Social networking sites may help smokers kick the habit

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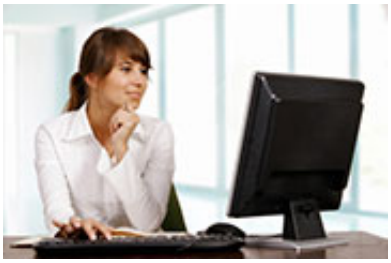

Users built strong connections to others, felt more empowered to quit, study found.

(HealthDay)—Smokers who turn to social networking sites focused on quitting smoking form strong supportive bonds with their like-minded peers, a new study reveals. And these cyber-connections boost the odds they'll kick their habit.

The finding is based on survey responses from 252 registrants of health-centric websites.

"I found that people who join health-based social networking sites are able to quit smoking and abstain for longer periods of time because of the sense of community they build with other members," said study author Joe Phua, an assistant professor in the department of advertising and public relations at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The study appeared online recently in the *Journal of Communication*.

To assess how online social networking might affect smoking cessation efforts, between 2009 and 2010 Phua focused on registered members at one of six health-focused portals, including iVillage, Why Quit and Inspire. None of the sites was sponsored by a drug manufacturer, and all included standard social media features, such as profiles, news feeds, message boards and "friend" links.

About seven in 10 of the network users were white, at an average age of roughly 40. As a whole, the group tended to be relatively affluent and well-educated.

Participants completed an online questionnaire about the amount of time they spent on the site and the degree to which each felt their attitudes, beliefs, sense of self and specific views on smoking were shared by other site members.

They also indicated the amount of social support they felt they got from other members, alongside informative, emotional and practical assistance. Finally, respondents ranked themselves in terms of their confidence about being able to snuff out their cigarettes for good.

On average, those surveyed spent nearly four hours a week on their respective sites, posting an average of six messages each week, Phua found.

Respondents said they had formed an average of 43 online friends among their fellow smokers, with some turning into real-world offline relationships.

Such site-sourced friendships seemed to boost users' sense of empowerment with respect to their ability to stop smoking for good.

Phua concluded that web users had developed a tangible sense of belonging to a committed group, and—despite being virtual—such interactions were deemed to be meaningful as a motivating force to quit.

In turn, strong and trusting relationships were fostered, leading to the exchange of practical information and advice regarding the struggle surrounding quitting.

"Smoking is an addictive behavior and a chronic health problem," Phua said. "And so I think many medical professionals don't approach it as an urgent situation. Which means a lot of people find it difficult and expensive to get help from the medical community, particularly those in rural areas. But online sites are easy to access, cheap and a direct connection to a larger and credible community that offers strong social support for those wanting to quit."

One health expert agreed that social networking for help in quitting is "definitely useful."

"Within the health care system we know that social support helps, but it's hard for physicians to think about how to orchestrate that," said Dr. Scott Sherman, co-chief of the section on tobacco, alcohol and drug use at the NYU School of Medicine's department of population health. "But social media seems like a perfect way to do that, and it gets people the help they need from outside the health care system in a very easy way."

The bottom line: "If this motivates people to make more quit attempts and motivates them to stay quit, that's a good thing," said Sherman, also a senior investigator with the VA NY Harbor Healthcare System in New York City.

Cliff Lampe, an associate professor of information with the School of Information at the University of Michigan, concurred that some smokers

benefit from cessation support beyond the health care system.

"Many smokers don't see smoking cessation as a medical need," Lampe said. "They view it as similar to getting more exercise or other habit changes ... But they don't always want to burden their friend. So seeking help from an online community, where someone like you is always paying attention to your needs, may make a lot more sense to many people than seeking help from a doctor."

More information: For more on smoking cessation, visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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