"Your Life Sucks," but I think “You Deserved It”: Social approval and disapproval of messages on FMyLife.com

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A B S T R A C T

This study used Social Judgment Theory (SJТ) (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) as a lens to understand how dominant societal standards for social support manifest in raters’ judgments of postings on a pop-culture website. The pop-culture website, FMyLife.com (FML), was analyzed to see if there were major themes within the community’s norms consistent with those of society. A total of 25,220 posts were analyzed for major themes on how raters rate posts from those looking to commiserate about their situation online. Since generic standards of conduct and norms apply in groups and at the individual level via computer-mediated communication, (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009), examples of common themes that relate to universal norms and ideologies are discussed pertaining to the two options of the FML website – “your life sucks” and “you deserved it.” Ten percent of posts for each option were then chosen at random to secure a frequency count for posts found within the themes. Results exhibit how elements of SJТ play a role in the rating process of posts, and directions for future research are suggested.

1. Introduction

Abraham Lincoln said, “He has a right to criticize, who has a heart to help” (Moran, 2011). This quotation highlights the intricacies found within the bright and dark sides of communication because while it may be easy to judge someone else, comments should derive from those willing to assist in times of need. The United States has placed social support on a metaphorical pedestal by deeming it a great virtue, and we can see this through the plethora of volunteer organizations (PR Newswire Association LLC, 2014) and philanthropic work (The Chronicle of Philanthropy, 2013). Social support is not only available in face-to-face interactions, but can also be given and accepted via online communities. Social support is readily available around the clock through the internet; people can log into different websites at any time to talk to individuals using their real names, internet monikers, or anonymously.

Internet communities that provide certain levels of anonymity offer an opportune environment for the emergence of “unusual” support; collectively, individuals that participate in some online communities may begin to “skew” what is typically thought of as support. For example, while social support websites have emerged to assist people with medical diagnoses (Klemm, Hurst, Dearholt, & Trone, 1999; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005), some, deemed “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” websites, emerged allowing individuals to assist those with eating disorders to continue maintaining unhealthy habits (Van Pelt, 2009). This shows how social support can be considered positive or negative, and this depends on if the support aligns with dominant societal standards.

Societies cultivate social norms and rules that are then followed by members. The “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” websites illustrate how supporting an unhealthy lifestyle stands against the broader societal norms of health and wellness. While the central purpose of social support sites is to foster belongingness and unity, sometimes this is cultivated through the promotion of commiseration. For example, the website www.FMyLife.com (FML) is a somewhat satirical website where people can post unpleasant, undesirable, or unexpected interpersonal experiences, and allow others to rate the acceptability of negative experiences (Valette, Passaglia, & Guedj, 2013a). The website name, FMyLife, has been taken from popular culture slang, “f” my life,” signifying self-pity.

The present study sheds light on societal standards of social support in an online context by investigating postings from the FML website (Valette et al., 2013a). Online communities, even those satirical in nature, can hold an element of the dark side of
communication, yet social norms and expectations are still present. The FML website will be analyzed because of its negative undertone of self-pity by taking a closer look at how raters decide whether things are worthy of an FML posting for amusement, or if the poster is looking for unwarranted sympathy. Social Judgment Theory (SJT) (Sherif & Havland, 1961; Sherif, Sherif, & Nebergall, 1965) offers a lens for this study, to evaluate posts from the viewpoint of the rater to explore what types of comments individuals find appropriate or inappropriate. Since individuals have different latitudes of acceptance and rejection, this study uncovers broad patterns from raters’ responses indicating that societal norms do exist when passing judgment anonymously online.

2. Social Judgment Theory

In order to make sense of what an individual deems acceptable or unacceptable, SJT (Sherif & Havland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965) developed from Egon Brunswik’s Lens Model through Probabilistic Functionalist psychology (Cooksey, 1996; Doherty & Kurz, 1996). SJT is a socio-psychological theory that helps explain how persuasive messages succeed (Griffin, 2012). With roots in Judgment Theory, SJT aims to understand the decision-making process related to persuasion as it explains how attitudes are expressed, judged, and modified (Miller, 2005). When an individual hears a message, they immediately judge where the message should be placed on their internal attitude scale.

Mallard (2010) suggests that SJT illuminates how individuals compare their own views on matters to the views of others by holding different latitudes of what is acceptable. SJT incorporates three latitudes having their own continuum since a person’s feelings toward acceptance, rejection, and noncommitment can vary within each individual latitude (Griffin, 2012). Latitude of acceptance is defined “as the range of positions on an issue...an individual considers acceptable to him/her (including the one ‘most acceptable’ to him/her)” (Sherif & Havland, 1961, p. 129). The latitude of rejection encompasses what is not acceptable, leading to very little (if any) attitude change. Finally, the latitude of non-commitment includes neutral feelings (Griffin, 2012). If the anchor falls within the middle of the latitude of acceptance (Miller, 2005), if a message matches up with an individual’s anchor, it will not lead to any change in feelings, but could reinforce their viewpoint (Miller, 2005).

After understanding the different latitudes, it is important to also understand an individual’s ego-involvement. Ego-involvement refers to how important an issue is in a person’s life, sometimes established by the group a person is a part of (Griffin, 2012). This concept has individuals questioning how important a topic is by considering things like, is this something constantly thought about? Or does it define who I am? If an individual has a large latitude of rejection, this is often a sign that the topic corresponds to high ego-involvement; whereas low ego-involvement is often linked to more of a latitude of noncommitment (Griffin, 2012). If a topic is really important, then an individual already has a hard stance on how they feel about it, and are most likely not willing to stray from their attitude. If a topic is not really important to an individual, they are more than likely indifferent about how they feel about it.

Since communication and points of view cannot always be taken at face value, SJT also highlights the possibility of confusion in individuals’ attitudes. Sherif felt that the biases in the judgments that we make in the world parallel how we determine the attitudes of others (Griffin, 2012), and errors arise when judging messages. One example is a contrast error, and explains when individuals decide a message within their latitude of rejection is farther from their attitudinal decision (their anchor) than it actually is (Griffin, 2012). Conversely, an error of assimilation describes when individuals decide a message within their latitude of acceptance differs less from their attitudinal decision (their anchor) than it actually does (Griffin, 2012).

Individuals subconsciously decide where messages fall within their different latitudes when face-to-face or online. For the purpose of this study, when analyzing the FML website, when a rater “accepts” a posters comment, it is as if they are issuing some sort of sympathy and offering support to the poster because the rater feels as though the poster’s “life sucks.” When a rater decides a poster “deserved” the negative occurrence, it is as if the rater feels the poster’s actions were unacceptable in some way, leading to some sort of blame and withdrawal of support. Understanding how online communities function will help shed light on the FML website and the decision behind rater attitudes. To better understand how individuals communicate and feel about online topics, it is important to understand how online communities and social networking sites operate.

3. Literature review

3.1. Online communities

As internet usage continues to grow, new tools and functions emerge regularly. The advent of chatting tools have allowed communication to evolve from an asynchronous (e.g., email), to a synchronous process (e.g., instant messaging, video chat). On a broader level, online communities have emerged as a result of the creation of synchronous online chat rooms. In these virtual spaces, individuals with common interests from anywhere can meet to share content and/or opinions at any time (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Jin, Lee, & Cheung, 2012; Preece, 2000, 2001).

Depending on the layout of the online community, members can post material or respond to others. Some online communities allow members to select a preset response, as is the case with FML. Since members choose their level of involvement, their sense of community differs, as well as their degree of attachment (Ren et al., 2012). Members may interact with the online community as a whole, a small group within the community, or at the dyadic level (Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009), and do not need to contribute regularly to remain a member of the online community (Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2005). Member contributions vary depending on the group’s norms. The values within these communities are cultivated through the interaction and dialogue created amongst members (Jin et al., 2012). These values are sometimes understood and reinforced through trial and error from an individuals’ interaction with other members.

3.1.1. Online social support

The ability to communicate interpersonally is often what keeps individuals logged-on (Seligman, 2011), and using both online communities and social networking sites (SNS). Also, discussing opinions and providing feedback via SNS can help support the growth of the individuals and the interpersonal relationship (Strom & Strom, 2012). In relation to online social support, members of an online community or those linked to a SNS can communicate to offer emotional support (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005) related to topics like families (Christian, 2005) or health diagnoses/concerns (Coulson, 2005; White & Dorman, 2001). Since individuals do not need to be face-to-face to gather or share information, the set up of an online social support site allows for the discussion of taboo topics (Braithwaite, Waldron, & Finn, 1999; Coulson, 2005). A majority of individuals visiting social support sites gather and process the information rather than post information related to the topic at hand (Li, 2010). Online social support sites provide an outlet for individuals to discuss topics in a way that is least face threatening. If the topic is unsafe or harmful in some way, participants are perpetuating a harmful cycle.
3.1.2. www.FMyLife.com

As mentioned earlier, the name of the FML website is derived from a self-deprecating sentence used in today’s pop culture. The website has roots in France when creator Maxime Valette created the website VDM, which stands for “Vie de merde” in 2008 (Barnesandnoble.com, 2013a). The site expanded worldwide after Valette was joined by his friends Guillaume Passaglia and Didier Guedj. The site is also the basis for the books My Life and My My Life World Tour: Life’s Creepiest Moments From Around the Globe (Barnesandnoble.com, LLC, 2013a). The site allows for individuals to post comments, rate comments, and even help the webmasters to filter out any posts that do not quite adhere to the FML guidelines that a good post “should be authentic, well written and make you laugh without being too shocking” (Valette, Passaglia, & Guedj, 2013b, para. 2).

FML allows people to disclose information with others who may be having similar days, and allows for people to comment on posts (Valette et al., 2013a). Individuals can still be a part of the website community without registering (Valette et al., 2013a), and this anonymity can reduce anxiety, allowing individuals to more freely share honest thoughts and emotions (Peter, Valkenburg, & Schouten, 2005). The creators explain the bond posters and raters share by saying, “There is a kind of solidarity among all countries when it comes to misfortune. We are all in a big, international pile of crap. We are in it together, the one sad worldwide universality in life” (Barnesandnoble.com, 2013b, para. 1). Even though FML can be considered a satirical site, the previous quote explains how the foundation of the website does contain elements of social support through commiseration.

While the blog site allows for comments, the site is more so used for its rating function. As raters choose which comment they want to rate, they engage in a level of communication with another individual. This communication takes a dark side approach because of the rating options. According to the FML website, “as soon as your story is online, visitors can vote on it in two ways: ‘I agree, your life sucks’ when they concur, or ‘you deserved it’ when, well, when they think you deserved it, obviously” (Valette et al., 2013a, para. 4). While the “I agree, your life sucks” option does include a certain level of understanding, technically, either option has a negative undertone. If an individual rates a comment as “I agree, your life sucks,” then they are giving the other individual warrant to pity themselves. If a rater chooses the “you deserved it” option, then they are telling the other individual that regardless of how negative they may feel, they should feel badly or should be blamed. This leads one to wonder about the types of details people consider when rating a post.

3.2. Social approval online

In all types of communication, it can be assumed that social norms are considered by individuals to gain social approval. Individuals usually learn at a very young age what is socially acceptable, and what they should refrain from doing or talking about. In groups and at the individual level via computer-mediated communication, generic standards of conduct and norms apply (Marques, Abrams, & Serodio, 2001; Wang et al., 2009). The black sheep effect occurs when an individual strays from these norms and does not receive a positive reaction or response (Marques & Paez, 1994).

Within an online setting, especially with a website that requires individuals to rate one another with clear responses such as “hot” or “not” on a physical attraction scale (Or Not Limited, 2013), if an individual likes or approves of something, it can be assumed that the rater feels favorably toward the information provided. If the rater provides this favorable response, we can assume they approve of the action, information, behavior, etc. (Oliver, 1980). According to Bow and Abrams (2003), if an individual is disliked or violates group norms, they will receive undesirable evaluations.

When discussing online communities, SNS, and social support groups via the internet, just as in face-to-face instances, individuals want to be accepted. This desire to be accepted can be reflected in the decision-making process an individual may go through when deciding what information they would like to disclose online. The black sheep effect has been previously studied in relation to individuals making effective decisions (Wang et al., 2009). This shows that there is something to be learned from an individual’s decision-making process, especially if each individual within the group has differing views related to what is and is not acceptable.

4. Project goals

Overall, online communities and SNS have meaningful uses that can be positive. This is evident in situations such as online support groups related to health diagnoses (Coulson, 2005; White & Dorman, 2001) or maintaining interpersonal relationships through SNS (Seligman, 2011). By using computer-mediated interactions, individuals can provide feedback and share or seek information anonymously. Contrarily, online communities and SNS also carry negative characteristics to online relationships. These features are highlighted when the behavior itself is not considered acceptable by societal standards, and individuals hide behind anonymity as they choose to provide negative feedback or make inappropriate choices.

The FML website proves to be very reflective of the bright and dark side of communication. The website almost acts as a social support for individuals who have had humorous unpleasant or undesired experiences, and offers an outlet for them to share their experiences with others allowing them to feel that they are not alone (Valette et al., 2013a). Interestingly, a main function of the site is for individuals to rate the experiences of others. Raters can agree that an individual’s “life sucks” or that the individual “deserved” the negative occurrence (Valette et al., 2013a). Either option reflects a negative outcome. The rater is either commiserating with the poster about how bad their life is, or blatantly telling the poster that the negative occurrence should have happened. This leaves questions related to the social approval from the rater’s perspective.

Since online communities have generic norms and can create their own social norms as they approve/disapprove of certain things (Ellemers & van den Bos, 2012; Wang et al., 2009), individuals each have their own latitude of acceptance (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965). The rater’s viewpoint on FML cannot be tied to a single continuum because opinions and feelings on different topics vary: so, rater attitudes fall within their individual continuums of the latitudes of acceptance or rejection (Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Sherif et al., 1965). How raters socially judge posts acts as an artifact of societal understandings about what is acceptable/unacceptable. Therefore, raters must distinguish whether things are worthy of an FML posting, or whether the poster is just complaining and looking for undeserving sympathy. Due to the relationship between online communities and societal norms and expectations, the FML website will be analyzed with the following question guiding the proposed investigation:

**RQ:** How do the dominant societal standards for social support manifest in raters’ judgments of FML postings?

5. Methods

This study used a mixed method approach to examine how social judgment manifests in raters’ approval or disapproval of
posts to the online website—FMylife.com. Top posts were analyzed over a seven-year period (2008–2014) to shed light on what types of FML posts were deemed socially acceptable (suggesting the posters “lives suck,” which implies some element of sympathy) and what types of postings were socially unacceptable (suggesting the posters “deserved it”). A dual examination of emergent themes as well as the frequency of their presence overtime was gathered to provide a holistic snapshot of raters’ social judgments of FML posts.

5.1. Content analysis

Content analysis was utilized to analyze data for this study because it was considered the best research tool for uncovering a pattern between specific words and concepts within a text (Colorado State University, 2014). In this particular case, the text was the FML website, and the goal was to find a pattern among the concepts that would lead raters to believe that a poster’s life “sucks” or that they “deserved” the situation that transpired. Content analysis was used regularly in the 1940s (Colorado State University, 2014), and continues to be used within a variety of fields including communication, journalism, and psychology (Neuendorf, 2002). This method of data collection and analysis has shown an increase in usage over the years. Specifically, a study completed in Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly showed a 28.5% increase of content analysis usage in that particular journal from 1971 to 1995 (Riffe & Freitag, 1997).

The process of content analysis consists of a step-by-step approach to collecting and analyzing data. When analyzing a particular text, researchers ultimately quantify the appearance of particular terms or concepts, leading them to infer about the messages that exist among the data within the text (Colorado State University, 2014). Historically, content analysis looked for frequency counts for specific terms, but over time the method has evolved into a qualitative and or quantitative method that can also look for a pattern of broad messages and conceptual networks (Carley, 1990). In order to follow the procedure for a content analysis, a researcher codes the text by choosing to either look for words, phrases, or themes and then uses the two most common types of analysis – conceptual analysis, or relational analysis (Colorado State University, 2014; Neuendorf, 2002), or a third type of analysis – procedural analysis (Carley, 1990).

The types of analysis within a content analysis each provide help reaching a different goal. Scholars choose the type of analysis depending on the overall goal of the research study, and what they actually want to know about the text. For example, a conceptual analysis is used when the goal of the study is to either explicitly find a specific numerical count of single terms, or implicitly add a layer of richer definition by looking for terms and phrases that could imply the meaning of the original term used in the explicit conceptual analysis process (Carley, 1990; Colorado State University, 2014; Neuendorf, 2002). Relational analysis is used when the goal of the study is to analyze the text by making connections among the different concepts that emerge to see if there are any relationships between the different elements of the data (Carley, 1990; Colorado State University, 2014; Neuendorf, 2002). The third type of analysis, procedural analysis, is used when the goal of the study is to uncover any actions that may be imbedded in the text (Carley, 1990). This includes looking within the text to find any elements of actions and reactions related to the individuals involved. In this type of the analysis, the text is sort of like the plot of a story, and the concepts that emerge are individuals’ actions, and the procedural analysis tries to uncover any rules that may be embedded within the text (Carley, 1990).

This study emerges from a strong foundation in SJT in order to uncover why individuals would rate specific ideas as deserved or undeserved. The content analysis procedure is a combination of relational analysis and procedural analysis. In order to get a better understanding of the text found on the FML website, it is necessary to look thematically at the different concepts related to each main FML category (“your life sucks” and “you deserved it”), and the relationship the subcategories have with the main rating category. This explains the need for relational analysis. Ultimately, being able to find the connections between why raters deem something as “your life sucks” or “you deserved it” helps explain the mental thought procedure used in the rating process.

5.2. Data sources

The initial population included 25,220 FML posts with a combination of “your life sucks” and “you deserved it” entries. This population was stratified by year to create groups/strata. Stratified sampling involves dividing a population into small groups so random sampling can occur within the groups, allowing for generalizability beyond the sample (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). Third, systematic sampling was used to select 10% of the postings from each category. Systematic sampling involves selecting every nth unit from a sampling frame (Riffe et al., 1998); in this study every 10th article was selected within each group. This yielded a sample of 2,520 posts per main category.

The exhaustiveness of the dataset was sufficient to reach saturation (Silverman, 2011) for the thematic analysis, and also provided generalizability for the content analysis. Each post was treated as one unit of analysis for the content analysis. The use of the actual posts on FMylife.com allowed for authentic language (as published) of individual voices, as received by members of society, and offer unobtrusive, unbiased data source (Creswell, 2009).

5.3. Data analysis

Data analysis involved two phases. In order to shed light on social approval and disapproval of FMylife.com posts, postings were divided into two categories (those that received a majority of “your life sucks” ratings, and those that received a majority of “you deserved it” ratings). All 25,220 FML posts were reviewed for broad themes that emerged consistent with each of the two main groups. As themes emerged (example: physical appearance, exclusion, etc.), subthemes also emerged within each theme as the relationship between ideas and phrases were taken into consideration within the text (example: the mirror is not my friend, and judging a book by its cover, within the theme of physical appearance). As each theme and subtheme emerged, they were assigned pop-culture phrases pertaining to the theme, and a codebook was created and maintained containing definitions. A color-coded scheme was used to group themes and subthemes together. The list of overall themes and subthemes are discussed in the results section, and can be found in the first column of Tables 1 and 2 of the results followed by the frequency in which they appeared within the sample.

Within the two main groups – “your life sucks” and “you deserved it” – postings were first open coded for themes using a priori guide of the following criteria mentioned in the posting: contexts, interactions, emotions, relationships, and language choices. A system of color notations was used to track themes depicted in the data. Themes from the initial coding were analyzed using Boje’s (2001) method of deductive analysis to view etic, or overarching themes. Using SJT as a sensitizing framework, themes from this initial coding were examined for linkages and inductively analyzed to allow emic, or inherent themes to emerge, and reveal points of divergence from the original coding criteria.

The emic themes for “your life sucks” classification coalesced around physical appearance, exclusion, lack of control, embarrassment, and awkward intimate situations. Once these key themes...
were noted, the data set was recoded to indicate how these specific elements of social judgment were employed by raters through their decision to judge whether the posters’ “life sucks.” Additionally, *emic* themes for “you deserved it” classification emerged through negligence, sex/pornography, intentional harm to another, being caught in a lie, and revenge. Two subthemes were identified within each of the five key themes for both classifications of “your life sucks” and “you deserved it.”

Direct quotations of key postings exemplifying social approval and disapproval of “your life sucks” and “you deserved it” were drawn from sample to provide concrete examples of themes that emerged from FMylife.com. The presence of each theme/subtheme is also provided for postings over the seven-year period. The thematic analysis and content analysis results provide insightful findings about societal perceptions of the social acceptability of unfortunate events.

6. Results

People experience undesirable events in many ways—some unexpected and some brought on by the individual. The FML website provides a public outlet for people to anonymously share their humorous unfortunate and undesirable experiences with the rest of society, but society then determines whether a poster is worthy of sympathy or deserving of their unfortunate circumstance. These social judgments of FML posts by raters provide a snapshot into societal perceptions about what is acceptable/unacceptable. Key themes/subthemes identified in the “your life sucks” and “you deserved it” classifications are provided, along with the numerical presence of these subthemes from 2008 to 2014.

6.1. “Your Life Sucks”

6.1.1. Physical appearance

Posts related to the physical appearance theme ranged to cover any and all mention of an individual’s facial or body characteristics. These posts appeared in two primary forms; posts about individual’s physical appearance of themselves, and posts about their appearance by others. Two subthemes were identified within each of the five key themes for both classifications of “your life sucks” and “you deserved it.”

Direct quotations of key postings exemplifying social approval and disapproval of “your life sucks” and “you deserved it” were consistently rated as “your life sucks.” These posts involved the poster making reference to a variety of their physical appearance flaws, or insecurities. For example, one poster referenced their own physical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme/subtheme</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
<th>2011</th>
<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical appearance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The mirror is not my friend</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Judging a book by its cover</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>158</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exclusion</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Odd person out</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>172</td>
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<td>4. Nice people finish last</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>90</td>
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<td>Lack of control</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>5. What just happened?</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>278</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>99</td>
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<td>426</td>
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<td>6. Why would you do that to me?</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>25</td>
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<td>140</td>
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<td>7. OMG, family!</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>83</td>
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<td>8. OMG, can’t believe I did that!</td>
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<th>2012</th>
<th>2013</th>
<th>2014</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>Negligence</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. My bad</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>88</td>
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<td>2. Oh, crap! I didn’t realize</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>58</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>Caught in the act</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Caught with my pants down</td>
<td>8</td>
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<td>4. X-rated oversight</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Eye for an eye</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>6. Emotional karma</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Foot in mouth</td>
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<td>60</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>9. I should’ve seen it coming</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>15</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>10. What goes around comes around</td>
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appearance and said, “Today, I’m 20 and I’m going bald. FML.” Another stated, “Today, I got braces fitted. For the next two years, I’ll be the most handsome guy on earth. FML.” While these posts captured posters’ references to their own physical appearance, a presence of postings about others commenting on the poster’s physical appearance also emerged.

6.1.3. Judging a book by its cover

Entries about someone making a negative or judgmental comment about the poster’s physical appearance were consistently rated as “your life sucks.” These posts discussed a variety of physical appearance flaws or oddities of the poster mentioned by others. For example, one poster said, “Today, I went to the doctor’s office because I was sick. The male nurse led me back and when he weighed me, he said, ‘Why do I get all the beefy girls today? FML.’” Another stated, “Today, I ate at a friend’s house. Her 5-year-old son, who was at the table with us, looked at me and said quietly, ‘you’re ugly.’ FML.”

6.1.4. Exclusion

Raters consistently indicated posters’ mention of exclusion should be classified as “your life sucks.” Posters referenced exclusion in two primary ways; the poster commented on a situation where they were completely out of place, or their personal characteristics of niceness and empathy made them vulnerable to exclusion. The two subthemes of exclusion were named “odd person out” and “nice people finish last.”

6.1.5. Odd person out

This subtheme was distinguished by posters’ description of events where others did not include them that would have normally been expected. For example, “Today, I was sleeping when my roommate walked in and asked me: ‘So...when are you leaving?’ She had decided to throw a party in our apartment. I wasn’t invited. FML.” Another example was, “Today, I found out my ‘best friends’ have gone on a crazy weekend and they didn’t invite me. FML.” While the “odd person out” category exemplifies a variety of situations where posters felt left out of social situations, another form of exclusion emerged—“nice people finish last.”

6.1.6. Nice people finish last

This subtheme represents a different level of social exclusion, and focuses on relational exclusion because of being “nice,” or “good.” For example, “Today, the girl I love told me she was sick of guys. I replied that I happened to be a guy. She laughed and said ‘No, I mean the boyfriend type!’ FML.” Another poster stated, “Today, I found my two best friends making out with each other. Not a big deal, right? Wrong. Today was my wedding day. One of the friends was my maid of honor, the other was my groom. FML.”

6.1.7. Lack of control

Posters described a variety of situations related to lack of control, whether unexpected situations or another person stepping in and taking their personal control away. Postings about lack of control were consistently rated as socially acceptable through raters’ indication that the posters’ “life sucks.” The two subthemes for lack of control are described.

6.1.8. What just happened?

Posters references to unexpected lack of control were quite diverse. One example of a posting that represented this subtheme was “Today, my refrigerator defrosted itself. FML.” Another poster said, “Today, I found out that the horrific smell coming from somewhere in my kitchen was a rotting dead mouse in my dishwasher. I have been eating off plates washed in dead-mouse water for the past week. FML.” While these revolved around posters’ unexpected lack of control, other postings were related to an identified outside influence.

6.1.9. Why would you do that to me?

Lack of control can be felt in a variety of ways; while it emerged as an unexpected occurrence in some postings, others emphasize how lack of control was the result of a particular source. For example, “Today my boss sneezed onto his hands and then licked them in front of my best customers. FML.” Another example is “Today, I was over at a friend’s place until very late. He had stolen my keys as a joke at some point, but by the time I noticed, he was too drunk to remember where he’d hidden them. FML.”

6.1.10. Embarrassment

People also seemed to provide postings with an emphasis on embarrassment. This appeared in two primary ways. Postings either involved embarrassing situations dealing with family members or parents, or mistakes made by the poster themselves. Illustrations from these two subthemes are provided.

6.1.11. OMG, family!

Postings referenced multiple scenarios that involved embarrassing family/parental situations. One example is “Today, my mom asked me if I would be embarrassed if she got a tramp stamp. FML.” Another example for this subtheme is “Today, after having recently told my 4-year-old daughter that she won’t grow big and tall if she doesn’t eat her veggies, she decided to pass this wisdom onto a midget that we passed in the store. FML.” Embarrassment regarding familial situations is embedded in each of these posts, but another level of embarrassment was identified regarding posters’ personal mistakes.

6.1.12. OMG, can’t believe I did that!

People consistently mentioned embarrassing moments that were the results of their own personal oversights warranting raters’ response of “your life sucks.” Some examples of posts representative of this category are “Today, I went out on a date with a girl for the first time. I opened her car door for her and then slammed her leg in it upon closing. She will be in a cast for 6 weeks. FML.” and “Today, I cut myself on a Band-Aid box, while trying to get one out for another cut. FML.”

6.1.13. Awkward intimate situations

People provided many examples of intimate situations that were to be meaningful, but ended up awkward. This theme highlights the intimate aspect of the poster’s interaction (avoiding mention of pornography—this was rated more negatively). The awkward intimate situation theme was judged primarily as “your life sucks” and appeared in two distinct forms—mention of advances and expressions.


Reference to awkward intimate advances was apparent in postings. One example was, “Today, my boyfriend proposed to me by sending me a Bumper Sticker on Facebook that said ‘B****, let’s get married.’ FML.” Another poster said, “Today, when my husband got home from work, I was standing in the kitchen, wearing nothing but stilettos. He asked me to make him hot chocolate. FML.” These posts revolved around comments of intimate advances, but another theme discussed intimate expressions.

6.1.15. “Game” gone wrong

Reference to awkward intimate expressions also emerged as a subtheme. In this theme an individual was involved in a sexual experience when something awkward or uncomfortable occurred. To illustrate postings that represented this subtheme the following
examples are provided: “Today, right after sex, my girlfriend apologizated to the neighbor for screaming. He thanked her for the entertainment, FML,” and “Today, while taking my boyfriend’s virginity, he started moaning, ‘Oh God! Oh God! Oh God!’ and then he started crying and praying, FML.”

6.1.6. Presence of “your life sucks” subthemes
The current study also used content analysis to examine the presence of emergent subthemes across a seven-year timespan. Table 1 illustrates that the most frequently appearing subtheme is why would you do that to me?, closely followed by what just happened?. The least frequent theme observed was the mirror is not my friend. It is important to note that the majority of postings were made in 2009 and postings recently rose in 2013.

6.2. “You Deserved It”

6.2.1. Negligence
A strong theme that emerged from the FML posts was negligence—stemming from both conscious and unconscious situations. Raters emphasized that negligence in any situation is worthy of a “you deserved it” rating, meaning posters deserved whatever the outcome may be. Examples of subthemes are provided.

6.2.2. My bad
This subtheme highlighted the emergence of conscious negligence, and was expressed in a multitude of contexts. Some examples include: “Today, during my beloved’s birthday party, I had so much to drink that I puked all over the room. FML,” and “Today, I did a barbecue. My boss won't believe me tomorrow when I tell him that the main pages of his 2-month work file helped make the best sausages I've ever done. FML.” In contrast, other posters provided instances where they were unconsciously negligent.

6.2.3. Oh, crap! I didn't realize
Posts that represented unconscious negligence involved discussion of an event that happened without the knowledge of the poster. One example of this subtheme is “Today, I'm on holiday, but my alarm clock isn't. It rang at 6 o'clock. FML.” Another example of unconscious negligence is a female poster who posted, “Today, I put my hand up in class. I forgot that I hadn't shaved. FML.”

6.2.4. Caught in the act
Another theme that was observed consistently involved postings about masturbation or pornographic events. These comments highlighted masturbation/pornography and were rated as socially unacceptable, whereas the mentions of intimate situations were more frequently deemed socially acceptable. In particular, masturbation and pornography references are provided for each subtheme.

6.2.5. Caught with my pants down
Posters made references to sexual situations or instances of masturbation, not framed in an intimate way. Raters consistently expressed this was socially unacceptable. Examples include: “Today, we had family over. A nasty need to wank seized me when I saw her: my 17-year-old cousin. I went to my parents’ unoccupied bedroom. My sister’s baby walkie-talkie was switched on, the whole family heard me. FML,” and “Today, to my delight I discover that there is security camera in the storage room at my work. The same room where, two days ago I masturbated. FML.” Posters also had stories to tell about their usage of pornography.

6.2.6. X-rated oversight
Reference to pornography also emerged as a subtheme. For example, “Today, my hard drive on my computer crashed. I took it to my Dad, who is a computer analyst, to see if he could recover anything. The only thing that he could salvage was my illusory collection of porn. FML.” Another example of a poster’s comment was, “Today, I was hitting on a cute girl… she gave me her name to add on Facebook… I opened Safari on my phone. It opened to my video from Pornhub I watched yesterday and started playing, on full volume… FML.”

6.2.7. Bullying backfired
Posters tended to reference how they meant to intentionally harm another person, physically or emotionally. Raters consistently viewed these types of postings as socially unacceptable. Descriptions and examples for these subthemes are provided.

6.2.8. Eye for an eye
Reference to intentional emotional harm also emerged as a subtheme. For example, “Today, I told a friend that he looked smart with his glasses on. He attacked [me]. FML.” Posters also had stories to tell about their intentional emotional harm on others.

6.2.9. Emotional karma
Reference to intentional emotional harm also emerged as a subtheme. For example, “Today, during my beloved’s birthday party, I had so much to drink that I puked all over the room. FML,” and “Today, I did a barbecue. My boss won't believe me tomorrow when I tell him that the main pages of his 2-month work file helped make the best sausages I've ever done. FML.” In contrast, other posters provided instances where they were unconsciously negligent.

6.2.10. Caught in a lie
Posters referenced instances about a lie regarding themselves. In these situations, the poster themselves revealed to someone else that they had lied. For example, “Today, I forgot to do my French homework, but since it was an online worksheet, I told my teacher my Internet wasn't working. I told her with an email. FML.” Another example is, “Today, I decided to cheat on my math test by writing a couple of equations on my hand. As I was heading toward the door, I happily waved goodbye to my teacher. She saw everything. FML.” While posters emphasized self-exposing lies, the other portion of the theme surfaced as posters’ lies were exposed by others.

6.2.11. Foot in mouth
The posters referenced instances about a lie regarding themselves. In these situations, the poster themselves revealed to someone else that they had lied. For example, “Today, I forgot to do my French homework, but since it was an online worksheet, I told my teacher my Internet wasn't working. I told her with an email. FML.” Another example is, “Today, I decided to cheat on my math test by writing a couple of equations on my hand. As I was heading toward the door, I happily waved goodbye to my teacher. She saw everything. FML.” While posters emphasized self-exposing lies, the other portion of the theme surfaced as posters’ lies were exposed by others.

People posted comments about instances where they were “caught” by another person. One example was, “Today, my dad asked me if I started smoking, I gave him a big speech about how I never have and never will. Two hours later he finds my stash of cigarettes under my bed. FML.” Another example was, “Today, my mistress called my wife on the phone. FML.”

6.2.13. Revenge
Individuals commented on instances of revenge in a variety of ways. These attempts at revenge surfaced in two primary ways through the FML postings—others wanting justice and revenge attempts gone wrong. Descriptions and examples are provided.
6.2.14. I should’ve seen it coming
Reference to others seeking justice emerged as a subtheme. For example, “Today, I had an argument with my wife. I told her to get back in the kitchen. How does she respond? By doing what I told her to do, and returning to hit me with a frying pan.” Another illustration of this subtheme was, “Today, I was on a date with a guy... I guess I was on my phone too much because halfway through the date he sent me a text saying how much my half of the bill would be. FML.” While a strong theme regarding people seeking justice emerged, a different twist on revenge also became apparent—revenge where attempts went wrong.

6.2.15. What goes around comes around
Revenge where attempts from the poster themselves went wrong also consistently received social disapproval, and a reputation that related acts were not socially acceptable. Some examples of this subtheme include, “Today, I called the police regarding people speeding down my street because I was worried for my young kids. On the way home from my daughter’s ballet class I got pulled over 2 houses away from my house... FML.” Another example of this subtheme is, “Today I saw my ex-girlfriend across the street. I was walking with a girl... and wanted to make my ex-girlfriend jealous. I kissed her and she immediately smacked me. I got a ‘ha ha’ text message from my ex. FML.”

6.2.16. Presence of “you deserved it” subthemes
The content analysis of the emergent subthemes revealed negligence (both my bad and oh, crap! I didn’t realize) as most frequently receiving social disapproval (see Table 2). Caught in the act references were also commonly present in individuals’ postings and these often received social disapproval. X-rated oversight references were much less frequently posted, but consistently received social disapproval. Revenge attempts gone wrong were mentioned more frequently than postings about others seeking justice over something the poster did, and both were rated as socially unacceptable. Similar to the classification of “your life sucks,” the majority of posts were made in 2009, and the most recent peak since then was in 2011.

7. Discussion
This study reveals that even on a satirical website, when deciding how to rate a post, raters do implore social judgment based on universal ideologies, ethics, and morals. Research from Jin et al. (2012) explains community values are cultivated through community member interaction. Although FML was more so selected as a cultural artifact rather than the epiphenome of pop culture, it still represents a humorous culture that has emerged while retaining universal societal norms and values. The results indicate that people find if remorse is shown, raters feel that forgiveness can be extended through understanding in the context of “your life sucks.” To counter this, raters find it displeasing when someone deliberately causes pain, injury, or harm to others, or behaves without thinking, and therefore feel as though the negative result it had on the poster was “deserved.”

Within the realm of “your life sucks,” the dominant societal standards that were evident were based on lack of control or rejection. For example, due to word choice like “Today my friends...” and “Today I accidentally...,” raters were able to see posters’ remorse when situations were out of the posters control, when the poster admitted to making a mistake, or when the poster openly and awkwardly took a chance without meaning harm. Raters were able to recognize when other people interfered in the well-being or happiness of poster in situations, such as the poster being excluded from an opportunity, or embarrassed by someone close to them, and extended their sympathies by deeming that the situation was indeed out of the posters’ hand, and that “suck[ed].” This concept also extended to situations that hurt posters, or were out of their control, such as their physical appearance.

The virtual FML world, while humorous in nature, still seems to value the ideology that we have been teaching children well before Thumper’s tagline in the movie Bambi, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” (Algar et al., 1942). Perhaps this positive universality evolved from the seven virtues of humanity, charity, love, patience, chastity, temperance, and diligence (Hoopes & Hoopes, 2011). It seems that although the rating of “your life sucks” does allude to commodisation, the support of universal virtues puts a more positive twist on these ratings and may act as more of a comfort. When it was evident that people affecting the poster were acting negatively, raters rated posts in favor of the poster as “your life sucks” by putting those affecting the poster in their latitude of rejection; therefore placing the rater’s situation in their latitude of acceptance.

In the “you deserved it” category, similar but opposing universal ideologies emerged. It seemed raters decided that knowingly making a wrong decision, lying, or engaging in inappropriate activity or harming others (and seeking revenge) would not be tolerated. In order to show their contrary feelings to the poster, a majority of raters voted that the poster “deserved” the negative outcome. This could be because the rater may not want to condone behavior that is universally negative. The seven deadly sins: pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, glutony, and sloth (Hoopes & Hoopes, 2011) are examples of universally negative ideologies, and the themes that emerged in this study reflect some of these concepts. Since parents constantly stress what is “right” and what is “wrong,” topics that are universally negative may lead to high ego-involvement, therefore, raters may have had a larger latitude of rejection when judging intentional harm and negligence, leading raters to choose the “you deserved it” option.

These findings have key implications for the virtual community. According to statistics, 10% of the raters and posters account for 85% of the contributions to that online community (Ling et al., 2005). This shows that this 10% of individuals consistently post and rate because of the connections made within the online social group regardless of their country of origin (Koh & Kim, 2003), and are in reality managing the creation of the social rules and norms that make-up FML. They have formed a culture, and the norms they follow deem what is acceptable or unacceptable since the values within this community are nurtured through the interaction and dialogue created amongst members (Jin et al., 2012). Since generic standards of conduct and norms apply in groups and at the individual level via computer-mediated communication, (Marques et al., 2001; Wang et al., 2009), when individuals stray, they fall prey to the black sheep effect. When a poster communicated negative details like hurting others, not feeling remorse, or lying, they took on the role of the black sheep and the rater branded them with the “you deserved it” label because the comment strayed from the standards of human conduct and the norms of the virtual community.

8. Conclusions
This study sought to explain how societal standards for social support are revealed in raters judgments of postings to the FML website. As a result of the analysis, it was uncovered that raters do use social judgment grounded in universal ideologies and morals when deciding how to rate a post. This process then cultivates a community culture within the FML website that is consistent with research explain how community values emerge through member interaction (Jin et al., 2012). Using context analysis, the FML website was analyzed both at the relational and procedural levels of...
analysis to uncover why raters vote the way they do and the relationship between the elements and themes that emerged. The themes and subthemes that came to light give a better understanding to what members of the FML community deem as appropriate and inappropriate.

Although this study used SJT as a lens to better understand how the dominant societal standards for social support manifest in raters’ judgments of FML postings, this study is not without limitations. First, only 10% of randomized postings for each of the two main voting categories were included within the frequency counts. While 10% may seem low, this 10% was randomized within the FML website layout, and all of the posts where considered when developing themes and subthemes. Also, the analysis of the 10% of FML posts occurred over several months and did not account for any major changes in randomized order. However, the consistent changes to the website format reinforced the randomization of codes, and since these posts were considered the “top” postings per main category, the difference between raters’ attitudes, and the consistency behind what was considered appropriate and inappropriate was large enough to where three months would not skew these results.

This study provides insight into how raters lend their approval or disapproval of posted messages, but did not analyze the comment options to understand any responses or questions raters had as they journeyed to pass judgment on posters. Further analysis of comments could provide more information behind social judgments. Along these lines, future studies may want to analyze similar websites that have spawned since the creation of FML. For example, another website with similar functionality is called MyLifeAverage (Corniche, 2014). Here posters discuss the mundane and raters decide how average the posts are in comparison to daily life.

Another area for possible future research would be the element of the current hash-tag culture. Although the use of the FML website has decreased since it’s early years, the term “FML” continues to be incorporated into different forms of social media in the form of it’s own hash-tag – #FML. Since technology is consistently changing and online communities are also evolving in their functionality, it would be interesting to analyze the #FML culture to see if there are any broad themes that could apply to universal norms and ideologies.

Overall, this study shines a light on the approval and disapproval of messages on a current pop-culture website and online community. Interestingly, while the FML website is not formulated like a majority of social support websites based around health and wellness, the creators of the humorous website insist that the website’s goal is to show others that they are not alone and they can have an open space to commiserate together (Barnesandnoble.com, LLC, 2013b, para. 1). This study sought to understand a fraction of pop-culture social judgments, and as virtual communities continue to evolve and new cultures emerge, it is also important to understand what fuels these social judgments, and if patterns continue to exist or surface.

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