

College Students' Perceptions of Social Media Utility to Discuss Divorce

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College students were asked about their perceptions concerning divorce on social media and the results were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. Findings revealed that participants perceived the utility of communicating about divorce on social media varies. Specific themes emerged from the qualitative descriptions regarding the helpfulness of communicating about divorce on social media.

College students have strong perceptions about using social media to communicate ideas about divorce.

Keywords: college students, communication, divorce, helpfulness, social media

Although divorce has grown more prevalent in American culture over the past decades, scholars have yet to fully investigate the perception of the utility of social media when a family, namely children, experiences a parental divorce. Media consumption habits often begin in childhood including, but not limited to social media use. Overall media consumption by children has increased so much that even the World Health Organization (2015) has called for research on Internet usage disorders, as media can impact children both physically and psychologically. This study focuses on the utility of mediated interpersonal media in the likelihood that individuals will turn to media habits already in use at times of emotional distress or information seeking.

Beginning in the 1980s, America witnessed a marriage movement aimed at strengthening marital relationships and creating a social awareness of the importance of a healthy marriage as well as the negative impact of divorce on children (Brotherson &

Duncan, 2004). Along the same timeline, media programming increased in the U.S., as did social media use. While individuals may turn to social media to help them process a divorce or in sense-making about the divorce, scholars have not yet studied perceptions about turning to social media during these processes. The purpose of this study, then, is to examine how young adult children perceive the use of social media in coping with parental divorce.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Divorce and Young Adult Children

Scholars have found that individuals often express more negative than positive emotions when reflecting on their parents' divorce, citing feelings such as anger, hostility, and bitterness (Metts et al., 2013). Aspects of the divorce such as parents' relational quality, conflict, and the degree to which the children were involved might affect how well children are able to process the divorce. Oftentimes, children of divorce report feeling they have to take on adult responsibilities, that family holidays and events are stressful, that they feel alone, and that they feel torn between parents (Marquardt, 2005). As divorce brings a host of family transitions, children may feel overwhelmed as they work through life in a divorced family.

Some stressors plague divorced families without ever coming to a resolution (McManus, & Nussbaum, 2011). Even when children have been members of a divorced family for some time, new events such as birthdays or weddings might shift the attention they pay to having divorced parents. Young adults in divorced families often worry about events (e.g., graduations) where both parents will be in attendance (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000). These individuals may turn to social media. Scholars have found that heavy users of social media report less emotional support, however, possibly those with lower perceived support tend to use social media more and partake in fewer in-person support activities (Shensa et al., 2016). Children of divorce could feel limited in their familial support options. Scholars have found that children from divorced families report decreased relational closeness with their parents as well as more feelings of being caught and of avoidance (Afifi & Schrodt, 2003). Additionally, this may lead some children to feel lonely or isolated. While Afifi and Schrodt (2003) claimed that children of divorce may utilize avoidance in removing themselves from hurtful interactions with parents, scholars need to

further examine where these children find an outlet for their emotional and communicative needs following their parents' divorce.

Social Media

Social media has become a prevalent means in Western society for connecting with others, voicing opinions, self-diagnosing, and gathering information from a wealth of sources. Motives such as socialization, conformity, and information/entertainment for using social networking sites are predicted by such factors as perceptions of social network sites being a medium for self-disclosure and social connection (Krishnan & Hunt, 2015). Thus, some individuals may engage with media to help them feel better or to mirror their own displeasure. This way of thinking might suggest that individuals can properly identify their emotional states but possibly social media could have adverse emotional effects if subscribers found themselves resorting to media to suppress their feelings or if they allow others' emotional purging online to fuel their own negative emotions. Individuals report using Facebook Groups to satisfy their social needs (e.g., talking with others, gaining a feeling of community, and getting support from peers), entertainment (e.g., amusement or leisure), and information gathering (Park et al., 2009). While Facebook is the most popular social media platform, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter are frequently ranked in the top five social apps for audience usage (Dunn, 2017).

In examining social media addiction, scholars have identified that when individuals who have few interpersonal connections do not get their support needs met in person, they turn to social media in order to fulfill their needs, leading to addiction (Bilgin & Tas, 2018). Researchers have noted that "most self-disclosure happens not in profiles but in everyday communication with others that allows people to develop relationships, provide social support, and build social capital" (Bazarova & Choi, 2014, p. 650). However, it is important to examine how individuals may seek out social support online to validate their own thoughts or emotions or to seek advice from others in similar situations. Individuals dealing with difficult family situations may turn to social media in order to connect with others and receive social support in a potentially less threatening, more face-saving environment. In college-age students, Facebook has been found to demonstrate bridging social capital, or social capital between social groups that transcend social groups such as race, religion, class, and has emotional benefits for those experiencing low life satisfaction

(Ellison et al., 2007). Being part of a divorced family may provide a motivation for connecting with others through social media, but scholars have yet to examine perceptions of how helpful or hurtful this is to the child's processing of divorce. In order to examine perceptions concerning social media and divorce, the following research question was posed:

RQ: For children experiencing parental divorce, what aspects of social media are perceived as helpful by college students?

METHODS

To gather college students' perceptions of divorce and social media, an online survey administered via Qualtrics asked students to answer questions on their perceptions about divorce and media. Participants took approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey.

Participants

Participants for this study were all undergraduate students enrolled in a communication studies course at a public American university located in the south. As part of an in-class exercise, descriptive statistics were not collected in order to safeguard the identity of participants. This course has a diverse population of student majors, because it fulfills the behavioral studies graduation requirement. Typically, in this class 60% of students are female, and the large majority are between the ages of 18 and 24, and roughly 90% are Caucasian. Students were requested to provide feedback about media, family, and divorce. This population was used because they are able to reflect back on their own experiences in childhood and adolescence and have the ability to assign value to these experiences. Additionally, this population would be familiar with the types of social media available and the potential uses of a platform. The purpose of the class exercise is to increase students' understanding about how media can influence our perceptions about relationships. An Institutional Review Board for Human Participants protocol was followed to protect the students' privacy and confidentiality. Students were not required to answer the questions if they did not feel comfortable. Students' names were not attached to their comments. The survey was an open-ended qualitative survey. Participants were asked a series of 6 unique questions with follow-up questions included (e.g. Why or why not?). The survey was distributed using Qualtrics and all answers were typed in the essay

text box format. This allowed students to write comfortably without running out of room for their response. Responses varied in length from sentence fragments to brief paragraphs. Students were advised to take their time with the survey.

For the purpose of this study, students' answers to the following question were analyzed: Do you think that social media can help children when their parents' divorce? Why or why not?

Data Analysis and Results

A grounded theory approach was used to uncover the emerging categories disclosed by participants (Glaser & Strauss, 1999). Using a deductive analysis approach (Gilgun, 2005), the researchers were able to find similarities and themes about divorce and social media. The researchers of this study coded and analyzed the data based on widely accepted qualitative data analysis approaches (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). First, each researcher analyzed the entire data set independently to let the themes naturally emerge from the data set. The responses were coded in their entirety. After the four researchers autonomously created themes deductively that were significant, then the researchers collectively compared the themes and merged similar themes and created new consensual labels for each them. The themes were also sorted into valenced categories. Researchers were provided with the list of agreed upon categories and brief definitions for each category as determined by the group of researchers. To ensure triangulation of each of the themes, an additional autonomous coding session occurred in which each researcher sorted responses into the consensual categories that were created by all researchers. When consensus was not reached for a response in this final sorting task, the response was discussed publicly and a decision was made on where to categorize the response.

RESULTS

Results are organized by themes generated by the data. Example statements for each theme are provided. All quotes are reported as written by the participants. Three valenced themes emerged in response to the question "Do you think that social media can help children when their parents' divorce?" The valenced themes are *not helpful*, *helpful*, and *depends*. Each theme also is supported by subcategories that were sorted into the valenced themes.

Theme 1: Not helpful

College students explained that social media is not helpful to processing divorce because it can cause negative feelings (child getting hurt), escape from coping, violates a rule (of privacy or a personal rule), or is not safe.

Negative Feelings. Some college students expressed concern that social media may lead to negative feelings or hurt feelings for children after their parents' divorce. One reason given was that social media may highlight what the child is now missing in their life. One student provided the following reasoning:

I do not think that social media can help kids with divorce. I think social media would only leave children feeling resentful or nostalgic seeing normal families on trips or nights out together. For instance, for me Christmas is a very hard holiday because it always feels off because I spend half of Christmas at each house and seeing normal families on social media spending a day together just leaves me feeling resentful and nostalgic.

Another student expressed the negative feelings that may stem from social media offering the opportunity for children to compare themselves to others:

I think social media can bring about negative feelings for a child. The ability to go online and see friends with their 'more complete' family can be depressing and can bring about a sense of 'my family is splitting up'. A lot of people on social media often post pictures of themselves with loved one and when you are going through two parents getting divorce that can be difficult to see.

Some expressed concern that others on social media would be mean to the children in response to the children's posts, questions, or comments. For example, one student stated:

No, I use Twitter a lot and people on there are pretty ruthless about things and just trying to get a laugh out of people. People on twitter try to be savages on there just to get popular and they will do whatever they can to get some retweets and favorites. I think it would damage children more than help them.

Escape from coping. Although not necessarily viewing social media as helpful, some expressed that it may serve as a way to cope with parental divorce. One student illustrated escape from coping, thus:

I do not necessarily think media can help children but provide them an escape to coping. Media gives the illusion of life and families in general

that do not usually agree with the real world. If children depend on the media to help with divorce they will have a misconception of how to problem [sic]. Helping in the form of providing emotional support yes, but not helping in solidifying mental stability for the future.

Rule Violation. Multiple participants invoked thinking about their own personal rules about divorce and or social media to explain how social media is not helpful. One of the rules potentially violated by using social media after divorce is related to the personal nature of divorce, which for some means it should not be shared publicly.

I don't think social media can help children with their parents' divorce. I think the best way to cope with divorce is through interpersonal communication, either with your parents, with a friend whose parents divorced, or even with other people who can support the child during the divorce. Divorce is a heavy and personal subject, so I think posting it on social media wouldn't be appropriate. I don't think the child would get the support they needed through a computer or phone screen; and I think a lot of people who would see the posts about divorce would make them uncomfortable and they wouldn't know how to help. Divorce is also a family issue, not just an issue affecting the child, so if the child posts about it on social media, the world can see the issue that also affects the parents that are getting divorced, and other family members and friends who may be a support system for the family during this time. I personally don't think it's appropriate to post about family issues on the internet; the issue doesn't only pertain to you. Divorce is a private issue, and social media isn't private at all. The less people who get involved with the divorce, the better. It's already hard enough between two people without everyone else sticking their noses into the couple's business and commenting on what's going on.

Others see the use of social media as a rule violation because it does not protect children from the comments and ideas of others.

I do not have any social media but the little that I do know about social media is that it is not a place to deal with personal matters. That being said I do not think that social media is a good place to help children when there parents are going through a divorce. On social media people tend to feel that they can say anything about anyone regardless how what they say can effect others. Things are not sugarcoated on social media so if you are really in need of sharing information on social media be prepared for the good and the bad responses that may follow. Although not everyone on social media are so harsh, there are some people who are capable to help and willing to help. At the end of the day, just be prepared for any outcome when looking and sharing personal information on social media.

Not Safe. Some students expressed concern for children's safety in terms of potential predators and also in terms of the children's own well-being and coping with divorce. One participant stated that social media is not helpful to processing divorce due to safety concerns. The participant stated,

No. At first, I was going to answer somewhere in between, but I don't believe that to be the case anymore after attempting to explain myself. The entire point of social media is to connect with other people. and display one's life. This is almost always dangerous when it comes to children expressing dismay about their parents or personal lives. It quickly becomes angry, and sometimes even dangerously secretive. I remember some of the people I was talking to when my mother divorced the second time (internet wasn't really too much of a thing the first time), and it was far less healthy coping, and more escapism.

Another student expressed concern this way:

I would argue that social media would pose more danger than benefit for the child, especially in the context of their parents getting a divorce. The reason for this is that children when upset don't think through their actions so having access to a public outlet to vent frustration towards the situation, this could result in not only the possibility of personal information being released, but more dangerously predators being aware of an emotionally vulnerable child. The danger of social media is that the masses have access to it which will always pose a risk, but the emotional destabilization brought on by parental divorce will magnify the danger.

Another student discussed safety and offered thoughts on a better outlet than social media:

No because it does not give an outlet for your children to express their emotions in a safe place. Social media exists to express your current life, but not your past and intimate life details. If anything it would alienate others and make them feel awkward about your life. I think the only good outlet to talk about your parents divorce is with friends and family.

Theme 2: Helpful

Reasons provided to support social media being helpful to process divorce to children who experience divorce included serving as an outlet for venting, connecting with others (e.g., receiving support), and as a distraction.

Outlet for venting. Some believe social media serves as a positive outlet for children to use to vent their frustration or concerns about their parents' divorce. One student stated,

I think it gives children an outlet to talk to others who are dealing with the same predicament that can ultimately help them and their understanding about the situation. A community type feel and feeling that they are "not alone" really aids in their coping, etc." Another also expressed the potential to vent and potentially receive helpful feedback. The student stated "I think it could because it gives the kid an opportunity to vent all of the frustrations that he or she may be feeling towards it all. If the child doesn't understand why it happened or what caused it, he or she can take to social media and maybe ask another child how they would deal with it or how they have dealt with it if they had been in the situation before.

Connection/Support. The opportunity to connect with others experiencing divorce and to receive support from others was another reason some believe social media is a helpful outlet for children. Multiple students expressed ideas similar to this quote:

I think the one aspect social media can help children with when their parents divorce is simply receiving support from others. I'm not saying kids lose their parents support when they get a divorce, but some kids feel responsible for their parents divorce and feel like their parents do not love them. So receiving support from friends and family members can reassure kids that they are loved and are not going through this alone. Also kids can be supported by people who have gone through the same thing they have through social media. Talking about their parents' divorce with someone who can empathize with them and provide them with answers and advice about how to deal with a divorce could be a huge help for children when their parents divorce.

Another respondent stated:

Yes I do believe that social media can help because it can connect kids who are going through similar situations at home and they can help each other get through it with advice and support. For example, a Facebook group that is about children of divorced parents can act as a support group that can draw on each others experiences to help out those in need.

Similarly, one student focused on inclusion,

Yes, because social media is a way to feel included. I'm sure that there are other people on social media who have divorce parents and they can reach out to them to help them better cope with the divorce and allow for them to feel that they are not alone.

Theme 3: Depends

The third theme was the sense that the helpfulness of social media depends, mostly on the characteristics of the child (e.g., age, level of understanding) or how and with whom social media is used.

Depends on the person. For some college students, they defer to particular aspects of the child when deciding on the helpfulness of social media. For example one wrote “Yes and no, depends primarily on the person who is using the social media. Some console in others for them to feel better while others console in themselves to feel better” and “Maybe, it depends on the kid because all children are different and react differently to divorce.”

Students also mention that helpfulness depends on who those children are in touch with on social media. For example, one student wrote:

It depends entirely on what kind of social media and who they speak to. The internet has a lot of cruelty and if they go to the wrong places they could even face abuse. However, if they use social media to go to support sites and to talk to other people who are, or have been in, similar situations before. This could provide therapeutic interaction and help them work through it in their own way with support from others, and they may even make new friends during the process.

Both positive and negative. Some participants were focused more on both the positive and negatives that may result from children’s use of social media during a divorce. One student wrote, “It could help or hurt, I believe media isn't bad but it has bad things on it and its all on what you use it for and how you see it. Both positive and negative influences could be presented.” Another student stated,

I think that it could be positive and also negative at the same time. I think that having social media can allow children to still feel connected to their parents even though they are not physically there all the time. Yet social media could also be damaging to children such as if one of their parents create a new relationship with someone else, it might make the child feel uncomfortable.

DISCUSSION

The goal of the current study was to examine college students’ perceptions of how helpful in processing parental divorce social media may be for children of divorce.

Participant answers reflected their personal experiences and knowledge of divorce from family, friends, and others. Participants felt that social media was helpful in processing

for some children and not helpful to processing parental divorce for others, while some claimed that the helpfulness of social media was dependent on a variety of factors.

This research took a grounded theory approach to understanding the emerging themes regarding the utility of social media for children experiencing divorce because this study was exploratory in nature and the researchers were interested in letting themes naturally present. After analysis, it was noted that a few of the themes to emerge did map onto Uses and Gratifications Theory, a theory of understanding the individual motivations for media use and the subsequent emotional response of said media use (Katz et al., 1974). Media gratifications can be sorted into three main motivations: content, process, or social gratifications. Individuals are motivated to select a medium based on either the content of the media, the act of consuming the media, or the social connection media can provide (Stafford et al., 2004). Specifically, the subcategories found under the Helpful theme appear to correspond to the established needs of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The Affective Need could encompass the outlet and connection/support subtheme the researchers found in this study and the Tension Release Need could include the distraction subtheme. While the researchers asked college students to speculate on the usefulness of social media, many noted computer-mediated communication can be both freeing in this regard, but can be a cause of concern when children and adolescents embark on information seeking. In the process of seeking support or information, children can encounter explicit content related to sex, alcohol and drugs, or even hate speech (Lindlof & Schatzer, 1998). Subsequent and more guided research could utilize established Uses and Gratifications measures to better understand the motivations and sought interactions for social media use during parental divorce.

While this research contributes to the body of scholarship on social media usage, there are a few limitations to consider. The study was exploratory in nature and future research would benefit from in-depth interviews as well as quantitative insight. In addition, we did not collect any demographic data about our participants as we focused solely on an initial understanding of the research question at hand. The current research did not ask participants to designate or qualify their answers based on a particular social media platform. Future research should analyze the conglomerate of various social media platforms and compare usage for coping with divorced families. As suggested by Sundar

and Limperos (2013), there are differences in the ways that people communicate via different social media outlets (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.). Hence, divorce may be communicated about differently on the various social media sites.

All in all, this study provides a deeper understanding of what young people perceive regarding the helpfulness of children using social media to cope with divorce. Further, findings from this study provide a unique perspective of the benefits and costs college students attribute to children's use of social media when coping with divorce.

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