

TWITTER + HEALTH: THE PSYCHOSOCIAL IMPACT OF SHORT-FORM TEXT-BASED MESSAGES ON WELLBEING

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ABSTRACT

Social relationships are one of the most well-documented psychosocial factors influencing physical and mental health. Benefits include decreased mortality and levels of distress, increased feelings of security, belonging, and self worth, and a source of regulation for maintaining healthy behaviors.

Over one billion people are a member of at least one online social network, designed to forge and maintain social ties, and 75% of the world's population communicates through a mobile phone. This study quantifies how digital exchanges impact wellbeing and feelings of perceived social support among users. Hypotheses were tested using Twitter, the interactive microblogging service that is utilized on a mobile device by 300 million active users.

My research puts forth a new theory known as the theory of perceived companionship, concluding that short-form text-based communication presents unique affordances to facilitate the development of companionate relationships known to improve health. Hypotheses were tested with an online survey of 61 Twitter users, which evaluated network structure, expectations for interactions, and explicit reactions to digital correspondences along metrics known to boost wellbeing.

Results indicate that Twitter users are not directly connected through channels outside of Twitter but nonetheless accrue some personal benefit from interactions with these weak ties, especially during interactive exchanges such as retweets and replies. Reciprocal online interactions enhanced wellbeing for users, notably through a perceived boost when a tweet is acknowledged. In addition, subjects experienced feelings of heightened recognition, connectedness, and appreciation, especially in the retweet and reply scenarios.

By identifying digital interactions known to improve wellbeing, researchers and developers may employ these principles in order to configure interactions that consider the psychological impact of online use and advance its known benefits. The study underscores the influential role that interaction and social design plays in influencing user perception of digital conversation partners and community, which promotes engagement and impacts user wellbeing.