

Study: Christians tweet more happily, less analytically than atheists

June 26 2013



University of Illinois psychology professor Jesse Preston (left), graduate student Ryan Ritter and graduate student Ivan Hernandez (not pictured) investigated the social, emotional and analytical content of the tweets of more than 16,000 Christian and atheist followers on Twitter. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

A computer analysis of nearly 2 million text messages (tweets) on the online social network Twitter found that Christians use more positive words, fewer negative words and engage in less analytical thinking than atheists. Christians also were more likely than atheists to tweet about their social relationships, the researchers found.

The findings are reported in the journal *Social Psychological & Personality Science*.

"Whether religious people experience more or less happiness is an important question in itself," the authors of the new analysis wrote. "But to truly understand how religion and happiness are related we must also understand *why* the two may be related."

To identify Christian and atheist Twitter users, the researchers studied the tweets of more than 16,000 followers of a few prominent Christian and atheist personalities on Twitter. They analyzed the tweets for their emotional content (the use of more positive or negative words), the frequency of words (such as "friend" and "brother") that are related to social processes, and the frequency of their use of words (such as "because" and "think") that are associated with an analytical thinking style.

Overall, tweets by Christians had more positive and less negative content than tweets by atheists, the researchers report. A less analytical thinking style among Christians and more frequent use of social words were correlated with the use of words indicating positive emotions, the researchers also said.

"If religious people are indeed happier than nonreligious people, differences in social support and thinking style may help to explain why," said University of Illinois graduate student Ryan Ritter, who conducted the research with U. of I. psychology professor Jesse Preston and graduate student Ivan Hernandez.

The findings are also in line with other studies linking greater levels of social connectedness to higher well-being, Ritter said.

"Religious communities are very social. Just being a member of a

religious group connects people to others, and it may be this social connection that can make people happier," Preston said. "On the other hand, atheists had a more analytical thinking style in their [tweets](#) than Christians, which at extremes can make people less happy."

Previous research has found a positive association between religion and well-being among Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims. But most such studies rely on individuals to report how satisfied they are with their lives or their experience of positive and negative emotions at a given time.

"What's great about Twitter is that people are reporting their experiences – good or bad – as they occur," Preston said. "As researchers, we do not need to ask them how they feel because they are already telling us."

Christians appear to be happier than atheists on Twitter, but the authors caution that the results are correlational and "this does not mean [atheists](#) are unhappy overall or doomed to be miserable," Preston said. "If religion improves happiness indirectly through other factors, those benefits could also be found outside religious groups."

More information: The paper, "Happy Tweets: Christians are Happier, More Socially Connected and Less Analytical Than Atheists on Twitter," is available online [spp.sagepub.com/content/early/ ... 50613492345.abstract](http://spp.sagepub.com/content/early/.../50613492345.abstract)

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Study: Christians tweet more happily, less analytically than atheists (2013, June 26) retrieved 15 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-christians-tweet-happily-analytically-atheists.html>

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