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CONTACT

James Leonard, (209) 228-4408

jleonard3@ucmerced.edu

Research pinpoints how to engage people and generate comments on health care social media groups

SAN ANTONIO – The use of images and direct questions by health communicators on Facebook tends to increase user engagement, though linking to external websites and videos does not. Posts conveying positive emotions have no clear impact on engagement, while negative ones — including expressions of depression, sadness, doubt, fear, hopelessness, anxiety and anger — generate an increase in user comments.

Those are a few of the results of a study on social media and health communications by University of California Merced student Holly Rus, who will present her findings at a paper session scheduled for 3:15 p.m. CT on April 24 during the Society of Behavioral Medicine's 2015 Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions in San Antonio. Rus is a society member.

Working with professor Linda Cameron, Rus conducted an analysis of more than 500 posts by diabetes-related support pages on Facebook. The researchers looked for attributes in posts that could be used to predict not just overall user engagement, but also specific types of engagement.

Among the study's findings:

- Posts with images had more than four times as many likes and 11 times as many shares as those without.
- Messages of support or encouragement and posts soliciting input both had more than twice as many comments as those without.
- Emotionally positive posts — including hope, optimism, humor, happiness, benefit finding and gratitude — did not predict any particular engagement, while negative ones generated a roughly threefold increase in comments.
- Posts about the possible effects of diabetes generated more than twice as many shares as those without, while the use of external links predicted fewer likes and shares.

It's clear that social media has the potential to be a significant resource for health communicators and for patients and their supporters. Rus said her study is a step toward a better understanding of how to make this growing form of health communication more effective.

"Ultimately we aimed to figure out which ingredients of online health messages were most likely to engage users," she said. "Doing this will help us better understand if and how social media can best be used in health care."

Cameron said this research could have significant implications in an area of ever-increasing importance.

“The big-picture question is how we can best harness social media to improve health care,” Cameron said. “Social media is a huge resource that people are increasingly using to gather health information. How can we shape these messages to increase engagement and encourage better health behaviors? If we want to be effective, we have to attract people to the message and have those people pass it around.”

Rus’ study received special recognition from the Society of Behavioral Medicine, being chosen as a Citation Abstract and a Meritorious Student Abstract. She and Cameron report no financial or other conflicts of interests.

The Society of Behavioral Medicine (SBM) is a 2,200-member organization of scientific researchers, clinicians and educators. They study interactions among behavior, biology and the environment, and translate findings into interventions that improve the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities (www.sbm.org).

The University of California Merced opened Sept. 5, 2005, as the 10th campus in the University of California. Situated near Yosemite National Park, the campus significantly expands access to the UC system for students throughout the state, with a special mission to increase college-going rates among students in the San Joaquin Valley. It also serves as a major base of advanced research, a model of sustainable design and construction, and a stimulus to economic growth and diversification throughout the region (www.ucmerced.edu).

This study will be presented during the SBM 2015 Annual Meeting & Scientific Sessions, held April 22-25 in San Antonio. However, it does not reflect the policies or the opinion of SBM. This presentation will be held on April 24. Given that this study was presented at a scientific meeting, the data and conclusions reached should be regarded as preliminary, until they are published in a peer-reviewed journal. Funding agencies played no role in this study. There are no conflicts of interest for the investigators.

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