Go For It and Share It: the Power of Facebook to Maintain Health Related Goals
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This netnographic research aims to explore social support online. We seek to extend the current understanding of social support by learning how members of Facebook communities encourage each other to maintain health related goals. Findings reveal that Facebook provides tools that can be used to demonstrate active and passive support.

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INTRODUCTION

It is January First and the list of resolutions for the New Year is a long one. Most of the lists begin with health-related goals: to lose weight, to exercise more, to quit smoking…. But how long do individuals stick to their New Year’s goals? Do such resolutions always end in new habits?

Despite individuals’ good intentions, most health-related goals go unfulfilled and the new bike remains in the garage, the low fat foods get stale in the pantry and the pounds keep adding on (Dalton and Spiller 2012). In fact, the correlations between intentions to change and goal accomplishment are modest: intentions account for only 20 to 30% of the variance in behavior (Gollwitzer 1999).

While the list of health resolutions remains hidden in a drawer, the obesity rates around the World keep growing. In 2008, overweight and obesity were estimated to afflict nearly 1.5 billion adults worldwide and at least 2.8 million adults die each year as a result of being overweight or obese, a situation that can be corrected with preventive measures such as a healthy diet and physical activity (Popkin, Adair and Wen Ng 2011; World Health Organization, 2012). Despite the well-established protective effects of a healthy diet and physical activity on all-cause mortality most people are physically inactive and eating unhealthy diets, therefore public institutions, civil organizations and private firms are making big efforts to promote healthy lifestyles and a change in behavior patterns (Ba and Wang 2013; Scammon et al. 2011).

One way to promote both, healthy lifestyles and change in behavior is the Internet. Previous research shows that is easier for consumers to share health-related information on line and build virtual communities to find information and support; or to join others in committing to a challenging goal such as losing weight or running a half-marathon (Ba and Wang 2013; Burke and Settles 2011); therefore the purpose of this research is to explore on whom or what motivates people to translate their good intentions into actions to reach their health goals and to shed light on how they obtain support from peers and friends on Social Network Sites (SNS). To explore these issues, our research includes locating user-generated content on Facebook regarding healthy eating and physical activity (Kozinets 2010).

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

From intentions to actions

Health compromising behaviors, such as lack of physical activity and bad dietary habits are hard to change (Schwarzer 2008), so how do we engage an individual to turn his intentions into specific plans to achieve his health goals? Successful goal attainment requires to get started and to be persistent until the goal is reached (Gollwitzer 1999), it sounds easy, but usually it is not that easy.

According to Ajzen’s (1991) Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) individuals have all the necessary resources, skills and abilities to perform the behavior at will. A central factor in the TPB is the individual’s intention to perform a given behavior. Intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence a behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, in order to perform the behavior.

Thus, we suggest that individuals willing to change their health compromising behaviors and translate them into health enhancing behaviors (e.g. going on a diet, quit smoking, etc.) need motivation to initiate the change and to maintain the desired outcome (Moorman and Matulich 1993); such motivation can come from supporting members of their community who at the same time can provide them with knowledge and tools to help them achieve the desired behavior (Ba and Wang 2013; Ballantine and Stephenson 2011; Burke and Settles 2011; Heinonen 2011).

Social Media and Social Support

Previous research shows that communities can be considered as interveners that facilitate physical activity and healthy lifestyles in accessible, easy and affordable ways to everyone by providing an environment that supports appropriate food choices and encourages healthy behaviour (Bors et al. 2009; Bowen and Hilliard 2006; Cheng, Kotler and Lee 2011). But do the same happen in virtual communities? Do individuals find an adequate environment and positive social support in the virtual world in order to attain their health goals easily?

Social network sites (SNS) have the potential to reach large populations at low cost to generate buzz that can lead to active participation in physical activities or to encourage people to monitor their food intake (Ba and Wang 2013; Fox 2008; Royne and Levy 2011; Turner-McGrievey and Tate 2013). Research related to SNS and health has addressed the role of SNS in providing social and emotional support; guidance; facilitating behavior change interventions; connecting individuals to resources and raising awareness about health-related issues (Buechel and Berger 2012; Liang and Scammon 2011; Woolley and Peterson 2012). One of the most successful SNS is Facebook, which accounts with at least 937.4 millions of users (Internet World Stats 2012). Facebook, allow users to leave their network friends private and public messages, share photos or videos and become members of a wide range of interest groups (Ballantine and Stephenson 2011; Örë and Sieber 2011). These communities become virtual social spaces where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn or to find company. They tend to be characterized according to the activity (e.g. support) or the people that they serve (e.g. breast cancer survivors), or the communication technology that supports them, (Hunt, Atkin and Krishnan 2012). By using online communities, individuals can chat on the website, blog about their health-related problems, and support each other with recommendations. In certain communities, members can update their health information and receive tailored suggestions such as daily calorie intake and customized exercise plans; as well as motivational messages and support from their friends (Ba and Wang 2013; Ballantine and Stephenson 2011; Burke and Settles 2011; Liang and Scammon 2011; Sarason et al. 1983).

Specifically two types of support can be transmitted through SNS: informational support in the form of advice or suggestions; and emotional support, such as comfort and encouragement (Heaney and Israel 2008). Through the interpersonal exchanges within a social network, individuals are influenced and supported in health behavior changes such as weight loss and smoking cessation (Ballantine and Stephenson 2011; Buechel and Berger 2012; Burke, Kraute and Marlows 2013; Heaney and Israel, 2008).
Based on how individuals communicate online two types of support are identified: active social support that occurs when participants interact with others in the SNS, by commenting on some other’s “wall”; or passive social support received by individuals who decide to read the posts on the walls, and not to contribute to the social interactions (Ballantine and Stephenson 2011). A passive member of the online community or lurker still receives social support by reading the weight loss testimonies of others (Hwang et al., 2013; Liang and Scammon 2011; Schlosser 2005). Thus, we suggest that a Facebook community can become the place where individuals find the social support that will provide them with the information, encouragement and motivation needed to reach their health goals.

**METHODODOLOGY**

Netnography

A covert Netnography (Langer and Beckman 2005; Kozinets 2006, 2010; Swift and Tischler 2010) was conducted to explore Facebook users’ behavior regarding themes of health goals attainment, physical activity and healthy eating (Hackley 2003).

**Data Collection**

The data collection included random discussion published in four Facebook groups related with health, weight management and physical activity. The first Facebook page selected is Fooducate (https://www.facebook.com/#!/fooducate?fref=ts), a personal grocery advisor, designed to help people make healthy food choices for their families. The second one is Rapport (https://www.facebook.com/#!/groups/236730866367592/?fref=ts), a private company established in the north of Mexico which mission is to help people achieve physical and mental goals using neurolinguistic programing and physical activity training. The Weight Watchers (https://www.facebook.com/weightwatchers) constitutes the third group under study. Weight Watchers is a leading, global provider of weight management services committed to providing a comprehensive approach to weight loss in a sustainable way by helping individuals adopt a healthier lifestyle and a healthier relationship with food and activity. And the fourth Facebook page selected for the study is called Movement I love Me the Most (https://www.facebook.com/vomeamomas?fref=ts), a website dedicated to promote a healthy lifestyle using contest among fans; posting videos and texts regarding diet, exercise and well-being.

**Data Analysis**

The qualitative data analysis and interpretation that this study undertakes includes 85 screen shots and 672 posts from the four Facebook communities that were coded and classified in terms of types of posts, specific themes and the social support they seek and/or provide. The analysis and interpretation of the texts was performed in line with those adopted by the mainstream methods (Boush and Kahle 2005; Liang and Scammon 2011).

**FINDINGS**

Our research suggests that Facebook provides three tools that can be used to demonstrate active and passive social support: one-click communications tools with the buttons “Like” and “Share”; and personalized communications with the button “Comment” that allows Facebook friends to comment on others’ posts. These tools allow individuals to receive immediate feedback and collaborations from other users. We suggest that there are different levels of support on Facebook. According to our observations a “Like” offers a weak support; while a “Comment” and “Share” denote a full and more active support from online friends who take the time to read the original post and provide an specific answer or observation for the support seeker.

“Like” can be understood as a virtual empathy tool that implicitly says: “I saw your post and somehow I agree with it, therefore I acknowledge your post by clicking on it”; while a comment can provide a reward or positive reinforcement (Bandura 1977) that demonstrates active support. A “comment” means that the user not only saw/read the post but that he/she took the time to make a comment (either negative or positive) denoting that the post was seen and deserved an answer. A “share” can even imply feeling proud of the achievements of the support seeker; and, as Liang and Scammon (2011) suggest, become at the same time a tool to provide informational and emotional support to others by re-posting or sharing an original thread, and a way to establish virtual relationships (Belk, 2013). The following conversation shows how support can be provided by Weight Watchers’ friends:

Xolisa: “I can’t wait to start...I’m currently pregnant.......can I do WW while pregnant?”

Suzanne: “Ur not supposed to loose weight when ur pregnant, so ww doesn’t let u participate in the program they do have a program for nursing moms”.

Jennifer: “No can’t do while pregnant you need the calories plus your doctor will keep you informed if he/she feels you need help they’ll refer you to a specialist. Congratulations and enjoy. WW after pregnant plus extra points in nursing”.

This thread demonstrates that with the help of the support providers, the support seeker has information to make a decision before undertaking a health compromising behavior, such as dieting while pregnant.

**Are friends and family your worst enemies?**

Although SNS make it easier to connect with both strong and weak ties (Wilcox and Stephen, 2013) it is hard to assess who provides the best support when trying to engage into a healthy behavior. In some posts loved ones provide the inspiration and motivation to be healthy, but in others family members do not seem to help:

“Support from family is great. Learning to resist the food that other people want to have in the house is difficult” (Alice, W.W.)

“WW is great if you have the will power and you take the time to plan what you eat. It is a bit hard when you have to cook for and feed a family” (Laura, W.W.)

“I did try to lose weight. But my family is not helping. They make nasty comments that make my self-esteem go low” (Sandra, Fooducate).

“It should be like that –family helping other members to lose weight- but, everybody in my house believes I run a restaurant. They want a buffet like meal all the time, including scrumptious desserts” (Hury, Fooducate).

“My fiancée and my family are essential to the process. They see my dedication and my success and support me 100 percent” (Rob, W.W.)

“Meet my fuel and engine: MY FAMILY! Thanks for being by my side” (Tencha, Rapport).

The findings suggest that people have an overwhelming need to share their emotional experiences; as well as their fears and doubts regarding health with others. The social sharing of emotion can provide immediate benefits, boosting well-being by increasing perceived social support (Buechel and Berger, 2012).
Making a commitment to reach a goal
According to social facilitation theory people perform better in the presence of others (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, making a goal public, increases commitment, in part because people do not want to appear inconsistent or irrational in front of others. By telling people about your goal, you feel social pressure to stick to the goal and comply with yourself and with others (Hollenbeck, Williams and Klein, 1989). The following comments express exactly that:

“Why do I use the app? It is simple. It is a matter of peer pressure. By making it public it compromises me with all my Facebook friends. And that way, I stay away from tobacco” (Guillermo, Rapport).

“I train for half marathons. Always have a goal and then tell everyone about it. Makes you motivated since everyone knows. And you get cheers along the way!” (Diana, Fooducate).

Sharing the goals and the achievements
By making self-disclosure convenient and less threatening, online social networks likely provide a perfect environment for those who fail to reach their goals and are seeking help to begin again in their task:

“I’ve been on WW several times. The last time I lost 40 and once again fell off the wagon. Need to get back on. The plan DOES work I just need to get motivated. Please help me!!!” (Antoinette, W.W.)

“I am going to try the online W.W. and pray it works. I am a yoyo for 20lbs.” (Tammie, W.W.)

“I am a confessed lapsed member. I need to get back on track. But I need motivation I am tired of being fat and UGLY! Such a struggle!!!” (Kelly, W.W.)

Findings also suggest that members who take advantage of the social features (i.e. photo sharing, making comments, like, etc.) of Facebook perform better on their individual goals than those who do not. People who collaborate are more likely to make it all the way to the finish line. It may be that the tight connection with another goal-seeker increases persistence, or that the partner inspires new ideas, reducing the chances of failure as we can observe in the following posts:

“I lost 50 lbs. doing exercise. I look back at pictures and it motivates more than I can say” (Dave, Fooducate).

“My final ‘a-ha’ moment was when I saw pictures from my godson’s baptism. I thought, “Oh my god, I’m huge and I’m not going to get to see him grow up.” Around the same time I was prescribed drugs for high cholesterol and high blood pressure. My doctor said if I didn’t change something, I’d have a heart attack. Those two events combined gave me the final push I needed to do something about my weight once and for all.” (Alexis, W.W.).

“I publish photos of healthy food to show others the delight to eat a balanced meal instead of something fast at Carl’s Jr. or Starbucks. I use Instagram and it immediately uploads the photo to my Facebook profile” (Joorhe, Rapport).

The qualitative analysis also reveals that sharing physical activity information via smartphone apps impacts feelings of connectedness among members of certain Facebook communities; it also provides a tool that can be used to encourage others to change their current behavior and engage into a healthier one, as the following comment demonstrates:

“I use Nike + iPod and I am surprised with my own results. That’s why I share the information with my friends.

I want to let them know that I have changed, that I am a healthier person and that they too, can embrace new habits and get rid of alcohol and tobacco addictions. It is like my own positive advertising campaign” (Sergio, Rapport).

I use Points Plus Diary on my android phone and love it. It always works, keeps great track of points, activity and favorite foods, recipes, etc. and I can email the results to myself to keep a hard copy of my progress (Sterret, W.W.).

These findings about the tools and features provided by Facebook and the way users are taking advantage of them provide evidence for our research propositions. Supporting members of the community can provide with knowledge, motivation and tools to those interested in acquiring the same health enhancing behaviors; and at the same time the Internet makes it easy to track milestones and post or receive encouragement to attain the desired goals.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION
The four Facebook communities examined in this study offer an online social support network for individuals to give and/or receive support in achieving their health related goals. They provide an open space for posting, share their exercise experience, ask specific questions about diet, exercise or sport injuries, comment on others’ stories, and answer others’ questions.

The results of the Netnography highlight how a social network can provide informational and emotional support, as well as tangible assistance to help people in their daily live decisions and actions. Some SNS, like Weight Watchers enable individuals to monitor their goals; others, like Rapport and Movement provide with motivation to change their lifestyles. While Fooducate has become a useful tool to acquire nutritional knowledge, and demystify some foods and beverages, becoming an aid for individuals in their shopping decisions.

The current research helps shed light on why consumers seek social support in online social networking. Results suggest that Facebook communities like Fooducate and Weight Watchers not only provide virtual tools that enable people to track their own physical activity levels and calorie consumption, they also connect users to a community of like-minded people willing to share their success recipes, to answer questions to those seeking support and even to offer face to face interactions to exercise with new buddies. The study contributes to social support theory by suggesting that weak ties established on SNS provide the support individuals need to achieve and maintain their health related goals.

For policy makers and health marketers interested in understanding how individuals seek and receive social support to achieve their health-related goals, these Netnography provides rich and interesting first hand data that can be useful to design specific communication campaigns, and social network sites dedicated to the promotion of healthy behaviors.

Future research can be conducted to measure how individuals perceive such support demonstration and if the three different tools of Facebook: Like, Share, Comment, offer different levels of support in the process. What has more power? A simple Like or a thoughtful Comment? Do individuals who post their pictures and milestones, feel community support when they see that others share their photos; or is the support bigger when followers take the time to make a comment?

Although the Netnography provided rich and interesting first hand data regarding how individuals seek and receive social support to achieve their health-related goals a quantitative study can be conducted to measure specific elements of social support on SNS: number of comments received; Likes received; Messages received;
Wall posts received; Content friends saved on their wall; and Photos tagged in can indicate active social support. While measures like Profiles viewed; News feed stories clicked on; and Photos viewed can become indicators of passive social support. Given that social media allow individuals to stay connected with hundreds of virtual friends it will be also interesting to study if the perceived support is different when it comes from immediate friends (i.e. strong ties) who at the same time interact face to face with the individual, and also post comments on the individual’s personal Facebook page; or when the comments are from more distant friends (i.e. weak ties) that belong to a virtual community. This research can be helpful to extend our understanding on how the mixing of offline and online social support aids individuals to reach and maintain their health related goals.

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