

Study shows role of media in sharing life events

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To share is human. And the means to share personal news—good and bad—have exploded over the last decade, particularly social media and texting. But until now, all research about what is known as "social sharing," or the act of telling others about the important events in our lives, has been restricted to face-to-face interactions.

A new study, published in the current issue of the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, investigates what happens when people share via new media. What media do people choose for sharing their important personal events? How do they feel when they share these events in mediated environments that lack nonverbal cues like hugs or high-fives?

Social sharing is very widespread, says study author Catalina Toma, an assistant professor of communication arts at UW-Madison. "It's almost like the event is not even real until you tell somebody," Toma says.

The study, run by graduate student Mina Choi and Toma, included 300 undergraduate students at UW-Madison. Participants kept track of how sharing affected their emotions by keeping a daily diary, in which they noted what they shared, where they shared it and how they felt both after the event and the sharing had occurred.

Results show that nearly 70 percent of the social sharing in the study took place via some kind of media, whether it was texting, phone calls, Facebook or Twitter.

Toma, who studies online self-presentation and how emotional well-being is affected by [social media](#), says people use phones, texting and social media to connect with others in a "substantial way."

Further, participants strategically chose the media that could meet their psychological needs. When experiencing positive events, people preferred to share via texting and Twitter, because both media are easily accessible from smartphones and are nonintrusive in that communication partners don't have to reply immediately.

"When something positive happens, you want to tell it right away," Toma says.

When experiencing negative events, people could justify interrupting their partners and preferred using the telephone, a more intrusive medium.

"You often hear people say when the phone rings, it's bad news," Toma says. "Our data support that."

Choi and Toma also found that social sharing via media enhanced the emotional tone of the event. Sharing a positive event increased its impact, an effect known as capitalization. "Telling somebody makes you even happier," Toma says.

But if you feel sad because you had a lousy trip to the dentist or a fight with your spouse and post something about it on Facebook, you will not feel better. Regardless of which form of media people in the study used to share bad news, they felt worse (though sharing by telephone had the smallest negative effect).

"Their negative effect got aggravated," Toma says. "Sharing makes it more real."

"Examining how people share their important personal events through new media and how they feel as a result of it is a golden opportunity to learn how humans work," Toma says.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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