



Text-based communication influences self-esteem more than face-to-face or cellphone communication



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ABSTRACT

Meaningful social interactions are positively associated with improvements in self-esteem, but this phenomenon has largely been unexplored in digital media despite the prevalence of new, text-based communication (e.g. Facebook, texting, email, etc.). To address this gap in the literature the frequency and quality, or *meaningfulness*, of communication was measured in mediated and non-mediated channels across a random sample of 3649 social interactions using Experience Sampling Methods. Results revealed that most communication took place face-to-face (62%), with less text-based (about 22%) and cell phone voice (14%) communication. Meaningful face-to-face and text-based communication were associated with changes in self-esteem according to a marginally significant and significant finding, respectively. Text-based communication was more important for self-esteem than face-to-face or phone communication, which is consistent with research on the magnifying effect of text-based communication on interpersonal processes. According to the Internet enhanced self-disclosure hypothesis, the psychological benefits of text-based communication stems from enhanced self-disclosure, which is also supported in the data. Additional work is needed to better understand the mechanisms underlying the positive relationship between meaningful text-based interactions and self-esteem, but findings point to the important role of digital communication for psychological health.

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1. Introduction

Since the inception of the social sciences, researchers have been trying to understand the effect of social interaction on mental and physical well-being (Durkheim, 1897). Over the last century we have learned that having strong support networks is associated with better cardiovascular, neuroendocrine (i.e. stress), and immune system functioning (for review see Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiecolt-Glaser, 1996). Also, socially isolated people are at a greater risk of being ill and they die sooner than socially connected people (House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). In other words, having a supportive social network is a key part of maintaining good psychological and physical health. This investigation takes on new meaning, however, in light of recent advances in communication technology. With 85% of the world subscribed to a mobile number, and 33% connected to the Internet, access to friends and loved ones is nearly constant for much of the world's population (International Telecommunication Union (ITU), 2011).

Growth in the number of ways to connect has simultaneously given rise to fears that new technologies undermine our capacity for meaningful social connections (e.g. Turkle, 2011). But as anxieties about the negative effects of technology mount so does evidence of potential benefits to mental and physical health (e.g. Byrne et al., 2012; Hampton, Sessions-Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011; Rains & Young, 2009; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009b). At the center of this debate persist the following questions: Do digital communication systems allow for meaningful social interactions that are critical for maintaining quality of life? If so, how do they compare to the benefits of face-to-face interactions?

One important factor associated with well-being and quality of life is self-esteem. Self-esteem is a determinant of mental and physical health (Ford & Collins, 2010; Trzesniewski et al., 2006), and is improved when people have supportive social ties (Cohen, 1988). Although previous research has explored the effect of the frequency of Internet use on self-esteem, no studies have examined the relationship between the quality or *meaningfulness* of digital interactions and changes in self-esteem. Moreover, most studies to-date on the digital media effects of self-esteem have been descriptive, do not compare channels (e.g. cell phone voice, text, face-to-face), and rely primarily on survey data. However, channel comparisons, or comparisons in the effects of the mode

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of communication, are important because they help to refine computer-mediated communication theory (see Walther, 2012), and surveys are an effective tool for collecting large generalizable samples, but they are also biased towards a respondent's most prominent and recent experiences (Kahneman, 1999). To address these concerns, I used ecological momentary assessment (EMA) to capture everyday social interactions as they occurred.

EMA is a methodology that involves the "repeated collection of real-time data on subjects' behavior and experience in their natural environments" (Shiffman, Stone, & Hufford, 2008, p. 3). EMA is another term used to describe diary methods that have been used for decades, the accuracy of which may be improved with the use of handheld digital recording devices. EMA provides enhanced ecological validity, minimizes risks of recall biases, and enables assessment of within-person processes. Individuals act as their own controls by prompting participants to report on social interactions as they occur (Almeida, 2005; Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). Findings from this dataset thus enhance the internal validity of research on self-esteem effects of new media. They also update earlier work examining the frequency of communication across different channels, and variations in the quality of that communication (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004).

1.1. Social connection and self-esteem

Self-esteem, self-worth, and other forms of self-regard are essential components of overall quality of life (Cohen, 1988). Self-esteem in this study is defined as the "value people place on themselves", and is presumed to vary as a function of different factors, including relationship quality (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). Greater self-esteem has been associated with financial successes, greater overall happiness, and better physical health (Baumeister et al., 2003; Martens et al., 2010; Trzesniewski et al., 2006). In other words, self-esteem is a central component of overall psychological health and well-being.

A substantial body of research suggests that the quality of one's relationships can alter levels of self-esteem, suggesting that self-esteem can be thought of both as a trait, but also as a state (Blackheart, Nelson, Knowles, & Baumeister, 2009; Wills, 1985). *Sociometer theory*, for example, argues that changes in self-esteem are designed to gauge whether or not social relationships are functioning properly (Leary, Tambor, Terdal, & Downs, 1995). If relationships are working self-esteem will improve or remain stable. If social relationships are strained or an individual is isolated self-esteem will drop. Specific interpersonal processes that have been shown to improve self-esteem include supportive listening, mutual sharing, and an absence of critiquing (Wills, 1985). A meta-analysis of 72 sociometer articles found that positive interpersonal experiences, more than exclusion, have a notable effect on self-esteem (Blackheart et al., 2009), and a recent diary study supporting sociometer theory found that high quality interactions throughout the day predict corresponding daily changes in self-esteem (Denissen, Penke, Schmitt, & van Aken, 2008). This association between fluctuations in interpersonal dynamic and self-esteem is consistent with other research that finds a link between the quality of daily social interaction and changes in outcomes such as health, relationship satisfaction, and daily well-being (Emmers-Sommer, 2004; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000; Reis, Wheeler, Kernis, Spiegel, & Nezelek, 1985).

1.2. Digital technology and self-esteem

Despite consistent findings of the benefits of meaningful social interaction for self-esteem offline, research on the relationship between digital communication and self-esteem has been mixed. Some research finds that people with low self-

esteem have a preference for Internet communication (Joinson, 2004; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005), though experimental work has found that online communication can be beneficial for self-esteem (Gross, 2009; Shaw & Gant, 2002). A subset of this work has focused on online social networking, also with mixed results (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011; Kalpidou, Costin, & Morris, 2011). Variation in these findings is likely due to variation in individual differences and the quality of communication that takes place online, as quality of communication has rarely been measured in these studies (see Valkenburg, Peter, & Schouten, 2006).

Most of the research above has explored the frequency of Internet use and self-esteem, but has not examined the relationship between the meaningfulness of digital social interactions and changes in self-esteem. Although the nature of social interaction has long been known to have an effect on changes in self-esteem, such that positive social interactions are good for self-esteem while negative social interactions may be bad for self-esteem (Leary et al., 1995; Blackheart et al., 2009), this relationship has been largely unexplored online. Yet there is reason to believe that these processes may be different online.

First, the Hyperpersonal Model claims that interpersonal processes may lead to enhanced or *hyperpersonal* impression formation in text because users are able to carefully construct messages, and attributions caused by those messages may be exaggerated in the absence of additional real-time visual and audio cues (Walther, 1996). Indeed, studies have demonstrated that online content has a more substantial effect on interpersonal impressions (Epley & Kruger, 2005; Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011), and may also influence impressions of the self (Gonzales & Hancock, 2011). From this perspective then, the enactment of supportive listening and mutual sharing that has been shown to improve self-esteem offline may be perceived as even *more* supportive and intimate when it takes place in text, which could have an enhanced effect on self-esteem.

Another communication theory that may inform differences in the relationship between meaningful communication and self-esteem in text-based contexts is the *Internet-Enhanced Self-Disclosure (IESD)* hypothesis. The IESD hypothesis proposes that adolescents often disclose more in text-based communication than face-to-face communication, which contributes to greater well-being (Valkenburg & Peter, 2009a). Indeed a number of studies have confirmed that people often disclose more online compared to offline (Jiang et al., 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009b; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), and greater disclosure is associated with more supportive relationships, which are good for self-esteem (Reis et al., 2000; Uchino et al., 1996; Wills, 1985). If people disclose more in text-based communication there is reason to suspect that text-based communication may play an even greater role in shaping self-esteem than offline communication.

Another contribution of these data is that they update and extend previous work by Baym et al. (2004) on the frequency and quality of communication across different channels, or modes of communication. That study, conducted in 2004, found that face-to-face communication comprises over 60% of social interactions, and, along with telephone communication, is perceived as slightly better quality than Internet communication. It is one of few studies to appreciate the use of multiple media channels by individuals. In that study, the authors noted that little research had taken advantage of diary methods to do comparative, within-person analyses of media use. Baym et al. (2004) established important groundwork for understanding the frequency and relative quality of communication across channels. I build on these findings by again collecting diary data using a sample that is more economically, racially, and age diverse, and by adding dependent measures of self-esteem.

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