“You Shouldn’t Use Facebook for That”: Navigating Norm Violations While Seeking Emotional Support on Facebook

Emily M. Buehler

Abstract
Facebook users who choose to seek emotional support publicly via Facebook Timeline posts must balance their needs for emotional comfort with norms for appropriate behavior within the Facebook context. Although Facebook promotes access to diverse social contacts who could serve as emotional support providers, the norms of Facebook use often prevent users from explicitly and directly venting their affect and requesting emotional support. A community sample (N = 185) completed an online questionnaire through which participants provided their most recent public Facebook post that was intended to garner social support. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to identify the strategies individuals enact to navigate the tension between effectively seeking emotional support while avoiding violating implicit Facebook norms associated with oversharing or appearing emotionally needy. Six themes characterizing emotional support-seeking strategies on Facebook emerged from the data. These themes are further subdivided, described, and discussed as they pertain to extant literature on supportive communication and Facebook norms.

Keywords
Facebook, supportive communication, emotional support, social support, implicit norms

Introduction
People use Facebook to fulfill various needs: passing time, entertainment, information sharing, companionship, and social interaction (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011). Among the social needs that are negotiated through Facebook, social support has been identified as an important need that can be fulfilled via Facebook (e.g., Li, Chen, & Popiel, 2015; Rozzell et al., 2014; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). More specifically, scholars have speculated that Facebook may be a venue in which the exchange of social support is enhanced, given the affordances (defined as features of technological media that users perceive as impacting their ability to fulfill their goals and needs) of the platform (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). For instance, users highlighted the ability to broadcast messages to one’s entire network as the key affordance impacting support-seeking via Facebook (Vitak & Ellison, 2013). Although Facebook has been touted for providing greater access to social support generally, there are various types of social support (see Xu & Burleson, 2001), and it is unclear whether it is appropriate to seek every type of support on Facebook. Publicly seeking emotional support on Facebook, in particular, may be viewed as inappropriate because doing so often violates implicit norms: Publicly making one’s emotional needs known on Facebook is likely interpreted as too much information, overly emotional, or needy.

Facebook users frequently indicate that posting overly emotional statuses is a violation of norms (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Users in McLaughlin and Vitak’s focus groups explained that they believed that others post overly emotional statuses “in order to receive support and comments from their friends,” and they “wished that those Friends would look for comfort outside of Facebook” (p. 308). The contradiction in the literature is apparent: According to the literature on Facebook norms, individuals who seek emotional support through Facebook have violated an implicit norm; however, research on social support on social network sites (SNSs) has
indicated that Facebook is a desirable medium through which to seek support (Li et al., 2015; Oh, Ozkaya, & LaRose, 2014). These conflicting strands of research need to be reconciled.

This study endeavors to understand how individuals navigate opposing needs to adhere to the implicit norms of Facebook by not posting overly emotional statuses while also fulfilling their emotional support needs through Facebook interactions. Inductive thematic analysis was employed to examine 185 public Facebook posts in which participants indicated they sought support. The objective of this analysis was to identify patterns demonstrating how individuals simultaneously signal their emotional support needs on Facebook while attempting to evade norm violations. The following sections provide a review of the literature on the norms of Facebook use and supportive communication on Facebook that inform the research question. Then, the qualitative methods employed to explore that research question are described before presenting, interpreting, and discussing the results.

Implicit Norms on Facebook

Social norms are socially shared definitions about how people do or should behave (Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000). These norms provide the framework through which technology users understand what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior on a given platform. Scholars have endeavored to identify the implicit norms of newer technologies such as Facebook (e.g., Cotter & Wanzer, 2008; Hooper & Kalidas, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012), and based on interviews with social media users, people know and consider norms when deciding how to share specific content (Zhao, Lampe, & Ellison, 2016). Often these norms are implicit—norms that are not written down but understood by the group. Implicit norms are of interest to the present study, as the norms of Facebook use are implicit—Facebook users learn how to conduct themselves by observing how others behave and copying those behaviors (Hooper & Kalidas, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012).

Only a few studies have identified and defined the implicit norms of Facebook use (see Cotter & Wanzer, 2008; Fife, Nelson, & Bayles, 2009; Hooper & Kalidas, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Many of the behaviors deemed unacceptable on Facebook mirror social norms dictating inappropriate behavior in offline contexts (Hooper & Kalidas, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). For instance, socially inappropriate behaviors such as using coarse language, sharing explicit content, and engaging in personal attacks and harassment are considered unacceptable on Facebook (Cotter & Wanzer, 2008; Hooper & Kalidas, 2012). One user in McLaughlin and Vitak’s (2012) study of Facebook norms compared his behavior on Facebook to a family wedding, saying, “. . . various groups of people such as friends, family, and colleagues may be in attendance . . . you need to take these varying groups into consideration when interacting to make sure that whatever you say is appropriate for everyone” (p. 305). In addition to offline norms that translate to Facebook, behaviors specific to the Facebook context have been identified as guided by norms: Friending and sharing information about Friends (Cotter & Wanzer, 2008; Fife et al., 2009; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012), Facebook stalking (Fife et al., 2009), and sharing in public versus private channels within Facebook (Fife et al., 2009; Hooper & Kalidas, 2012; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). These norms seem largely agreed upon across studies identifying the implicit norms of Facebook.

Central to the present study are the norms dictating what type of content is appropriate for public posts on Facebook. Overly emotional content is perceived as less appropriate for public sharing. In a study exploring what affected the selection of a channel through which to share emotional experiences, Choi and Toma (2014) found that users did not share overly emotional events through public channels like Facebook Timeline posts. Similarly, Bazarova (2012) found that highly personal disclosures were viewed less positively in more public channels. These empirical findings are consistent with Hooper and Kalidas’s (2012) study of behavioral norms on Facebook, in which over 90% of respondents indicated that they did not expect to see information posted publicly on Facebook that was too personal, the most widely agreed upon norm in their study.

Fulfilling Emotional Needs on Facebook

Despite studies indicating that posting emotional content violates Facebook’s implicit norms, scholars have suggested that using Facebook improves perceptions of emotional support (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011; Wright, 2012). Emotional support, or comforting, includes expressions of care, concern, or encouragement that are intended to alleviate the emotional distress of others (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). Individuals seeking emotional support are seeking comfort to assuage their emotional distress, which helps to fulfill emotional needs. Although some studies have indicated that using Facebook is associated with perceptions of emotional support, it is unclear how individuals are communicating their emotional support needs on Facebook. Most investigations of actual requests for support on Facebook are limited to requests for informational or tangible support (e.g., Ellison, Gray, Lampe, & Fiore, 2014; Jung, Gray, Lampe, & Ellison, 2013; Vitak & Ellison, 2013). The present study focuses on the strategies employed to express the need for emotional support.

Although publicly sharing emotions on Facebook is frowned upon, individuals need a space in which to express and fulfill their emotional needs. Facebook could be an advantageous medium through which to receive emotional support. Scholars such as Vitak and Ellison (2013) suggested that the affordances of Facebook enable the exchange of...
social support. They reasoned that “The site lowers barriers to signaling support needs to one’s network and provides simple methods (e.g., commenting on a status update) through which individuals of varying closeness can respond to the request” (Vitak & Ellison, 2013, p. 250). Facebook facilitates access to emotional support from both known and unfamiliar others, particularly through public Timeline posts that can reach a large audience with one post. Scholars have argued that it is this access to both strong and weak ties—to one’s relationally close ties (e.g., close family and friends) as well as relationally non-close ties (e.g., looser acquaintances)—that makes Facebook an advantageous venue for seeking support (Rozzell et al., 2014). An individual who is experiencing a rare condition or situation, for example, may be unable to find a close friend or family member who shares their experience. However, having access to a wide audience through a Timeline post on Facebook may help that individual identify others, perhaps looser acquaintances or friends of friends, who are coping with similar issues.

Additionally, scholars have speculated that CMC channels, generally, reduce some of the costs associated with seeking support. For instance, feelings of embarrassment or vulnerability that are often associated with seeking support may be minimized in CMC channels because individuals are not physically or temporally co-present with the receivers of their messages (Walther & Boyd, 2002). These feelings impact whether and how an individual seeks support (e.g., Williams & Mickelson, 2008), so diminishing these feelings can increase the likelihood and effectiveness of seeking support. Additionally, posting to Facebook provides users with time to craft their messages, an affordance that allows for strategic message production and self-presentation (Walther, 1996; Walther & Boyd, 2002). Altogether, the affordances of Facebook allow users to navigate the tensions involved in seeking support while simultaneously attempting to adhere to Facebook norms.

**Negotiating Norm Violations and Emotional Needs**

Although the affordances of Facebook may decrease obstacles to seeking support, the reality remains that posting personal, emotional information on Facebook is a norm violation. Because users are aware of this norm, they may experience ambivalence and tension when they need support because they do not want to appear needy or seem like they want pity (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Individuals need to balance the tensions among their needs for support and adherence to norms. Balancing these tensions influences the strategies and behaviors individuals enact to seek support and, in turn, impacts the outcomes of their supportive interactions—whether they receive support and the quality of that support (e.g., Barbee & Cunningham, 1995).

Because we know little about how individuals seek emotional support on Facebook, this study seeks to uncover a rich, descriptive understanding of the strategies employed to seek emotional support on Facebook. Additionally, because publicly seeking emotional support on Facebook may violate norms for using the SNS, this study explores how users’ support-seeking strategies may serve to evade norm violations. More formally stated,

**RQ.** When posting to seek emotional support on Facebook, what strategies do individuals use to navigate the tension between seeking support while avoiding the violation of implicit norms?

**Method**

**Participants and Procedure**

A community sample (N=185) including faculty, staff, and students from a large, Midwestern university who self-identified as active Facebook users were recruited through the university list-serv for a larger project that included this study. Participants completed an online questionnaire in which they were asked to identify the most recent post on their Facebook Timeline in which they sought support from their Facebook Friends. Participants were given the following instructions to help them identify posts and give them a broad sense of what was meant by seeking support:

> On your own Facebook timeline, identify a time when you posted something in the hopes of getting help or support from others. It’s important to note that getting help or support can mean lots of different things: You could have been asking for advice, looking for help with a task, looking for information or an answer to a question, trying to get emotional comfort in a stressful time, and/or attempting to boost your own self-esteem or confidence through people’s likes or comments on your post. Looking for help or support can take many forms.

After identifying a post, participants were asked to copy and paste the post into the questionnaire. Additionally, participants responded to an open-ended question that asked them to explain what they were trying to communicate through the post.

Of the 553 individuals who originally responded to the questionnaire, 299 were able to identify a post. As part of a larger project using this data corpus, those 299 posts were rated by independent coders for the presence of five types of support: emotional, esteem, informational, network, and tangible support. Of these 299 posts, 185 of them involved emotional support and were included in the dataset for this analysis. The 185 participants who supplied those posts (85.9% female; age M=33.33, SD=12.24) identified primarily as Caucasian (90.3%), followed by Asian (3.2%), multi-racial (2.2%), African American (2.2%), Hispanic (1.6%), and other (0.5%).

**Data Analysis**

Inductive thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, organize, and offer insight into patterns of meaning
within the posts provided by the participants. The end goal of this method is to tell a story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The inductive approach to thematic analysis places data at the center of the analytical process. The codes and themes are derived directly from the data with conclusions of the analysis matching closely with the content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The researcher arrives at themes by identifying and describing the patterns of meaning that exist within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After producing transcripts of the Facebook posts, the author read through participants’ posts and explanations of what they were trying to communicate to form a basic impression of the data. Then, the author reread the transcripts and began coding each post and its accompanying explanation. In this phase of data analysis, the posts were coded to identify a shorthand label for a feature of the data that was potentially relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After identifying codes, the next phase of analysis transformed the codes into themes. A theme “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). Themes emerged from the codes after the author noticed the repeated use of similar language and phrases, or the expression of similar ideas across codes despite differences in language use. After establishing preliminary themes, the author returned to the data to verify the context and meaning of each post. This step served to ensure that the data was not misinterpreted during the initial coding process. While working with the codes and transcripts to develop themes, the author also began to write memos that detailed how the themes operated together to tell a story about the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These memos included detailed descriptions of the themes, the criteria for data to fit within a given theme, and exemplars from the data that illustrated the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

Although these coding procedures were completed by the author alone, the findings were discussed in a peer debriefing session to verify that the author’s interpretations were in line with scholars who engage in similar research. After the completion of the memos, a colleague was asked to review the memos in a process of peer-checking (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to discuss the themes the author had generated and identify areas of agreement and disagreement. This colleague received information about the process of theme development used by the author and reviewed the memos. Together, the two discussed the themes and how they fit together within the data. For the most part, the author and peer-checker initially agreed on themes, and discussion continued until all themes and the name of each theme were agreed upon.

**Results and Interpretation**

The research question asked what strategies individuals use to navigate the tension between seeking emotional support and avoiding implicit violations of Facebook norms. The analysis yielded six themes that characterize the types of strategies Facebook users employed to seek emotional support while simultaneously avoiding norm violations: redirecting attention to others, projecting optimism in the face of adversity, disarming with self-deprecating humor and sarcasm, rich storytelling, vaguebooking, and remarking on the significance of the date. The next section details conceptual definitions, descriptions, and examples illustrating each strategy. The strategies are presented in order from most to least frequently encountered in the dataset.

**Redirecting Attention to Others**

Rather than focusing the post on one’s own needs and emotions, 65 participants redirected the need for support to another individual, making this the most common theme in the dataset. These individuals deflected attention away from themselves to someone else—their spouse, child, or other family and friends. This strategy involved seeking support on behalf of another individual, venting one’s own emotional need under the guise of helping others in similar situations, and extending appreciation to others who have helped through distressing situations. Redirecting attention to someone else allowed these participants to appear selfless, gracious, and attentive to others’ needs rather than requesting help for themselves or appearing as though they wanted pity.

Some participants downplayed the severity of their own problems by focusing the attention on someone else. One participant chose to seek support for her husband rather than herself while she was in the hospital. She posted,

> ... if you could please keep [husband] and [daughter] in your thoughts, I would appreciate it. He is stressing about me, but I am in good hands at Mercy with round the clock service just a button away. He is on his own with [daughter], daycare, work, school, and the house. Seriously he needs good vibes way more than I do.

This participant avoided explicitly seeking support for her own illness and redirected attention to her husband. She put the husband’s stress above her own, which projected a selfless image. By directing attention away from herself, it was as if this participant was not seeking support at all.

In a similar vein, other participants directed the focus of their posts on helping unknown others who might be in similar situations. For instance, one participant avoided asking for emotional support about her mother’s illness by turning the focus outward. She posted, “It’s fitting to bring my mom to chemotherapy on World Ovarian Cancer Day. Know the signs and symptoms to save your life . . .” In explaining what she was trying to communicate, the participant wrote, “I want people to know the signs and symptoms to help people from having to go through what I am going through with my mom.”

Rather than discussing her own emotional distress, this participant shifted the focus from her own needs to raising awareness
for the benefit of others. In doing so, this individual talked around her distress and demonstrated selflessness.

Other participants rained praise on those who helped them through a situation, rather than confessing that the situation was difficult for them. One participant posted, “I have been made aware the last few weeks what amazing friends and family I have. Thanks for putting up with me . . . .” By thanking those who helped her, this individual avoided discussing the core of the issue: the stress she had been experiencing. Again, this individual avoided explicitly seeking support, and instead extended gracious thanks to her loved ones. The participant who shared this post indicated that she was “venting” in this post; however, the participant’s emotional distress and venting was masked because she redirected the focus of the post to thanking those who had helped her.

**Projecting Optimism in the Face of Adversity**

The second theme involved projecting optimism, positivity, strength, and hope in the face of difficulty or distress. Rather than complain about or wallow in their difficulties, 56 participants found a way to put a positive spin on their troubles by employing this theme. This strategy seems to match implicit social norms in the United States related to optimism. According to data from the Pew Research Center, Americans tend to be more upbeat than people in other nations (Gao, 2015). Additionally, studies have indicated that people tend to disclose positive aspects of themselves on SNSs (e.g., Qiu, Lin, Leung, & Tov, 2012), and this norm of positivity was visible in the data. Despite the fact that most of these participants were posting about emotionally distressing experiences, many of them did so in an optimistic way.

One participant wrote, “So happy April is done and May has started. April was rough this year and I’m hoping some ‘May flowers’ will come my way.” This participant made her emotional distress known, but did so with an optimistic point of view. Another participant remarked on the major events of the previous year:

> 2014 was a great year for me. I got an awesome new job along with awesome co-workers, and [name] & I had a great farming season. Sadly though, I lost two very special friends. One on the west coast and one on the east coast. My New Year’s resolution is to keep their adventurous and fun-loving spirits close to me every day.

Sandwiched between statements of positivity was her admission of the sadness and loss of the previous year. The participant did not dwell on the sadness, moving quickly to an optimistic look to the future. For many participants, the overall tone of their posts was upbeat—conveying hope, strength, and optimism about an otherwise difficult and distressing situation. By projecting positivity, these individuals avoided appearing emotionally needy.

**Disarming With Self-Deprecating Humor and Sarcasm**

In 46 of the posts, individuals attempted to disarm their audiences by using self-deprecating humor or sarcasm. These individuals attempted to avoid coming off as needy or whiny by poking fun at themselves or the situation. The following post embodied this strategy: “Is it too early to start drinking?!? [cry emoticon].” In the explanation of her post, this individual indicated that she was having a bad day at work. She wrote, “My boss had been exceptionally cranky that morning, taking things out on us that we couldn’t control . . .” The specificity this participant provided in the explanation of what she was trying to communicate did not come through in the post itself. Readers of this post might have found it funny and relatable, but they would not have known the source of the poster’s distress. If this individual had chosen to unload the details about her bad day and perceptions of her boss, the post may have been seen as an over-share.

Another participant indicated that she was frustrated about final exams and looking for kind words of advice when she posted, “Currently running on coffee and the naïve hope that I’ll pass all my midterms.” By resorting to self-deprecating humor, this participant avoided directly expressing that she was upset, which she admitted in the explanation of her post. Additionally, the self-deprecating humor made the participant appear modest about her intellectual and test-taking abilities, which might have made her seem more relatable to her Facebook Friends who have shared similar experiences.

**Rich Storytelling**

Thirty-four posts exhibited rich storytelling. These participants provided rich, descriptive, and often lengthy accounts of the impetus for their need for emotional support. Their verbal and nonverbal expressivity—using storytelling, poetic and figurative language, emoticons, photos, and features of the site (e.g., “—feeling overwhelmed”)—drew readers into their posts. One participant wrote about sentimentally sorting and packing up her mother’s jewelry amidst her declining health:

> Visiting Mom this weekend . . . She has declined a lot in the last month and will soon be moving into the highest care section of her facility. It also means the dresser she had always had…will be going away. This means that the center drawer and cupboard where she stored jewelry and other things that we looked at as kids and really identify as part of Mom have been sorted through . . . By no means the worst of the sorting but it is almost the final one which makes us very sad . . . I really miss my mom.

The anguish this individual was experiencing as her mother’s health declined was apparent in the vivid story she told about her mother’s jewelry and its symbolic meaning. The story that this individual used to disclose her sadness received 32
comments, which reflects the responsiveness of her audience to this particular post.

Another individual reflected on her last moments with her young daughter who had passed away years earlier in a moving, expressive post that extended for several paragraphs. In a selection of the post, she wrote,

Each year as today approaches my thoughts are filled with memories of May 12, 2009 when I raced to the ER and held my breath for an hour while the doctors and nurses did everything they could to bring life back into her. The afternoon where I held her earthly body for the last time. The evening that I laid my baby’s body on the hospital bed and walked away, leaving her behind in that empty room.

This mother communicated her grief and loss in a very powerful, expressive way. She employed literary devices such as repetition of phrases and vivid imagery that gave the post a poetic feel. Toward the end of the post, repetition added emphasis to the woman’s hope:

Every May 12th I reflect upon the future and I am filled with hope. Hope that her life was not meaningless. Hope that her loss has brought my husband, my children, and myself closer to God. Hope that there is always a future even if it isn’t here on earth. Hope that I am one day closer to seeing her again.

Many of the Friends who commented on this post remarked on how much they enjoyed the poster’s writing style. Not only did this post exhibit rich storytelling and poetic elements such as repetition, but it also emphasized the significance of particular dates and projected optimism. It served as an exemplar of several themes, which was typical of many of the posts.

**Vaguebooking**

Thirty-two instances of vaguebooking manifested in this dataset through ambiguous, vague, and sometimes passive-aggressive posts. The name of this theme, vaguebooking, was borrowed from popular use of the term as well as scholarly invocations of the term. Scholars define vaguebooking as “a unique form of strategic ambiguity encountered on Facebook” (Child & Starcher, 2016, p. 485). Consistent with prior research on vaguebooking, messages that exemplified this strategy yielded multiple possible interpretations and the participants who used this strategy often did so intentionally. Because these posts were vague and could be interpreted in many ways, the emotional support needs of participants who used this strategy were not readily apparent to the author and often only surfaced in the participants’ explanations of what they were trying to communicate. The vaguebooking posts ranged from vague statements of distress to quirky reflections, quotations without any explanation, and seemingly innocuous statements that disguised a serious need for comfort.

In one vague statement of distress, a participant posted, “Pizza and chocolate chips because screw today.” Readers of this post would recognize that the poster was having a bad day; however, the poster was strategically ambiguous about the source of her distress. In the explanation of what she was trying to communicate, she wrote, “I had had a bad day. A colleague had passed away unexpectedly. I just wanted to express my sadness without getting into it too deeply, but wanted a little boost from friends.” This participant alluded to the implicit norms of Facebook by indicating that she did not want to “get into it too deeply,” but also described her need to express her sadness and loss. By being intentionally vague about the root of her distress, the participant avoided violating a norm.

Another participant provided a quirky reflection on the life of Leonardo da Vinci in the post he identified, which hinted at the fact that he was wrestling with his thoughts late at night:

I wish I knew what Leonardo da Vinci would be like if he were alive today—would he be the singular Renaissance man that we saw at such a point in history? Or would he have given into distraction? More importantly:

1. Why am I not him?
2. Why am I asking myself these questions at 1230 AM?

This post emerged as one of the most vague posts in the dataset and also one of the posts that disguised a serious need for emotional support. This individual signaled his restless thoughts late at night; however, the source and depth of his distress were not clear. In explaining his post, this individual disclosed that he posted this the day his fiancée broke up with him and wrote, “I could have used some reassurance that there was something to me that made me stand out.” Serious distress stemming from relational dissolution was hidden beneath this vague, mildly entertaining post. To an outsider, this individual’s distress was almost completely concealed.

Another participant shared the quotation, “Before You ‘Assume’ Try This Crazy Method Called ‘Asking.’” No explanation of the quotation was given in the post itself, but the participant explained that a conflict at work had instigated the post and expounded on what she was trying to communicate with the following:

After a long day of chewing over the situation, I changed my profile picture to the quote . . . It’s a passive aggressive way to vent without going into specifics with strangers, which I will not do online. THAT would be unprofessional on my part.

This individual articulated the need to vent but also the recognition of the boundaries of appropriateness for doing so. Rather than “going into specifics,” the participant chose to be vague.
Other vague posts were seemingly innocuous, if not downright uplifting, but disguised needs for comfort. For instance, one participant posted:

You know those people who go around giving free hugs to random people on the street? We need more of those people. I would totally love some giant hugs from people who have no intentions other than to spread love. I think everyone could use some more love, and hugs. Love. Hug. Love.

Based on her post, this individual did not seem to need support. Instead, she seemed intent on spreading support to others. In the explanation of what she was attempting to communicate, however, her need for comfort became apparent. She wrote,

I needed a hug that day. I didn’t want to flat out ask for a hug, and I don’t ever put my personal problems on Facebook for everyone to see. I do vague things that are positive and not directly about me.

This individual chose to be vague and positive rather than ask for emotional comfort in a public and straightforward way.

Some of the participants whose posts qualified as vaguebooking also employed social steganography. Social steganography involves encoding publicly visible messages so they are only understood by certain audiences (boyd & Marwick, 2011; Oolo & Siibak, 2013). To audience members without the insider knowledge to decode the message, the true meaning is unclear. These posts were vague on the surface but would have been interpretable by a subset of participants’ Facebook Friends—often their inner circle of close ties. The presence of social steganography was apparent to the author when participants indicated that there were particular audience members who would know what their oblique posts meant. Participants utilized tags, inside jokes, and specialized language to communicate hidden meanings to their inner circle. For instance, one individual posted, “I’d give just about anything for a Krispy Kreme chocolate covered vanilla cream filled donut.” Some readers might have interpreted the post as innocuous, but the participant confessed that this treat was hard to find where she currently lived and the post was meant to signal to friends and family back home that she was homesick.

The use of social steganography is a powerful strategy to signal emotional support needs without overtly violating norms of Facebook. This strategy allows SNS users to “be in public without always being public” (Marwick & boyd, 2014, p. 1052). In other words, social steganography allows users to participate in their social network while simultaneously limiting network members’ access to the full, personal meanings embedded in their posts. For the woman who posted about Krispy Kreme donuts, she was able to encode a private message about her homesickness in a seemingly public space. Through social steganography, this user was able to balance the tension between participating in her diverse social network with a relatable post about donuts while also keeping her homesickness private from most of her audience.

**Remarking on the Significance of the Date**

Twenty-nine participants made reference to time and anniversaries in their posts, making this the theme that was least frequently encountered. These participants attempted to justify the expression of their emotional need by identifying the date of their post as temporally important—because of the loss of a loved one, a birthday, or an anniversary of some sort. One individual posted, “Today would have been my parents’ 50th wedding anniversary! We love you, Mom and Dad!” The date served as an impetus to bring up emotional distress, which the participant indicated in her explanation: “My parents have both passed away I miss them. I realized on January 23 that it would have been the day of their 50th wedding anniversary. I was feeling a bit nostalgic so I shared that fact on Facebook.” For many participants, it seemed that identifying the date as special, or remarkable in some way, justified the emotions expressed in their Timeline posts.

In other posts, participants were forthright about their intentionality in posting only because of the significance of the date. One participant began her post with,

Only a few days a year I post about my mom. Tomorrow marks four years since she said enough was enough after battling cancer for the five years before. I spent her last Mother’s Day in the hospital with her. Today is spent thinking and reflecting on my mom and son both in heaven.

This individual seemed to justify her post by declaring that she only posts about her mother a few times a year. Mother’s Day, combined with the impending anniversary of her mother’s passing, sparked her post. In addition to Mother’s Day, other significant dates that frequently emerged in the data included wedding anniversaries, anniversaries of a loved one’s death, anniversaries of a diagnosis or being cleared of an illness, and birthdays.

**Discussion**

The present study identifies and categorizes strategies that Facebook users employ to seek emotional support while simultaneously attempting to abide by implicit norms about sharing overly emotional content on Facebook. Results of the analysis contribute to what we know about support-seeking strategies on Facebook by providing differentiation and description of the types of strategies that Facebook users employ to balance these tensions. Because there is limited research on the implicit norms of Facebook use and emotional support-seeking on Facebook, this study contributes to both of these literatures in meaningful ways. The
might be interpreted as attention-seeking (e.g., Carpenter & others treat vaguebooking as an annoying behavior that more private on Facebook (Child & Starcher, 2016), whereas more direct privacy management practice than simply being Facebook. Some studies have argued that vaguebooking is a be extended to the context of seeking emotional support on (e.g. Child & Starcher, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014)—may tion tactics unique to SNSs that are often studied in the con- views the support seeking post.

The results of the analysis reinforce assertions from literature on social support in face-to-face contexts that support-seek- ing strategies vary in directness (Barbee & Cunningham, 1995). Some of the strategies, such as rich storytelling, often involved relatively straightforward expressions of emotional difficulty and requests for comfort. Other strategies, such as redirecting attention, often involved hinting at one’s need for support. There appear to be fewer instances of explicit and direct strategies represented in the sample. Rich storytelling and remarking on the significance of the date were often more direct, and these strategies were the least common in the dataset. On the other hand, several strategies, including some of the most common, qualified as relatively more indi- rect (e.g. redirecting attention, projecting optimism, and vaguebooking). The imbalance in direct and indirect strategies may reflect the social costs participants perceived they would incur by openly expressing their emotional distress on Facebook. Scholars have contended that support seekers employ more indirect strategies when the perceived costs of seeking support are high (e.g. Williams & Mickelson, 2008). The use of more indirect strategies may reflect a concern over the ramifications of posting one’s need for emotional support on Facebook. In lieu of incurring those social costs, participants may have chosen to be more indirect.

This study also reveals that categorizing support-seeking strategies as either direct or indirect is an oversimplification for communication through channels that allow messages to be viewed by broad, diverse audiences that may not all inter- pret the messages in the same way. Not all of the strategies enacted by participants in the present study neatly fit into one of these two categories: direct or indirect. For instance, posts exhibiting social steganography may have been interpreted as direct signals for help by one segment of the audience and as vague by other segments of the audience. The mutually exclusive categories of direct and indirect do not fit these strategies, suggesting that directness can only be interpreted from the perspective of the specific audience member who views the support seeking post.

The present study also provides evidence that the study of vaguebooking and social steganography—two communica- tion tactics unique to SNSs that are often studied in the con- texts of privacy management or impression management (e.g. Child & Starcher, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2014)—may be extended to the context of seeking emotional support on Facebook. Some studies have argued that vaguebooking is a more direct privacy management practice than simply being more private on Facebook (Child & Starcher, 2016), whereas others treat vaguebooking as an annoying behavior that might be interpreted as attention-seeking (e.g., Carpenter & Tong, 2017). If vaguebooking is viewed as a form of atten- tion seeking, this strategy may not be perceived in a positive light by potential support providers. Future studies should investigate how support providers respond to emotional support-seeking posts characterized by vaguebooking.

Social steganography has been studied in such contexts as the expression of sexual identity (Duguay, 2016), expression of political views (Mor, Kliger-Vilenchik, & Maoz, 2015), and general privacy management (Marwick & boyd, 2014; Oolo & Siibak, 2013). The results of this study suggest that utilizing social steganography may also prove useful in seeking emotional support via SNSs. Previous studies on social steganography have found that teens use song lyrics, quotes, inside jokes, and other obscure references to communicate hidden meanings to particular audience members (see boyd & Marwick, 2011). The results of the present study suggest that individuals older than teens employ similar tactics (e.g., quotes, obscure references). Future research should investi- gate similarities and differences in how members of different age groups use social steganography.

Some of the vaguebooking posts communicated different meanings to different segments of the audience, which high- lights the phenomenon of context collapse in a supportive communication context. Context collapse occurs when mul- tiple audiences are flattened into one (Marwick & boyd, 2011). Audiences on Facebook comprise various individu- als—individuals who users know in different ways and indi- viduals with whom users are more or less familiar—and users can never be sure what portion of their audience will read their posts. Tensions arise when users attempt to present themselves to that diverse audience. Some of the individuals in this study were in need of serious emotional comfort, yet venting that emotion would not be appropriate for all of their Friends. Social steganography emerged as a strategy that some of the participants in this study used to grapple with the need to get a message out to some but not all of their Facebook Friends, which is consistent with Marwick and boyd’s (2014) conclusion that social steganography is used to negotiate privacy in the face of context collapse on SNSs.

The results of this study also demonstrate the delicate dance of impression management that users perform while attempting to achieve their support-receiving goals. Participants posts’ evidenced the carefully curated impres- sions that they attempted to maintain through their posts. Facebook, above other SNSs, is a place for highly curated content (Zhao et al., 2016). Indeed, the most frequently used strategies (i.e., redirecting attention, projecting optimism, and disarming with humor and sarcasm) reflected partici- pants’ attempts to carefully curate their Facebook image by promoting socially desirable traits. The participants who projected optimism, for instance, avoided violating norms about posting overly personal, emotional information by adhering to norms about remaining positive and resilient in the face of adversity. Similarly, those individuals who chose to redirect attention from themselves to someone else came off as
positive, gracious, and selfless rather than needy and overly emotional. Finally, the use of self-deprecating humor gave off an image of modesty in many cases. These trade-offs demonstrate the strategic impression management that Facebook users negotiate through their posts.

In addition to promoting socially desirable traits, some participants seemed to attempt to entice others to capture their personal interests. Several strategies imply users’ attempts to be evocative, entertaining, or intriguing. Individuals who engaged in rich, descriptive storytelling and those who wrote humorous posts likely captured the attention of their audiences. Because entertainment and habitual time-passing are two of the reasons why people report using Facebook (Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011), some participants managed to avoid norm violations by providing entertainment value for their audiences. By being poetic, funny, or heart-wrenching in their posts, participants satiated the needs of their Friends who were scrolling until they found something worth reading. And increasing the likelihood that a Friend reads the post could increase the likelihood that someone responds. For instance, Pennington and Hall (2014) found that self-deprecating humor garnered more comments than likes, suggesting that self-deprecating humor might be an effective strategy to increase the likelihood of receiving responses from Friends.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study was not without limitations that future research should address. Participants were primarily Caucasian women. The strategies employed to seek support via Facebook might vary for different populations, especially as they pertain to racial and gender identity. For instance, recent theorizing by Davis (2015) suggests that Black women communicate vulnerability and emotionality differently than Caucasian women. Thus, the support-seeking strategies exhibited in this sample may not apply to all women. Future investigations should seek to recruit more diverse samples to ascertain patterns of support-seeking in other populations. There are also few men represented in the sample, making it difficult to draw conclusions about men’s support-seeking strategies or whether it is common for men to seek emotional support on Facebook at all. Future studies can verify whether the low incidence of men who seek emotional support on Facebook is unique to this sample or reflective of a broader trend.

Another limitation of the present study lies in the timing of data collection. Participants were asked to identify the most recent post in which they sought support, and data collection began shortly after Mother’s Day. By consequence of the timing of data collection, many participants identified posts in which they sought comfort on a day that reminded them of the absence of their mothers: Mother’s Day. This limitation could inflate the number of individuals who remarked on the significance of the date, and future research should confirm whether this strategy emerges in other datasets in which the timing of data collection did not fall immediately after a potentially significant date (e.g., Mother’s Day, Father’s Day).

Finally, several questions remain regarding the effectiveness of each of these strategies. Based on their explanations of what they were trying to communicate, we can see that users attempted to avoid norm violations and attempted to get emotional support through the strategies they employed; however, the data are limited in revealing whether these attempts were successful. First, it is unclear to what extent the audiences of these posts felt that norms were adhered to, and future research should investigate audience perceptions of the effectiveness of each strategy in evading norm violations. Relatedly, future studies are needed to ascertain the success of the support-seeking attempts in garnering high quality responses. Both effectively avoiding norm violations and effectively asking for help should increase the chances of receiving higher quality supportive responses from one’s audience. Future research should confirm this speculation by documenting the amount and quality of support received in response to each strategy. Finally, future studies should explore how effective each of these strategies is in helping people cope with their emotional distress. Self-deprecating humor, for instance, may attract more comments (see Pennington & Hall, 2014), but would those comments attract sensitive responses from others that would help alleviate distress? And maintaining optimism corresponds with positive health and social outcomes (see Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005); however, if that optimism distracts people from their problem, it may not result in beneficial outcomes (see Burleson & Goldsmith, 1998). Future research should explore to what degree each of these strategies helps Facebook users achieve emotional improvement in their stressors.

**Conclusion**

Facebook is the latest technological tool that we use to negotiate our social and emotional needs. This tool can facilitate emotional comfort and coping with distress; however, individuals who choose to use Facebook in this way must be aware of competing social expectations that might affect the success of their support requests. Users must balance competing needs for emotional comfort with needs to behave appropriately within the Facebook context. To receive quality emotional support through Facebook, individuals not only need to enact effective support-seeking strategies, but they also need to understand the norms that dictate appropriate behavior within that context. This study paves the way in identifying the strategies that Facebook users employ to attempt to negotiate these needs. These results contribute to the growing body of knowledge about social support on SNSs and provide directions for future studies to investigate the effectiveness of each of these strategies.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Dr Andrew High for his significant role in the larger project that included this study, to Dr Jennifer Jackl for her role in peer debriefing, and to Dr Jiyeon Kang for her comments on earlier drafts of this manuscript.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

Barbee, A. P., & Cunningham, M. R. (1995). An experimental approach to social support communications: Interactive coping in close relationships. In B. R. Burleson (Ed.), Communication yearbook 18 (pp. 381-413). New York, NY: Routledge.

Bazarova, N. N. (2012). Public intimacy: Disclosure interpretation and social judgments on Facebook. Journal of Communication, 62, 815-832.

boyd, d., & Marwick, A. (2011). Social steganography: Privacy in networked publics. Paper presented at 61st Annual International Communication Association Conference, Boston, MA.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3, 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Burleson, B. R., & Goldsmith, D. J. (1998). How the comforting process works: Alleviating emotional distress through conversationally induced reappraisals. In P. A. Andersen & L. K. Guerrero (Eds.), Handbook of communication and emotion: Research, theory, applications, and contexts (pp. 245-280). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Burleson, B. R., & MacGeorge, E. L. (2002). Supportive communication. In M. L. Knapp & J. A. Daly (Eds.), Handbook of interpersonal communication (3rd ed., pp. 374-424). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Carpenter, C. J., & Tong, S. T. (2017). Relational distancing and termination between online friends: An application of the investment model. In Proceedings of the 2017 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 6925-6935). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. doi:10.1145/3025453.3026026

Child, J. T., & Starcher, S. C. (2016). Fuzzy Facebook privacy boundaries: Exploring mediated lurking, vague-booking, and Facebook privacy management. Computers in Human Behavior, 54, 483-490. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.08.035

Choi, M., & Toma, C. L. (2014). Social sharing through interpersonal media: Patterns and effects on emotional well-being. Computers in Human Behavior, 36, 530-541. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.04.026

Cotter, C., & Wanzer, M. B. (2008, November). Facebook norms and expectancy violations. Paper presented at National Communication Association Annual Convention, San Diego, CA.

Davis, S. M. (2015). The “Strong Black Woman Collective”: A developing theoretical framework for understanding collective communication practices of Black women. Women’s Studies in Communication, 38, 20-35. doi:10.1080/07491409.2014.953714

Duguay, S. (2016). “He has a way gayer Facebook than I do”: Investigating sexual identity disclosure and context collapse on a social networking site. New Media & Society, 18, 891-907.

Ellison, N. B., Gray, R., Lampe, C., & Fiore, A. T. (2014). Social capital and resource requests on Facebook. New Media & Society, 16, 1104-1121. doi:10.1177/146144481453998

Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., & Lampe, C. (2011). Connection strategies: Social capital implications of Facebook-enabled communication practices. New Media & Society, 13, 873-892. doi:10.1177/1461444810385389

Fife, E. M., Nelson, C. L., & Bayles, K. (2009). When you stalk me, please don’t tell me about it: Facebook and expectancy violation theory. Kentucky Journal of Communication, 28, 41-54.

Gao, G. (2015). How do Americans stand out from the rest of the world? Washington, DC: Pew Research Center.

Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Hooper, V., & Kalidas, T. (2012). Acceptable and unacceptable behaviour on social networking sites: A study of the behavioural norms of youth on Facebook. Electronic Journal of Information Systems Evaluation, 15, 259-268.

Jung, Y., Gray, R., Lampe, C., & Ellison, N. (2013). Favors from Facebook friends: Unpacking dimensions of social capital. In Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (pp. 11-20). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. doi:10.1145/2470654.2470657

Li, X., Chen, W., & Popiel, P. (2015). What happens on Facebook stays on Facebook? The implications of Facebook interaction for perceived, receiving, and giving social support. Computers in Human Behavior, 51, 106-113. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2015.04.066

Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). Qualitative communication research methods: 3rd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Lyubomirsky, S., King, L., & Diener, E. (2005). The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? Psychological Bulletin, 131, 803-855.

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2011). I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience. New Media & Society, 13, 114-133. doi:10.1177/1461444810365313

Marwick, A. E., & boyd, d. (2014). Networked privacy: How teenagers negotiate context in social media. New Media & Society, 16, 1051-1067. doi:10.1177/1461444814543995

McLaughlin, C., & Vitak, J. (2012). Norm evolution and violation on Facebook. New Media & Society, 14, 299-315. doi:10.1177/14614448114212712

Miller, D. T., Monin, B., & Prentice, D. A. (2000). Pluralistic ignorance and inconsistency between private attitudes and public behaviors. In D. J. Terry & M. A. Hogg (Eds.), Attitudes, behavior, and social context: The role of norms and group membership (pp. 95-113). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Mor, Y., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., & Maoz, I. (2015). Political expression on Facebook in a context of conflict: Dilemmas and coping strategies of Jewish-Israeli youth. Social Media + Society, 1, 1-10. doi:10.1177/2056305115606750

Oh, H. J., Ozkaya, E., & LaRose, R. (2014). How does online social networking enhance life satisfaction? The relationships among...
online supportive interaction, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior, 30*, 69-78. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.053

Oolo, E., & Siibak, A. (2013). Performing for one’s imagined audience: Social steganography and other privacy strategies of Estonian teens on networked publics. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace, 7*, article 7.

Papacharissi, Z., & Mendelson, A. (2011). Toward a new(er) sociability: Uses, gratifications and social capital on Facebook. In S. Papathanassopoulos (Ed.), *Media perspectives for the 21st century* (pp. 212-230). New York, NY: Routledge.

Pennington, N., & Hall, J. A. (2014). An analysis of humor orientation on Facebook: A lens model approach. *Humor, 27*, 1-21.

Qiu, L., Lin, H., Leung, A. K., & Tov, W. (2012). Putting their best foot forward: Emotional disclosure on Facebook. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking, 15*, 569-572. doi:10.1089/cyber.2012.0200

Rozzell, B., Piercy, C. W., Carr, C. T., King, S., Lane, B. L., Tornes, M., . . . Wright, K. B. (2014). Notification pending: Online social support from close and nonclose relational ties via Facebook. *Computers in Human Behavior, 38*, 272-280. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.06.006

Vitak, J., & Ellison, N. B. (2013). “There’s a network out there you might as well tap”: Exploring the benefits of and barriers to exchanging informational and support-based resources on Facebook. *New Media & Society, 15*, 243-259. doi:10.1177/1461444812451566

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*, 3-43. doi:10.1177/009365096023001001

Walther, J. B., & Boyd, S. (2002). Attraction to computer-mediated social support. In C. A. Lin & D. J. Atkin (Eds.), *Communication technology and society: Audience adoption and uses* (pp. 153-188). Creskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Williams, S. L., & Mickelson, K. D. (2008). A paradox of support seeking and rejection among the stigmatized. *Personal Relationships, 15*, 493-509.

Wright, K. B. (2012). Emotional support and perceived stress among college students using Facebook.com: An exploration of the relationship between source perceptions and emotional support. *Communication Research Reports, 29*, 175-184. doi:10.1080/08824096.2012.695957

Xu, Y., & Burleson, B. R. (2001). Effects of sex, culture, and support type on perceptions of spousal social support: An assessment of the “support gap” hypothesis in early marriage. *Human Communication Research, 27*, 535-566.

Zhao, X., Lampe, C., & Ellison, N. B. (2016). The social media ecology: User perceptions, strategies and challenges. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems* (pp. 89-100). New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. doi:10.1145/2858036.2858333

**Author Biography**

Emily M. Buehler (MA, Wake Forest University) is a PhD Candidate in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa. Her research investigates supportive communication in online environments, with a specific interest in how communicators’ perceptions of the affordances of online communication channels shape messages exchanged in those channels.