting that it has the potential of downregulating stress.

The findings further support the empirical work regarding social sharing in offline contexts, namely that offline feedback did not help to diminish the impact of the emotional experience (Rimé et al., 1998). On the contrary, that FtF feedback seemed to increase stress intensity during test taking, may inspire future studies to examine the impact of offline interactions during periods of high emotional intensity. In spite of this, we note that FtF feedback could still exert a positive influence on other relevant constructs, such as overall life-satisfaction, as has been found earlier (Trepte, Dienlin & Reinecke, 2015). Further, it can still be the case that the immediacy and richness of cues of FtF support may make it *seem* more satisfactory than online support, as Trepte and colleagues (2015) have noted.

Lastly, Chapter 5 offers a state-of-the-art approach, that of dissecting within from between person relationships over the course of an important event. In this respect, that the downregulating effect of online feedback occurred within-persons, instead of across subjects, justifies using this approach, and calls for further research, particularly because it is remarkable that this effect was not evidenced for FtF prosociality. The field could further advance by investigating the interplay between online and offline contexts for other emotions, such as anger or sadness, as well as for other relevant constructs such as well-being and life satisfaction.

General theoretical implications

This dissertation presents several relevant implications for future studies focusing on social sharing of emotions online and emotion regulation. First, regarding social sharing of emotions, this dissertation found that online SSE is a prevalent and naturally occurring phenomenon in SNSs. Further, the findings of Chapter 2 revealed that the sharing of negative emotions seems to be more prevalent than positive emotions. This finding implies that online SSE may not be as superficial as initially supposed. By telling the core aspects of an emotional experience, and receiving useful feedback, users may well be confronted with the root of their emotional issues. However, the characteristics of the medium may have played a role in this finding. Namely, the environment of Live Journal is more anonymous than other more popular networks, for instance Facebook. Since users seem more prone to disclose more positive emotions in social media (Waterloo, Baumgartner, Peter & Valkenburg, 2018), this brings forth the question of how anonymity may influence online SSE and open the door to more research about disclosure of negative emotions in more popular SNSs.

Second, this dissertation broadened the scope of online SSE theory beyond initial sharing and included emotion regulation as an outcome, including social support. Notably, the full

process of online SSE, including sharing and feedback, showed to have a slight downregulation effect in Chapters 4 and 5. These results suggest that the process of online SSE may lead to emotional recovery, or decrease the negative emotional impact of the experience (Nils & Rime, 2012). Since FtF SSE has been found to have limited effects on recovery, these results could inspire future comparative research on online and FtF SSE.

Similarly, the fact that both informative and affective feedback achieved great collinearity in Chapter 5, may be a sign that online, the operationalization of different types of feedback may fall to be too similar, or else need greater differentiation, an endeavor which future research could tackle. That cognitive feedback was more effective in eliciting reappraisal in Chapter 4, may well illustrate SNS's communication potential to allow more instant access to cognitive appraisals than is usual in FtF. This greater effectivity may be explained by that in FtF, feedback is often given instantly, and is subject to social expectations, while the asynchronous character of Facebook status updates, and their lesser degree of social presence and cues (Walther, 2011), may enable receivers to better reflect on the feedback's content. This proposition is in line with 'the FtF fallacy' view (Sundar, 2008), which argues that despite common beliefs, FtF communication is not necessarily superior to online exchanges, nor results in greater well-being.

Limitations

Several broader limitations of this dissertation should be acknowledged. First, to some, the use of self-reports poses a limitation to emotion measures. However, subjective feeling and felt intensity are considered the hallmark feature of emotion by emotion researchers (see e.g. Scherer, 2005) and can be reliably measured using self-reports. Obviously, additional measures, for instance physiological or facial expressions, could be useful as complementary indices of other emotional response components.

Second, future studies may improve upon the measurement of emotion regulation. In addition to intensity changes assumed to result from regulation, aspects of the composite nature of emotion regulation need to be measured, such as antecedent emotion regulation strategies (Gross, 2007). Moreover, the appraisals of regulated emotions should be revealed as they are modified in regulation. Despite these shortcomings, we believe that the present study opens a new avenue for research on social media and emotion.

Third and admittedly, the samples used in our studies have limitations regarding generalization. Ideally, future studies could replicate the research using larger sample sizes. However, the studies do bring forth an effort to carry out data collection in lesser-known

populations, such as Chile, an emerging case study in communication research (e.g., Valenzuela, Arriagada & Scherman, 2012).

Fourth, this dissertation limited itself to study the impact of prosocial support and feedback expressions, while the possibility of receiving negative feedback (e.g. replies meant to harass, humiliate, denigrate or insult) through online networks exists. Although this dissertation found positive effects of prosocial online SSE, this work should not be misunderstood as a glorification of the behavior, as its risks should also be acknowledged and investigated in the light of the theoretical and empirical considerations brought here forth.

Conclusion

Some scholars, media and the general public have expressed concern about the potential of social media to foster a superficial exchange of information and to promote narcissistic self-presentation. The findings of this dissertation bring nuance to these critiques, finding that people generally confide in their online social networks when undergoing an emotional event of significance. Moreover, most replies seem to express affect and empathy, which utilize paralinguistic cues, just as in face-to-face communication, to strengthen the emotions in the message.

Further, online feedback can potentially help users to manage their emotions. Our results suggest that supportive interactions can help people to manage their negative emotions in both the short and long term, with its effects spanning at least a few weeks. This dissertation broadly shows that online support effects are: (a) contextual and (b) a matter of time. Instead of being a superficial 'band-aid' for our negative feelings, supportive messages, particularly informational or cognitive ones, (i.e. which provide useful factual information or that aim to change the persons' perspective) have the potential of making users confront their emotional issues and make them feel better *bit by bit*.