Attracting Effective Support on Social Networking Sites: Examining Three Characteristics of Online Support-Seeking Messages

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Effective support acquisition on social networking sites (SNSs) usually begins with strategic support seeking. This study conducted an online cross-sectional survey (N = 405) to examine whether certain characteristics of an online support-seeking post would draw more support. The results showed that negative posts could draw more emotional support compared with neutral and positive posts. SNS users who posted negative content, directly solicited support, and adopted more politeness strategies in support seeking would receive more informational support. Self-presentational concerns, however, were not associated with the examined characteristics of online support-seeking posts. The findings suggest that online support seekers can strategically compose their messages to elicit more effective support.

Keywords: supportive communication, social networking sites, self-presentational concerns, message valence, directness of support request, politeness

Seeking support on social networking sites (SNSs) is a rewarding yet challenging activity. Positive effects of this online exchange, such as access to a broad audience and heterogeneous viewpoints anywhere and anytime, have been well noted in extant literature (Rains, Peterson, & Wright, 2015; Tichon & Shapiro, 2003). However, to receive desired support on SNSs, support seekers may put their self-images at risk (Li, Coduto, & Song, 2020). Soliciting support may suggest that support seekers

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need others' help to deal with stressors, thus working against the seekers' positive images (Lee, Park, Imai, & Dolan, 2012). Many previous studies have investigated how self-presentational concerns are associated with the willingness to seek support and the production of support-seeking messages (Martin, Leary, & Rejeski, 2000; Oh & LaRose, 2016). Compared with other channels, public platforms such as SNSs may exacerbate the concern over self-presentations and impact an individual's support-seeking behavior (Rui & Li, 2018). Given that most online supportive communication begins with the critical phase of support seeking (MacGeorge, Feng, & Burleson, 2011), it is imperative to examine closely whether and how an online support seeker's self-presentational concerns may affect the production of support-seeking messages.

Support-seeking messages can be composed in different ways to reach the same end goal of soliciting effective support. Three characteristics of support-seeking messages, including message valence, directness of support seeking, and politeness, are considered to have close relationships with support seekers' self-presentational concerns and are thus examined in this study. Message valence refers to the positivity or negativity disclosed in the contents. While it is normative to disclose negative information to seek support, self-presentational concerns may drive people to limit negative disclosure on SNSs (Buehler, 2017). The directness of support seeking is characterized by whether or not a support seeker asks for support in a straightforward way. A direct request is more likely to risk a support seeker's self-presentation compared with an indirect request, and this factor thereby might be weighted in the composition of a support-seeking message. Politeness in a message shows acknowledgment of a recipient's positive and negative faces (Brown & Levinson, 1987), revealing its close connection with self-presentational concerns. Taken together, this study takes the initiative to examine the impact of self-presentational concerns on the three characteristics of support-seeking messages.

Besides examining the antecedents to the production of support-seeking messages, the other important objective of this study is to investigate whether and how characteristics of support-seeking messages may affect supportive communication outcomes. In the process of support exchange, the ultimate goal for a support seeker is to obtain effective support to buffer stress and solve problems. Therefore, we strive to understand if certain characteristics of support-seeking messages can help people receive more effective support on SNSs. Put together, this study takes the perspective of a support seeker to examine the chain of perception–message production–received support in the context of SNSs. The following section reviews the three characteristics of support-seeking messages as well as a support seeker's self-presentational concerns and received support on SNSs in relation to the production of support-seeking messages on SNSs. It is followed by the findings of a survey conducted to examine the proposed hypotheses.

Characteristics of Support-Seeking Messages

Support seeking usually serves as the first act to initiate the process of supportive communication (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Characteristics in a support-seeking message may influence how others help a support seeker. Based on theoretical and empirical research on supportive communication, we examine three characteristics of support-seeking messages, namely valence, directness, and politeness, which are explained in detail below.

The Valence of Support-Seeking Messages

Earlier research has shown that the valence of online support-seeking posts varies (Blight, Jagiello, & Ruppel, 2015). On the one hand, for the purpose of seeking support, people would be willing to confess or disclose their problems and negative feelings. On the other hand, the norm of positivity bias suggests that posting positive content on SNSs might be viewed more favorably than negative ones (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014). Given that support-seeking messages broadcasted on SNSs can reach a broader audience, a previous study suggests that more often support seekers add positive content to their support-seeking messages to conform to the expectations of positivity (Li et al., 2020). Blight and colleagues' (2015) study also lends support to the norm of positivity bias: They found that people present support-seeking posts with a mixture of positive, negative, and neutral valence on Facebook. Hence, unlike negative posts that usually uncover negative feelings and difficulties, neutral posts may balance the negative content with some positive sides such as optimism or resilience (Li et al., 2020). In contrast, positive posts, albeit less commonly seen on SNSs than the other two post types, may indicate a need for support by framing problems or difficulties in positive tones. For instance, someone may write a post asking for other people's blessings to pass an exam, in which case the poster indicates their stressor by projecting optimism without disclosing any negative content.

The Directness of Support-Seeking Messages

The directness of support seeking refers to the extent that a support seeker explicitly discloses support needs and asks for help (Li et al., 2020), which has been proven to be associated with the likelihood of receiving social support (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Sensitive interactions systems theory has acknowledged both direct and indirect strategies in support seeking and coping (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Some people prefer to seek help straightforwardly whereas others may implicitly hint at their needs for support without a direct request. Extant literature has noted that the directness of support-seeking posts may vary depending on different factors, ranging from personal traits and preferences to contextual factors such as social expectations and the publicness of the channels through which people seek support (e.g., Li et al., 2020; Youngvorst & High, 2018). While some people prefer to explicitly ask for help, others may choose to imply that they need assistance without making a formal request. In face-to-face (FtF) communication, prospective supporters may be inspired to offer support by picking up on the nonverbal cues that indicate that the people they interact with are experiencing distress. Although people can still use verbal language or emoticons to express their emotions in online posts (Walther, 1992), technological constraints on SNSs may curtail the ways they choose to express themselves, in which case the support needs become less noticeable to, or even ignored by, others, especially considering the sparse attention that may be shared by the audience on a specific post (Pan, Feng, & Shen, 2020). In addition, different levels of publicness of the SNS platforms are also found to moderate the effects of support-seeking strategies on the language use of support providers (Youngvorst & High, 2018; Zhou & High, 2023). Moreover, while making self-disclosures and seeking support through different SNSs, people may choose to leverage these social media channels to send coded or hidden references to their stressors because of concerns about visibility or anxiety and fear of social stigmatization (Das & Hodkinson, 2020). As a result, how explicitly people frame their support-seeking messages becomes an even more prominent factor in online support seeking.

The Politeness of Support-Seeking Messages

The third characteristic, politeness in support seeking, is rooted in the politeness theory. Building on Goffman's (1967) work on the face, Brown and Levinson (1987) developed the politeness theory to explain people's face needs and their use of politeness strategies in interactions. According to the politeness theory, face can be divided along two dimensions: Positive face and negative face. Positive face is about the desire to have one's self-image appreciated and approved by others. Negative face refers to the need of protecting one's autonomy from being imposed on by others. Corresponding to the two face types, people would adopt positive and negative politeness to address face-threatening behaviors. Positive politeness tries to maintain and protect one's positive face, and negative politeness helps minimize imposition on autonomy and maintain freedom of choice.

Supportive communication is inherently face threatening (Feng, Li, & Li, 2016). A support seeker's positive and negative faces are threatened during support exchange. On the one hand, support seeking implies support seekers may need others' help to deal with stressors, threatening their own positive face (Goldsmith, 1992; Lee et al., 2012). On the other hand, receiving help from others may also put support seekers' negative face under threat for two reasons. First, support seekers may feel obligated to follow others' suggestions and reduce their autonomy (Li & Feng, 2015). Second, support seekers may feel they are in debt and should return the favor someday (Goldsmith, 1992).

Compared with support seekers' face needs and the use of politeness strategies, significantly less research has examined the impact of support seeking on potential support providers' face needs. In fact, the negative face of a prospective support provider would be threatened if they feel obligated to comply with a support request. The threat to a prospective support provider's positive face is more controversial. Under most circumstances, a support request should not put a potential support provider's positive face at risk. However, it may become an issue if the person intends to provide no support (e.g., is uncaring of others; Edwards, 2014). Given the complexity of face threats in support provision, a support-seeking post can adopt some politeness strategies to minimize potential threats to a potential support provider's face.

Self-Presentational Concerns and Characteristics of Support-Seeking Messages

People are concerned about how they present themselves in front of others (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Leary, Kowalski, & Campbell, 1988) and thus engage in strategic activities to control their presentations (Goffman, 1959). Early studies on support seeking also find that the visibility of behaviors could also affect how people seek support (Shapiro, 1978). People may be worried or embarrassed to talk about their personal problems in public (DePaulo & Fisher, 1980). For example, research shows that threats to the public image constrain how people seek support in public (Chan, 2013). A study found that people's self-presentational concerns were salient when soliciting support in public channels on SNSs (Oh & LaRose, 2016).

Adhering to the norm of positivity bias and expecting to be viewed more positively, support seekers are more likely to display themselves in a positive light by including positive content in a support-seeking post. At the same time, although negative feelings and stressors are common elements of a support-seeking post, these negative components might be intentionally downplayed in their posts. For instance, Buehler (2017) found

that online support seekers project optimism in the face of adversity or use self-deprecating humor to indicate difficulties without explicitly mentioning them. Therefore, people with high self-presentational concerns would be more likely to post positive content to enhance their public image and less likely to post negative content that would threaten their public image. The following hypothesis was proposed:

H1:   Self-presentational concerns will be the highest among online support seekers with positive posts and the lowest among online support seekers with negative posts; online support seekers with neutral posts will have middle levels of self-presentational concerns.

The directness of support requests may also vary as a function of self-presentational concerns. A straightforward request for support might involve more explicit disclosure of stressors and negative affect, suggesting a need for support to handle problems, and thus potentially damage an idealized version of the self (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995; Youngvorst & High, 2018). Support seekers who do not explicitly ask for help may argue that they still have the potential to address the problems by themselves. They may only use post writing as a coping strategy because writing about emotional experiences has been shown to have therapeutic effects in past research (Pennebaker, 1997). Under such circumstances, indirect support seekers may project an even stronger self-image as they have the resilience to cope with stressors. Therefore, people with higher levels of self-presentational concerns are less willing to directly ask for support.

H2:   Self-presentational concerns will be higher among indirect support seekers compared with direct support seekers.

Self-presentational concerns may play a role in politeness strategies used in support seeking (Oh & LaRose, 2016). Given that support exchange is a face-threatening activity, support seekers adopting politeness strategies can mitigate face threats to prospective support providers, thus enhancing their own images (Lee et al., 2012). Specifically, positive politeness used in a support-seeking post can convey favorable impressions such as being polite and appreciative. Using negative politeness in a support-seeking post can make others feel less intrusive, leaving a good impression as well. Therefore, the level of self-presentational concerns is expected to be positively related to the amount of positive and negative politeness strategies used in a support-seeking post.

H3:   The level of support seekers' self-presentational concerns will be positively related to the amount of (a) positive politeness strategies and (b) negative politeness strategies used in their support-seeking posts.

Characteristics of Support-Seeking Messages and Received Support

To obtain effective support online, people may choose different strategies to compose support-seeking messages. The three characteristics of support-seeking messages aforementioned might be associated with received support online. Specifically, this study examines the associations between characteristics of support-seeking messages and received support through the lens of informational and emotional support. Informational support refers to messages that provide facts, advice, and guidance to help solve problems; emotional support features messages of empathy, comfort, and concern (Cutrona &

Suhr, 1992). Although different typologies of support have been identified in extant literature (Cutrona & Russell, 1990), past research shows that these two types of support are the most prevalent (Eichhorn, 2008). Particularly relevant is a meta-analytic review examining five types of support messages shared across different health-related online platforms (Rainset al., 2015), which found that among all types of support, informational and emotional support were most frequently exchanged online.

Informational and emotional support can work together to provide more effective support (Feng, 2009; Liao, Oh, Zhang, & Feng, 2023). For instance, informational support provided after comfort would be considered more effective than offering informational support alone (Feng, 2009). Another study found that certain patterns of combined emotional and informational support produced more optimal outcomes in interactions (Liao et al., 2023). At the same time, we should acknowledge the unique features of each support in interactions, especially in public spheres. Compared with informational support, which often provides relatively objective information and advice, emotional support involves the exchange of more intimate thoughts and feelings, which may be less appropriate to share on identified public channels (Bazarova, 2012). With concerns over self-presentation and privacy, support providers may offer more informational support than emotional support on SNSs. Given the prevalence and uniqueness of informational and emotional support shared online, both these types of support are examined in this study.

The current empirical evidence of the influence of post valence remains inconclusive, and the underlying mechanism warrants further scrutiny. One possible explanation is that as per the norm of positivity bias, support seekers may try to balance both their needs and self-presentation concerns and thus may choose to incorporate some positive cues in their support-seeking messages (Li et al., 2020; Utz, 2015). However, the positivity may also backfire: Framing a support-seeking message in a positive tone may lead to side effects that prevent one from effectively receiving support. It is likely that a support-seeking post with positive content obscures or downplays the support needs. That is, it might be the case that the audience perceives the poster as being competent to independently handle difficulties and thereby not in immediate need of support. Indeed, previous research shows that online support seekers who disclosed fewer emotions in their posts would be perceived as having fewer support needs and others intended to provide less support (Forest, Kille, Wood, & Holmes, 2014; Li, Coduto, & Morr, 2019). Therefore, we propose that a negative post is more likely to mobilize support provision compared with a neutral post, followed by a positive post:

H4:   *An online support seeker will receive more (a) informational support and (b) emotional support when leaving a negative post, followed by a neutral post, and lastly a positive post.*

Besides varying the valence in the support-seeking messages, another strategy to elicit effective support is to directly ask for support online. Past research has found that more direct support-seeking behaviors were associated with more helpful support giving in FtF communication (Collins & Feeney, 2000). In the context of computer-mediated communication on SNSs, this factor becomes more prominent as most nonverbal cues are filtered out while seeking support, in which case indirect support requests might easily go unnoticed. Even those who notice the needs may be worried that they are offering unwanted support (Roloff, Janiszewski, McGrath, Burns, & Manrai, 1988). In addition, an online post usually circulates among a broad audience. The shared responsibility, in line with the bystander effect among online communities (Yan & Jian, 2017), means that each individual viewer may feel less obligated to respond to a particular

post (Rains & Keating, 2011). To the opposite effect, a direct request for support may raise others' awareness of a support seeker's circumstance and make support needs more obvious, thus motivating them to offer help (Li et al., 2020).

H5:   *A direct online support seeker will receive more (a) informational support and (b) emotional support compared with an indirect support seeker.*

In addition, politeness has been acknowledged as an important factor in supportive communication (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Research has mostly focused on its role in support provision (Feng et al., 2016) yet overlooked this characteristic in support seeking. For instance, extant literature examines whether or not a support message including politeness strategies would be perceived more effective than a support message without such strategies (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000; MacGeorge, Feng, Butler, & Budarz, 2004). Given that asking for help can threaten the face needs of prospective support providers (Roloff et al., 1988), applying politeness strategies in support seeking may help elicit more effective support. Past research has found that threat to a support provider's face needs was negatively related to the person's support provision (Edwards, 2014). Employing positive politeness helps validate favorable images of prospective support providers, who thereby may want to maintain the positive images and thus provide more effective support. At the same time, embedding negative politeness in support-seeking messages shows a support seeker's consideration for prospective support providers' freedom, which likely yields a positive impression of the seeker and the provision of more support.

H6:   *An online support seeker will receive more (a) informational support and (b) emotional support when employing more politeness strategies in a support-seeking post.*

Methods

Participants

On approval by the Institutional Review Board, participants (*N* = 608) were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk and paid a small amount of money for participation. All participants were based in the United States. Exclusion criteria included inability to consent, age < 18 years, and inability to complete the survey in English. All participants were active users on at least one SNS (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter). A total of 33 (5.5%) cases were excluded because of participants' failure to pass one or more of three attention checks. Of all the participants, 170 (29.6%) reported they did not recently post a support-seeking message on any SNSs and were not included in the data analysis. This left 405 participants for the final analysis (M_{age} = 36.29, SD_{age} = 10.06; 50.9% female). More information about participants' descriptive characteristics is reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Sample (N = 405).

Characteristics		Participants
Female, *n* (%)		206 (50.9%)
Age (years), mean (*SD*)		36.29 (10.06)
Race,[1] *n* (%)		
	White	325 (80.2%)
	Black / African American	38 (9.4%)
	American Indian/Alaska Native	12 (3%)
	Asian/Asian American	38 (9.4%)
	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0
	Other	4 (1%)
Education level, *n* (%)		
	Less than high school	1 (0.2%)
	High-school graduate/GED	50 (12.3%)
	Some college	74 (18.3%)
	2-year degree	41 (10.1%)
	4-year degree	186 (45.9%)
	Professional degree	50 (12.3%)
	Doctorate	3 (0.7%)
Income level, *n* (%)		
	Below $20,000	43 (10.6%)
	$20,000–$29,999	49 (12.1%)
	$30,000–$39,999	53 (13.1%)
	$40,000–$49,999	61 (15.1%)
	$50,000–$59,999	45 (11.1%)
	$60,000–$69,999	39 (9.6%)
	$70,000–$79,999	29 (7.2%)
	$80,000–$89,999	18 (4.4%)
	$90,000–$99,999	22 (5.4%)
	$100,000 or more	46 (11.4%)
Friends/followers on the platform, *n* (%)		
	100 or less	98 (24.2%)
	101–200	101 (24.9%)
	201–300	67 (16.5%)
	301–500	61 (15.1%)
	501–1000	49 (12.1%)
	1001 or more	29 (7.2%)
Information intimacy, mean (*SD*)		3.71 (1.19)
Stressor severity, mean (*SD*)		3.42(1.19)

[1] The sum of percentages exceeded 100% because participants could choose more than one ethnicity.

Procedure

Participants were asked to log onto the SNSs they frequently visited and identify one most recent post they publicly put to ask for support. The post should have been written with the intention of seeking comfort and/or suggestions from others. After filtering out participants who could not identify such a post, the remaining participants were instructed to copy and paste their support-seeking posts into an open-ended text box. They were also asked to complete a series of questions about their self-presentational concerns, the emotional and informational support received from others on the support-seeking post, and demographic information.

Measures

Self-Presentational Concerns

Participants were asked about the degree of their self-presentational concerns. Twelve items on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = *not at all like me*, 5 = *a lot like me*) were adapted from a few studies (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013; Leary,1983; e.g., "It is important for me to convey a good impression." "I worry about what other people will think of me even when I know it doesn't make any difference."). This scale was highly reliable (M = 3.08, SD = 0.93, a = .93).

Received Informational Support

Four items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) were used to measure the extent to which participants felt supported by the information provided in others' responses. The items were adapted from Xu and Burleson's (2001) scale of informational support and modified for use in the current study. The items assessed the extent to which participants received facts, advice, and appraisals regarding situations of concern from others (e.g., "The respondents gave me advice about what to do," "The respondents gave me reasons why I should or should not do something."). The four items constituted a reliable scale (M = 4.44, SD = 1.75, a = .90).

Received Emotional Support

Five items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) were used to measure participants' perceptions of the emotional support provided in others' responses. The items were adapted and modified from Xu and Burleson's (2001) scale of emotional support. The items assessed the extent to which participants received love, empathy, and concern from others (e.g., "The respondents comforted me," "The respondents expressed sympathy."). The five items demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency (M = 5.53, SD = 1.43, a = .89).

Valence of Support-Seeking Posts

All support-seeking posts were coded to be positive (+1), neutral (0), or negative (−1) based on a post-valence coding scheme (Li et al., 2020). A positive post was characterized by content that only

projected optimism, strength, and/or hope without mentioning negative content such as stressors (e.g., "I need to prove to myself that I can do things."). A negative post mentioned negative content, mostly stressors, and problems without including positivity (e.g., "Feeling like a failure yet again. Stressed and no end in sight."). A post that consisted of both positive and negative content or only neutral content was coded as a neutral post (e.g., "Whitney just got married and I'm happy and sad about it. I feel like I'm not gonna see her as much."). Two research assistants were trained and coded a random sample of 160 (39.51%) cases for reliability assessment. After completing several rounds of coding, the two coders reached good reliability (Krippendorff's a = .72). The rest of the cases were evenly split among the two coders for independent coding. Of all posts, 11.1% (n = 45) posts were found to be positive, 36.5% (n = 148) were neutral, and 52.3% (n = 212) were negative.

Directness of Support Requests

All the recorded support-seeking posts were also coded for the directness of support requests (Li et al., 2020). A direct support-seeking post (+1) was one that asked for support in a straightforward way (e.g., "Any advice or hugs are welcome!"). An indirect support-seeking post (0) only indicated a need for support without explicitly asking for it (e.g., "Sometimes I wonder if I'm really doing anything right.") The same batch of 160 posts (39.51%) was independently coded by the two coders and reached satisfactory reliability (Krippendorff's a = .89). Then the remaining cases were evenly split among the two coders to code independently. Of all posts, 47.2% (n =191) involved direct requests for support.

Politeness in Support-Seeking Posts

The coding scheme was adapted from Feng and colleagues (2016) and modified for use in this study. Nine positive politeness strategies and six negative politeness strategies were identified as relevant to the study. Two research assistants were trained to code the frequency of each politeness strategy exhibited in the participants' responses. They then calculated two frequency scores for both positive and negative politeness strategies by summing up the frequencies of the positive politeness strategies used by each participant as well as by calculating the same for the negative politeness strategies. The inter-coder reliability (Krippendorff's a) of positive and negative politeness was .763 and .765, respectively, for the overlapping 160 cases (39.51%). Coding discrepancies were resolved through discussion. The remaining cases were then evenly split between the two coders for independent coding. The overall politeness score was calculated as the aggregate of positive and negative politeness scores (M = 1.73, SD = 1.91).

Control Variables

Participants' demographic characteristics including sex, age, education, and income level were included as covariates in this study. In addition, our study also measured the number of friends or followers participants had on the platform where they posted the support-seeking messages, how intimate the post information was, and the severity of the issue disclosed in the posts. Adopting a measure used by Bazarova and colleagues (2013), the number of friends was measured by asking participants to choose one of the six categories (100 or less; 101–200; 201–300; 301–500; 501–1000; 1001 and above). The intimacy of information revealed in a post was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *trivial or superficial*, 5 = *intimate or*

personal; *M* = 3.71, *SD* = 1.19) modified from previous studies (Rains & Brunner, 2018). Issue severity, that is, the severity of the stressor in a post, was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *mild*, 5 = *severe*; *M* = 3.42, *SD* = 1.19).

Results

Descriptive statistics and zero-correlation test results among key variables are presented in Table 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted that online support seekers with positive posts would have the highest self-presentational concerns followed by support seekers with neutral posts, who would have middle-level concerns, and those with negative posts having the lowest self-presentational concerns. This hypothesis was tested through multinomial logistic regression analysis with the valence of support-seeking posts as the dependent variable and self-presentational concerns as the independent variable. Results showed that the logistic regression model was statistically insignificant, X^2 (16, *N* = 405) = 23.44, *p* = .103. Compared with participants who wrote positive support-seeking posts, those with negative posts did not have significantly lower self-presentational concerns: *b* = −.14, *SE* = .19, *p* = .48, 95% confidence interval [CI] = (0.60, 1.27). Participants with neutral support-seeking messages did not differ from the ones with positive posts in terms of their self-presentational concerns either: *b* = −.17, *SE* = .20, *p* = .40, 95% CI = (0.58, 1.25). Therefore, H1 was not supported.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations Among Key Variables.

		1	2	3	4	5	Mean	SD
1	Self-presentational concerns						3.08	0.93
2	Received informational support	0.06					5.53	1.43
3	Received emotional support	0.01	0.498**				4.44	1.75
4	Positive politeness	0.03	0.09	0.099*			1.33	1.61
5	Negative politeness	−0.004	0.134**	0.02	0.184**		0.40	0.76
6	Overall politeness	0.03	0.132**	0.09	0.921**	0.553**	1.73	1.91

Note. *p* < .05, ***p* < .01.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that self-presentational concerns would be higher for indirect support seekers compared with direct support seekers. We assessed H2 using a binary logistic regression analysis with self-presentational concern as the independent variable and support-seeking directness as the dependent variable. Results showed that there was no significant difference in self-presentational concern between participants who wrote indirect support-seeking messages and those who sought support in their posts explicitly: *b* = −.07, *SE* = .11, *p* = .52, 95% CI = (0.86, 1.34). H2 was not supported.

Hypotheses 3a and 3b were regarding the associations between self-presentational concerns and the use of politeness strategies in support-seeking posts. To test these two hypotheses, we employed two hierarchical linear regression analyses to evaluate the prediction of positive and negative politeness, respectively. Demographic and control variables were entered in the first block of the regression model. Participants' self-presentational concern was entered separately into the second block. Results indicated that the models after adding self-presentational concern did not account for a significant amount of variation

in both positive politeness ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, F [8, 396] = .503, $p = .85$) and negative politeness ($\Delta R^2 = .01$, F [8, 396] = 1.79, $p = .08$). There were no significant associations between the level of support seekers' self-presentation concerns and the amount of positive politeness ($\beta = .02$, $t = 0.36$, $p = .72$) and negative politeness ($\beta = .003$, $t = 0.06$, $p = .96$) deployed in their posts. Therefore, H3a and H3b were not supported.

Hypotheses 4a and 4b were concerned with the association between post valence and the received informational and emotional support. We first conducted two hierarchical linear regression analyses with control variables in the first block, post valence entered in the second block as the independent variable, and the two types of received support as dependent variables, respectively. Results showed that the valence of the support-seeking posts was negatively associated with the informational support participants received ($\beta = -.10$, $t = -2.10$, $p = .04$). The same result was found with the received emotional support ($\beta = -.16$, $t = -3.41$, $p < .001$). We then conducted a multivariate analysis of variance to further compare the between-subjects effects of positive, neutral, and negative posts on the two types of received support, considering that informational support and emotional support were correlated. The multivariate result was significant for post valence, F (4, 802) = 5.89, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .03$. An least significant difference (LSD) post hoc test showed that compared with participants who wrote neutral posts ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.90$), those who left more negative posts ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 1.65$) tended to receive more informational support, $p = .02$. Nevertheless, in terms of the received informational support, participants who wrote positive posts ($M = 4.28$, $SD = 1.65$) did not differ from the ones who left neutral ($p = .77$) or negative posts ($p = .22$). Participants who left more positive support-seeking messages ($M = 4.75$, $SD = 1.43$) tended to receive a significantly lower level of emotional support than those who wrote negative posts ($M = 5.69$, $SD = 1.29$, $p < .001$) as well as those with neutral posts ($M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.54$, $p < .001$). However, no significant difference was found between neutral and negative ones in regard to the received emotional support, $p = .29$. Both H4a and H4b were partly supported.

Hypotheses 5a and 5b were regarding the association between directness in the support-seeking posts and received informational and emotional support. Two hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted to test these two hypotheses. Results revealed that posts that sought support explicitly led to significantly more informational support ($\beta = .13$, $t = 2.56$, $p = .01$), yet there was no significant association between the directness of the messages and the emotional support received ($\beta = .05$, $t = 0.99$, $p = .32$). H5a was supported, while H5b was not.

Finally, H6a and H6b were concerned with the effect of the amount of politeness exemplified in the support-seeking posts on received informational and emotional support. Overall politeness was calculated as the sum of both positive and negative politeness strategies participants deployed in their support-seeking messages. We conducted two linear regression analyses using overall politeness as the independent variable and the two types of received supports as dependent variables, respectively. Results indicated that the level of politeness of the support-seeking posts positively predicted the received informational support ($\beta = .12$, $t = 2.51$, $p = .01$). In other words, participants who wrote posts employing more politeness strategies received a higher level of received informational support. However, the association between the level of politeness of the posts and received emotional support was not significant ($\beta = .09$, $t = 1.87$, $p = .06$), a result that did not change when we tested positive and negative politeness separately. Therefore, H6a was supported, while H6b was not.

Discussion

Due to the increasingly important role SNSs have been playing in interpersonal communication, it is crucial to examine what factors are associated with how people seek social support online and what characteristics of support-seeking posts are associated with receiving more effective support. Building on online impression management literature and theories in supportive communication, the current study focused on the three most important characteristics of support-seeking posts on SNSs, namely, the emotional valence, directness, and politeness of the support-seeking posts and examined how these characteristics were associated with received informational support and emotional support. Furthermore, considering that both support seeking and support provision are situated in a social media context, we examined how SNS users' self-presentational concerns may serve as an antecedent to the characteristics exemplified in support-seeking posts.

The most important results lie in the significant associations between received informational support and the valence, directness, and politeness of the support-seeking posts. Previous studies have well-documented that support-seeking strategies and characteristics of the support-seeking messages affected the type, quantity, and quality of support they received (Li & Feng, 2015; Pan, Feng, & Wingate, 2018; Youngvorst & High, 2018). This study advances the literature by showing that support-seeking posts with negative valence can motivate more informational support compared with neutral posts and more emotional support compared with positive posts, which is likely because of the great need for support indicated by negative posts. These findings are consistent with the negativity effect, which stated that negative self-disclosure including negative emotions, undesirable experiences, or distress is usually treated with greater importance compared with positive information (Kellermann, 1984). Although SNSs have a general tendency to value positive self-presentation, disclosure of negative emotion in the specific context of support seeking may be viewed as atypical and attract more attention from potential support providers. Although the current findings are seemingly contradictory to previous research, which found that neutral support-seeking posts elicited the greatest number of responses compared with posts with the other two valence types (Li et al., 2020), it is worth noting that the number of responses does not equal to the perceptions of support received (MacGeorge et al., 2011). Support seekers may feel satisfied with a small amount of quality support or feel unsatisfied with a great number of ineffective messages. Given that different outcomes were examined in this study and previous ones, the current results instead tap into the nuances in supportive communication rather than contradicting previous findings.

The negativity effect observed in the current study has also been exemplified in previous research examining the effects of post valence on potential support providers' intentions to provide support (Li & Zhang, 2021). However, Rains and Brunner (2018) found that broadcasting negative self-disclosure on SNSs led to less liking and lower willingness to provide social support. Although examining willingness or intentions to provide support is of both theoretical and practical importance, the current study also advances our understanding of online supportive communication by examining the supportive outcomes from the perspective of support seekers. One of the important supportive outcomes is support seekers' evaluations or subjective perceptions of the received support. After all, support seekers are the beneficiaries of support and thus are in a good position to evaluate received support.

Consistent with the sensitive interaction systems theory (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995), the results of the current study show that directly seeking support is associated with receiving more informational support. Previous studies investigating the effects of the directness of support seeking in both online and offline settings have also reported similar results (Li et al., 2020; Williams & Mickelson, 2008). When reading a post directly asking for support, the potential support provider may perceive the poster to have an urgent need for support, therefore they would be more likely to provide messages with specific instructions and advice to solve the problem at hand. Albeit directness is commonly viewed as a support-seeking strategy, several previous studies focusing on other supportive outcomes such as the "one-click" reactions on social media and verbal person-centeredness of support-provision messages did not observe the positive effect of directness (Li et al., 2020; Youngvorst & High, 2018). The required efforts to produce different support-provision outcomes vary and may be promoted by different perceptions or psychological mechanisms. The mixed findings again underscore the importance of extrapolating strategies of support seeking to different supportive outcomes.

Furthermore, the observed association between the politeness of support-seeking posts and received informational support is worth noting. Compared with valence and directness, politeness has received relatively less attention in past research. Our results indicate that politeness strategies could be subtly employed to invite more support in an online setting. The degree of support solicitation corresponds with both support seekers' and support providers' face concerns (Goldsmith, 2000). From the support providers' perspective, their face needs could constrain their message production (Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997). When viewing support-seeking messages exemplifying politeness strategies, support providers may feel that their contribution is important, valued, and appreciated by the support seekers. For example, our results are in line with previous findings that positive politeness strategies including using informal address/greetings, in-group identity markers, and inclusive pronouns may indicate relationship closeness (Centerbar, Schnall, Clore, & Garvin, 2008), and the use of explicit words acknowledging the support providers' competence to provide support could also encourage others to provide higher-quality support. Negative politeness strategies such as minimizing impositions and abasing the self while raising the status of the other could indicate the caring of others' negative face (Goldsmith & MacGeorge, 2000). We propose that future studies should continue to examine the nuances in specific politeness strategies and their associations with different types of online support.

In terms of the two observed supportive outcomes, we only found a significant association between support-seeking strategies and received informational support but not emotional support. The unique affordances (e.g., publicness) of SNSs may account for the observed differences between received informational and emotional support. Considering that the context of support seeking in the current study is broadcasting posts on SNSs that are visible to the public, sharing informational support and providing action-facilitating support may be deemed as more appropriate compared with the more intimate type of emotional support (Bazarova, 2012). Previous studies have also found that the channel through which a support provider responds to the support-seeking request also affects the quality of their messages (Vitak & Ellison, 2013; Youngvorst & High, 2018). Both support seeking and support provision could be viewed as face-threatening acts, and features of public channels such as status updates may heighten potential support providers' concerns about self-presentation and impression management (Oh & LaRose, 2016). Therefore,

they may not feel comfortable sharing sensitive and intimate thoughts commonly observed in emotional support messages (Bazarova, 2012).

Contrary to the predictions, the results indicate that participants' self-presentational concerns were not associated with their adoption of support-seeking strategies. Self-presentational concerns govern various aspects of strategic impression management, social interactions, and interpersonal communication. Previous literature on online impression management and online supportive communication all supported the rationale that self-presentational concerns should strongly predict how people engage in self-presentation, both in verbal and nonverbal forms (Rains & Brunner, 2018; Youngvorst & High, 2018). In the current study, self-presentational concerns were measured as a holistic perception people had when presenting themselves to others. In the specific context of support seeking, other more immediate or proximal concerns such as the problem severity, the stress of the problematic situation, or the urgency of the issue might play more prominent roles when people seek support on SNSs. The features of the SNSs in which the support is sought may also heighten the level of self-presentational concerns support seekers have in public posts. Future studies could continue to examine the differences in self-presentational concerns people have when using public or private channels to seek support and how self-presentational concerns and channels interact to affect which strategies people may use when seeking support.

The results of the current study offer practical implications for individuals who attempt to seek social support on SNSs. Potential support seekers who use SNSs to seek social support could strategically use various features of these sites and extrapolate the characteristics of the support-seeking posts to optimize the support-provision outcomes. As indicated in the current study, when crafting support-seeking posts, individuals could adopt more approach-oriented styles such as clearly expressing emotion, directly seeking help, and openly discussing the problem (Goldsmith, 1995; Youngvorst & High, 2018). Using approach strategies such as directly stating the problem and using more politeness strategies to attend to others' faces could also motivate others to provide effective support messages (Liu & Kang, 2017).

Limitations

The current study has several limitations. First, we chose to focus only on self-presentational concerns as an antecedent of support seeking because of its close connection with the features of SNSs. However, there are other factors such as the features of specific social media platforms, the relationships between a support seeker and potential support providers, and the specific issues on which the support seeker seeks social support that may be associated with the characteristics of the support-seeking messages. Although several were included in the current study as covariates, future studies could continue to identify other antecedents of online support seeking and even compare various factors to find the most prominent antecedents contributing to characteristics of support-seeking posts.

Second, the cross-sectional design of the current study prevents us from making any causal inferences. Although the process of support seeking took place in temporal order, other situational, contextual, and relational factors could also have affected the supportive outcomes. Future studies could adopt experimental methods or longitudinal survey designs to establish the causal relationships between the characteristics of support-seeking messages and subsequent support provision.

Third, the conceptualization and operationalization of publicness on SNSs deserve more work. The boundary between publicness and privateness has been blurred on SNSs. While most people would consider a support-seeking post as public if shared with a large audience, a post visible to a group of close friends may also be perceived as public by many. Different understandings of post publicness may potentially affect people's self-presentational concerns and support outcomes.

The last limitation pertains to the measurement of self-presentational concerns. In the current study, participants' self-presentational concerns were measured as a general and stable personal trait. Although the general or trait-level self-presentational concerns may affect the salience of such perceptions during specific situations of support seeking, future studies could adopt more specific and contextual measurements of self-presentational concerns that emerge when seeking support on SNSs.

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