Introduction

Literature Review

- Negative attentional bias: Tendency for depressed individuals to attend to negative vs. positive or neutral stimuli (e.g., Beens, 2005; Schnyer et al., 2015).
- Individuals at risk for depressive disorders perceive themselves and the world around them negatively (Beck, 1967).
- For example, depression is characterized by (Baddeley, 2012; Rude, Gortner & Pennebaker, 2004)... Increased negative emotion words (cried, dread, idiot) and self-focus (I, me, my).
- Less social engagement, as indicated by lower language style matching (LSM) in emails.

Research Questions

- Will anxious or depressed participants be more socially engaged with negative (vs. positive) posts?
- Will social comparison (feeling better/worse than or equal to prompt authors) relate to social engagement?

Method

Sample

- 104 participants recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk
- 61.5% men
- Age M = 36.8, SD = 10.3

Measures & Materials

- LIWC (Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd, & Francis, 2015): % of total words:
  - LSM function word categories: Personal and impersonal pronouns, articles, auxiliary verbs, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, negations, quantifiers
  - Social words (e.g., help, friend, chat)
- Social engagement
  - LSM: Degree to which participants’ style matched with prompts:
  \[ 1 - \left( \frac{|p_{pron} - p_{pronprompt}|}{p_{pron} + p_{pronprompt} + 0.0001} \right) \]
  - Self-report: Desire to further engage with the author (e.g., “I want to talk with this person one-on-one in private messages.”)
- CESD-R (Centers for Epidemiological Studies of Depression Scale-Revised): Assessed depression in 20 items, e.g., “Nothing made me happy”
- GAD-7 (Generalized Anxiety Disorder scale): Evaluated frequency of recent anxiety symptoms in 7 items, e.g., “Trouble relaxing”

Downward/Upward Comparisons: Participants’ comparison with the prompt author’s current state, e.g., “The author’s situation right now is better than mine.”

Writing task: Participants read two (positive and negative) Reddit-style prompts then responded with advice.
- Topics: Mental health, fitness, career/life goals, dating, finance.

Results

- Effect of tone on LSM was moderated by anxiety (p = .030), not depression:
  - Less anxious people matched more with the negative prompt, B = -.036, SE = .01, t = -3.55, p < .001.
- Effect of prompt tone on LSM was partly mediated by downward comparison, p = .057, Indirect effect 95% CI (-.012, -.001).
- Non-depressed participants used more social words than depressed participants, B = 1.95, SE = .80, t = 2.43, p = .017.

Negative Mental Health Prompt: “I’m just going through the motions ... Maybe if I had someone who really loved me things would be different. I feel so alone. I wish someone would care about me, no one ever does. When I think about this, how I’m in all alone with nobody there for me, by my side, my chest hurts so badly I can’t even breathe. That’s why I like sleeping so much.”

Response (non-depressed, non-anxious 34-year-old man with high LSM and high downward comparison):

“How can anyone else love or respect you when you don’t respect/love yourself? I don’t mean to sound harsh, I do sympathize with you, but wallowing and being pessimistic isn’t going to do anything but make your situation worse. Drag yourself out of bed and start exercising every day, and I mean vigorous exercise. Give it everything you have...”

Discussion

- Downward comparison may buttress mental health by allowing people to feel both helpful and better-than-average:
  - Self-esteem threats lead people to derogate others to restore self-esteem (e.g., Crocker & Parker, 2004)
  - People at all self-esteem levels benefit from negative validation or commiseration (Marigold et al., 2014)
  - Viewing positive Facebook posts decreases well-being (Kross et al., 2013)
- Are LSM-by-tone effects moderated by relation to authors (stranger vs. friend)?