

A Model Outlining Female Identity Crises and Stranger Affirmation Seeking on Private Facebook Groups: Insights for Marketers

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Abstract

Facebook groups are increasing in popularity, both in the eyes of female consumers as well as marketers. Previous research has identified that users provide detailed information about themselves through these groups, which marketers can capitalize on in order to precisely target commercial messages. The question then arises, what do women gain from Facebook groups? A model is proposed which answers this question, tying together one previously identified and one new variable: identity crisis and stranger affirmation seeking. Identity crises occurs multiple times throughout a woman's life, ranging from starting a new job, to having a child, to retiring. Through Facebook groups, she may seek affirmation from strangers during these times of trial. Marketers may recognize these tumultuous periods and develop a closer relationship with the female through the additional information she shares on the group page. Propositions are outlined, and recommendations for marketers provided.

Keywords: Affirmation, Facebook, advertising

Track: Consumer behavior

Over 400 million of Facebook's 2.37 billion active users participate in groups, joining others from around the world in conversations about topics ranging from recipe swaps to overcoming a cancer diagnosis (Fottrell, 2019). Mark Zuckerberg, one of the founders of Facebook, seeks to capitalize on this behavior, by evolving Facebook and its ever-growing number of groups into the equivalent of a private living room. Studies have shown that people are "more likely to reveal illnesses, mental health-issues or even quirky embarrassing hobbies" through these private Facebook groups, information that is then aggregated by the social media company and sold to advertisers (Fottrell, 2019). Precisely targeted advertisements are produced from this information, which can indeed result in more meaningful experiences for users. However, the monetary benefits that Facebook receives from collecting such vast amounts of information on their users far outweighs the perks of having more targeted advertisements pop up on a consumer's screen. The question then is, what exactly are Facebook group users gaining from such interactions?

More than half of Facebook's consumer base is female (Gourdreau, 2010), and it is theorized that these women have much to gain from engaging in Facebook groups, including overcoming an identity crisis. For a female, an identity crisis can occur at any point in her life, from starting a new job, to having a child, to losing a loved one (Cherry, 2019). This paper identifies a new path through which women combat identity crises: stranger affirmation seeking through private Facebook groups. A conceptual model is presented which proposes a linear causal relationship between an identity threat and the newly proposed variable, stranger affirmation seeking through private Facebook groups. Numerous investigations have focused on the concepts of identity threat and affirmation. However, to date, no studies have examined stranger affirmation, or its correlation with identity threat. Given that women undergo identity crises throughout their lives, and their prevalent use of Facebook and its groups, it is vital to understand the relationship between these two variables. Additionally, due to the vast amount of information that is provided by women on these groups pages, a mutually beneficial relationship between marketer and consumer may ensue.

1. Social Media Behavioral Characteristics of Target Population

Female users account for 55.4% of Facebook's audience, and predominantly utilize the site as a tool to make connections with others experiencing similar situations, and to share information (Gourdreau, 2010). Private Facebook groups allow for such an exchange of

experiences. “Every day, thousands of women around the world are joining private Facebook groups where they crowdsource their questions about careers, sex, money and everything in between” (Cuen, 2017). These groups are seen as a resource base in which women help and support other women, empowering and affirming one another.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This paper is rooted in the Strength of Weak Ties Theory (Granovetter, 1973). This theory states that our social networks are made up of both strong and weak ties. Weak ties allow people to develop larger social networks and gain access to a new source of information from an expert on the topic (Wright, 2016). Weak ties can also be utilized through Facebook groups, as they provide a user with four primary functions: access to an array of information, information that comes directly from others who are undergoing the same issue, disclosure of personal information without the fear of stigma or rejection, and an overall sense of belonging (Zigron & Bronstein, 2019).

3. Model and Model Variables

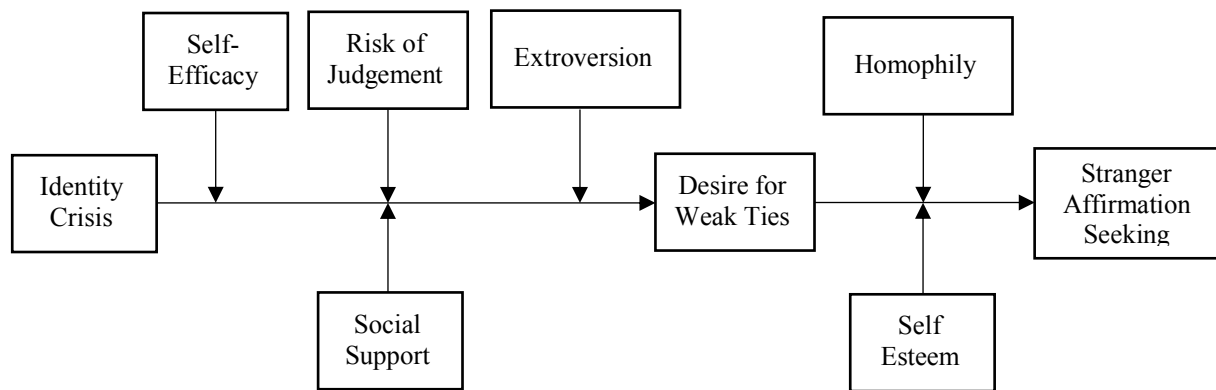


Figure 1. Model for Combatting Identity Crisis through Affirmation Seeking

Research has shown that women’s identities are often shaped via exposure to the media – television, film, fashion magazines, and advertising in all its forms. Women are under a constant state of pressure to balance their identities, including their appearance and sexuality, their careers and motherhood, and their own true selves (Marcelin, 2012). All too often, there is a discrepancy between the ideal portrayed in the media, and real life. For a female, two types of identity crises can occur at any point in her life: legitimization crisis or motivation crisis (Baumeister, Shapiro & Tice, 1985). Legitimation crisis occurs when several commitments arise which result in

conflicting behaviors and ends with one commitment's betrayal. This can occur when a new mother must choose between playing the "caring mother" versus the "corporate social climber" role. Motivation crisis occurs when the individual does not have a clear set path and struggles to establish personal values and goals, such as a midlife crisis. A woman must then grapple with both legitimation and motivation identity crises during critical points, such as starting or ending a career, or losing a family member. This leads to *Proposition 1: Discrepancies between real life and media-induced identities result in identity crises.*

Self-efficacy is the belief that a woman has about her own ability to execute certain behaviors that will lead to specific successful outcomes (Bandura, 1997). These personal evaluations influence the development and ultimate achievement of goals. Goals are generally aligned to overcome challenges (Cherry, 2019), including those a woman faces during an identity crisis. Women with low self-efficacy do not believe they can battle the challenges they must face through an identity crisis (Cherry, 2019). Previous research has shown that those with low self-efficacy "may have a greater need and desire for information and feedback" (Davis & Fedor, 1994). Thus, it is more likely that those with low self-efficacy will tap into strong and weak ties in order to achieve affirmation, and thus increase their self-efficacy. This leads to *Proposition 2: Low self-efficacy leads women to seek out support through affirmation from others.*

Social support comes from strong ties, or those who are emotionally close to a woman, including her friends and family. These people can be accessed during a crisis in order to provide the woman with a broader focus, as well as a positive self-image (Towey). There are three types of support that are important for a woman to tap into through her social support network, including emotional (empathy, love, trust and caring), informational (suggestions, advice, information), and the aforementioned appraisal support (self-evaluation and reaffirmation) (University of Pennsylvania). Should a woman have a strong social support net, and receive these three types of support, the need for affirmation seeking from strangers will indeed decrease. However, if the social support system fails her, she may seek out other sources of affirmation, including that from weak ties. This leads to *Proposition 3: Strong social support networks reduce the likelihood of a desire for weak ties.*

The risk of judgement from strong ties in a woman's social support network will increase her desire to form weak ties. Women, in particular, are more anxious and fearful of being judged relative to men. In a prior study, nearly two thirds of new mothers polled were criticized for their parenting decisions by their strong ties, while only 7% indicated that judgement came through social media (Klass, 2017). Additionally, women are also more likely to be judged by their close friends. Often, this type of judgement is triggered by either envy or stress (Leising, Gallrein & Dufner, 2014). Overall, "individuals may feel more comfortable sharing with others that they do not share overlapping relationships with, rather than their friends and families" (Wright, Rains & Banas, 2010). This could be attributed to potential stigmas that may come about, which results in judgement. This leads to *Proposition 4: The risk of judgement by strong ties will lead a woman to desire affirmation from weak ties.*

Extroverts are defined as those who have the ability to recharge through communication with others. Extroverts have larger social networks whom they trust and can tap into, composed of both strong and weak ties. Regardless of the relationship strength or size of network, the core driver of such a communal source of support is trust, which "guarantees they will not be taken advantage of in uncertain or risky situations" (Zell, McGrath & Vance, 2014), such as an identity crisis. These higher levels of intimacy and trust open up perceived barriers between the individual and their weak ties. As extroverts are more outgoing and make friends more easily, they are also be able to extend their network via additional weak ties should they be unable to find the specific support that they need in an identity crisis. This leads to *Proposition 5: Extroverts are more likely to seek out weak ties during an identity crisis.*

There is an increased likelihood that a person will articulate what they need to an acquaintance, as opposed to a strong tie. In conversations with strong ties, people "tend to skip contextual details and largely rely on implicit communication" (Amitabh, 2019). However, in weak tie communication, people are "forced to explicitly state what they want and why." Thus, a woman may feel that she can better express the issues that she is going through with a weak tie as opposed to a strong tie. Weak ties can then be used as a means of social support, providing emotional strength that the female did not achieve elsewhere. There are a variety of different ways in which weak ties are better than strong ties during an identity crisis situation, including decreased perception of risk and stress (Wright, Rains & Banas, 2010), increased information not

attainable through strong ties, increased social comparisons, and social obligations (LaGaipa, 1990). This leads to *Proposition 6: Weak ties may be preferred to strong ties for affirmation seeking during an identity crisis.*

Homophily, the idea that connections form more quickly with people who are similar to oneself than to those who are dissimilar, ties together relationships of many kinds which results in a homogenous personal network (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). This homogeneity comes in the form of sociodemographic, behavioral, as well as interpersonal characteristics. If it is presumed that people are “inherently multidimensional, have many attributes and are members of multiple groups” (Block & Grund, 2014), then it can be assumed that women engage with a variety of different groups, whether real life or virtual, in which they see different dimensions of themselves represented. A private Facebook group then becomes a representation of a particular facet of a woman’s dimensions. Should a particular dimension of her identity be under attack, a woman may turn to a Facebook group where this dimension is most salient. The higher the degree that the woman associates herself with the group, the more she will feel comfortable with opening up about her identity crisis and seeking affirmation. This leads to *Proposition 7: Perceived homophily within a given private Facebook group will increase a woman’s desire for affirmation from strangers within the group.*

Having low self-esteem will increase the need for appraisal and affirmation. In particular, low self-esteem arises through a sense of inferiority, which is brought about by a number of factors, including external influences such as the media. An overall sense of inferiority is often learned early on in life through media exposure, and the notion is strengthened throughout adulthood. Comparatively, women have lower overall self-esteem relative to men, and this phenomenon is more pronounced in industrialized Western cultures. Many women then learn that “their fundamental self-esteem and self-worth comes not from within but from others, and so they constantly seek other people’s approval or attention” (Cikanavicius, 2018). Thus, women who do not have a high degree of self-esteem will seek out affirmation from other. This leads to *P8: A woman’s low self-esteem will increase her need for affirmation from strangers on private Facebook groups.*

One common coping response to identity threat is to seek affirmation, as this occurs when a person's identity is reflected back to them (Johnston, 2018). Research shows that people are affirmed in their identity through social interactions (Sevelius, 2013). Engaging with a stranger online and receiving affirmation from them includes a number of elements that are not present when it is received from a strong tie: there is a physical and emotional buffer between the individual and the stranger, there is a lower sense of commitment, and a temporal element that limits the interaction time. Additionally, due to the closeness-communication bias, people tend to communicate better with strangers than with those they are close to (Savitsky et al., 2010). This may lead to affirmation from a stranger being weighted more heavily than that from someone who is a strong tie. As the person has had no prior experience with the woman in question, they have "no context to digest the information with, so they are forced to have a relatively unemotional and objective response" (Wylde, 2016). Often, what a woman wants when she undergoes an identity crisis is "an authoritative stranger, responding to a specific query, speaking from their experience, but with no strings attached, no connections, no fear of seeing them in the grocery store and them asking if the advice was taken" (Peterson, 2019). This all contributes to a relationship at arm's length, as opposed to one that develops in close proximity to the woman. This parasocial relationship may be desired, as it may resemble face-to-face interactions, but differs in its mediation and one-sidedness (Horton & Wohl, 1956). Thus, the woman may achieve affirmation without the strings of a permanent relationship attached to it. This leads to *Proposition 9: Stranger affirmation is sought out by women going through an identity crisis.*

4. Conclusion and Marketing Implications

A major societal trend in recent years is the formation of Facebook groups. The more people come together to communicate about their common interests, whether it be regarding an identity crisis or their political orientation, the more data Facebook is able to collect (Fottrell, 2019). Facebook groups encourage the sharing of stories regarding a woman's passions and interests, and the more intimate the conversations become, the more valuable the data that is unlocked for marketing purposes. Women are increasingly allowing themselves to be heard during an identity crisis through participation in such Facebook groups. As outlined above, in this online environment populated with weak ties, a more powerful form of affirmation may result than that which a woman might potentially receive through strong ties. Such insights allow marketers to

develop a deeper understanding of their female customer base when it comes to turning points in their lives, which may result in a more intimate relationship, ultimately leading to more precisely targeted advertisements. “Targeting advertisements to groups of people is naturally driven by dialogue and interaction and will help make the experience more relevant and meaningful for users” (Fottrel, 2019). Additionally, these targeted advertisements may lead the female to feel better about herself during her identity crisis, as research shows that such advertisements can alter self-perceptions. This type of targeting may ultimately “change how consumers see themselves and make them feel like they already have the traits implied by the ads. This suggests that brands with strong personalities might particularly benefit” from such targeted messages (Reczek, Summers & Smith, 2016). This paper contributes to current literature by presenting and defining the concept of stranger affirmation seeking. The process by which women undergoing an identity crisis utilize private Facebook groups to obtain such affirmation is outline in a model. Marketing implications are addressed. It should be noted that not all variables that might contribute to stranger affirmation seeking were included in this model. Yet to be identified factors may also play a salient role in predicting affirmation seeking behavior. Future research on the concept of stranger affirmation seeking should test the specific variables that contribute to this behavior.

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