Public Abstract

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Title:SOCIAL PROXMITY AND USER-GENERATED HEALTH CONTENT: AN EXPERIMENTAL TEST OF PERCEIVED SOURCE SIMILARITY AND CONSTRUAL LEVEL THEORY

Access to the internet allows anyone to have an audience. People write messages distributed to friends, family, and acquaintances via social network sites like Facebook. Health is one topic people write about on Facebook and other sites, and the health messages people read from other users online may influence their behavior, particularly if the source is someone they know or someone similar to them. This study examined people's responses to messages about exercise, healthy eating, and stress reduction written by sources who were similar to them or not and who were or were not considered health experts. If participants in the study thought a source was similar, they were more likely to find the message relevant and believable. In addition, messages from sources who were similar to them were more likely to positively influence their health behaviors. Whether a source was similar or not was more important than whether a source was considered an expert on health and medical topics. This study is important because it shows that personal information from sources similar to you, or who you know, might be more important than information from medical experts. This creates an opportunity for people interested in improving health behaviors and access to health information to enlist internet users within a social network to spread advice or support on health and wellness topics through sites such as Facebook.