Chapter 7
Exploring Healthy Connection:
Communication, Social Networks, and Wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Virtual social connection has become a way of life for many people. The continued implementation of new technologies in social interaction presents an ever-escalating need for researchers and practitioners to understand the implications of mediated interaction and virtual communities on human health and wellbeing. Accordingly, this chapter presents research on the salience of communication and social bonds in relation to human health and wellbeing, explores ways in which individual as well as relational health and wellbeing are affected by the use of social network sites, and argues a case for research on the health-related functions of expressive narratives in virtual settings such as online social networks. Considerations and future directions for research of these issues conclude this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

Establishing healthy social connections can buffer stress and help people cope with a variety of expected and unexpected events in life. And more than ever people are turning to virtual spaces in order to make social connections. This chapter explores the research related to establishing and maintaining social connections as well as the communicative processes that hinder and enhance health and wellbeing. Towards that end, this chapter establishes the salience of communication and social bonds in

relation to human health and wellbeing, explores ways in which individual as well as relational health and wellbeing are affected by the use of social network sites, and presents a case for theoretical and applied research on the health-related functions of expressive communication in virtual settings such as online social networks. Additionally, this chapter pays special attention to the function of social support. Issues, controversies, and problems that face researchers are offered for consideration, as are directions for future research. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to build upon the existing body of work in the field by considering how communication that unfolds in social networks impacts human health and wellbeing.

Background

The structure and content of our social worlds support our health, wellbeing, and general quality of life. Researchers have developed a significant body of scholarship that focuses on identifying and supporting the cognitive and communicative processes that enhance our individual, relational, and socio-cultural welfare. Critical, humanistic, and social scientific researchers alike have pursued an understanding of human symbolic exchange, and growing numbers of researchers are uniquely interested in making contributions to a body of scholarship central to healthy lives, relationships, and communities.

Underlying this chapter is an understanding that health and wellbeing are not simply characterized by the lack of mental or physical illness, but the *presence* of factors that sustain and enhance our psychological and physiological wellness. Affection, inclusion, and control, for example, are fundamental human needs that are often given and received through the social connections we make with others. What's more, the fulfillment of these needs via interaction with people with whom we have formed relationships is a necessity for humans to function normally (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). The quality of our social ties, it is argued, contributes directly to the quality of physical and mental wellbeing.

Research on the relationship between social connection and physiological health, for example, establishes a positive association between social support and cardiovascular, endocrine, neuroendocrine, and immune system functioning (Uchino, Cacioppo, & Kiercolt-Glaser, 1996). Stress exposure weakens immune system functioning and, thus, physical health; however, social support has been shown to buffer the damage inflicted by stress on biological functions (Uchino, 2004). Studies reveal that the break-up of a close relationship such as a marriage can elevate blood pressure and weaken the immune system, but these effects may be inhibited by the prevalence of other positive social connections (Russek & Schwartz, 1997; Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003). It seems that direct positive social ties cushion

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