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Social Support for Weight Loss: Online Friends Versus Real Friends

Sherry L. Pagoto
University of Massachusetts Medical School

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SOCIAL SUPPORT FOR WEIGHT LOSS: ONLINE FRIENDS VERSUS REAL FRIENDS

Sherry Pagoto, PhD
Associate Professor of Medicine
University of Massachusetts Medical School
Collaborators

Kristin Schneider, PhD

Effie Olendzki

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 originated from an offline relationship</td>
<td>12% (19%)</td>
<td>82% (26%)</td>
<td>.00</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**

- Twitter: 5
- Facebook: 3
- Family: 4
- Friends: 4

**How Supportive to Your Weight Loss Effort**

- Twitter: 5
- Facebook: 3
- Family: 4
- Friends: 4

**How Helpful Are They To Your Weight Loss Effort**

- Twitter: 5
- Facebook: 3
- Family: 4
- Friends: 4

**Get Information**

- Twitter: 5
- Facebook: 3
- Family: 4
- Friends: 4
Negative influence

Feel Embarrassed About Weight

How Judgmental

Twitter | Facebook | Family | Friends | Twitter | Facebook | Family | Friends
---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---
0 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 3

* Indicates significance
## What Do You Like Most?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Twitter (n=103 responses)</th>
<th>Facebook (n=28 responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharing information</strong></td>
<td>Support/encouragement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Support and encouragement</strong></td>
<td>Information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common interest/community</strong></td>
<td>Find in person friends with weight struggles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motivation/inspiration</strong></td>
<td>Pic sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Anonymity</strong></td>
<td>Forming a private group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lack of judgment</strong></td>
<td>Way to drive people to Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conciseness of tweets</strong></td>
<td>Lack of judgment relative to face-to-face</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1%</td>
<td>interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3%</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?
Find us on Twitter:
@DrSherryPagoto
@DrKrisSchneider
@EffieChung
@300IbsAndRunnin