Venting Negative Emotions on Twitter and The Number of Followers and Followees

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ABSTRACT

Do people who express negative feelings (loneliness, sadness) on Twitter gain or lose online contacts? To answer this question, the authors tracked the number of followers and followees of people who tweeted about loneliness or sadness twice; once when they expressed the negative feeling and a second time five months later. The authors compared the networks of those users with the networks of others who either simply retweeted tweets about loneliness/sadness or (re)tweeted about the corresponding positive feelings. People expressing loneliness in their tweets, as well as people expressing sadness in their tweets had smaller networks than people expressing feeling loved or happy. This effect held only for the original tweets, not retweets, and was – in case of sad/happy – stronger for the followees than the followers. Moreover, the authors found that people expressing loneliness also had smaller friends’ networks five months later than the people expressing feeling loved, and that the networks of the people expressing sadness became even smaller during the following five months.

KEYWORDS
Loneliness, Negative Emotions, Number of Followers and Friends, Retweeting, Sadness

INTRODUCTION

Social media help people to stay in touch with friends and acquaintances and to expand their networks. However, some scholars worry that online communication just gives people the illusion of being connected (Turkle, 2012) and that the positive content encountered on many social media makes people envious, sad and depressed (Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Anne Tolan, & Marrington, 2013; Kross et al., 2013). Despite the positivity norm for social media posts (Reinecke & Trepte, 2014; Utz, 2015b), there are also social media users who vent their negative emotions and feelings online (Bazarova & Choi, 2014). By doing so, they not only can relieve negative emotions, but also may gain social support from others. Nonetheless, there is a risk of losing more followers in the context of Twitter, in which the relationships between each user are relatively weak.

Al-Saggaf & Ceric (2016) compared tweets expressing boredom with tweets expressing excitement and explored their relationship with the number of followers and the number of followees. To determine if a relationship exists between the number of followers and the number of followees and these expressions in Twitter, i.e. boredom and excitement, they collected 13,008 tweets from English-speaking Twitter users using the phrase “I am bored” and its opposite feeling “I am excited”, in double quotation marks. The authors found that the bored English-speaking Twitter users have less followers and followees compared to the excited English-speaking Twitter users. One of the aims of
the current study is therefore to further explore whether expressing negative feelings is related to the number of followers and followees.

To answer this question, we examined the networks of people expressing loneliness and sadness on Twitter: once at the time of expressing the feeling and a second time five months later. We also contrasted them with the corresponding positive feelings (feeling loved, happy).

Moreover, whereas previous research often excluded retweets in the data cleaning procedure (see, for example, Kivran-Swaine, Ting, Brubaker, Teodoro and Naaman, 2014), we consider retweets as an adequate control condition. boyd, Golder & Lotan (2010) argued that retweeting is a core practice in Twitter and its conventions should be understood; not overlooked. boyd, Golder & Lotan (2010) study’s findings highlight several motivations for retweeting including (1) “To amplify or spread tweets to new audiences”; (2) “To make one’s presence as a listener visible “; (3) “To publicly agree with someone”; (4) “To validate others’ thoughts”; (5) “As an act of friendship, loyalty, or homage by drawing attention, sometimes via a retweet request”; (6) “To recognize or refer to less popular people or less visible content”; and (7) “For self-gain, either to gain followers or reciprocity from more visible participants.” Thus, by holding the content of the tweet constant, we can examine the role of tweeting an experienced feeling vs. just retweeting the feeling of someone else’s. Our central variable of interest is the network size, i.e. the number of followers and followees on Twitter.

We collected 11,880 tweets posted in English, including retweets, expressing loneliness, sadness, feeling loved and happy from an international sample of different Twitter users and examined the number of followers and friends of the respective Twitter users. We then performed several quantitative analyses to answer the following research questions:

- Do people who express loneliness and sadness on Twitter have less followers and followees than (a) people who express feeling loved/happy and (b) people who just retweet tweets expressing negative feelings?
- Do people who express loneliness and sadness on Twitter show less interaction with others in tweets?
- Are network differences between lonely/loved and sad/happy people stable over time?

**BACKGROUND**

**Tweets and Network Size**

Loneliness and sadness are both negative experiences that are related to depression (Joiner Jr, 1997; Krause, 1987). In the literature, different forms of loneliness are distinguished, ranging from rather mild impatient boredom over desperation to the more enduring and severe forms depression and self-depreciation (Rubinstein, Shaver, & Peplau, 1979). In offline contexts, lonely people report smaller networks (Stokes, 1985). Lonely people have also more difficulties in receiving social support which can decrease their well-being and eventually lead to depression (Golden et al., 2009; Joiner Jr, 1997). Lonely people also exhibit lower levels of offline self-disclosure (Chelune, Sultan, & Williams, 1980; Davis & Franzoi, 1986).

With regard to loneliness expressed on Twitter, Kivran-Swaine, Ting, Brubaker, Teodoro and Naaman (2014) did an in-depth study of tweets containing the phrase “I’m so lonely” and looked at the temporal aspect (temporary vs. enduring), context and explicit interactivity (addressing other person). Most tweets were ambiguous with regard to the temporal aspect, but from the remaining, more (22.5%) indicated transient loneliness than enduring loneliness (14.8%). However, this study did not include a control group of people not expressing loneliness and looked more at different forms
Colour as an Indicator of Vulnerability of Users Within Social Networks

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