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

How Supportive to Your Weight Loss Effort

How Helpful Are They To Your Weight Loss Effort

Get Information

Twitter Facebook Family Friends

Twitter Facebook Family Friends

Twitter Facebook Family Friends

Twitter Facebook Family Friends
Negative influence

Feel Embarrassed About Weight

How Judgmental

Twitter | Facebook | Family | Friends
--- | --- | --- | ---
2 | 3 | 4 | 3
* | 2 | 3 | 2

Twitter | Facebook | Family | Friends
--- | --- | --- | ---
1 | 2 | 3 | 2
* | 1 | 3 | 1
### What Do You Like Most?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Twitter (n=103 responses)</th>
<th>Facebook (n=28 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>Support/encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and encouragement</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>Information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common interest/community</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Find in person friends with weight struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivation/inspiration</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Pic sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>Forming a private group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of judgment</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>Way to drive people to Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conciseness of tweets</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>Lack of judgment relative to face-to-face interactions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### What Do You Like Least?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Twitter (n=36 responses)</th>
<th>Facebook (n=34 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social comparison</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Friends don’t care/think I’m bragging 26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too much info</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Don’t want friends to know 23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of personal connection/don’t live close to people I follow</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>Misinformation/bad advice 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inconsistent response from followers</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Judgmental 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ads/spam</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Social comparison 1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140 character limit</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cliques</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misinformation</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At first hard to find people to follow</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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?
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@EffieChung
@300lbsandrunnin