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Social Media Responses To Self-Concept Threats

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Several studies demonstrate that individuals carry out observable behaviors in order to achieve positive self-concepts. These behaviors can be related to engagements with social media. Thus, two studies tested whether the sharing of self-relevant symbols on user-heavy social media platforms is an engagement used to achieve positive self-concepts. In these studies, participants viewed resumes (Study 1) or Linkedin profiles (Study 2) intended to threaten their self-definition and then considered their own accomplishments in comparison. They were then asked to rate and choose one article, either relevant or irrelevant to their self-definition, to hypothetically share on their own social media page based on attractiveness. In Study 1, a high threat to participants' self-definition led them to report goal-irrelevant articles as less attractive to share on social media. In Study 2, the data displayed varied results for relevant and irrelevant social media sharing, depending on the stimulus type. Participants' self-definition goals moderated the effect in Study 2. Discrepancies in study findings are discussed in the context of the self-evaluation maintenance and symbolic self-completion theory.

Keywords: Social media, self, self-regulation, social comparison, self-esteem

More than two billion people use some form of social media worldwide and more than 75% of people in the United States have a social networking profile (eMarketer, n.d.). As social media usage becomes more prevalent, it changes the way we interact with the world and each other. Instagram "memories" replace scrap books, Facebook "wall posts" replace birthday cards, and instant messages replace phone calls. Less of life is taking place face-to-face and more of it is taking place online (Twenge, 2017). Just as social media is reshaping the way we interact, it may also be altering the techniques we use to construct and manage our identities and sense of self. As society becomes increasingly reliant on it for communication, it is important to understand the ways in which social media alters our perceptions of others, as well as how we begin to use social media to create perceptions of ourselves.

The increased use of social media and universality of social media presences has altered the expectations of self-presentation. Users are encouraged to take advantage of social media platforms by creating and communicating an identity on their profiles (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The ability for users to control and produce their own press to an audience of family and friends, makes it easy to mold public personas; and, use such personas to influence the impressions and perceptions others make and create about them. The material users choose to share can often reflect their self-concepts: ideas and beliefs they have about themselves.

This study aims to explore how, and under what conditions, individuals use their social media

profiles to communicate and affirm their self-concept while managing self-esteem. Previous research mainly identifies behaviors through face-to-face interactions, however, the present study tests whether self-definitional needs influence behavior on current social media platforms. The present study narrows in on social media engagement in order to understand these behaviors as it relates to the current rise in social media usage . More specifically, we aim to examine a phenomenon known as symbolic self-completion, within the context of social media activities. We hypothesize that when individuals experience status insecurity (i.e., a feeling of incompleteness or lacking in self-definition) as a result of encountering self-definitional threat, they will respond by displaying self-relevant symbols on their social media profile.

The Self and Social Media
Self-concept, or an individual's understanding and beliefs of their own attributes, including who and what they are, is a central idea in past research on the self (Baumeister, 1999). The self-concept is an important factor in a person's social identity —one derived from their knowledge of membership in a particular social group, as well as the value and emotional significance they assign to that membership (Tajfel et al., 1979). The self-concept is social in nature. It is also both a reflection and internationalization of others' reactions to the self that an individual presents in social settings, otherwise known as the public self (Turner & Onorato, 1999). Moreover, individuals strive to establish positive social identities in order to achieve positive self-concepts (Tajfel et al., 1979; Tesser & Campbell 1982; Wood 1989). Thus, individuals usually engage in self-enhancement during social interactions and source their self-esteem from successfully obtaining a positive self-image.

Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, increase hyper-connectivity, which provide opportunities for increased self-esteem. Online profiles give users an audience to whom they can strategically display aspects of

the self. These profiles also allow for reactions to those aspects, which can clarify or challenge a user's understanding of who they are and how they are perceived by others. In other words, individuals can assess others' reactions to their social media posts and activities to gauge public evaluations of the self, which informs self-concept.

The notion that social media sites are stages for the self connects well with social comparison theory. According to social comparison theory, people compare their own abilities to those of others in order to form judgments about their own abilities; this generates a self-concept (Festinger, 1954). In the context of social media, comments and likes can serve as indicators of performance and feedback, and other profiles are databases of others' abilities. These other profiles can serve as a medium for comparison. That is, when objective, physical bases for evaluations do not exist or are not available, such as judging how well-matched an individual is to their self-concept, an individual's assessment of their abilities depends on subjective judgements that rely on comparisons with other people (Festinger 1954).

Comparing oneself to someone who is relatively superior (i.e an upward comparison) may threaten the self-concept when the discrepancy is large or if the area of comparison is of personal importance (Festinger, 1954). Importance moderates this self-definitional threat in such a way, that the more important the ability is to a person, the more likely it is that that person "will recognize and acknowledge that someone else is clearly superior to them" (Festinger, 1954, p. 131). Past research (Haferkamp & Kramer, 2011; Vogel, Rose, Roberts, & Eckles, 2014) has shown that users capitalize on the features provided by social media in order to engage in these kinds of comparisons.

The Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model (Tesser & Campbell, 1982) examines

comparison processes. The SEM also suggests that individuals choose comparison targets in an effort to manage self-esteem. The SEM predicts that when two individuals are close, one individual's superior performance will lead to a greater threat than if they were distant; and, when performance is highly self-relevant, such that it is a "self-defining" area, that individual will be motivated to compare themselves in a way that evokes threat to their self-definition (Tesser & Campbell, 1982). To maintain a positive self-evaluation, individuals can either reduce closeness (distance themselves from the other), reduce relevance (distance themselves from the goal), or reduce the performance differential (improve their own performance or do something to impair the other's performance).

Symbolic Self-Completion Through Social Media
Other work highlights that individuals achieve self-definition or positive self-concepts by using indicators of attainment, which could be any behavior or representation that conveys information about an individual's identity (e.g., an academic degree or professional title). Indicators of attainments can be used to influence others' opinions by providing self-descriptions of an individual's performances or interests to ensure that others will be exposed to those descriptions (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1981). Arthur (1997) also highlights the importance of this visual element in self-symbolizing—or rather, the need for others to observe and acknowledge the physical symbols that an individual displays. For instance, if an individual held the belief that they were intelligent but could not acquire the usual symbols that characterize this self-definition (e.g., advanced degrees), then they would seek alternative symbols to appear intelligent, such as buying/displaying books or demonstrating a large vocabulary (Schiffmann & Nelkenbrecher, 1994). Once others react to those descriptions as if the individual embodies that self-definition, then the individual will feel complete and validated (Arthur, 1997; Gollwitzer, Wicklund, & Hilton, 1982).

Harmon-Jones and colleagues (2008) extended their research on symbolic self-completion by studying self-symbolizing behaviors found in Internet communication. In their study, they examined email signatures and the relative status of university professors. Consistent with motives for symbolic self-completion, they found that those with fewer indicators of success (i.e., less senior in their career) were more likely to use their email signatures to communicate their success to others (i.e., had more elaborate email signatures). Beyond email, other forms of Internet communication, such as social networking sites, provide promising areas of study for symbolic self-completion because they include both the visual and auditory exchanges that are seen in face-to-face interactions. This can be applied to Facebook, for example. Facebook gives users powerful mechanisms to steer and produce public profiles which can be used as expressions of the self. These profiles can then be used to communicate information about one's self-definition and can serve as a platform to symbolize. That is, as platforms have updated their functionality, users have come to understand these online spaces as tools for self-promotion: interface technologies (e.g., "liking", "following", "friending") emote, connect, and allow for the accumulation of social capital from a curated audience (van Dijk, 2013).

The present study focuses primarily on social media profiles as sites for identity clarification, which Bazarova and Choi (2014) found to be a motivating factor for disclosing public updates via Facebook. Social media platforms allow individuals to communicate and develop their idealized selves to their curated audience, whether that be public followers or friends and family. In research on teen social media usage, boyd (2010) found that social media is used in a way that, for many, feels seamless with their everyday lives; it does not constitute an alternative or "virtual" world. Public networks also provide opportunities for "always on" access to peers, which makes creating public

identities on an individual's social network easy and accessible (boyd, 2010). This raises questions as to whether symbolic self-completion behaviors persist on social media platforms.

We hypothesize that when individuals are exposed to stimuli that threaten their self-definition, they will be more inclined to engage in symbolic behaviors—behaviors that affirm their self-concept —on social media platforms, compared to those whose self-esteem has not been threatened when exposed to stimuli.

Study 1

The goal of Study 1 was to test whether inducing feelings of high threat to an individual's self-definition would lead to higher ratings of attractiveness for self-relevant stimuli; and, if it would increase the individual's likelihood of selecting self-relevant stimuli to share on a hypothetical social media page. Self-definitional threat was manipulated by having participants compare themselves to a highly impressive or unimpressive resume from a supposed student at their academic institution. In line with symbolic self-completion theory, we anticipated that those experiencing a high threat would compensate by expressing a stronger interest in sharing self-goal relevant social media content.

Method
Participants
A sample of 109 undergraduates, primarily freshmen, at a small liberal arts college outside Philadelphia participated in this study. Participants were recruited from an introductory psychology class in exchange for partial fulfillment of their course requirement. The mean age of the participants was was approximately 19 (59 female, 50 male; $\mu_{age} = 19.13$, $\sigma = 0.94$). Participants were also informed that they were participating in a study that "measures of cognitive performance" in order to avoid biases or discrepancies in participant choices. Approval for this study was granted by Swarthmore College's Internal Review Board.

Procedure and materials

Part 1

First, participants indicated the level of importance (1 = *Not at all*, 7 = *Very much*) that having a reputation as an "intelligent person" was to their self-definition via three items (e.g., "How important is it to your self-concept that you are regarded as an "intelligent person" by others?, $\alpha = .92$).Then, they were randomly assigned to review an impressive (high threat) or neutral (low threat) resume of an alleged freshman student and were asked to consider their own accomplishments after. This was then followed by a response to three items that measured their perceived closeness to their own goal of achieving a strong resume that communicates their level intelligence (e.g., "How close are you to having a strong resume that you believe would communicate your intelligence?, $\alpha = .86$). These items were all rated on a 1 to 7 scale (1 = Not at all, 7 = Very much).

Part 2

Directly after considering their own resumes, participants viewed 12 article headlines, in a random order, that appeared as links on Facebook. Participants rated how attractive each would be to share on their own social media profile using a 1 (Not at all attractive) to 7 (Very attractive) response scale. Six articles were related to intelligence (e.g. "50 Books to Read Before You Die") and six were unrelated to intelligence (e.g. "50 of our Best-Ever Dinner Recipes). We averaged intelligence-related and intelligence-unrelated article headline ratings to form separate sharing attractiveness indices. After, participants were asked to select one article, from the list of 12, that they would most like to share on their own social media profile. We dichotomized intelligence-related and intelligence-unrelated article headlines as "1" and "0", respectively. As a manipulation check, participants were also asked to indicate, on a 7-

point scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 7 = Strongly Agree), how strongly they agreed or disagreed that the resume was "impressive," "intimidating," "inspiring," and if it made them feel "inadequate" (α = .86). Finally, participants completed the Big Five Inventory-2 (Soto & John, 2017) and a brief demographic survey.

Results

Exclusion
Participants who scored below the midpoint of the goal importance scale index ($N = 2$) were excluded from the analysis. This left a sample consisting of 107 participants for data analysis.

Manipulation Check
An independent samples *t*-test examined differences in the perceived threat associated with viewing the stronger resume, as operationalized by how strongly participants believed the resume was impressive, intimidating, or made them feel inadequate. Levene's test indicated heterogeneity of variances; we therefore utilized a Welch's *t*-test, which revealed that participants in the strong resume condition perceived a greater threat (μ = 4.61, σ = 1.20) than those in the control condition (μ = 2.68, σ = 1.26), $t(106.48) = 8.183$ $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-2.40, -1.46].

Figure 1. *Attractiveness of Sharing Articles*
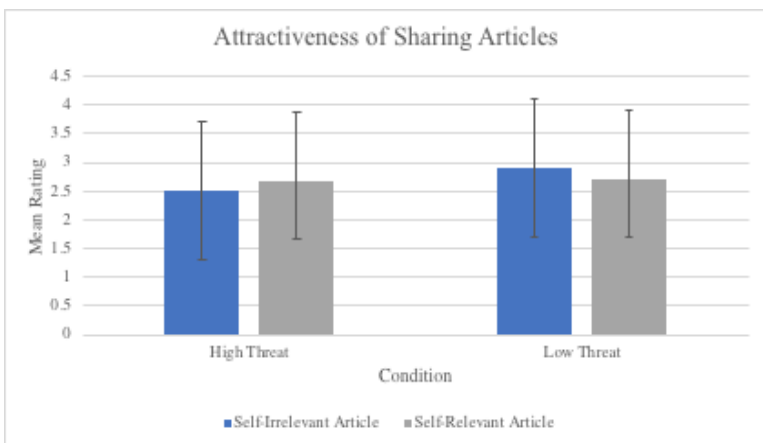
*Note*. Attractiveness of sharing article headlines as a function of stimuli goal-relevance. Mean and standard deviations displayed.

Analysis

In order to examine the attractiveness of sharing online articles headlines, we computed a 2 (Self-Definition Threat) × 2 (Social Media Content) mixed-factor ANOVA with self-definition threat occurring between subjects and the content-type (social media related) within subjects. The model with online article headlines did not yield a significant effect of content type between control article headlines (μ = 2.69, σ= 1.20) than the work-related article headlines (μ = 2.75, σ = 1.19), $F(1, 107) = 0.431$, $p = .513$, $\eta_{2p} = .513$. No effect of self-definition threat was found, $F(1, 107) = 0.744$, $p = .390$, $\eta_{2p} = .007$; however, an interaction with content type the effect was trending toward conventional statistical significance, $F(1, 107) = 2.658$, $p = .106$, $\eta_{2p} = .024$.

Figure 2. *Threat Condition and Sharing Choice Percentage*
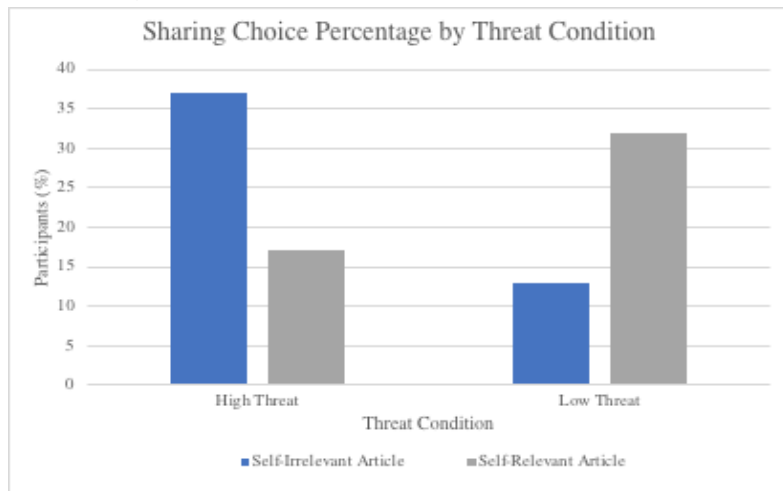
Note. Percent choosing to share a goal-relevant article headline on social media as a function of self-concept threat condition.

We analyzed participants' forced choice responses to the article headlines they would share if they were required to share one with a Chi Square test to assess if the threat condition influenced preference to share a goal relevant vs goal irrelevant article headline. This analysis revealed a significant effect of the threat condition for the articles, $\chi_2(1, N = 107) =$

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16.475, $p < .001$, but in the opposite direction than predicted (see Figure 1). For the article headline stimuli, participants were more likely to share goal relevant articles in the low-threat condition (32.4%) compared to the low-threat condition (17.6%).

Discussion

Study 1

Study 1 did not provide evidence consistent with the hypothesis that those experiencing self-definitional threat would demonstrate a stronger preference for goal relevant article headlines than those in the low-threat condition. However, there was partial evidence for the opposite pattern of data. Taking into consideration the Self Evaluation Maintenance Model, these findings suggest that those in the high threat condition are distancing themselves from their goals in order to reduce self-definitional insecurity by sharing alternative articles—essentially, distancing the self from the threatening domain. In order to ensure that the threat of the peer-resume was high, we told participants that it was an alleged freshman resume. This was to ensure psychological closeness (participants were primarily freshman) to the comparison target, while, ultimately, would increase the threat. However, this psychological closeness may have been a confounding factor. It is possible that participants mediated the threat by distancing themselves from their goal, rather than seeking alternative symbols of self-definition to assert their status. This behavior is consistent with the predictions of the Self Evaluation Maintenance model, which posits that when an individual feels inferior to someone who is psychologically close, they will respond by either distancing themselves from the individual, distancing themselves from the goal, or reducing the performance differential. Because the only available response to participants was to reduce the relevance of the goal to their self-definition (i.e. distance themselves from the goal) their response in this study partially supports the predictions of the Self-Evaluation Maintenance Model.

Study 2

Given that the trends from Study 1 were more consistent with the Self-Evaluation Maintenance model, Study 2 sought to test the same hypothesis but with several changes. First, data was collected from participants that had less shared experiences in order to address the concern surrounding psychological closeness. Second, stimuli were adjusted to more closely mimic content an individual may find on a social media site. Finally, adults with Linkedin profiles were recruited to heighten the relevance of the Linkedin manipulation and make the self-definition threat feel natural.

Method

Participants

Adults living in the United States were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk to participate in a study in exchange for $0.35. Sample size was set a priori to 400, and a final sample of 401 participants (186 female, 214 male $\mu_{age} = 38.17$; $\sigma = 11.68$) was reached before exclusions. The study design, hypothesis, exclusions, data analysis plan, and stopping rules were pre registered at aspredicted.org: http://aspredicted.org/blind.php?x=8du7xf.

Procedure and materials

First, participants completed the Big Five Inventory-2 (Soto & John, 2015), Work-Family Values, and Priority Goals and Life Satisfaction Scales (Masude & Sorthiex, 2011). Then, they answered questions about demographic information. Similar to Study 1, participants indicated how important (via levels of importance) having a reputation of being "accomplished" was to their self-definition via three items (e.g., "How important is it to your self-concept that you are regarded as an 'accomplished professional' by others?", $\alpha = .94$). Thereafter, participants were randomly assigned to view either an impressive (high threat) or neutral (low threat) Linkedin profile. Participants rated the six articles headlines on how attractive they were to share on their

personal social media profiles. These headlines were links (if shared on Facebook), memes, and cartoons that were either related to success (e.g. "10 Office Hacks That Will Change Your Work Life") or unrelated to success (e.g. "11 Ways to Tell if Your Lover Loves You"). These items were rated on a Likert-type scale from 1 (*Not at all attractive*) to 7 (*Very attractive*). Participants were presented with all eighteen items and asked to indicate which they would share on their personal social media profile, if they were required to share one. They then were asked to consider their own accomplishments and respond to three items (e.g., "If others were to review your resume, how confident would you be that they would perceive you as an accomplished professional; $\alpha = .97$) on a Likert-type scale that measured their perceived closeness to their own goal of achieving a strong resume—of which communicates their status as an accomplished professional. As a manipulation check, participants were asked to indicate, on a 7-point scale, how strongly they agreed that the Linkedin profile was impressive, intimidating, or made them feel inadequate ($\alpha =.86$) (1- *Strongly Disagree*; 7 – *Strongly Agree*).

Results

Pre-registered exclusions
Those who scored below the midpoint of the goal importance scale index ($N = 69$) and those who indicated they did not have a Linkedin account ($N = 39$) were excluded from analyses; this was pre-registered on aspredicted.org. In total, 99 were excluded from the analysis, leaving 301 participants, 154 in the control condition and 147 in the threat condition.

Manipulation check
An independent samples *t*-test examined the differences in the threats perceived when viewing the stronger Linkedin profile. This was operationalized by how strongly participants believed the resume was impressive, intimidating, or made them feel inadequate. Levene's test indicated heterogeneity of

variances, therefore we utilized a Welch's t-test which revealed that revealed that participants in the strong Linkedin condition perceived greater threat ($\mu = 4.55$, $\sigma = 1.27$) than those in the control condition ($\mu = 2.13$, $\sigma = 0.99$), $t(274.28) = 18.35$ $p < .001$, $CI_{95\%}$ [-2.67, -2.15].

Analysis
In order to examine the sharing attractiveness of online articles, memes, and cartoons, we computed a series of three, mixed-factor ANOVA with self-definition threat occurring between-subjects and social media content-type occurring within subjects: 2 (Self-Definition Threat) × 2 (Social Media Content). The model with online articles only yielded a marginally significant effect of content type with participants rating the work-related article headlines more favorably ($\mu = 3.65$, $\sigma = 1.48$) than the unrelated article headlines ($\mu = 3.52$, $\sigma = 1.50$), $F(1, 299) = 2.83$, $p = .094$, $\eta_{2p} = .009$, however there were no differences between threat conditions (see Figure 3). No effect of self-definition threat, $F(1, 299) = 2.24$, $p = .136$, $\eta_{2p} = .007$ or interaction with content type emerged, $F(1, 299) = 0.458$, $p = .499$, $\eta_{2p} = .002$. No effect of self-definition threat was found for either the memes, $F(1, 299) = 0.622$, $p = .431$, $\eta_{2p} = .002$, or cartoons, $F(1,299) = 0.943$, $p = .322$, $\eta_{2p} = .003$.

Figure 3. *Attractiveness of Sharing Articles Threat*
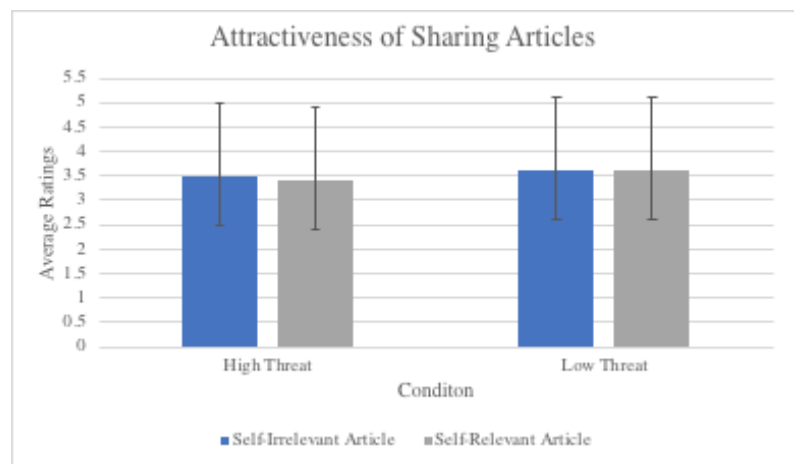
Note. Attractiveness of sharing article headlines as a function of stimuli goal-relevance.

Next, we analysed participants' forced choice responses to which of each set of stimuli they would share if they were required with three Chi Square tests to assess if the threat condition influenced preference to share a goal relevant vs irrelevant article, meme, and cartoon. These analyses revealed a significant effect of threat condition for the articles, $\chi2(1, N = 301) = 6.14$, $p = .013$, but not for memes, $\chi2(1, N = 301) = 0.027$, $p = .869$, or cartoons, $\chi2(1, N = 301) = 0.037$, $p = .848$. For the article headline stimuli, participants were more likely to share goal relevant articles in the high-threat condition (29.1%) compared to the low-threat condition (19.3%) (see Figure 3).

Figure 4. *Sharing Choice Percentage by Threat Condition*
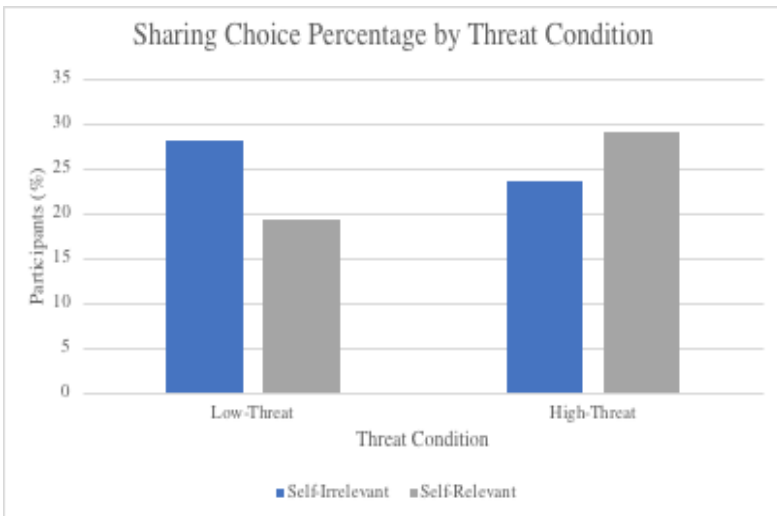
Note. Percent choosing to share a goal-relevant article headline on social media as a function of self-concept threat condition..

Exploratory Analysis

Following my pre-registered data analysis plan, I explored ANCOVA models examining attractiveness ratings of articles, memes, and cartoons with goal importance (mean-centered) added as a potential moderator. The three way interaction of Threat × Content × Importance emerged, $F(1, 690) = 34.569$, $p < .001$, $\eta_{p2} = .048$. Whereas importance predicted greater attractiveness in sharing work-related article headlines among participants in the high threat

condition ($N = 362$), it was unrelated to attractiveness ratings among those in the low-threat condition ($N =368$) (See Table 1). Importance did not predict attractiveness of sharing control article headlines in either the low-threat (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Analysis from ANCOVA output.*

Condition	ANCOVA Results				
	b	SE	t	p	η_{p}^2
High Threat Work Related Articles	0.229	0.075	3.056	0.002	0.025
Low Threat Work Related Articles	-0.016	0.104	0.155	0.877	0.001
High Threat Control Articles	0.12	0.075	1.6	0.11	0.007
Low Threat Control Articles	0.143	0.075	1.365	0.173	0.005

General Discussion

Study 1 and Study 2 tested the hypothesis that social media responses are influenced by a motivation to manage self-definitional threat. In Study 1, participants that viewed a resume by an individual that was psychologically close, experienced high self-definition threat via upward social comparison. These participants responded to this threat by distancing themselves from goal-relevant stimuli. However, in Study 2, when participants were confronted with a self-definitional threat through the same upward comparison, they responded by indicating a greater desire to share goal-relevant articles instead of goal-relevant memes and cartoons. This was likely due to psychological closeness being intentionally reduced in this study. As a result, only data from Study 2 provides evidence that is *partially* consistent with symbolic self-completion theory (Wicklund & Gollwitzer 1981; Harmon-Jones et al., 2009; Schiffmann, & Nelkenbrecher, 1994).

Both Study 1 and Study 2 successfully manipulated participants' sense of security with respect to their self-definition. However, the two studies yielded very different response patterns. As noted, only a few elements of Study 2 produced results consistent with symbolic self-completion in social media sharing preferences. This was seen when the self-definition threat led to an increase in the sharing of goal-related content for the article-headline stimuli, but not for the memes and cartoons. One potential explanation for this discrepancy includes the significant difference between the article headlines from the memes and cartoons. While all three sets of stimuli were associated with the self-relevant areas of interest, the article headline stimuli was focused on goal achievement and was serious. In contrast, the memes and cartoon stimuli were humorous and offered no means of goal pursuit. It is possible that the underlying tone of stimuli influenced the perceived attractiveness and desire to share them. Thus, as a whole, the data does not support the hypothesis initially made. This is because the goal-relevant set of stimuli (serious) illustrated the symbolic self-completion pattern, while the goal-irrelevant set of stimuli (humorous) did not. This is primarily speculation; future research should directly test this interpretation.

Study 1's results could be interpreted as evidence for the Self-Evaluation Maintenance (SEM) model. A possible explanation for these findings centers on the SEM model, which postulates that when individuals feel threatened, they will be motivated to distance themselves from their goal in order to maintain their positive self-concept. The SEM model suggests that a person's relationships with others have a significant impact on self-evaluation. Additionally, the relevance of self-definition and psychological closeness affects the way individuals respond to others' performances; it also determines whether or not they will experience threat (Tesser & Campbell, 1982). As clarification, psychological closeness refers to the extent to which two people are connected to one another, and can increase

due to physical proximity or similarity along demographic dimensions. In Study 1, all participants were recruited from the same small undergraduate institution and the resume from the manipulation was alleged to come from a freshman peer. An interpretation of this data, as previously discussed, relies on this model, and would suggest that when threatened by a psychologically close target, participants are likely to distance themselves from the goal to manage the threat, rather than providing external symbols to assert their status.

Limitations and Future Research
There are several limitations to our data. One being, that the data does not provide evidence for our hypothesis: a causal relationship between self-definitional threat and symbolic self-completion behavior. For this reason, future research should take context into consideration, such that threats from certain targets evoke specific responses, while threats from other targets evoke other responses. Future studies should also take into account stimulus connotation and address the confounding issue of Study 2. More specifically, the stimuli used should have similar tones rather than varied ones (humorous vs. serious), as this limited the present study. Furthermore, the present study included a small range of social media stimuli and only allowed for one type of social media behavior (i.e. sharing). Future research could examine a wider variety of stimuli, and could explore other social media engagements such as comments, likes, or caption content, that also communicate information about the self and the regulation of self-esteem.

The populations in our samples also present limitations with respect to the strength of our conclusions. All of the participants in Study 1 were college students while all of the participants in Study 2 were simply individuals that had Linkedin accounts. Because both studies were only concerned with a professionally-oriented self-definitional domain, it is possible that there is a third variable

involved: the behaviors demonstrated in these studies are related to another factor that is shared between people who value professional identity. For instance, this could be personality type. Because evidence for symbolic self-completion theory has been found across a number of self-definitional domains that extend beyond professional identity (Arthur 1997; Schiffmann, R., & Nelkenbrecher, 1994), future research should test social media-related symbolic self-completion behaviors for other self-definitional domains. The present study does not allow for generalization, and additional research could strengthen the case for external validity.

Furthermore, this study only utilizes one approach for manipulating threats. Additional methods for threat-manipulation could be informative, especially those that more closely mirror the posts that social media users encounter on sites in naturalistic settings. Determining whether stimuli, such as Instagram posts, Facebook statuses, or inspections of other profiles, would be threatening in certain circumstances; and, under what conditions these circumstances arise has important implications for understanding how individuals employ social media tools to regulate self-esteem. Moreover, our operationalization of sharing desire is limited in the sense that it relies on self-reporting. It is possible that individuals do not have an accurate insight or access to what they find attractive to share; or, that due to demand characteristics/social desirability, they did not want to share their honest perceptions. Future research should examine sharing behaviors in a naturalistic setting, or operationalize sharing desires in a different mode. In addition, the present research demonstrated that participants experienced threat, but not necessarily incompleteness. Future research should re-test this hypothesis by employing a methodology that would more accurately make participants experience incompleteness, and not just status insecurity.

Conclusion

Our social world has forever been changed by social media sites. Social media usage is now central to the process of building, articulating, and developing relationships and statuses in peer networks. Social media also provides individuals an alternative method to connect with others in a way that feels continuous with their offline-lives (boyd, 2010). Thus, as these technologies infiltrate our everyday lives, past research pertaining to offline mediation must be updated to address the realities of our digital society.

This research provides a starting point for new insights into people's motivations for social media behavior and is one of few attempts to specify how people use social networking sites to alleviate self-concept-related anxiety and feelings of inadequacy. The research presented in this paper offers groundwork for future work in applying symbolic self-completion theory and other offline behaviors to the online space. While our data, as a whole, does not support our hypothesis, some evidence suggests that threats to self-definition may have an effect on sharing preferences and behavior; and, as a result, this merits further investigation. Subjectively, the most important contribution of this work is to provide an initial psychological explanation for the relationship between self-esteem and the social media usage motivations, rather than effects, which have been the focus of most past research.

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