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# Social Support for Weight Loss: Online Friends Versus Real Friends

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# SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR WEIGHT LOSS: ONLINE FRIENDS VERSUS REAL FRIENDS



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# Collaborators

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# Social contagion



- Obesity is “socially contagious” such that people are significantly more likely to be obese when they have an obese spouse and/or friends (**Christakis and Fowler, 2007**)
- Health habits are also shared in social circles
- **Good news:** *If you adopt healthy behaviors, your family and friends may be more inclined to.*
- **Challenge:** *To get healthier, you’re gonna need to find some healthy friends.*

# “Peer to peer healthcare”



- 34% of internet users have read about someone else's experience with a health condition on the internet (Pew Internet Survey 2012)
- 25% of internet users with a chronic health condition have sought out others with that condition on the internet (Pew Internet Survey 2012)



**Find Patients Just Like You**

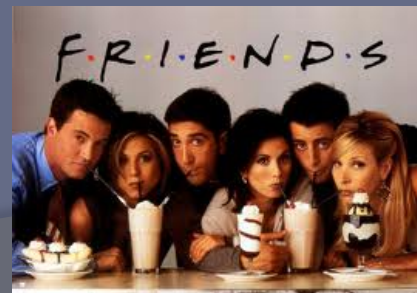
Do you have a life-changing condition? Learn from the real-world experiences of other patients like you.

A grid of small, square photographs showing a variety of people of different ages, ethnicities, and genders, representing a diverse community of patients.

# Organic online social network for weight loss on Twitter?



- **Observation:** There is a subculture of Twitter users who use it to talk about their weight loss journey.
- **Study:** How much positive and negative social influence about weight loss do people get from Twitter vs Facebook vs in-person friends, vs family?



# Methods



- PI tweeted the survey 33 times over 4 weeks to get 90 complete responses for 2.72 surveys/tweet
- Tweet: *“Do you tweet about your weight loss journey? Complete a brief survey!”*
- Survey evaluated:
  - 4 areas of positive social influence (comfort, helpful, informative, supportive)
  - 2 areas of negative social influence (embarrassment, judgmental)



# Participants

- 90 surveys completed
- 79 participants had both Twitter and Facebook accounts
- 82% female, mean age = 35 (range 21-57)
- Mean weight lost in current weight loss effort = 35 lbs, sd=36 (range 0-193 lbs)



	Twitter	Facebook	p value
<b>Account duration</b>			.11
< 1 year	25.3%	1%	
1-3 years	55.7%	17%	
3+ years	19%	81%	
<b>Log-in frequency</b>			.60
Several times/day	68%	57%	
Daily	23%	25%	
Less than daily	9%	17%	
<b>Number of friends/follows</b>	437 (533)	474 (621)	.73
<b>% of friends/followers originated from an offline relationship</b>	12% (19%)	82% (26%)	<b>.00</b>



# Items

I feel **comfortable** talking about weight loss, diet, and exercise with \_\_\_\_\_.

In general, I find \_\_\_\_\_ to be very **helpful** to me as I try to lose weight.

I get **support** from \_\_\_\_\_ about my weight.

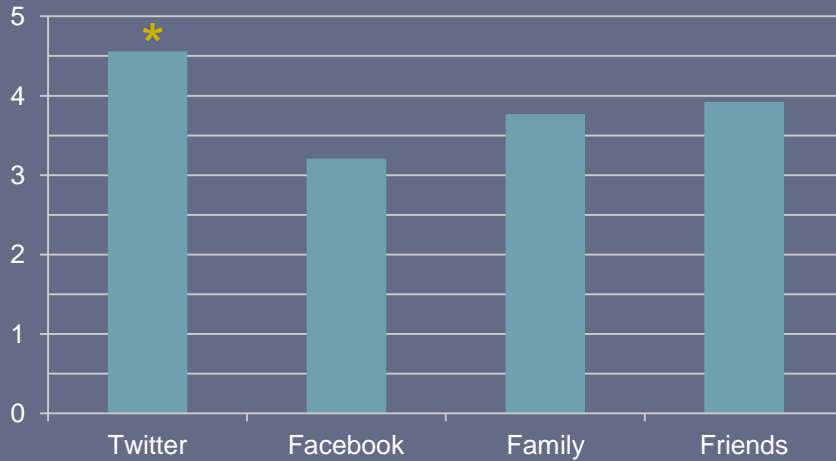
I get useful **information** from \_\_\_\_\_ about weight loss, diet, and/or exercise.

I have **felt embarrassed** about my weight when it comes to \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ tend to be **judgmental** about my weight.

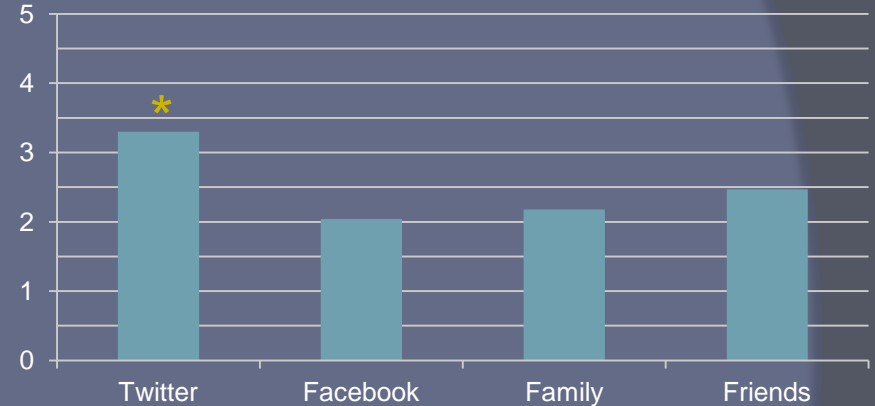
# Social Support

## Comfort Talking About Weight

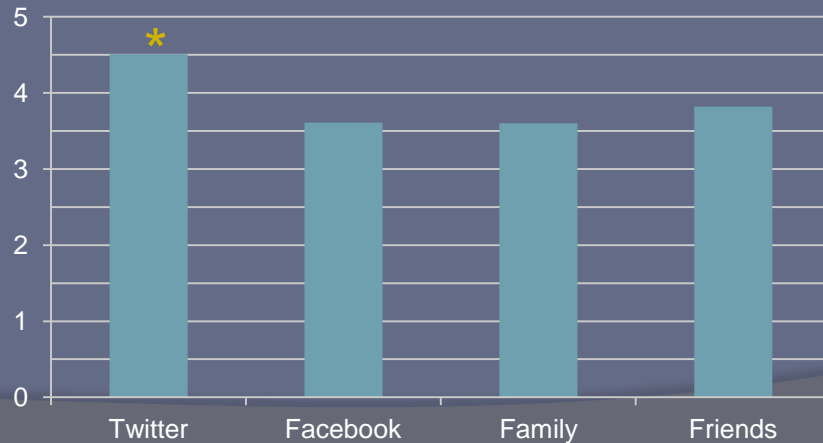


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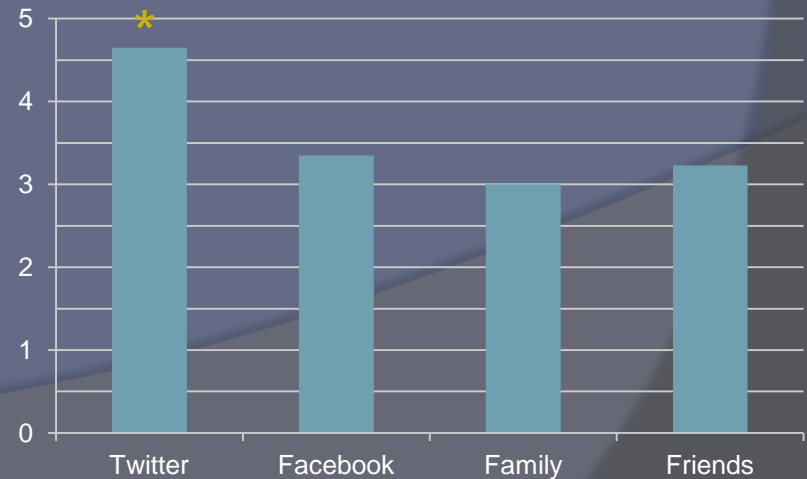
## How Helpful Are They To Your Weight Loss Effort



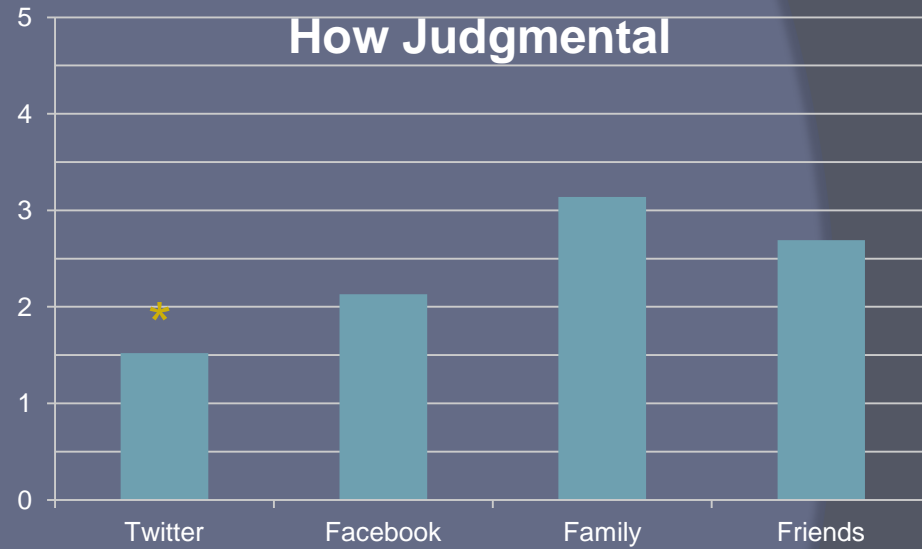
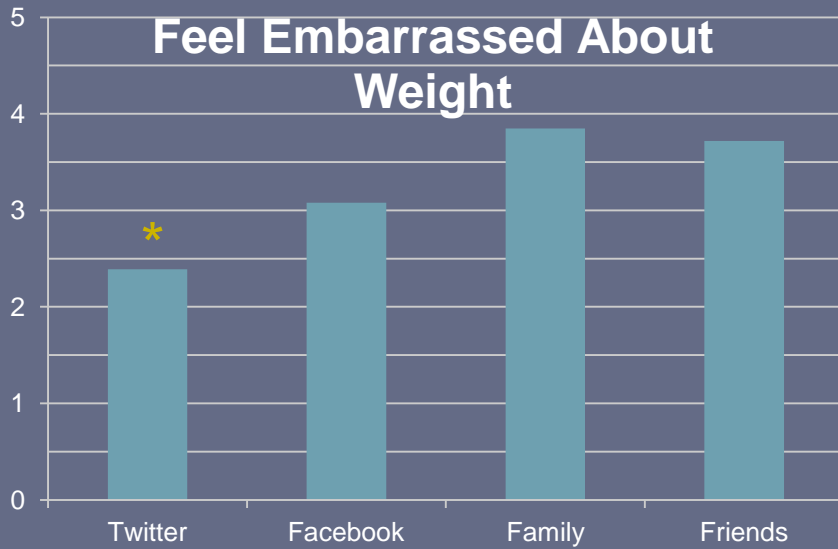
## How Supportive to Your Weight Loss Effort



## Get Information



# Negative influence



# What Do You Like Most?

Twitter (n=103 responses)		Facebook (n=28 responses)	
Sharing information	31%	Support/encouragement	32%
Support and encouragement	21%	Information sharing	18%
Common interest/community	17%	Find in person friends with weight struggles	18%
Motivation/inspiration	13%	Pic sharing	14%
Anonymity	10%	Forming a private group	11%
Lack of judgment	6%	Way to drive people to Twitter	4%
Conciseness of tweets	1%	Lack of judgment relative to face-to-face interactions	3%

# What Do You Like Least?

Twitter (n=36 responses)		Facebook (n=34 responses)	
Social comparison	19%	Friends don't care/think I'm bragging	26%
Too much info	19%	Don't want friends to know	23%
Lack of personal connection/don't live close to people I follow	17%	Misinformation/bad advice	20%
Inconsistent response from followers	14%	Judgmental	20%
Ads/spam	11%	Social comparison	1%
140 character limit	8%		
Cliques	6%		
Misinformation	3%		
At first hard to find people to follow	3%		

# Discussion points

- Twitter is a source of positive social support for weight loss (more so than Facebook)
- Why?
  - More likely source of encouragement, community and information than Facebook
  - Anonymity may circumvent stigma/shame, disinhibits discomfort about talking freely
  - Social network is hand-crafted, negative forces are easy to eliminate





# Limitations

- Selection bias –recruiting from Twitter may have selected folks who are more positive about Twitter than Facebook
- No social support measure has been developed specifically for online social behavior





# Future Research

- We need theoretical models of online social interaction
- Can social media-naïve people be entered into these networks and benefit?
- What are the characteristics of people who are drawn to online social networks?

Find us on Twitter:



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