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#Smiling, #Venting, or Both? Adolescents' Social Sharing of Emotions on Social Media

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Abstract

Although social media offer adolescents new possibilities for emotion regulation, little is known about how adolescents use different platforms to this end. This study adds to the emotion regulation literature and affordances-of-technologies perspective by describing whether and how adolescents use different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, 9Gag, and blogs) for emotion sharing and how technical, social, and contextual factors influence these practices. In-depth interviews with 22 adolescents aged 14 to 18 show that adolescents share emotions on multiple of these platforms. Although the different platforms have similar affordances, their social norms clearly differ and influence adolescents' online behavior. Facebook statuses, Instagram, and Snapchat are mostly used for sharing positive emotions, if emotions are shared at all. Twitter and Messenger, on the other hand, are also used for sharing negative emotions, albeit for different reasons.

Keywords: adolescents, social media, emotion regulation, social sharing of emotions, affordances, in-depth interviews

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1. Introduction

Social media have been defined as “the sites and services that emerged during the early 2000s, including social network sites, video sharing sites, blogging and microblogging platforms, and related tools that allow participants to create and share their own content” (boyd, 2014, p. 6). Social media are popular among teens: 89% use social media, and 71% even use multiple platforms (Lenhart et al., 2015). Although research suggests that adolescents have a waning enthusiasm for Facebook (Madden et al., 2013), Facebook still has the largest percentage of adolescent users. Other popular platforms include Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Google+, and Tumblr (Lenhart et al., 2015).

Social media can be used for many purposes, amongst others emotion regulation. Users can, for example, look for online content that will help them to change or enhance their current emotional state (Myrick, 2015; van Ingen, Utz, & Toepoel, 2015). Moreover—and this will be the main focus of this study—they can also try to regulate their emotions by posting and talking about them with others via these platforms (social sharing of emotions [SSE]¹; Bazarova, Choi, Schwanda Sosik, Cosley, & Whitlock, 2015; Rimé, 2009). Content and sentiment analyses show that social media are indeed rich in emotions (e.g., Kivran-Swaine & Naaman, 2011; Kramer, Guillory, & Hancock, 2014; Thelwall, Wilkinson, & Uppal, 2010).

Researchers have already studied emotion regulation on social media, but little is known about why adolescents use certain platforms for emotion regulation and other platforms perhaps not. Although different social media platforms have characteristics in common, such as profile pages and the possibility of communicating with others despite being physically separated, there are also differences, for example, regarding how public or

¹ SSE: Social sharing of emotions

private the communication is. In addition, studies have suggested that there are varying social content-sharing norms across platforms (Hayes, Carr, & Donghee, 2016; Uski & Lampinen, 2016).

Because the sharing of emotions is only adequate under certain circumstances (e.g., right audience, right timing, congruent with existing social norms, etc.; e.g., Bazarova, 2012; Choi & Toma, 2014), adolescents' actual (non-)use of certain platforms might help them (e.g., by receiving helpful feedback) or harm them (e.g., when being scrutinized for—ignorantly or willingly—violating certain social norms).

In this study, we used in-depth interviews to explore adolescents' (aged 14–18) SSE practices on different social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, and 9Gag), as well as the decision-making processes behind them. The elements that are taken into account in these processes are supposed to reflect adolescents' perceptions of the possible positive and negative outcomes of their actions, which might be acquired through an informal learning process (e.g., by watching others or learning from their own experience). The cross-platform comparison, as called for by Rains and Brunner (2015), does not only pay more attention to the complex reality adolescents have to deal with, but also enables comparing and weighing the perceived (dis)advantages of platforms against each other and thus explaining young people's (strategic) choices more in detail.

2. Emotion Regulation on Social Media

2.1 Social Media: New Platforms for Emotion Regulation

Adolescents must deal with physical, social, cognitive, and emotional changes. Their most important developmental task is establishing an independent identity (Wilson & Wilson, 2014) and hence spend more time with peers and less with family (Gilbert, 2012). Compared to children, adolescents experience more negative life events regarding family, friends, and

school (Larson & Ham, 1993, as cited in Goossens, 2006). Although not all adolescents find this period stressful, their average emotional state is overall less positive than children's (Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). It is important that adolescents (learn to) regulate their emotions successfully because adolescents who find this difficult are more vulnerable to internalizing and externalizing problems (Silk, Steinberg, & Morris, 2003).

Social media offer adolescents new opportunities for emotion regulation. One way is by turning to others for help (Zaki & Williams, 2013), such as by socially sharing their emotions with others by describing the emotional event and the emotions they experienced using a socially shared language (Rimé, 2009) or describing only the event or emotion (partial SSE; Rodríguez Hidalgo, Tan, & Verlegh, 2015). People share emotions to fulfill two needs when dealing with an emotion: the need for personal expression and the need to receive feedback (Choi & Toma, 2014).

Approximately nine out of ten positive and negative emotional experiences are shared with others (Rimé, 2009). Sharing often occurs multiple times and with multiple people; in the case of adolescents, it mostly occurs with their family (typically their parents) and friends (Rimé, 2009). When people share their emotions, they relive the positive or negative event that caused those emotions. While sharing can thus evoke both positive and negative feelings (Rimé, 2009), SSE can also help the sharer by allowing him or her to receive, for instance, attention, feedback, support, sympathy, or validation (Rimé, 2007). Whether the sharing is successful also depends on the feedback: Affective feedback is beneficial in the short run, but long-term emotional recovery requires cognitive feedback (Rimé, 2009). Interpersonally, SSE strengthens social bonding (Rimé, 2009).

No study that we know of has looked at the full process of adolescents' SSE on social media, but we do know that adolescents post emotions on blogs (e.g., Davis, 2010), instant messaging services (e.g., Dolev-Cohen & Barak, 2013), and social network sites (e.g.,

Jordán-Conde, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2014). Studies specifically about SSE on social media (although not explicitly about adolescents) have shown that people share their emotions on LiveJournal, Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and instant messaging services (e.g., Bazarova et al., 2015; Choi & Toma, 2014; Rodríguez Hidalgo et al., 2015). Results are inconsistent regarding the valence of the shared emotions. Choi and Toma (2014) and Bazarova, Choi, Schwanda Sosik, Cosley, and Whitlock (2015) found that positive emotions are dominant on social media—even more so when sharing publicly, such as through statuses (Bazarova et al., 2015). Emotions expressed publicly are also less intense than those shared privately (Bazarova et al., 2015). In contrast, Rodríguez Hidalgo, Tan, and Verlegh (2015) found that emotional posts on LiveJournal are more often negatively valenced (53.1%) than positively valenced (22.3%) or bivalent (24.6%). Overall, feedback is more often affective than cognitive. Thus, our first research question is:

RQ1: On which social media platforms do adolescents share their positive and/or negative emotions?

2.2 Taking a Closer Look at Social Media Platforms

Most of the time, however, a given study focuses on only one platform. Much remains unknown about why adolescents choose specific platforms. We already know that platform choices partially depend on the affordances of modes (such as Agosto, Abbas, & Naughton, 2012; Choi & Toma, 2014; Helles, 2013). “The affordances of a digital medium refer to the subjective perceptions of the digital object’s utility that arise out of its objective qualities” (Vanden Abeele, Schouten, & Antheunis, 2016, p. 2).

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| Social network sites | Facebook allows users to create personal profiles, pages, and groups. Users are expected to use their real names. Profiles can be public or private. Users can communicate by sending texts, photos, or videos. They can do this privately (e.g., via Messenger or private groups) or publicly (e.g., via status updates, wall posts, or posts on a page or in a public group). |
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| (Micro)blog sites | (Micro)blogs such as Twitter and Tumblr are typically more public than Facebook. People post messages and can follow and be followed by others. On Twitter, text-based messages, photos, and videos are limited to 140 characters. On Tumblr, people create messages using text, photos, videos, audio, and more. Both platforms also allow for private communication (messages). |
| Photo-sharing sites | Instagram, 9Gag, and Snapchat focus on sharing photos. 9Gag is a humorous site on which every registered user can upload pictures and send messages to strangers using 9chat. On Instagram, people can post photos, short videos, and text publicly (e.g., to all users or just to friends, depending on privacy settings) or privately to another user. Snapchat is more private than 9Gag or Instagram. Users send photos, videos, and text to specific friends or place it on their “My Story” feed for all their friends to see. Messages are deleted after 10 s, and My Story posts are deleted after 24 hr. Users can also send text messages to each other that can be saved and can engage in video chat. |
| Video-sharing sites | YouTube allows registered users to upload movies to be seen by the whole world or only by a selected audience. |

Table 1. *Short Overview of the Characteristics of Popular Social Media Platforms*

Note. The information in this table is based on the websites of these platforms (9Gag, 2015; Facebook, 2015; Instagram, 2015; Snapchat, 2015; Tumblr, 2015; Twitter, 2015; YouTube, 2015). We looked at the characteristics at the time of the interviews (from late 2014 through early 2015).

Looking at different social media platforms (Table 1), we see that some characteristics are equal for most platforms. They all allow users to communicate with others via the Internet when physically separated. Their content is also persistent, scalable, replicable, and searchable (boyd, 2011). Although these platforms have much in common, especially when compared to talking face-to-face or calling, there are also differences between platforms and between applications within one platform (such as messaging versus status posting on Facebook). The platforms vary with regard to content focus; “time and place controllability” (when and where they can be used; what users require to use them); “message controllability” (how [a]synchronous they are and how rich they are in audio, visual, and contextual cues); and “audience controllability” (what type of audience can be reached; how public or private messages are; Van Cleemput, 2012). All these characteristics

thus “enable (and also constrain) the engagement in some activity [in this case emotion sharing]; they shape the conditions of possibility associated with an action” (Hutchby, 2014, p. 87). Hence, our second research question is:

RQ2: How do technical characteristics influence if and in what ways adolescents share their emotions via a certain social media platform?

2.3 Social Norms and Emotion Regulation on Social Media

Although each platform has certain characteristics, this does not mean that all adolescents will use a given platform similarly for SSE. Individual differences (such as earlier experiences, intentions, and psychological predispositions) and social context factors influence how users perceive, value, and act upon these characteristics (boyd, 2014; Hutchby, 2001a, 2001b, 2014; Schrock, 2015; Treem et al., 2016; Van Cleemput, 2012; Vanden Abeele et al., 2016) and thus if, how, and which emotions adolescents share. Adolescents learn from peers which site is good for what practices and discover social norms by observing others' behavior (boyd, 2014). These norms dictate, for example, that it is not acceptable to share overly emotional statuses on Facebook (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) and that it is more appropriate to disclose intimate information in private messages than in statuses (Bazarova, 2012). In addition, emotional display rules may differ across various contexts (e.g., home, peer group, etc.; Wilson & Wilson, 2014) that often become mixed in social media, as in Facebook friendships with parents and peers (boyd, 2014).

Meeting these norms might be especially important for adolescents because most adolescents are very self-conscious. They often have the feeling that others are watching them and thinking about them negatively (Wilson & Wilson, 2014). Their self-concept is often still quite fragile; therefore, impression management is quite important. They might feel group pressure to meet these social norms and to express (or not express) certain emotions, independent of their true feelings (Wilson & Wilson, 2014).

Understanding social norms and their influence would teach us in which instances online SSE might be recommendable and when it might be harmful—when sharing might lead not to the validation, help, and/or support that the sharer desires (Rimé, 2007) but to negative social consequences. Our last research question is, therefore:

RQ3: How do social norms and contextual factors influence if and how adolescents share their emotions via a certain social media platform?

3. Method

We conducted in-depth interviews to answer these questions. The Ethics Committee at [university deleted] approved this study.

3.1 Sample and Procedures

We interviewed 22 [country deleted] adolescents aged 14–18 (40.9% boys). All of them were secondary school students (although one respondent did not attend classes), and they attended general (12), arts (4), technical (3), and vocational (3) education. We recruited them via flyers (at a university, schools, youth organizations, and a shopping street), through a Facebook notice, and through a web page about the study. We aimed for a diverse group with regard to sex, age, and type of education. The first author conducted the interviews (which lasted approximately 45–75 minutes each) at the university or in the respondents' homes or schools. We obtained informed consent from all respondents and from their parent(s). Each respondent received a €10 gift voucher.

3.2 Interview Protocol

The data are part of a larger study [reference deleted], in which we looked at SSE offline (face-to-face, calling, texting, etc.) and online (e-mail, social media, etc.). Whereas the first article [reference deleted] had a broader focus and looked at both offline and online sharing, this study took a more in-depth look and focused specifically on different social

media platforms.

We questioned our respondents in two ways about their SSE on social media, their thoughts about these platforms' affordances, and sharing norms. First, we talked about daily hassles/uplifts and positive/negative life events they experienced in the last several months; we asked them what happened, how they felt, if they shared it and with whom, and to explain which modes they used to share or talk about these events and how they did so. A visual aid with potential life domains in which the event could have taken place (interests & hobbies, school, friendship, family, love, looks [appearance], health, financial matters, and other; inspired by "the inventory of communication patterns of adolescents" by West & Altman, 1987) and lists of possible emotions, potential sharing partners, and sharing modes was created to help them reconstruct the events and sharing. Secondly, we asked if and how they used certain platforms for SSE, with whom they shared their emotions, and how they felt when using each platform. We wanted to focus on different types of platforms: social networking sites, photo-sharing sites, video-sharing sites, micro-blogging platforms, and so on. We looked at the platforms that were most popular among [country deleted] adolescents (Van Waeg, Van Hoecke, Demeulenaere, & D'hanens, 2014) at that point of time. To make sure our respondents talked about all the platforms important to them, we also included an additional category: "other." We therefore showed our respondents the icons of Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, 9Gag, blogs, and "other." If they used a certain mode, they had to complete the Self-Assessment Manikin—a visual scale for measuring pleasure, arousal, and dominance (Bradley & Lang, 1994)—to indicate how they felt while using this mode. We used this scale merely as a trigger; they had to think about each dimension and to justify each score. This taught us what they (dis)liked about each platform, what affordances they perceived and preferred (or did not) for SSE, and how they thought about online behavior and content. The latter, in combination with direct questions,

taught us what they thought was (or was not) appropriate to post on these platforms.

3.3 Analysis

All the interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed verbatim, using a transcription protocol to increase consistency (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). The data were analyzed with NVivo (QSR International, version 10.0) using qualitative thematic analysis. The first author created a hierarchically structured codebook consisting of both etic (based on the literature and interview topics) and emic (inductively coded from the first half of the interviews) codes (Mortelmans, 2007). The most important codes (and subcodes) for this article were:

- “Communication modes – general use”
 - Subcodes: e.g. “blog,” “photosharing” (which consisted of “Instagram,” “Snapchat,” and “9gag”), “microblogging (“Twitter,” “Tumblr”), “Facebook” (“private,” “public,” “group pages”), “video sharing,” and “other”
- “Communication modes – emotion sharing”
 - Subcodes: e.g. “blog,” “photosharing” (which consisted of “Instagram,” “Snapchat,” and “9gag”), “microblogging (“Twitter,” “Tumblr”), “Facebook” (“private,” “public,” “group pages”), “video sharing,” and “other”
- “Social norms”
 - Subcodes: e.g., “amount of sharing,” “negative emotions,” “positive emotions,” “relationships,” and “other.”
- “Communication technology – affordances”
 - Subcodes: e.g., “availability – communication mode not available,” “availability – communication mode available,” “stays online,” “costs money,” “costs no money,” “public – bigger public,” “private, select group,” “synchronicity – synchronous,” “synchronicity – asynchronous.”
- “Other motives”
 - Subcodes: e.g., “interpretation,” “not burdening others,” “venting emotions,” “FTF not possible,” “no one’s business,” “does not interest others,” “easier,” “more personal,” “privacy – dangerous,” “privacy – more privacy this way,” “too long to type,” “Twitter – losing followers.”
- “Result of sharing”
 - Subcodes: “positive reactions,” “negative reactions,” “feels better,” “feels the same or worse,” “mixed results.”

The first author then used this codebook to code all 22 interviews, with one or more codes per sentence or paragraph. When codes were missing, new emic codes were added. To

increase the coding consistency, the first author reread the codebook and a coded interview before coding a new interview if there was a time gap between coding.

The first author then analyzed the relevant codes in detail and looked for recurring patterns and differences within and between the codes. She made notes as to what was said more specifically about these topics. Coding matrices helped her in this process, but she also reread original transcripts for the wider context. The findings were illustrated with quotes to increase validity (Guest et al., 2012). The results were then presented to the other authors, who critically assessed them and asked for more information when needed. Because the interviews and analysis took place in [language deleted], the quotes in this article are English translations.

4. Results

4.1 Social Media Use

This study focuses on different platforms regularly used by our respondents: Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Snapchat, Instagram, 9Gag, blogs, and YouTube. Two respondents used only Facebook. According to them, Facebook incorporates all the functions of the other platforms, so they had no need to use the others. However, most respondents used three or more of the mentioned platforms. Facebook was the most popular; only one female respondent did not have a Facebook page (anymore). Aside from Facebook, 13 respondents used Snapchat, 12 Twitter, 11 Instagram, 6 Tumblr, and 6 9Gag. Almost all watched videos and/or listened to music on YouTube, but only a few respondents posted likes, comments, or videos, and none of them expressed emotions on YouTube. This was also the case for 9Gag, where the participants only scrolled through posts. None of the participants had a blog. Therefore, we will not discuss YouTube, 9Gag, and blogs any further.

4.2 Emotions and Social Media

4.2.1 Facebook

Almost all respondents (21) used Facebook, but most of them (14 out of the 18 respondents who used Facebook and at least one other platform) did not love that platform the most. Although using Facebook can be very practical (such as for schoolwork) and even joyful, five participants thought of Facebook as boring and/or felt obliged to share certain information or to like everything. For instance, R1 (female, 16) said: "There is just nothing to do on it. Almost nobody is still on Facebook. Everyone changed to um... Snapchat and Instagram and um... what is it all. Almost nobody is still on Facebook. So it is just boring and..." Similarly, R15 (female, 16) said, "I find Facebook sort of a social obligation. You have to like the good photos of your friends and you need to post a new profile picture now and then. I find it more an obligation than really pleasant."

Three respondents mentioned how friends' posts do not reflect reality well; one of them (R13, male, 15) even mentioned that this made him feel ill-humored:

Yes I do have social network sites, but... Yes, actually I just talked about it with a friend. Actually it just makes us depressed... Well, not depressed but it makes us rather ill-humored than happy I think.

Q: Why is that?

Sam: Why? Well, yes. That is like this perfect world and I think it bothers everyone. To be inclined to present their lives as perfect as possible.

This does not imply that Facebook only consists of positive content because our respondents also experienced negative emotions while using it, including sadness after reading a sad news story or a message from a friend who was not feeling well. Both the quantity and the content of posts (e.g., those that are weird and unnecessary, shameful, or too personal or emotional, such as very sad or depressive) also generated feelings of vicarious shame, frustration, irritation, and sometimes even anger.

There really are some people, of whom I think, that they post something every day, about that

they're sad. Then I think you know, if you're sad then you do something about it. Then you talk with someone. Either you do it to get attention, and that is a bit annoying that they post something every day. And that you see it every day. Then I think, then you know they do it for the attention you know. Then ask someone if they want to talk with you. (R5, female, 17)

Some (four) respondents also mentioned that fights do not belong on Facebook. Not only will they stay online forever, but fights should be kept private. Online, other people will interfere, resulting in more fights. R3 and R4 also mentioned "liking"² or commenting on a post about a lost loved one as being inappropriate:

My grandmother passed away three years ago, and um... my sister posted on Facebook "All the best to you, up there." And then people liked that. In real life you say "please accept my condolences" and on Facebook you're going to like it. First of all, you don't post something like that on Facebook, well, personally I don't understand that, I really don't understand it. (R3, female, 17)

One girl even stated that sharing emotions on Facebook is only for "old people."

Their and others' reactions to other peoples' posts teach users what (not) to post. Although Facebook is not emotion-free, our respondents are careful when posting emotional statuses. They are aware that their Facebook friends include not just real-life friends but also family members, acquaintances, and sometimes even people they do not actually know or like, and they see emotions as not being these people's business. A few (three) of the respondents also brought up that not everyone would be interested in their emotions.

So... I don't think that people that don't know me at all, that they should know about that [proud of a good school report]. (...) It is just ... They actually should not know about it. They also don't feel the need to know that, I think. (R10, female, 14)

Some respondents (eight) also mentioned that not everyone can be trusted, that posted information could be spread and/or used against them, or that they might receive negative

² At the time of the interviews, Facebook users could only "like" each other's comments and not use any of the other emoticons that are available today.

comments. R2 (male, 16), for example, also wanted to protect himself from rereading the posts at a later date:

[I] try to only post positive things on it. That I won't... That when I scroll through old statuses, I won't see anything negative and then think about it again. And that you think then: "That is not a good moment to be confronted with again."

Therefore, only six of our respondents posted emotional statuses, limiting them to certain cases such as obtaining a driver's license or doing a nice activity. They share these emotions because they are proud of themselves or to tell everyone about good news (because this is easier than sending lots of texts). However, not all the respondents made such posts; they noted that not everyone needs to know about a given event and/or that they are worried that these posts could also come across as bragging or attention-seeking. These impression-management concerns are also reflected in their nearly nonexistent sharing of negative emotions. Take, for example, this exchange with R3 (female, 17):

Q: So you won't post certain things, when talking about emotions? Won't place it, because, because of what others would think?

Sara: Yes, indeed, because you don't want to be known as an attention seeker or something.

The "feeling" function is not commonly used by our respondents. When they did share emotions, they mostly just stated what had happened (e.g., "I passed my driver's test"; R22, male, 18) or posted a photo, assuming that others would understand how they felt. One girl (R19, 17) said that she looks for pictures or quotes that represent how she feels and posts them online. By doing so, she still feels relieved but does not receive questions from others. She sometimes also posts her feelings in a vague way.

The respondents did not share emotions in a status very often, but most of them (19) did use Messenger for SSE to a certain extent. Although they mostly preferred sharing emotions face-to-face, this was not always possible. Messenger offers cheap, easily accessible, and private communication, like text messages. A user can also see if someone is

online and if a message has been read. Although Messenger is synchronous, it still gives users time to think about how to phrase what they will say: "That's why I love chatting more, because you can then calmly think" (R9, male, 16). Our respondents used Messenger to talk about both positive and negative emotions. Because it is private, they can also be more explicit. Although it seemed to be socially accepted to talk about different types of emotions via Messenger, they sometimes refrained from talking about "heavier" topics or (specific) negative emotions because in that medium, everything has to be typed, which is time-consuming; the lack of nonverbal cues, such as not being able to see or hear each other, also made communication more difficult. This could easily lead to miscommunication:

With chat, you cannot see each other and something can look completely different than you meant it. In real life, you can see each other's face and the way you say it. With chat, yeah, it can look completely different or people could understand it differently. (R14, female, 14)

This lack of visual cues could also be seen as an advantage; for example, a person might not want to be seen in a vulnerable state:

Sometimes I find it easy to share negative emotions face-to-face as well, but sometimes also via chat and the like. Mostly because I am crying and then they will not see that. I do not want, well ... because I do not want that they see ... that it would look vulnerable or anything. (R2, male, 16)

However, although Messenger is easy to use and can lead to emotional relief, it might be a lesser choice for emotional recovery:

Well, when I am sad, I want to tell it to my friends, so I can really realize it myself and when I type I usually do not do that. But... well... I sometimes want to tell the unpleasant things rather via social media or so, because that is sometimes also easier for telling. (R16, male, 14)

4.2.2 (Micro)blogging.

Our Twitter-using respondents (12) found Twitter much more pleasant than Facebook. Two respondents used Twitter only for staying up-to-date on celebrities, but for the majority

(ten), it was also a platform for sharing information—including emotions. Although two respondents felt that they needed to tweet (including about emotions) to keep their followers, two others—in contrast—refrained from sharing more personal emotions because they believed that doing so would not be interesting for others, as R11 (male, 17) noted;

When I say “I’m mad at my teacher because my test was bad,” everybody who isn’t at my school or hasn’t seen me learning has no identification with it. So I don’t think it would interest other people if I would tweet that.

Through Twitter, they could reach a big audience or could create a more anonymous account. They liked the brevity of tweets and reactions, and they felt rather free about what and how they posted. Our respondents shared both positive and negative emotions via Twitter. Although two respondents mentioned posting mostly about positive emotions, the eight others, such as R1 (female, 16), shared both or even tended toward more negative emotions:

Yes, when I’m angry, it happens sometimes. Yes, actually I do that quite a lot. Even more when I’m ... when I’m happy I will be less inclined to post something on Twitter than when I’m angry or sad or whatever, hurt or something. Most often I’ll, when I’m sad I most often tweet something about it.

The respondents shared emotions in multiple ways. They described both what happened and how they felt (mentioned four times; e.g., “And now to the Avant-premiere, super happy, super excited”; R5, female, 17); or only one or the other (mentioned five times; e.g., “Sleep well Trixiebel”; R1, female, 16, after her dog died). Posting something poetic, vague, or including just a photo or quote were also options (mentioned four times). Although two respondents said that being vague was annoying and a form of attention-seeking, two other respondents mentioned that it was the point of using Twitter. For example, R12 (male, 17) said:

With Twitter you get a vague look into something very deep, but it stays rather vague. It is fun

that they can guess or ask about it at school. Because that way you actually get the attention that you want/ask for.

For R3 (female, 17) and four others, Twitter was perfect to vent their feelings:

It is just so much fun. You can just tweet and tweet and tweet and nobody really cares about what you post. It is just really... you tweet and can post directly a hundred tweets, or you can just tweet once in five weeks and it does not interest anyone and nobody reacts to it, really. Just whine to yourself and still have the feeling of "I share it, I let it go."

Twitter can feel more anonymous, and two respondents even had an anonymous Twitter account. R15 (female, 16), who is very insecure and afraid of others judging her negatively, welcomed the feedback of strangers. The anonymity was important to her; it made her feel safe:

It is anonymous and you can say whatever you like. And there is always someone who wants to listen. (...) Yes, I do like it to sometimes talk with people you do not really know. Then you have no obligations toward them and you will never meet them in real life. I like that. (...) I will not share any... personal information because I would find it really sad if someone finds out it is me. But like arguments, or anger, or sadness or being mad, I can post all that. There is not something like "I would rather not share that."

In contrast, others (three) found feedback from friends to be important. By posting, they could not only vent but also get attention. If feedback would come too late, the act of sharing might even feel pointless.

Unlike Twitter, Tumblr (currently used by six of our respondents) brought emotions other than joy to the respondents. Two female respondents said that they had used Tumblr but stopped because there was so much negativity, which they felt had impacted them:

Tumblr in the past, but not anymore, it is not healthy, really not healthy. No, it is very gloomy and well, really depressing actually, just really depressing. (...) It was just a kind of indoctrination, like, you saw pictures and texts and um... you started seeing that in your daily life. (...) Everything became bad, black. It was black or white and not... there was no spectrum anymore, uhm, pro or against, everything was just bad. School: bad. Food: bad, uhm, collarbones: oh wow, look. (R3, female, 17)

Nonetheless, four of our respondents greatly enjoyed Tumblr and were happy when they saw something beautiful there. They only experienced negative emotions such as sadness after reading sad posts, such as a piece about a war. Tumblr also afforded them the chance to discuss this with strangers, which one girl especially liked. They did not post a lot of emotions to Tumblr themselves; one girl did that sporadically, and one girl occasionally reblogged other posts that impacted her emotionally.

4.2.3 Photo-sharing platforms.

Not all respondents used a photo-sharing platform, but the ones who did found them pleasurable. On Instagram (11 users), our respondents enjoyed looking at photos and contributing their own. They posted pictures of things they liked or activities they did with friends, and six respondents acknowledged that they might have communicated some form of emotion in doing so, although this was not always their goal of sharing. Only two respondents said that they also posted comments, such as “I am happy,” with or within their photos. Four respondents mentioned being quite selective in posting; they do not want to share too much, for example, because they found that to be annoying. For instance, R20 (female, 16) explained in this exchange:

Q: Do you know how often you post a photo?

R20: Once every other week or something. I'm careful with it. Some people post like 25 photos a day. But I don't do that kind of thing. That would be a bit too much for me.

Q: That is too often?

R20: I think that's a bit annoying. If they post like 25 photos a day... yeah, you also have a limit guys.

Five respondents only posted positive emotions. R6 (female, 16) found a way to share negative emotions without being afraid of negative feedback from her environment. She created one “normal” account and one “sensitive” account. Only a few people knew of her sensitive account, so apart from them, only strangers would look at it. She received helpful

feedback on this account; for example, people said that she had to see something in another light. Four other respondents also mentioned receiving positive feedback and could thus capitalize on their positive emotions. Sharing photos that depicted the respondent along with friends or family could also enrich these relationships because others would see who was important to the sharer: “[I share] to show the person in the picture: ‘Look, you are really important to me. I can tell you everything and do fun stuff with you’” (R17, male, 14).

Snapchat differs from Instagram in that it is often more private and ephemeral. Using Snapchat makes the Snapchat-using respondents (13) laugh and feel happy. Although Snapchat is more private (when a message is sent to only one person), and although these messages are (or at least should be) erased automatically, the respondents did not use Snapchat for sharing negative emotions; only five said they use it to share positive emotions. Our respondents use Snapchat for talking with others, but mostly for funny, weird actions or for sharing fun events. They accepted the use of words to describe feelings as long as they were not negative emotions. Ten respondents mentioned that Snapchat was not really suited for sharing negative emotions. R1 (female, 16) said, for example, that sharing negative emotions would take the fun out of Snapchat:

Gosh, because Snapchat is actually used with a lot... actually for laughing. And if you then send something negative, then it's like a bit... um... destroying the humoristic and fun part of Snapchat shall I say. But I have never had someone who... well never in the period that I have had Snapchat, have I received a negative snap and I think people also don't do that. Because it is just not right on Snapchat. That has to stay fun, so....

They were careful, as R1 (female, 16) noted: “Snapchat is not really safe. Because they apparently already have leaked something. (...) But okay, they have all those photos and they are saved in those... in those... computers. I'm careful with that....” Likewise, four users mentioned that they still have to be concerned about privacy because others can take screenshots and misuse them.

Um.. pff.. you can only type a limited text and that is holding me back a bit. Yes, that text. And yes, I do not know why you would do that via Snapchat. If you feel bad, they can always make a screenshot or something like that. (R20, female, 16)

In addition, text space is limited on Snapchat, and five respondents explained that they do not understand why one would send a sad picture of oneself or of something else that mirrored those feelings. R7 (female, 15) noted:

Q: Do you sometimes share emotions via Snapchat?

Lisa: No

Q: Why not?

Lisa: That's difficult (laughing). That's so ridiculous, well, I don't know, I'll post photos of myself crying or throwing a chair or something. No.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Adolescents, who are experiencing a relatively emotional period, are active on social media. By letting 22 adolescents (aged 14–18) explain their online SSE experiences and thoughts in their own words, this study contributes to the understanding of how and why SSE, an often-used emotion regulation strategy, is (or is not) used in these popular online environments.

5.1 Social Sharing of Emotions on Social Media

To date, only a few studies have focused on SSE in an online context (e.g., Bazarova et al., 2015; Choi & Toma, 2014; Rodríguez Hidalgo et al., 2015). None of these studies has focused specifically on adolescents. We found that although most adolescents prefer to engage in SSE face-to-face, they also share some emotions on social media. In accordance with Rodríguez Hidalgo et al.'s (2015) research about SSE use on LiveJournal, our respondents mostly talked about daily hassles and uplifts online; they discussed more important life events less often.

We also wanted to know how adolescents shared their emotions on social media.

These social media platforms' affordances are quite similar, but we noted that they are used differently for SSE. Placing the modes on a continuum from sharing no emotions (on the left) over positive emotions to sharing all emotions (on the right), we see that—for our respondents—Snapchat, followed by Facebook statuses and Instagram, can be placed toward the left-middle because our respondents use these platforms mostly for sharing positive emotions—if emotions are shared at all. Twitter and Messenger, on the other hand, can be placed more toward the right of the continuum because our respondents also share negative emotions on them. Although this article focused only on social media platforms, we must keep in mind that face-to-face communication would be placed even further to the right because this mode is often the preferred mode for SSE for our respondents.

Although some sharing practices fulfill the conditions of full SSE, on the more public platforms, our respondents often only stated what happened or only vented their feelings—not both. This does not correspond with the study of Rodríguez Hidalgo et al. (2015), who found that, on LiveJournal, most sharing takes the form of full SSE. This might be explained by the more anonymous character of LiveJournal because anonymous accounts seemed to help our respondents to share a whole story more explicitly, just as talking privately (such as on Messenger) might help.

Earlier research suggested that the imagined audience, those for whom the message was meant, is most important when posting because it defines the social context (boyd, 2014). We noted that our respondents had a good knowledge of who could see what content, as well as of the possible consequences for posting. Although impulsive sharing happens, most adolescents think before sharing. They often refrain from sharing in a public way and choose a more private mode. When they share publicly on social media, their messages are sometimes quite explicit, especially when sharing positive emotions. However, they also protect their privacy and reputation by using vague language, quotes, or pictures, a technique

that boyd (2014) labeled as social steganography or subtweeting; in this way, only those who are “in the know” understand the message. Some of our respondents also shared anonymously and sometimes even talked with strangers about their emotions.

5.2 Technical Characteristics and Social Norms

In line with earlier studies (e.g., Agosto et al., 2012), we found that technical characteristics influenced the choice of medium. First, as already explained above, sharing is influenced by how public or private the communication method is. Being able to share anonymously also makes sharing one's emotions easier. Second, text-based messages have a higher risk of misinterpretation and are often less favorable than talking face-to-face, but our respondents still preferred text messages to photos about (negative) emotions. Overall, although the participants greatly enjoyed using photo-sharing sites, they thought that these sites were not the best choice for SSE.

As expected, technical affordances alone cannot explain the diverse practices we observed on these platforms. This study adds to the literature on technological affordances by confirming that social norms influence users' choices and by specifying what these norms entail in the case of adolescent SSE. Messenger and Snapchat, for instance, both afford the user the chance to talk about emotions in private and to post both text and photos. Although Messenger is commonly used to share both positive and negative emotions, it seems not acceptable to share negative emotions on Snapchat (which confirms the findings of Bayer, Ellison, Schoenebeck, & Falk, 2015). Instagram, just like Snapchat, is predominantly used for sharing pictures, so it is also not a place to share negative emotions. However, the respondents did not say that doing so would take all the fun out of Instagram. These norms were less strict on Twitter, and thus, not following them seemed to have no major consequences. This might explain why our respondents liked Twitter for emotion-sharing. Lastly, even after looking at the affordances, there were still differences in sharing practices

that can only be explained by individual preferences.

5.3 Effects of Sharing

Although we did not explicitly focus on the effects of SSE on social media, our respondents seemed to enjoy receiving likes and positive comments on their positive emotions. This feedback helped them to capitalize on these emotions. Some also claimed that venting their negative emotions gave them a feeling of relief. Obtaining this feeling of relief can be an important motivation for SSE (Duprez, Christophe, Rimé, Congard, & Antoine, 2015). However, research has shown that the mere venting of emotions only brings temporary relief and that it cannot change emotional memory (Rimé, 2009). Our respondents sometimes also received feedback that fueled cognitive work and could thus lead to emotional recovery; however, affective feedback seemed more common.

Choi and Toma (2014) suggested that some modes might be better for the sharer's well-being than others. This study could not, however, focus on the long-term effects of social sharing on different types of media. Further research needs to be done to investigate these different effects, including feedback type and how feedback is perceived. Future studies might also explore how these platforms can facilitate cognitive work by, for example, guiding users who express severe negative emotions to a page that contains information about how to regulate their emotions and about where to look for professional help.

5.4 Strengths and Limitations

Our study's biggest strength is that it focused on multiple social media platforms. To date, most research on social network sites has consisted of single-platform studies—often (80%) focused on Facebook. This type of study creates potential problems with issues such as generalizability (Rains & Brunner, 2015). Comparing multiple platforms also mirrors the complexity of adolescents' daily lives because they have to decide which mode they will use, what they will use it for, and with whom they will use it. Next, by letting adolescents explain

in their own words how and why they use these media platforms, we obtained a better understanding of the subtleties that influence their emotion-regulation behavior. However, we used a small sample that contained a slight overrepresentation of adolescents with the highest level of education (and thus perhaps also of those with high socioeconomic status); this means that we must be careful with generalizing.

A limitation of this study is that we used recall methods. The rate of social sharing would probably not differ much if we had used other methods; Rimé (2009) showed that the rate of face-to-face sharing does not differ much based on the type of study (e.g., recall, follow-up, experimental, or diary). However, it is possible that the respondents forgot to mention certain platforms; for instance, they may have remembered sharing via Messenger with their friend but forgot that they also shared it with their mother via text.

We also need to keep in mind that adolescents are not always aware that they are sharing their emotions. They might think of certain practices as being free from emotions, but we could still label these practices as emotion sharing, even though they did not share those emotions intentionally. In this study, we focused on the practices they considered to be emotion sharing.

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