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Low spirits vs. high spirits: How failure and success influence sharing in social media groups

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ABSTRACT

Sharing experience via social media communication has been examined in psychology, sociology, communication and linguistic studies. While this research has mostly examined consumption experience and health issues, how people make meanings and develop interactions while sharing mundane matters needs more investigation. This paper reports on a pragmatic investigation into individuals sharing their exam experiences in social media groups. Data were collected from two support groups on *Douban*, a Chinese social networking site that encourages users to share their thoughts, interests and experiences. A total of 400 original posts, 200 each from a group sharing experiences of failure in examinations and a group sharing their success in examinations, were collected and analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings showed that the two groups were significantly different in the ways they voluntarily disclosed their identities and in the types of expressions they employed to refer to different participants. In addition, they differed significantly in how they sought or offered support in interactions. Similarities and differences between the two groups' sharing are discussed in relation to the instructions of the two groups, their identity construction, the affordances of social media, and the importance of politeness and face in Chinese culture.

1. Introduction

Sharing experiences, opinions and expertise is both facilitated and encouraged by social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TripAdvisor and so on. It is believed that analysing the linguistic patterns in individuals' sharing discourse can provide insights into their thoughts and feelings (Lyons et al., 2018), with studies on such practices encompassing a number of disciplines, including communication, psychology, sociology, public health and pragmatics.

Sharing is a homonym (John, 2017: 146). In this study we are interested in individuals' voluntary sharing experiences during multi-participant communication via social media. Research into sharing personal experiences online has examined social media updating among friends (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2014; Pérez-Sabater, 2021), online consumer reviews (e.g., Vásquez, 2014) and peer support groups (e.g., Pounds et al., 2018). Within the last area, research in support and discussion groups has mostly examined health issues. More research is warranted to investigate individuals' sharing experiences in contexts other than severe health problems, but which still have important consequences for their lives.

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In addition, existing research on sharing has sought to explore the commonness of particular linguistic patterns and pragmatic strategies in individuals' posts. Some studies on online consumer reviews have found variations influenced by platform affordance (Ruytenbeek et al., 2021), product type (Feng and Ren, 2020; Vásquez, 2015) and review valency (Ren, 2018; Kamoen et al., 2015). However, research in contexts other than consumer reviews has rarely investigated whether any such variation exists. A study by Stapleton and Wilson (2017) is one of the exceptions, examining the narratives of two separate groups in a nationalist Belfast community to investigate how shared templates are realised in the two groups. Their results showed that the two groups used different discursive, pragmatic and interactional strategies to achieve different templates, and the authors called for more narrative pragmatics studies to explore variations in activities rather than seeking definitive descriptions of narrative discourse.

Based on these research gaps, this study aims to contribute to pragmatics studies of sharing by investigating individuals' sharing experiences in social media groups, and examining whether opposite exam results lead to pragmatic variations in their sharing posts. It is worth noting that exams, which are frequently talked about in society, are extremely important in China's education system.

2. Literature review

2.1. Studies on sharing experiences in digital communication

Sharing can be defined as a constitutive activity of internet communication such as sharing files, an economy model such as a sharing economy, or a category of speech such as sharing experience (John, 2017). The last sphere is the area of interest in this study, and it has been examined from various perspectives in pragmatics.

A number of studies have investigated sharing mundane life experiences on social media. Androutsopoulos (2014) analysed how two young people from a Greek background shared their experiences on Facebook during a one-year period of transnational mobility between Germany and Greece. He proposed that sharing practices could be analysed as a process of selecting (what to share), styling (how to entextualise what is shared, i.e., represent social activities via the semiotic resources afforded by social media platforms) and negotiating (how to engage the audience to follow up), illustrating how the two participants manipulated their linguistic repertoires to share moments of transnational mobility with their networked audience. Drawing on Androutsopoulos (2014), Pérez-Sabater (2021) examined how particular offline moments affected online exchanges among transnational work colleagues on WhatsApp. The results showed that their offline situation influenced the participants' styling in the WhatsApp group communication.

The above studies examine sharing among friends and colleagues with whom the social media user is acquainted. There are also contexts in which the poster shares experience with a wider audience that he/she does not know. For example, online consumer reviews are a common communication genre among non-acquaintances in asynchronous and usually anonymous computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Vásquez, 2014). People publish their comments on various aspects of their consumption experience, which can range from the quality of products and services and the speed of delivery to their personal feelings and post-purchase experiences (Ren, 2018; Cenni et al., 2020). Prior research has found that online consumer reviews of this kind, and responses to them, consist of a wide range of speech acts, such as complaints, thanking, justification and recommendation (Feng and Ren, 2019; Zhang and Vásquez, 2014). Even negative reviews performed in complaints also often embed positive appraisals (Vásquez, 2011). Product types (Feng and Ren, 2020; Vásquez, 2015) and platform affordances (Ruytenbeek et al., 2021) have been found to affect the length, temporal reference, explicitness and impoliteness strategies in online consumer reviews. In addition, review valence (positive vs. negative) also influences netizens' language use in online consumer reviews, such as (in)direct wording (Kamoen et al., 2015), modification (Ren, 2018, 2019) and (im)politeness strategies (Ren, 2023). For example, Kamoen et al. (2015) found that in positive reviews, direct wording (e.g., good) was considered more positive than indirect wording (e.g., not bad), whereas in negative reviews, they were interpreted as the same negative (e.g., not good vs. bad). Ren (2018, 2019) showed that customers employed more subjectivisers and intensifiers in negative reviews than in positive reviews.

Sharing emotional distress and health problems online is another common modern phenomenon. Online groups have become a popular place for netizens to share problems and seek various kinds of support, since online support networks can increase the users' sense of social connectedness and group belonging (Lyons et al., 2018), which have been found to be beneficial for individuals' psychological and physical health (Rains and Young, 2009; Wright, 2022). The affordances of visibility, anonymity and control often make people feel more comfortable disclosing personal information in online support groups than in face-to-face support groups (Rains, 2018). Pounds et al. (2018) investigated expressions of empathy in a diabetes support group on Facebook, finding that seeking and providing advice from and to others and expressions of social support were central to the support group's discourse. Lyons et al. (2018) examined threads in online discussion forums and found that overall, people with mental distress displayed a higher frequency of personal pronouns and emotional words in online discussion forums than a control group.

Zhao and Mao (2023) analysed help-seekers' identity construction in medical crowd-funding discourses on a Chinese web-based platform. They found that online help-seekers, constructing themselves as family members, patients and disadvantaged individuals, deployed identity as an interactional resource to persuade readers to donate. Focusing on special

support groups for mothers on Facebook, Zayts-Spence et al. (2023) demonstrated that mental health messages are typically framed as 'troubles-talk' (Jefferson, 1988). The mothers shared their experiences online to make sense of their troubles and to seek informal psychosocial support from other members facing similar problems. The authors noted that although sharing one's mental health problems online may require less emotional investment than it does in face-to-face communication, the medium of Facebook does not provide complete anonymity. Therefore, in this paper we focus on sharing on *Douban*, a social media networking site that allows complete anonymity for users to post threads online.

2.2. Sharing through small stories on social media

Online consumer reviews usually share experiences involving little personal pressure, but online support groups often share emotive or highly personal problems that may lead to severe stress. It will be illuminating to examine sharing in between these two extremes – for example, experiences that might cause important consequence for individuals, but which are not as severely stressful as physical or mental health problems. Therefore, we decided to investigate the sharing of exam experiences in online discussion groups.

Page (2012) observes that online forums are typically used to seek or offer information or advice. Similarly, *Douban* groups have a prior defined purpose based on topics of common interest. For instance, the information section for the group "考试失败垂头丧气互相安慰联合会" (the *Federation of Mutual Comfort to Low Spirits after Failure in Examination*) explains its purpose: "Many times it's not that we don't work hard enough, it's just that we lack a little luck in exams. There is a place where we can comfort each other without worrying about being seen by acquaintances, where we can grieve as much as we want, and we can also discuss and accumulate experience together." The description also reminds users that there is another group particularly dedicated to exam preparation. This kind of regulation for group members is referred to as a directive by Georgakopoulou (2023), pre-categorising group experiences and stipulating posting practices and relational actions. Because directives are generally used in pragmatics as a category of speech act, this paper uses instructions to refer to the regulations of *Douban* groups.

However, instructions should not be taken as imposing a deterministic use of storytelling online; rather, netizens have agency to strategically make up their storytelling practices. Georgakopoulou (2021a) analyses the clash between user control and creativity on the one hand and prior categorizations of experiences on the other. In the context of the present study, *Douban* group instructions mean that each group has its own common interest and purpose; for example, the instruction quoted above states that a key purpose of posting in the group is to relieve feelings and attract interaction from the audience, but not be recognised by acquaintances. Therefore, how to share their experience appropriately is crucial for posters in the group.

Stories refer to reports of past events, completed and reflected upon retrospectively (De Fina, 2016; Georgakopoulou, 2021a). They play a crucial role in people making sense of and disseminating their experiences and emotions, allowing them to selectively construct their identities (Bamberg et al., 2007; Page, 2023). Recent research has focused more on investigating storytelling in the CMC as contextualised social practice rather than as text. Unlike the conventional definition of stories, the small story approach has been proposed and developed to analyse stories shared on social media (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou, 2008; Georgakopoulou, 2022; Giaxoglou and Spilioti, 2020). Small stories are characterised by their recency and immediacy, tending to be brief, fragmented or told elliptically (De Fina, 2016; Georgakopoulou, 2023). They may even be reported as they unfold (Page, 2012).

In a series of works, Georgakopoulou (2021b, 2023) argues that it is critical to interrogate the (in)visibilities of tellers-tales-audiences, and illustrates that the process of formatting stories on social media relies on sharing life in the here-and-now, focusing on audience engagement and authenticity in the tellers' self-presentation. Giaxoglou and Spilioti (2020) also emphasise the importance of analysing interaction and participation patterns in social media stories. Building on Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) analysis of small stories, Page (2023) demonstrates the importance of her three levels of analysis of co-tellership in social media posts. She examined stories told by influencers on Instagram, including an analysis of the identities displayed in the stories, the roles taken up by tellers in the mediated interactions, and the ideological implications of the storytelling. Her analyses show that social media influencers often strategically show their personal transformation by using then-now images, so as to increase authenticity in the aspirational identities they create.

As noted above, key life events influence the style of WhatsApp communication (Pérez-Sabater, 2021), and negative vs. positive reviews have an impact on consumers' pragmatic strategies. Inspired by these findings, in this study, we aim to investigate whether key offline events influence netizens' pragmatic storytelling practices in their negative and positive threads. Consequently, the present study examines two contrasting groups on *Douban*, focused on exam failure and exam success respectively, to explore whether the valency of the netizens' exam results (failure vs. success) influences their sharing in the groups. The following specific research questions guided this study:

(1) To what extent do the failure and success groups differ in how they disclose their identities?
(2) To what extent do the failure and success groups differ in terms of references to participants?
(3) To what extent do the failure and success groups differ in how posters engage readers via seeking or offering support?

3. Methodology

3.1. Data and data collection

Data were collected from *Douban*, a Chinese social networking site encouraging users to share their opinions, experiences, and daily lifestyles in a common digital realm. Although posts and comments can only be published by individuals who sign up for an account with *Douban*, all content is public and participants can use any pseudonym they like to identify themselves. Online groups consist of individuals who share similar interests, experiences, or problems. There is no word limit for a message posted on *Douban*.

There are hundreds of groups related to exams on *Douban*, for example, 'Exams of Accounting', 'TOEFL-iBT' and 'Exam Atmosphere Group'. Among all the groups, we deliberately chose two in particular: '考试失败垂头丧气互相安慰联合会' (the Federation of Mutual Comfort to Low Spirits after Failure in Examination, hereafter referred to as the failure group), and '考试成功兴高采烈互相鼓励联合会' (the Federation of Mutual Encouragement to High Spirits after Success in Examination, hereafter referred to as the success group).

We chose these groups for two reasons. First, the two groups met the requirements of the current research, i.e., focusing on opposite results in exams (failure vs. success). Second, the two groups are among the most active groups on *Douban*, with new posts published almost every day. The failure group had 299,436 members and the success group had 121,032 members at the end of September 2023, making them both much more popular than most of the other exam groups that only have dozens or hundreds of members.

We used an automatic data crawler programmed in the Python language to retrieve the posts, and aimed to randomly collect 200 original posts each from the two groups. First, we crawled 240 posts each from the two groups. We then read the posts carefully and excluded posts manually if they were advertisements or about irrelevant themes. The manual selection resulted in 200 posts from the failure group. However, we found that among the 240 posts collected from the success group, many were about the poster's wish to pass their exam, which was not directly about exam success as required by the research. Consequently, we had to exclude this type of post. Therefore, we conducted another round of data crawling for the success group and collected 1000 posts. Finally, after additional rounds of careful reading and manual exclusion, we also selected a total of 200 posts from the success group.

We examined the length of the 400 posts from the two groups. It was a straightforward process to calculate the number of words in each post by using the word count tool. Table 1 summarises descriptive statistics related to the length of the collected posts published by the failure and success groups. As displayed in Table 1, both groups varied greatly in the length of the published posts, with the shortest only a few words and the longest over 2000 words, indicating that posters have significant freedom in the lengths of their posts in *Douban* groups. The posters can share their experiences briefly and in a fragmentary manner, or they can choose to write at much greater length. This is in line with the small story approach introduced in Section 2.2. On average, the failure group's posts were approximately 247 words in length, while the success group's posts contained approximately 223 words. The difference between the lengths of the two groups of posts was not significant ($t = 0.735$, $p = .463$).

Table 1
Length of posts in the failure and success groups (N = 200 each).

Group	Min	Max	Mean	Median	Standard Deviation
Failure	3	2088	247.26	159.00	289.07
Success	5	2424	223.22	98.50	361.39

3.2. Data analysis

Our analysis of the posts in the *Douban* groups adopts the perspective of small stories, positioning storytelling as a complex process of sense-making (De Fina, 2016) and exploring different aspects of tellers-tales-audiences (Georgakopoulou, 2023). For the coding of the data, we analysed individual posts for three different categories using the software NVivo: 1) how the posters construct or disclose their identities (age, gender, major, ability etc.), 2) how they refer to different participation roles, and 3) how they engage their audience by seeking and offering advice or assistance. These three aspects also correspond to the stages of selecting-styling-negotiating (see Section 2.1 for explanations of the terms) in the analysis of sharing practices proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014).

Our coding for the poster's self-disclosure of identity includes neutral self-presentation, self-deprecation and self-praise, and is summarised in Table 2. Neutral self-presentation refers to utterances in which posters provide some background information about themselves without evaluation. If the posters assess themselves, regardless of appearance, skills or abilities, the utterances are coded separately as self-deprecation if the assessment is negative, or as self-praise if the assessment is positive.

Table 2
Coding for self-disclosure.

Types	Definitions	Examples
Neutral self-presentation	The posters offer some background information about themselves without evaluation	*I am 30 years old this year.*
Self-deprecation	The posters negatively assess themselves in terms of appearance, skills, abilities and so on	*(I'm) feeling worthless.*
Self-praise	The posters positively present themselves in terms of appearance, skills, abilities and so on	*I have always been good at English.*

The participation framework is an often-examined topic in technology-mediated communication (e.g., Ren, 2023; Dynel, 2014; Frobenius, 2014). We are aware of the complex nature of participation roles (Goffman, 1981), particularly in CMC genres. This paper is interested in whether the sharing experience (i.e., failure or success in exams) influences how the poster describes themselves, the audience and others. Consequently, coding according to the participation framework results in information about the poster themselves, including how posters refer to themselves and how they are described in reported speeches, by the recipient, and by third parties. In addition to pronouns, which have been well examined in support group studies (Lyons et al., 2018), other personal deixis and linguistic expressions (He and Ren, 2016) can also be used to refer to particular persons. Therefore, coding in this category included personal pronouns, address terms, and other types of directed linguistic expressions such as *louzhu* (楼主, original poster) and *xueba* (学霸, top students).

We also coded how the posters explicitly engaged the readers (Georgakopoulou, 2021b; Pounds et al., 2018) through different speech acts. Although the names of the two groups include comfort (in the failure group) and encouragement (in the success group), the posters often seek and offer advice and various kinds of assistance. Since comfort and encouragement can also be seen as psychological support, we only used advice and assistance in the coding for reasons of brevity.

4. Results

4.1. Self-disclosure of identities

Table 3 presents how the failure and success groups constructed their identities in the posts. As shown in the table, the success group described themselves neutrally (35.25%), negatively (29.50%) and positively (35.25%) in nearly equal distributions. In contrast, the failure group most frequently described themselves neutrally (50%), followed by self-deprecation (40.98%). Self-praise was used much more infrequently (9.02%) in the failure group's posts. Chi-square results showed that the two groups were significantly different in terms of the ways in which they disclosed their identities ($X^2 = 25.27$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 3
Self-disclosure of identities by the failure and success groups.

	Failure	Success	Total
Neutral self-presentation	61 (50%)	49 (35.25%)	110 (42.15%)
Self-deprecation	50 (40.98%)	41 (29.50%)	91 (34.87%)
Self-praise	11 (9.02%)	49 (35.25%)	60 (22.99%)
Total	122	139	261
$X^2 = 25.27$, $df = 2$, $p < 0.001$			

Although *Douban* groups allow users to remain anonymous, the two groups still often disclosed information about their identities in various ways; this occurred in 61% of the posts (122 out of 200) in the failure group and 69.5% (139 out of 200) in the success group. Neutral self-presentation was the most frequent identity construction strategy used by both groups of posters, although it was the same frequency as self-praise in the success group. The failure group described themselves neutrally more frequently than the success group (61 times vs. 49 times), but this difference was not significant ($X^2 = 1.81$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.18$).

For example, the netizens in both groups often revealed background information about themselves to the audience, as shown in the following examples:

(1) 本科专业是经济学 硕也要读经济学 (the failure group)
My undergraduate major is Economics, and I will also study Economics for my master's degree.
(2) 我是去年毕业的，今年二战，本科普通一本金融专业 (the success group)
I graduated last year and took the exam for the second time this year. I majored in Finance as an undergraduate.

The failure group often put themselves down when they talked about their exam failures (50 times out of the 200 posts), making up 40.98% of all their self-disclosures; this is shown in example (3). The success group also downgraded themselves (41 times out of the 200 posts), accounting for 29.5% of their self-disclosures (see example 4). The Chi-square test results

showed that the two groups were not significantly different in their use of self-deprecation in their posts ($X^2 = 1.15$, df = 1, p = 0.28).

(3) 但是我已经不相信自己了。一边准备一边掉眼泪觉得自己是个废物。(the failure group)
However, I no longer believe in myself. While preparing, I shed tears and felt like a waste.

(4) 三年读研压力特别大，焦虑抑郁。毕业后想争取读文科的博士，结果托福成绩一直没有考出来。长时间怀疑自己，否定自己，在挫败的道路上死磕。(the success group)
Three years of postgraduate study was extremely stressful. I was anxious and depressed. After graduation, I wanted to pursue a PhD in liberal arts, but my TOEFL scores were never satisfactory. I doubted myself for a long time, denied myself, and stayed on the road of frustration.

In this study, in the success group 49 posts (out of the 200) contained self-praise, accounting for 35.25% of all self-disclosures. See example (5) as an instance of this. Interestingly, the failure group also sometimes included self-praise in their posts sharing their failure experience (see example (6)), although they did this infrequently, in only 11 posts out of the 200 (9.02% of all their self-disclosures). A Chi-square test results shows that the two groups' employment of self-praise was significantly different ($X^2 = 28.31$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$).

(5) 我太开心啦，就连自己也没有想到自己能这么厉害 (the success group)
I'm so happy. Even I didn't expect that I could be so powerful.

(6) 可能确实有几分聪明吧，小学不用费力学习就可以考的很好，加上长得可爱又很机灵很讨老师喜欢，一直觉得自己与众不同。(the failure group)
Maybe I am somewhat smart. I could do well in elementary school without studying hard. In addition, I am cute, smart and popular with teachers. I always felt that I was different.

4.2. Reference to participants

This section examines the two groups' references to themselves, to the audience as the recipient, and to others as third parties. The results are shown in Table 4. In addition to the posters' explicit references to themselves, at times such references also appeared in posts in the form of reported speech; therefore, second- and third-person pronouns could also realise the function of reference to the poster.

As shown in Table 4, on average the failure group used 1.47 types of expressions to talk about themselves, while the success group used 1.22 types of expressions. A Mann–Whitney U test result showed that the difference between the two groups' references to themselves was significant (U = 17,492, Z = −2.286, p = 0.022), indicating that the failure group used significantly more types of expressions to refer to themselves than the success group did.

The most frequently used expression to refer to the poster themselves was 我 (*wo*, I), followed by 自己 (*ziji*, myself). Other expressions observed include:

a) *different forms of first-person singular pronoun*, including 我自己 (*wo ziji*, literally meaning 'I myself'), 俺 (a dialectal form of 我 *wo*);
b) *different forms of first-person plural pronoun*, including 我们 (*women*, we) and 咱(们) (*zan* or *zanmen*, meaning *we* but emphasising the inclusion of the addressee);
c) *other personal deixis of I*, including 本人 (*benren*, myself), 我本人 (*wo benren*, a combination of *I* and *myself*), and 老子 (*laozi*, literally meaning an old man but often used to refer to the speaker in an impolite and contempt manner);
d) *cyber expressions*, such as 楼主(*louzhu*, original poster) and *lz* (abbreviation for *louzhu*);
e) *different expressions in reported speech*, including 你 (*ni*, you) and 他 (*ta*, he).

The success group also used the kinship term 姐 (*jie*, elder sister) and 苯人 (*benren*, the same pronunciation as 本人 but with a deliberately incorrect character 苯 instead of 本).

Table 4
Reference to different participants by the failure and success groups.

Participants	Failure		Success		Mann–Whitney U test
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
Poster	1.47	1.14	1.22	1.07	U = 17,492, Z = −2.286, p = 0.022
Recipient	0.37	0.72	0.91	0.98	U = 26,767, Z = 6.584, p < 0.0001
Third party	1.83	2.40	1.44	2.83	U = 16,599, Z = −3.139, p = 0.002

In contrast, the recipient was less frequently referred to in both groups' posts. On average the failure group used 0.37 types of recipient expressions, while the success group used 0.91 types. A Mann–Whitney U test result showed that the difference between the two groups' references to the recipient was significant (U = 26,767, Z = 6.584, p < 0.0001), indicating that the success group used significantly more expressions to involve the recipient than the failure group. The expressions used consisted of:

a) *second-person pronouns*, including both singular form 你 (*ni*, you) and plural form 你们 (*nimen*, you);
b) *first-person plural pronoun* 咱们 (*zanmen*, we with the projection of audience);
c) *kinship terms*, including 姐妹(们) (*jiemei* or *jiemei men*, sisters), 兄弟姐妹们, (*xiongdi jiemei men*, brothers and sisters), 家人们 (*jiaren men*, family members), 赛博姐妹们, (*saibo jiemei men*, cyber sisters), 学妹 (*xuemei*, academic sister), 学弟学妹们 (*xuedi xuemei men*, academic younger brothers and younger sisters);
d) *sweeteners*, including 宝宝(们) (*baobao* or *baobao men*, darling), 同学们 (*tongxue men*, classmates), 朋友(们) (*pengyou* or *pengyou men*, friends), 友友(们) (*youyou* or *youyou men*, friends), *uu*(们)/*uus*/*uum* (U represents 友, as the letter U shares the pronunciation with the Chinese character 友, the letter S indicates plural form while the letter M shares the pronunciation of the first letter of 们), *momo* (a nick form for 妹妹*meimei*, sisters), 小伙伴(们) (*xiaohuoban* or *xiaohuoban men*, mates), 战友们 (*zhanyou men*, battle companions);
e) *general referents*, including 大家 (*dajia*, everybody), 大噶 (*daga*, representing 大家), 各位 (朋友/友友/大神) (*gewei*, or *gewei* + *pengyou*/*youyou*/*dashen*, everyone or every friend/GOAT);
f) *particular expressions referring to the group*, including 我们/咱们组 (*women zu* or *zanmen zu*, our group), 组内/里 (*zunei* or *zuli*, meaning within group), 这个组 (*zhege zu*, this group), 备考er (*beikao er*, examinees), 英专儿 (*yingzhuan'er*, English majors), and 楼里的大家/uu (*louli de dajia*/*uu*, everybody or all friends in the group).

The two groups often referred to others as third parties when describing their experiences. As shown in Table 4, on average the failure group talked about third parties 1.83 times, while the success group referred to third parties 1.44 times. A Mann–Whitney U test result showed that the difference between the two groups' references to third parties was significant ($U = 16{,}599$, $Z = -3.139$, $p = 0.002$). References to third parties consisted of:

a) *third-person pronoun*, including 他 (*ta*, he), 他们 (*tamen*, they);
b) *kinship terms*, including 爸爸 (*baba*, father), 妈妈 (*mama*, mother), 爷爷 (*yeye*, grandpa), 奶奶 (*nannan*, grandma), 父母 (*fumu*, parents), 家人 (*jiaren*, family members), 亲戚 (*qinqi*, relatives), 某大妈/大爷 (XX *dama*/*daye*, Auntie/Uncle XX);
c) *occupations*, including 老师 (*laoshi*, teacher), 教练 (*jiaolian*, coach), 辅导员 (*fudaoyuan*, counselor), 老板 (*laoban*, boss), 领导 (*lingdao*, literally meaning leaders), HR (the abbreviation for human resources);
d) *sweeteners*, including 同学(们) (*tongxue* or *tongxue men*, classmates), 室友 (*shiyou*, roommate), 朋友(*pengyoun*, friend), 小伙伴 (*xiaohuoban*, mate), 学霸 (*xueba*, top students);
e) *general expressions*, such as 身边人 (*shenbian ren*, meaning people around), 高学历的人 (*gao xueli de ren*, highly educated people), 轻松的人 (*qingsong de ren*, relaxed people);
f) *names*, including full names or given names of particular persons. The last category was only used by the success group, usually in thanking and recommending some public professional trainer's service and help.

4.3. Engagement with the recipient

In addition to addressing the recipient, as analysed in the previous section, the posters also directly engaged with the recipient through the speech acts of requesting and offering advice or assistance. Table 5 compares the two groups' intentions in these two aspects. Chi-square test results showed that the two groups differed significantly in terms of seeking or offering advice and assistance from and to the recipient in their posts ($X^2 = 95.75$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 5
Seeking or offering advice or assistance by the failure and success groups.

	Failure	Success	Total
Seek advice or assistance	44 (77.19%)	6 (5.22%)	50 (29.07%)
Offer advice or assistance	13 (22.81%)	109 (94.78%)	122 (70.93%)
Total	57	115	172
$X^2 = 95.75$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$.			

When sharing their exam experience, the failure group often (44 out of the 200 posts) explicitly sought advice or assistance from the reader. As shown in examples (7) and (8), after talking about their choices and listing the advantages and disadvantages of each choice, the poster expressed their wish to consult the recipient and solicit advice from them.

(7) 该怎么选择更好？需要建议！(the failure group)
What is the better choice? Need advice!
(8) 把优缺点列了一下，大家能给我一些建议吗？(the failure group)
I have listed the advantages and disadvantages. Could you give me some advice?

The analyses showed that even the success group sought advice or assistance from readers, although much more rarely (only 6 out of the 200 posts). Chi-square test results showed that the two groups were significantly different in terms of seeking advice or assistance in their posts ($X^2 = 33.01$, $df = 1$, $p < 0.001$). When the success group did seek advice or

assistance, they mostly asked for the recipient's advice on how they could celebrate their success and happiness without offending others, as illustrated in example (9):

(9) 我想搞一点大张旗鼓的庆祝，本人社牛，只要不违法怎么庆祝都行，比如海底捞拉横幅那种我都想过了，大家有什么好建议吗？(the success group)
I want to have a grand celebration. I'm a social butterfly. As long as it's not illegal, I can celebrate in any way. For example, I've thought about pulling banners in Haidilao [a popular hot pot restaurant]. Do you have any good suggestions?

There was only one instance in the success group in which the poster explicitly expressed their wish to receive encouragement from their post's recipients, as shown in example (10).

(10) 工作快3年了，才去考研，这次上岸东南大学了，但是往日的同学今年研究生已经要毕业了，往日的同事也已经开始买房结婚了，突然发现上岸了却没有能分享喜悦的同龄人。大家都在忙自己的事情，不想打扰别人，从初试到复试近一年的备考经历，感觉只有得知上岸的一瞬间是喜悦的，但很快就消散了。大家可以鼓励下我嘛？(the success group)
I had been working for almost 3 years before taking the postgraduate entrance examination. This time I was accepted by Southeast University. However, my former classmates are already graduating from graduate school this year. My former colleagues have also started to buy flats and get married. Suddenly, I found that I had no peers to share my joy with. Everyone was busy with their own business. I don't want to disturb others. After nearly a year of preparation from the preliminary exam to the second exam, I felt that I was only happy when I learned that I was accepted, but it quickly dissipated. Could you encourage me a bit?

In this example the poster shared that they had finally succeeded in passing the postgraduate admission exam and had been accepted into a key university after working for almost three years. In contrast, however, their previous classmates were already graduating, and their colleagues were leading happy lives. They felt they did not have friends to share their happiness, and could only celebrate their success in the group and seek encouragement from the other group members.

It was quite common for posters in the success group to express their good wishes towards their readers by offering their willingness to help, tips for exams, and advice and information about taking exams (109 out of the 200 posts). Some offers were quite short, such as example (11), which is an indirect promise, while some were longer with detailed advice and information (see example (12)). The longest advice in the present dataset consisted of approximately 2000 words, which cannot be reproduced here due to space limitations.

(11) 考研英语方面需要帮助的uu可以问俺！(the success group)
If you need help with English for the postgraduate entrance examination, you can ask me!

(12) 我的经验吧，感觉就两条。充分的准备和放松的心态。 放松的心态这一点，太多人说了。可是对于考试紧张的人来说，越想放松可能越紧绷。我的想法是可以从一些难度简单的小考试开始，培养自信心，熟悉考试的氛围。 我觉得充足的准备，这一点更重要。对于一次考试，究竟你准备得充不充分，只有你自己最清楚。切忌表演性复习，不要假装学习，不要自我感动。(the success group)
From my experience, there are only two opinions. First, be well prepared and relaxed. Too many people have said this about a relaxed state of mind. However, for people who are nervous about exams, the more they want to relax, the more nervous they may become. My idea is to start with some small-scale and easy exams to develop self-confidence and become familiar with the atmosphere of the exam. I think adequate preparation is more important. For an exam, only you know best whether you are fully prepared or not. It is crucial to avoid performative review. Do not pretend to study, and do not impress yourself.

In contrast, the failure group also offered advice or assistance in their posts, but much more infrequently (in only 13 out of the 200 posts). For instance, in example (13) the poster suggested that readers should not take the civil servant exam in other cities. Chi-square test results showed that the two groups were significantly different in terms of offering advice or assistance in their posts ($X^2 = 108.69$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$). The success group offered advice and assistance much more frequently than the failure group.

(13) 本帖用于提醒组内考公选择不要异地。(the Failure group)
This post reminds students in the group not to choose to take the civil servant exam in other cities.

5. Discussion

This study has investigated whether failure or success in exams influences netizens' posts sharing their experiences in support groups on an anonymous social networking site, *Douban*. A corpus of 400 posts, collected via automatic data crawling and manual selection, varied greatly in terms of their length, with the shortest only a few words and the longest over 2000 words. The varied length of the posts confirms De Fina's (2016: 478) observation that stories on social media vary widely, ranging "from autobiographical or biographical stories, to stories of personal experience, to anecdotes, to small stories".

Guided by the small story paradigm, we first examined the posters' self-disclosure of their identities. The findings showed that although the social networking site allowed anonymity, the posters in both groups often disclosed information about their identities to some extent to enhance the authenticity of their sharing experience. This finding is in line with previous observations in research on small stories (Georgakopoulou, 2021b, 2023; Page, 2023) and support groups (Rains, 2018; Wright, 2022). Taken together, it is possible to conclude that netizens are aware that even if anonymity is allowed, a certain amount of self-presentation and identity construction can increase the authenticity in their posts and enhance trust for the reader, as trust is highly valued in Chinese culture (Zhao and Mao, 2023). Such posts thereby attract more attention, more interaction and more information exchange from the reader.

However, the results also showed that the two groups were significantly different in terms of the frequency with which they used self-praise. It was not surprising to find that the success group praised themselves more frequently than the failure group, but it was insightful to discover that the failure group also employed self-praise in sharing their failure experiences. Qualitative analyses of the failure group's 11 self-praises showed that the posters intended to positively present their personal qualities (Spencer-Oatey, 2008), including competence (seven instances), confidence (three instances) and intelligence (one

instance). That is, the self-praises were not used in a sarcastic manner. This finding suggested that even though they might have failed their exams, sometimes netizens still wanted to communicate their strengths, perhaps in order to build their confidence and maintain their positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987), the positive self-image or personality claimed by themselves. As one netizen wrote, “What I emphasise is that I am not always horrible”.

The success group presented themselves neutrally and positively in equal percentages (35.25%), with negative self-assessments appearing slightly less frequently (29.50%). It is to be expected that when netizens share their successes they aim to elevate their positive face via self-praise, in order to demonstrate their credibility and boost their ego (Ren and Guo, 2020). Indeed, this was encouraged by the instructions in the success group and echoed in the group's name which specified “high spirits after success in examination”. Even so, the netizens in the success group still often felt obliged to mitigate their success by self-deprecation. There may be two possible reasons for this. On the one hand, it may be hypothesised that netizens in *Douban* groups perceive each other as in-group members; this is also suggested by the frequent use of kinship terms and expressions about the group, discussed in Section 4.2. This would imply that posters care about their readers' positive face as well, leading them to downgrade their own “high spirits” in their posts by using self-deprecation to achieve a level with their recipients (Kim, 2014) who may not have passed the exam yet. By disclosing their own intellectual shortcomings and negative characteristics, they can also appear modest and open to the audience (Elden, 2023).

On the other hand, netizens in the success group often deprecate themselves in the past in order to highlight the appropriateness of their self-praise in the current moment. For instance, in the message “I have always been poor in English and even developed a fear of it. Although the CET-6 score was not particularly high this time, it was greater than 425. I feel that I have been making progress. I am truly amazing.”, the poster disclosed his/her poor English in the past only to highlight the success of the CET-6 English exam and the progress he/she had made. This strategy of contrasting between past and present was documented by Ren and Guo (2020) in their examination of Chinese self-praise on social media. It also echoes Page's (2023) finding that then-now comparisons are often used as a strategy by social media influencers seeking to increase their authenticity by showing their personal transformation.

Second, the study found that posters in both groups used a wide variety of linguistic expressions to refer to themselves, the recipients of their posts, and others. The failure group used significantly more types of expressions to entextualise and (re) contextualise the poster themselves and third parties than the success group, while the success group used significantly more types of expressions to address the recipient than the failure group. Lyons et al. (2018) found that people experiencing distress used first- and third-person pronouns more frequently than people who were not in distress. In line with this finding, it is reasonable to hypothesise that the higher numbers of references to themselves by the failure group may indicate their distress and an in-ward focus on the self after exam failure, and the higher numbers of references to third-parties reflect their attention and sensitivity to others. In contrast, the success group involved the recipient more. According to Ren and Woodfield (2016), strategies referring to recipients indicate moves toward the recipient. Therefore, these findings indicate the success group's emphasis on being considered as supporting members of the group, and their intention to interact with the audience and build up in-group solidarity. This difference in styling (Androutsopoulos, 2014) in terms of references to posters and recipients in the two groups' posts indicates that it is not the subject (in this case, sharing exam experience) that matters; rather, it is the offline situation (failure vs. success) that impacts the adoption of different preferences for addressing participants. This is also in line with observations by Pérez-Sabater (2021) that key offline events influence transnational workers' communication style in relation to sharing on WhatsApp.

Third, irrespective of frequency, both groups strategically manipulated their potential interaction with recipients by seeking and offering advice or assistance. However, the two groups positioned themselves differently. Although seeking advice or assistance implicitly places themselves in a lower position and threatens their positive face (Brown and Levinson, 1987) in relation to positive personal qualities such as competence, the failure group also tended to express this explicitly, which is hypothesised to attract compassion or emotionally sympathetic reactions from recipients (Giaxoglou and Spilioti, 2020). This tendency to explicitly seek support may be influenced by the affordances of anonymity in online discussion groups (Rains, 2018), which mean that posters can distance themselves from their posts and the social support they may receive.

In contrast, the success group positioned themselves as authorities with insider knowledge and successful experience related to particular exams, who were able to offer advice and assistance and provide specific information about particular third parties who may offer further support. Since the success group was set up to encourage each other and to celebrate “high spirits” after exams, it had become a local group ritual that original posters would offer support to the group as a way of showing gratitude to other members. Offering personalised advice can enhance the solidarity of a group, conforming to the requirement to “Maximize benefit to other” in Leech's (1983: 132) Tact Maxim. In this study, offering advice was often realised by experience sharing, reducing any potential threat to the recipient's positive face (Pounds et al., 2018).

In general, sharing exam experiences in online groups represents a convenient and easy-to-access space for individuals to release their emotions (either negative or positive) and seek social support, with less judgement and fewer obligations from acquaintances in comparison with face-to-face communication (Wright, 2022). As shown by this study, examining the pragmatics of this kind of social practice can provide researchers with a way to investigate how meaning making and relationship building are achieved in online communication.

This study makes a few contributions to the literature. First, by analysing the sharing of experiences in *Douban* groups, the study has expanded the literature on particular social media platforms and demonstrated a valid way to explore the possible influence of the affordance of anonymity in individuals’ emotional investment in sharing stress or mental problems, which

Zayts-Spence et al. (2023) cautioned about in their analyses of Facebook groups. Second, the study examined how posters construct identities, how they entextualise and (re)contextualise participants, and how they manipulate interactions with recipients, thereby providing an analytic framework to empirically explore the (in)visibilities of tellers-tales-audience emphasised by small story researchers (e.g., Georgakopoulou, 2023).

Third, rather than interrogating sharing experience by netizens as a homogeneous group, the study compared the situated performance of two contrasting groups, i.e., a group who had failed their exams and a group who had succeeded. Such comparisons can reveal individuals' own ways of sharing with networked audiences in different groups (Stapleton and Wilson, 2017), deepening our understanding of the pragmatics of sharing experience in online communication. Finally, examinations of effective sharing among online peer groups are conducive to training individuals to relieve their stress, manage their emotions, identify potential risks and prevent severe depression.

6. Conclusion

This study has offered a pragmatic examination of individuals sharing their experiences after success or failure in exams on an anonymous Chinese social networking site. The results have shown that their offline situations of failure or success influenced the netizens' posting. Specifically, the two groups were similar in terms of disclosing their identities neutrally and negatively. However, the failure group used more types of expressions to talk about themselves and third parties, and they sought advice or assistance more frequently in order to engage their recipients. In contrast, the success group praised themselves much more frequently, used more types of expressions to refer to the recipient, and offered more advice or assistance in order to interact with their recipients.

The present study offers some implications for future research. First, the study could only examine one aspect at each of the three levels of analysis of tellers-tales-audiences. Future studies are encouraged to explore other aspects of analysis, or focus on one analysis dimension and engage in a more nuanced examination. For example, it would be illuminating to conduct a detailed analysis of the use and frequency of personal deixis in sharing experiences among test-takers who had different exam results. Second, the present study only examined how posters shared their experiences by examining their original posts. Examining the relationships between original posts and replies in threads will provide more insights into the interaction in online groups. Finally, this study only investigated individuals' sharing after they passed or failed exams in general. Although it falls beyond the realm of pragmatics, future research could delve into different types of exams, exploring the various impacts of the exams' importance on the test-taker's sharing and emotions. This will be particularly useful to provide support to students suffering stress or mental health problems related to their examinations. To date, most related research has examined settings in English-speaking countries. More empirical studies in non-English speaking settings, such as the present study, will be beneficial for a broader understanding of sharing across different languages and cultures.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Wei Ren: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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