Reasons for Sharing With Separate Social Media Audiences During Life Transitions

Tianxiao Liu   **Jasmine Glover**   **Oliver L. Haimson**
tialiu@umich.edu   jasglo@umich.edu   haimson@umich.edu
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA

ABSTRACT

During life transitions, people sometimes turn to social media audiences separate from their typical online networks. By qualitatively analyzing open-ended data from a U.S.-based survey (N = 775), we examined why and how people discuss life transitions with these separate audiences. Survey questions asked about life events experienced, separate networks and the interactions that occurred there, and participants' reasoning behind these online behaviors. We found that people use separate networks, especially online support groups, to interact with others anonymously, receive informational and emotional support, and have direct and focused discussions with people with similar experiences.

Major life transitions:

Inspired by Holmes and Rahe's influential 1967 taxonomy [16] and prior life transitions literature [2, 14, 21], we created an updated taxonomy, *The Major Life Events Taxonomy*: a list of 120 life changes that people considered to have a major impact on them. The taxonomy included prevalent life events (e.g., graduation from college, starting a new job) and events that are less common but require major readjustment (e.g., death of a loved one, recovery from addiction).

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Woman	71	50.0%
Man	53	37.3%
Non-binary	18	12.7%
Transgender	12	8.5%
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian	8	5.6%
Asian	10	7.0%
Black/ African American	27	19.0%
Hispanic/ Latino	19	13.4%
Middle Eastern	1	0.7%
White	97	68.3%
Age		
18-24	36	25.4%
25-34	47	33.1%
35-44	27	19.0%
45-54	12	8.5%
55-64	13	9.2%
65+	7	4.9%

Participants could choose multiple gender and race/ethnicity options, so percentages add up to greater than 100%.

INTRODUCTION

How people use social media during major life transitions is an important topic of academic study [7, 13, 15, 19, 22]. Scholars have found numerous positive influences of social media sites on users' emotional wellbeing and access to social resources [11, 17]. However, people sometimes face certain challenges in online spaces during life transitions, such as online harassment and stigmatization [10, 20]. In order to manage these complexities, people sometimes use multiple social media platforms and networks simultaneously when experiencing major life transitions [12]. To understand how social media can better support people during major life transitions, the current study expands on prior research by examining why people sometimes turn to networks separate from their typical online networks during major life events. Specifically, we wanted to better understand why separate online networks, typically comprised of strangers, could sometimes be more comfortable than one's close ties and acquaintances when discussing major life transitions. We qualitatively analyzed open-ended survey responses to understand motivations behind participants' online sharing choices.

METHODS

We used online surveys for data collection as it allowed for anonymity that can give people space to reflect on sensitive topics and disclose personal experiences. We surveyed 775 U.S. participants about their experiences using social media during life transitions. This sample included a representative U.S. sample (*N*=567) as well as specific marginalized groups (racial/ethnic minorities (*N*=100) and transgender and non-binary people (*N*=100)). Out of 775 participants, 202 stated that they shared life events with separate online networks and 142 answered at least one of three open-ended survey questions about separate online networks (see sidebar on page 3). We pilot tested the survey and maintained data quality via attention checks and by manually examining data.

We analyzed data using line-by-line qualitative open coding and axial coding [8] via affinity diagramming [5] to allow for creativity and flexibility of the coding process. Two researchers collaboratively discussed and compared codes, then organized them into themes. The theme we focus on in this paper is sharing life events with separate online networks.

RESULTS

Although participants often shared life events with their close friends, many shared their life events with people outside their typical networks on separate online platforms like Discord, Reddit, and Facebook secret groups, which is consistent with prior findings [12]. Specifically, many chose to share with online support groups focused on that particular life change, where people have experienced or are experiencing something similar. These communities were particularly useful because they provided anonymity, emotional and informational support, and direct and focused discussions.

Informational support helps solve or eliminate problems, including feedback on actions, factual input, and advice [9].

Emotional support provides comfort but does not directly help to solve problems, including expressions of caring, concern, empathy, and sympathy [9].

Anonymity

Anonymity enabled participants to avoid potential consequences of sharing in their personal lives, which created a sense of safety for some. *"I shared them anonymously on Reddit to avoid potential ramifications in my personal life, as these events were private and could have social consequences,"* (P96). P69 concurred: *"These people do not know me. I could leave at any point and they could not find me elsewhere."* Especially when it comes to life transitions with negative stigma, such as mental health diagnoses and LGBTQ-related issues, many participants preferred to share within groups centered on that topic. P106, with experiences of abuse and mental health struggles, reported, *"I chose to share my struggles because the group was specifically for that purpose and it felt safe.".* The safety that comes with online anonymity is a crucial benefit for people facing life changes, echoing prior research [3, 4].

Informational and Emotional Support

One reason participants preferred online support groups is that such groups provided informational and emotional support that helped with coping. P137 reflected on her participation in a parenting group: *"Because these people are having the same experiences. They have advice and sympathy."* Given that members of support groups are predominantly people with similar experiences, their advice is often more useful and effective than people without that experience. When asked about interactions within the group, P108 mentioned that people shared links to helpful resources. P80, who experienced the death of a loved one, shared that the support group *"provided critical information, tips, and guidelines for better managing the issues."*

Participants also appreciated the emotional support provided by online support groups. The supportive environment of such communities is especially meaningful for those experiencing stigmatized events. P96 reflected on sharing their experience of mental health struggles and abuse in online support groups: *"The interactions were overwhelmingly supportive. People tended to offer advice or share their own related stories... this was partially due to the specificity and privacy of the groups."* One response illustrated that sharing similar experiences builds bonds among people: *"They could better understand the situation I was experiencing as they had gone through similar experiences and could relate to my circumstances. I felt a stronger emotional bond with them than with my typical online network."* (P80). P95 described how the support within online support groups is uncommon in typical networks: *"I could never talk to most of my friends about these things, they would never understand."* These responses demonstrate how online support groups can provide support sometimes lacking in typical networks.

Direct and Focused Conversations

Another benefit that comes with sharing resources and support in online communities is that conversations can become more direct and focused, more serious, and less cliche. P94 shared, *"I wanted to*

get feedback from those who would take my issues seriously.” Since many people join the group because of a specific life event, discussions are often centered on that particular issue, without irrelevant chatting or comments. *“The discussions are taken very seriously, so I felt that anything I needed to talk about was valid. On other forums there [is] a tendency to be flippant,”* said P106. Discussions in online event-specific groups are likely to be efficient and to the point, allowing sharing experiences to be meaningful.

Overall, participants reflected positively on separate networks. A quote from P85 summarizes what it is like to share life transitions with strangers: *“I share it with a group of strangers but they are not strangers to me. They understand where I am coming from.”*

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We showed how sharing life transitions with people outside of one's typical networks — support groups centered around a specific topic with people who have had similar experiences — enables anonymity, informational and emotional support, and a space for direct and focused discussions, all of which can make people feel safer with groups of strangers than friends. These results suggest that when experiencing life transitions, many people chose to share the event with people outside their typical networks, mostly groups focused on specific topics or issues, because they perceived such groups to be safer than typical networks.

The current study uniquely contributes to the understanding of social media users' behavior as we more holistically examined people's motivation for using separate online networks in the contexts of a broad set of major life transitions (rather than focusing on one type of transition in isolation). Previous studies found that separate online spaces allow people to find community and support during life transitions and the following readjustment phase [1, 4, 6, 12, 18, 22]. Participants' responses deepen our understanding of separate online spaces by indicating that one key to such spaces is transition-specific groups. Taken together, anonymity, support, and direct and focused conversations demonstrate how in online interactions around life transition contexts, anonymous ties can be as beneficial as strong ties. The boundaries between friends and strangers have become more complex and blurred as online networks began to play an increasingly important role in people's social lives. It is noteworthy that rarely did participants turn to acquaintances throughout life transitions — that is, people can be quite extreme when it comes to choosing audiences, and they tend to confide in either complete strangers or very close friends (confirming prior research [13]).

Our results lead to several design implications that may improve social media sites for those facing life transitions. User-centered social media sites should refine ways to enable users to easily find communities of peers with similar experiences. How to maintain accessibility of such communities while protecting users' privacy is a question that requires further examination. Furthermore, social

media like Facebook should include features that allow users to share about negative or stigmatized events anonymously, so that more people can realize the prevalence of stigmatized events without associating the event with specific individuals. In addition, explicit design for seamless switching between multiple accounts on one social media platform can potentially facilitate anonymous disclosure with separate online networks. The current research points to the need for future studies that provide more detailed examinations of online communities specific to particular life transitions. Future studies should examine, via methods like interviews and design workshops, how people's social media behaviors and needs differ when experiencing different types of life transitions.

REFERENCES

[1] Tawfiq Ammari and Sarita Schoenebeck. 2016. "Thanks for your interest in our Facebook group, but it's only for dads" Social Roles of Stay-at-Home Dads. In *Proceedings of the 19th ACM Conference on Computer-Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 1363–1375.

[2] Nazanin Andalibi and Andrea Forte. 2018. Announcing pregnancy loss on Facebook: A decision-making framework for stigmatized disclosures on identified social network sites. In *Proceedings of the 2018 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*. 1–14.

[3] Nazanin Andalibi, Oliver L. Haimson, Munmun De Choudhury, and Andrea Forte. 2018. Social Support, Reciprocity, and Anonymity in Responses to Sexual Abuse Disclosures on Social Media. *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 25, 5 (Oct. 2018), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1145/3234942

[4] Nazanin Andalibi, Oliver L Haimson, Munmun De Choudhury, and Andrea Forte. 2016. Understanding social media disclosures of sexual abuse through the lenses of support seeking and anonymity. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 3906–3918.

[5] Hugh Beyer and Karen Holtzblatt. 1998. *Contextual design: defining customer-centered systems*. Morgan Kaufmann Publishers Inc., San Francisco, CA, USA.

[6] Lindsay Blackwell, Jean Hardy, Tawfiq Ammari, Tiffany Veinot, Cliff Lampe, and Sarita Schoenebeck. 2016. LGBT parents and social media: Advocacy, privacy, and disclosure during shifting social movements. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI conference on human factors in computing systems*. 610–622.

[7] Moira Burke and Robert Kraut. 2013. Using Facebook after losing a job: Differential benefits of strong and weak ties. In *Proceedings of the 2013 conference on Computer supported cooperative work*. 1419–1430.

[8] Kathy Charmaz. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. SAGE Publications.

[9] Carolyn E Cutrona and Julie A Suhr. 1992. Controllability of stressful events and satisfaction with spouse support behaviors. *Communication Research* 19, 2 (1992), 154–174.

[10] Jill P Dimond, Casey Fiesler, and Amy S Bruckman. 2011. Domestic violence and information communication technologies. *Interacting with Computers* 23, 5 (2011), 413–421.

[11] Nicole B Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe. 2007. The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of computer-mediated communication* 12, 4 (2007), 1143–1168.

[12] Oliver Haimson. 2018. Social media as social transition machinery. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, CSCW (2018), 1–21.

[13] Oliver L. Haimson, Anne E. Bowser, Edward F. Melcer, and Elizabeth F. Churchill. 2015. Online Inspiration and Exploration for Identity Reinvention. In *Proceedings of the 33rd Annual ACM Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '15)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 3809–3818. https://doi.org/10.1145/2702123.2702270

[14] Oliver L Haimson, Jed R Brubaker, Lynn Dombrowski, and Gillian R Hayes. 2015. Disclosure, stress, and support during gender transition on Facebook. In *Proceedings of the 18th ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work & Social Computing*. 1176–1190.

[15] Oliver L. Haimson, Bryan Semaan, Brianna Dym, Joey Chiao-Yin Hsiao, Daniel Herron, and Wendy Moncur. 2019. Life Transitions and Social Technologies: Research and Design for Times of Life Change. In *Conference Companion Publication of the 2019 on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '19)*. Association for Computing Machinery, Austin, TX, USA, 480–486. https://doi.org/10.1145/3311957.3359431

[16] Thomas H Holmes and Richard H Rahe. 1967. The social readjustment rating scale. *Journal of psychosomatic research* (1967).

[17] Junghyun Kim and Jong-Eun Roselyn Lee. 2011. The Facebook paths to happiness: Effects of the number of Facebook friends and self-presentation on subjective well-being. *CyberPsychology, behavior, and social networking* 14, 6 (2011), 359–364.

[18] Michael Massimi, Jackie L Bender, Holly O Witteman, and Osman H Ahmed. 2014. Life transitions and online health communities: reflecting on adoption, use, and disengagement. In *Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing*. 1491–1501.

[19] Sabirat Rubya and Svetlana Yarosh. 2017. Video-Mediated Peer Support in an Online Community for Recovery from Substance Use Disorders. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '17)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1454–1469. https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998246 event-place: Portland, Oregon, USA.

[20] Morgan Klaus Scheuerman, Stacy M Branham, and Foad Hamidi. 2018. Safe spaces and safe places: Unpacking technology-mediated experiences of safety and harm with transgender people. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 2, CSCW (2018), 1–27.

[21] Bryan Semaan, Lauren M Britton, and Bryan Dosono. 2017. Military masculinity and the travails of transitioning: Disclosure in social media. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on computer supported cooperative work and social computing*. 387–403.

[22] Bryan C. Semaan, Lauren M. Britton, and Bryan Dosono. 2016. Transition Resilience with ICTs: 'Identity Awareness' in Veteran Re-Integration. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '16)*. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 2882–2894. https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858109