Teachers' Engagement with Emotional Support on a Social Networking Site

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Abstract: This study is part of a larger study investigating teachers' co-construction of social support on a social networking site. It reports the participants' views of the use of facebook postings to engage with emotional support. Four categories of viewsemerged from the analysis which are the 'Avid (+AV)', the 'Analytic (+AC)', the 'Anxious (+AS)' and the 'Agnostic(-AC)'. The teachers with positive views (+AV, +AC, +AS) emphasize the affordances of facebook in coping with emotional turbulence in their professional lives whilst the teachers with negative views mainly worry about the unintended consequences that might arise when teachers seek emotional support on the site. This study concludes that teachers' views of the use of timeline postings as a mechanism to seek emotional support are influenced by their level of their participation on facebook, such as whether they are active users, lurkers or non-users.

Key words: Emotional support, facebook timeline, Malaysia, english language teacher, social support

INTRODUCTION

Social Networking Sites (SNS) such as facebook and twitter have opened up new opportunities for all manner of people ncluding teachers to communicate with each other. Many teachers turn to SNS to obtain social support as they 'grapple with the immense emotional, intellectual and social demands' of the job (Day *et al.*, 2006). For instance, the presence of an online support communityon facebook enables teachers to share their teaching-related experiences and concerns with like-minded friends as they can choose who they want to connect with on the site through its privacy setting.

In the case of Malaysia, both school colleagues and administrators have been found to be unsupportive of teachers (Jais, 2010; Saufi *et al.*, 2013) which explains why the teachers use SNS to make up for this lack of support. To date, little is known about how teachers might seek and receive emotional support and in particular, how English language teachers might seek this in a Malaysian context. This research has thus been carried out in order to examine Malaysian English language teachers' engagement with emotional support on facebook timelines. I hope that the findings of this study will provide a better understanding of the nature of teacher SNS discourse and insights into why and how teachers seek emotional support using SNS technology.

Literature review: There are two dichotomies of support in the social support literature, structural versus functional support and emotional versus instrumental (tangible) support (Beehr and Glazer, 2001). Structural support is associated with the existence of supportive others whereas emotional and instrumental support are types of functional support, the functions that a supportive other can collaboratively construct with the person in need of support. This study limits its scope to emotional support as the discussions on structural and informational support are presented elsewhere.

Research on social support mainly focuses on two different dimensions: perceived social support (Zhu *et al.*, 2013; Oh *et al.*, 2014; Angeles and Vico, 2014; Indian and Grieve, 2014) and received social support (Ochsner *et al.*, 2014; Scholz *et al.*, 2013; Yang *et al.*, 2013). These two dimensions of social support are reviewed in section 2.1 below.

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Perceived versus received social support on social networking sites: Perceived and received social supports are two distinct concepts. Drawing on Cobb (1976)'s and Schulz and Schwarzer (2004)'s conceptualization of social support, Nurullah (2012) highlights the difference in defining perceived support as an individual's belief that they are cared for and loved, esteemed and valued and that they belong to a supportive community whereas received support is the experience of receiving supportive acts and behavior. Perceived support can be associated with Beehr and Glazer (2001)'s concept of structural support where individuals believe in the existence of 'supportive others' around them. Received support can be associated with Beehr and Glazer's concept of functional support when individuals experience both emotional and instrumental support.

Despite the difference in conceptualization, both perceived and received social support share common ground in that they are potentially beneficial to individuals facing stressful life events by providing positive experiences and buffering the effects of stress (Panayiotou and Karekla, 2013). Lakey and Cohen (2000) propose four ways social support can contribute to wellbeing: by promoting active coping and positive self-appraisal, elevating self-esteem and sustaining positive identity. Active coping refers to 'purposeful, constructive attempts to actively manage a stressor or circumstances surrounding a stressor' (Clarke, 2006) and can take two forms: problem-focused coping and emotion-focused coping (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). Problem-focused coping aims to solve the problem between the self and the environment, whereas emotion-focused coping aims to alleviate any negative emotions that arise as a result of stress. Appraisals can also be categorized into two forms: primary appraisal, where individuals judge whether a particular event is threatening; and secondary appraisal where individuals evaluate whether they have the personal or social resources to cope with an event (Lakey and Cohen, 2000). Self-esteem is elevated and positive identities sustained 'once a person develops stable beliefs about the supportiveness of others'.

Recent studies show that SNS can be useful platforms for individuals to obtain and benefit from social support. For instance, Oh *et al.* (2014) analyzed the diaries of 339 adult participants where they documented their feelings and behaviour as they participated on. Their ages ranged from 18-81 with a mean of 28 year old and they were recruited using a snowball sampling technique whereby undergraduate students at a Midwestern University were asked to recruit their friends and family members to take part in the study. Oh *et al.* (2014) concluded that the perceived social support of friends contributes to a high level of life satisfaction and sense of community amongst users.

In another study, Indian and Grieve (2014) explored the influence on well-being of perceived social support derived from . Indian and Grieve compared the responses of individuals with high (n = 105) and low (n = 194) social anxiety and concluded that the perceived social support available on significantly contributed to the life satisfaction of individuals with high social anxiety, mainly, they argued, because such individuals found it easier to interact with other individuals online than face-to-face.

The conclusions of the studies reviewed above suggest that teachers can benefit from their interactions on timelines as these provide opportunities to share their feelings and receive feedback from friends and so co-construct the social support necessary for promoting active coping, positive self-appraisal, raising their self-esteem and sustaining their positive identities. Studies on social support in teaching and teacher education are reviewed in the next section.

Social support in teaching and teacher education: Brannan and Bleistein (2012) point out that social support is not well-theorized in the teaching and teacher education domain. However, aspects of social support are reflected in the language of teachers' work and lives (Day and Kington, 2008; Day, 2014; Day and Gu, 2014), especially the survival of novice teachers (Pillen *et al.*, 2013; Staudt *et al.*, 2013) and teachers' emotions (Kinman *et al.*, 2011). To the best of my knowledge, there are only a handful of studies in the teaching and teacher education context focusing on the concept of social support; this sub-section reviews these studies: Brannan and Bleistein (2012), Bataineh (2009), Pomaki *et al.* (2010).

Brannan and Bleistein (2012) point out that 'no one has examined the impact of support providers for TESOL professionals and the impact these providers have on teaching efficacy', illustrating the immaturity of the social support concept in educational research in particular that involving english language teachers. To address this issue, Brannan and Bleistein employed a mixed-method approach to examine social support resources for novice English language teachers and the impact of perceived support on teacher efficacy. The participants were 47 recent graduates (within 3 years) from two MA TESOL programmes in a university in the United States who were employed as english language teachers. Brannan and

Bleistein revealed that co-workers and more experienced colleagues were perceived to be the main support providers followed by administrators, media sources (e.g., books and internet) and family members. The participants reported that co-workers provide social support in the pragmatic realm (e.g., by sharing ideas about teaching and classroom management) as well as in the affective realm (e.g., offering encouragement and friendship), whereas family members provided social support by listening which enabled them to experience positive emotions.

Interestingly, Brannan and Bleistein (2012) point out that even though co-workers and more experienced colleagues were the major support providers, 'it was perceived support from their family that was most likely to predict higher levels of perceived teaching efficacy'. In other words, the teachers who reported higher levels of social support from family members also reported higher levels of perceived teaching efficacy, as an instructional capability strategy. This was mainly because family members provided social support 'regardless of the circumstance or need', for example through means, such as 'purchasing supplies or organizing and stapling studys' or providing 'childcare'. They also reported that families 'listened to them' and 'affirmed their vocation'. This suggests that for them to cope with the challenges of the teaching profession, teachers require individuals who can collaboratively work with them to construct various social support resources including emotional support.

Brannan and Bleistein (2012)'s finding of the significance of social support from family members in teachers' lives concurs with that of Bataineh (2009), who had a similar finding. Bataineh distributed questionnaires on 'burnout' and sources of social support to 83 in service special education teachers in Jordan. Bataineh found there were 'significant positive correlations between family support and (teachers') personal accomplishments'.

In contrast to Brannan and Bleistein (2012) and Bataineh (2009) work on the impact of social support from family members in teachers' lives, Pomaki *et al.* (2010) draw attention to the importance of the social support provided by colleagues. Pomaki distributed questionnaires to 71 new teachers in Canada, the majority of whom were within the first three years of teaching. The aim was to investigate the direct, buffering and indirect effects of social support on 'turnover' intentions among teachers the intention to leave the profession. This study revealed three main findings. First, there is a 'direct negative relationship' between social support from colleagues and turnover intentions. This means that the more social support from colleagues, the lower teachers' turnover intention were. The second finding was that in the face of higher workloads, teachers with higher social support had lower turnover intentions than teachers with lower social support. This finding supports the buffer hypothesis that social support 'acts as a buffer in the relationship between workload and turnover intention'. Pomaki link the buffering effect with Tajfel (1978)'s social identity theory, inferring that stressors in the working environment activate group identities which unite teachers. They argue that unity in the workplace gives teachers higher job satisfaction which explains the third finding that 'social support acts indirectly, through job satisfaction in relation to turnover intention'.

Previous research into teacher social support shows that important support providers in teachers' professional lives are not limited to individuals in the workplace such as co-workers and administrators but include family members who support teachers unconditionally. My research expands the literature on teacher social support by providing insights into the impacts of social support from online friends in particular friends, who can be from diverse social groups.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Teachers' views of the social support on timelines were generated through the semi-structured interviews, involving 34 secondary school english language teachers of whom 20 were active users, nine who were lurkers and five non-users. The initial plan was to purposively sample the interviewees and only interview teachers who actively post teaching-related issues on timelines as I believed that this group of teachers would be able to give rich insights into the phenomenon being studied. However, after the first few interviews, some teachers' participation as lurkers emerged. Participating as a lurker means teachers only occasionally post on timelines or do not post at all but read friends' postings regularly. Therefore, to gain a comprehensive understanding of teachers' use of facebook, I extended the interview samples to include teachers who do not actively post teaching-related (or other) issues on timelines.

I could not anticipate in advance who the potential lurkers were therefore to recruit them I used a convenience sampling technique, whereby I approached any English language teachers and asked whether they were willing to be interviewed. The majority of these extended sample participants were teachers who taught in the same schools as the purposive sample participants

whom I had already identified. Recruiting the teachers using convenience sampling has not only brought me to teachers who take part in timeline conversations as a lurker but also to those who do not have an account with facebook. Interestingly, as will be discussed later in this study, these three groups of teachers (active users, lurkers and non-users) have distinctive views on the use of facebook in teachers' professional lives, thus contributing to the richness of my data. I stopped interviewing after the 34th participant that is when I reached a saturation point at which new data ceased to shed any further light on the issue under investigation. Ethical and methodological issues that arose in this study have been presented in an earlier study published by the Nottingham Jubilee Press.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Teachers' views of emotional support on facebook timelines: Teacher views of social support are reflected in their responses when they talk about their activities on timelines and the opportunities offered by facebook. Based on the thematic analysis, there appear to be two broad views, one positive and the other negative, held by the teachers about the use of timeline postings as a mechanism for co-constructing social support in their professional lives. Further analysis of these two opposing views lead to the emergence of four categories of views that I refer to as the '4As' which are the 'Avid (+A)', the 'Analytic (+AC)', the 'Anxious (+AS)' and the 'Agnostic' (-A). These four categoriesare summarized below, followed by some detailed illustrative examples and analyses.

The Avid (+A) category refers to the very positive perceptions held by teachers regarding the use of facebook to seek social support in their professional lives. The teachers are enthusiastic about, impressed by or interested in facebook and perceive it as useful. The avid view is mostly expressed by teachers who frequently post on timelines (active users).

The Analytic (+AC) category encompasses teachers who are enthusiastic but, at the same time, critical of the use of facebook to seek social support, feeling that it needs to be used in particular ways. The analytic view is also mostly expressed by teachers who frequently post on timelines (active users).

The Anxious (+AS) category comprises teachers who are enthusiastic about the use of facebook to seek social support but at the same time, they worry and fear there may be unintended consequences. The anxious view is mostly expressed by teachers who often read timeline postings but rarely post (the lurkers).

The Agnostic (-A) category refers to teachers with unfavorable or negative views of the use of facebook as a platform for seeking social support. This includes teachers who perceive facebook as detrimental and unhelpful. The agnostic view is mostly expressed by teachers who do not have facebook accounts (the non-users).

The analysis reveals that the younger teachers tend to be active facebook users have positive views of the emotional support they receive, whilst the older teachers who less frequently engage with facebook have the opposite views. Excerpt 1 is taken from the group interview involving Linda, Christine and Kaur, where they talk about using facebook to vent (line 3) their feelings. (Table 1).

As Excerpt 1 shows, there is some level of tension between the teachers discussing the use of facebook to vent their feelings. Whilst Christine and Linda have

Table 1: Talk about facebookwent their feeling

Variables	Explainantion
Researcher	Do you have particular expectations for joining facebook?
Christine	Facebooking is a way to express ourselves
	It is a public opportunity to vent out the frustration felt in our daily life as a teacher
	But if we share within our school compound is okay. Not with others as it will tarnish the school image
Kaur	It is not a good practice. Better talk about frustration in the meeting
	Should be like senior teachers who are more reserved
	If you see, SNS are used by younger teachers
Christine	It depends on how you look at it actually
	Some teachers share about good things such as students' achievement. It's a chance to express our pride
	When you put thoughts online, if you say out unprofessionally, you definitely get backlash cause you never know who read your posts
	So make it in professional manner and it will lead to further discussion, your friend can give constructive feedback
Kaur	Being on FB, you expose yourself to public. It is better to talk one to one
	As a professional we need to maintain our status
Linda	FB is one of a freeway. Everyone can express their feelings as long as we express it in a good way
	And it is a good thing. However, if we use it wrongly, it can create backlash against us and other teachers

Excerpt 1; Group interview 2; Linda (I15), Christine (I16), Kaur (I17)

positive views, Kaur has negative views and they all have their own rationales justifying their personal views.

Christine puts forward the 'Analytic' (+AC) view regarding the use of timelines as a platform to vent (line 3) feelings. She shows enthusiasm for using facebook for emotional expression when she says facebooking is a way to express ourselves (line 2). The use of the word opportunity (line 3) suggests that she views facebook as useful in teachers' professional lives in that teachers can vent their frustration on the site. She views this opportunity as a public opportunity which suggests that it is different from other kinds of opportunity available offline which might be limited in terms of their openness. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest that teachers value the public nature of facebook, perhaps because it enables them to get supportive responses from as many friends as possible. As revealed by Lin *et al.* (2014), facebook users with large networks tend to disclose their emotions as it is likely that they will get responses from friends.

The 'Analytic' (+AC) side of Christine is discernible when she refers to sharing within the school compound as okay, while sharing with outsiders could tarnish the school's image (line 4). In other words, she holds the view that venting frustration should be limited to friends teaching in the same school. To some extent, Christine has an 'Anxious' (+AS) view when she is worried about the school's image if teachers from other schools read their Status updates. By suggesting that the status updates relating to teachers' frustration should be viewed only by teachers from the same school, Christine shows that she has a good grasp of the privacy settings of timeline. This is because teachers can choose to set the privacy setting of the Status updates to be seen only by a particular group of friends.

Christine's 'Analytic' (+AC) and 'Anxious' (+AS) views of teachers' engagement in relational-oriented activities on timelines is challenged by Kaur who puts forward an 'Agnostic' (-A) view-point. Kaur shows no interest or enthusiasm for expressing her feelings or frustrations on a timeline as shown from her comment about it not being good practice and preferable to discuss frustration in meetings (line 5). She points out that younger teachers are more likely to use SNS (line 7) but that younger teachers should actually behave more like senior teachers and show more reserve (line 6), so it is reasonable to suggest that she views expressing feelings on timelines as immature and unprofessional. For her, teachers need to keep their personal feelings quiet and not express them in public spaces. The contrasting views of Kaur and Linda could be due to an age gap. Mahadi (2013) reported that there are 13.3 million facebook users in Malaysia, 45.5% of the total population. Users aged

between 18 and 24 make up the highest proportion (34.5%) followed by users aged 25-34 years (29.5%) and users aged 13-17 years (16.3%). There are no statistics for people aged 35 years and above (just under 20% is the remaining population from the statistics given) which suggests the percentage is low. Hence it is not surprising that Kaur, who is 48 years old, does not favour the use of facebook in teachers' professional lives as the general trend in Malaysia shows that older people do not use the site as part of their daily lives.

Christine's enthusiasm for venting feelings on facebook is also discernible when she expresses disagreement with Kaur's 'Agnostic' (-A) view. She begins her argument with it depends on how you look at it actually (line 8) which suggests that Kaur has negative views because she chooses to look from a negative angle. Christine further argues that teachers do not only express negative feelings on facebook but also talk about good things (line 9), such as students' achievement which they are proud of. Christine uses the word chance (line 10) to suggest the existence of facebook enables teachers to do something that they could not do if facebook did not exist. This reflects her very positive view regarding the use of facebook in teachers' professional lives.

The 'Analytic' (+AC) side of Christine is emphasized when she points out that teachers need to put thoughts online (line 11) in a professional manner so that friends can give constructive feedback (line 12). In other words, she stresses the need for the teachers to craft their Status updates carefully so that their professional identities can be maintained even when they are expressing negative feelings. On the other hand, Christine's 'Anxious' (+AS) view is discernible when she states that teachers will get a backlash if they do not post in a professional manner as they never know who might read their posts (line 11). Christine, despite being enthusiastic about using Facebook for expressing feelings is still worried about the unintended consequences that might result.

Interestingly, even after Christine has made her stance clear, that referring to work issues on facebook will only be useful if engaged in a professional manner, Kaur still refuses to envisage the positive sides of teachers expressing their feelings on facebook which reflects her strong 'Agnostic' (-A) view. She still believes that it is better to express feelings on a one-to-one basis offline (line 13) as she believes that teachers need to maintain their professional status (line 14). Kaur's view is that public exposure can be detrimental to teachers' professional identity (line 13), although she does not offer an explanation of how it can be harmful.

Linda who chooses to speak after a few exchanges between Christine and Kaur, puts forth the 'Analytic'

(+AC) and 'Anxious' (+AS) views, hence positioning herself in line with Christine, rather than Kaur. The 'Analytic' (+AC) view is visible when she argues that as long as everyone expresses their feelings appropriately there is no problem (line 15). While Christine uses the phrase in a professional manner, Linda uses the phrase in a good way to describe how teachers should express their feelings on timelines. Both seem to agree that teachers should not be reckless when expressing their feelings in a public space like facebook. On the other hand, the 'Anxious' (+AS) side of Linda is discernible when she repeats Christine's point that inappropriate ways of expressing feelings may create a backlash (line 16).

The 'Analytic' (+AC), the 'Anxious' (+AS) and the 'Agnostic' views put forth by the teachers contradict Moore and McElroy (2012) findings suggesting that adult users 'are unaware of how facebook may negatively affect their lives'. Fox and Moreland consulted focus groups of 44 students at a Midwestern University. The participants ranged in age from 19-52. One possible reason to explain why the participants in the study appeared unaware of the negative effects of facebook is because they were still students thus are not concerned with their professional image. As I have shown in Excerpt 1, Christine, Linda and Kaur not only discussed the act of expressing feelings on timelines as the main relational-oriented activity on facebook but also pointed out the pros and cons of this activity and how it should be engaged in to control for unintended consequences that might arise. Nonetheless, the teachers did not talk about why they chose to express their feelings on timelines. Consequently, I asked them directly their motives for expressing their feelings on timelines as shown in Excerpt 2.

Excerpt 2 shows that expressing feelings on timelines is an attempt to obtain emotional support. This finding resonates with Moore and McElroy (2012) who suggest that 'less emotionally stable individuals' tend to spend more time on facebook (Table 2).

Christine who has a positive view of obtaining emotional support on timelines, points out: everybody wants to be heard to get their views supported and to get feedback from others (line 2). This three-part requirement (Potter, 1996) clearly suggests that teachers express their feelings out of genuine need for emotional support. Christine adds this is made possible by facebook because it can connect like-minded people (line 3). This suggests that teachers might not be surrounded by like-minded people offline as they do not share a similar world view. This finding resonates with Palfreyman (2005) that english language teachers often have different views from other individuals in their professional lives and this explains why they choose to share their feelings on timelines.

Linda, who also holds a positive view of teachers' expressing their feelings on timelines, agrees with Christine that their frustration is eased when somebody else responded to it (line 4). Gaining emotional support as the main motivation for expressing feelings on timelines is made clear by Linda's statement that responses make teachers feel supported and not alone (lines 4-6). Linda also perceives likes as a form of support when she says even getting likes mean a lot as they agree with what we post (line 6). Note that Linda uses the 'footing' (Goffman, 1981), we indicating that she believes other teachers also perceive Likes as a supportive response. This suggests a pressing need for teachers to get any kind of response from their friends to feel supported. Given this need, it is not surprising when teachers report they will be more stressed if nobody responds.

On the other hand Kaur, who has a negative view of teachers expressing their feelings on timelines, questions the quality of advice received through facebook. She argues that the advice might be of low quality and does not provide new insights into teachers' problems as she believes that facebook only connects young teachers with people in the same age group (lines 7-8). This argument reflects her 'Agnostic' (-A) side that does not favour facebook use in teachers' professional lives, made even clearer when she reiterates her opinion that teachers need to seek face-to-face advice and approach older teachers to get better advice (line 10).

Table 2: Expressing feeling on timelines

Variables	Explaination
Researcher	Why do teachers choose to express their feelings on timelines?
Christine	Everybody wants to be heard, to get their views supported and to get feedback from others
	Facebook enables them to fulfill these basic needs by connecting them with like-minded people
Linda	Many teachers are frustrated…lonely…and sharing the frustrations ease their burden as somebody is there responding to their frustrations
	When somebody responds, we feel that they support us
	Even getting Likes means a lot as they agree with what we post
Kaur	Receiving support…advice…may sound good but you have to remember that on Faecbook you are connecting with young people
	How useful is their advice? You are likely to hear something you already know
	That is why I said that if teachers have problems, go and see older teachers
	You will get better advice

Excerpt 2; Group Interview 2; Linda (I15), Christine (I16), Kaur (I17)

CONCLUSION

Whilst the older teachers with low levels of participation on facebook do not favour the use of timeline postings as a mechanism for seeking social support, there is clear evidence in the views shared by the younger teachers that they perceive facebook as allowing them to connect with like-minded friends who are supportive. As evidenced in this study, perceiving facebook friends as supportive individuals because they share many similarities, hence are like-minded, emerges as the main factor encouraging teachers to turn to timelines when they are in need of social support. In other words, teachers perceive their friends as supportive because they feel that these friends share a common identity with them.Thus, it is recommended for future research to examine how the common identity is co-constructed by teachers and what are the unintended consequences that arise as they co-construct the common identity. Future research can also develop the four categories of views proposed in this study by examining the views of teachers from different cultural context and background.

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