

#ehps2015- Virtually there

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I am feeling excited as
the start of the annual
European Health
Psychology Society

(EHPS) conference approaches. I have never been to an EHPS conference or Limmasol, Cyprus – where it's being held this year for that matter either. There is warm summer weather forecast, the hotels look great, so too the conference facilities, pre-conference workshops and program. The only minor catch is that I'm not there and I'm not going to be... well not physically there at least... Instead, I am at my desk in Maastricht, The Netherlands. I have actually been following the build up to and excitement of the conference via Twitter.

Twitter is the social network that provides a service where users can read and send messages (i.e. "tweets") of up to 140 characters, and attach photos or videos and include links to websites. Twitter was launched in July 2006 by four creative undergraduate students from New York University - Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams, Biz Stone and Noah Glass. From humble beginnings, there are now approximately 316 million monthly active users sending approximately 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2015). With so many users and tweets, it is apparent that Twitter has harnessed or defined something of a contemporary communication zeitgeist.

Twitter has been credited with pivotal roles in facilitating free speech and democracy but also racism, sexism and homophobia. Not surprisingly

though, it has also attracted the keen interest of researchers. A quick search for "twitter" on Google Scholar yields nearly 6 million hits and articles dating from 2007. These early articles explain what Twitter is, who can and could use it and what can be expected in the future. Another search, this time within PubMed for articles with "Twitter" in the title yields 334 results (some of which are actually ornithological in nature). Articles come from the fields of psychology, medicine, nursing, education amongst others and examine issues ranging from what information is being conveyed and how, to ethical issues, communication strategies of healthcare institutions and the potential of "big data" to mine tweets for the purpose of early detection of illness and trends in healthcare.

I however am a latecomer to the Twitter party. I register with Twitter to get a better sense of what it is like to follow the conference and be a virtual participant and observer. Signing up is easy, but finding a unique username that I can identify with and use beyond the conference is a little harder. Not surprisingly, some of the 316 million users have already had a chance to choose one of the names I consider. If only I was not such a late adopter of the technology!

To begin I search for the conference and quickly see that tweeters are sharing their anticipation and excitement as they complete last minute travel arrangements. There is some initial uncertainty amongst early arrivals and pre-conference workshop attendees/tweeters about



which hashtag should be used with messages. Without the use of a common hashtag, tweets are bound to go unread and people miss out on part of the experience. Users quickly communicate though with each other to alert them to #ehps2015 or #EHPS2015, before the conference begins and the concerns about missing out are allayed.

Early reports from the pre-conference workshops are glowing. So too are tweets about the opening drinks and presentations. Combined with photos of slides, key messages from presenters, and the location, I'm left with the feeling of wanting to know more. The links included in tweets act as prompts for searches for journal articles, and the names of presenters give me ideas for potential collaborators, manuscript reviewers and what the state of the art is. All aspects of the conference experience that I have had in the past when attending other conferences in the "real" world. (Does "real/virtual" world now represent a false dichotomy as we merge our "online" and "offline" identities ever more within daily life?)

By the end of the conference 1002 tweets have been sent from a total of 216 contributors including @healthpsycleeds who contributed an impressive 62 tweets and 31 photos. Popular trends of discussions include digital/mHealth interventions, the theory of planned behaviour, messages of congratulations and thanks to award winners and conference organisers respectively, and of course, the next annual conference to be held in Aberdeen, Scotland.

It is no wonder that back in Maastricht, the stream of updates has made it at times difficult to concentrate on the tasks at hand. I'd rather be on the island.

I have to confess to being surprised by how much of the conference experience can be

conveyed in combinations of 140 characters, hashtags, photos and uploaded videos. Each tweet in itself does not necessarily communicate much, but especially when there are multiple tweets about the one presentation and so many different eyes and ears relaying impressions and experience of different elements of the conference it is possible to get a good sense of the event. For me though, Twitter cannot adequately replace the personal connections and conversations that occur before, between and after the sessions, but it's better than not being there at all!

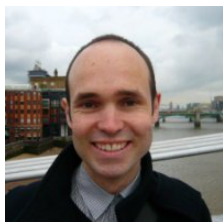
Now, as the conference recedes and daily tasks and commitments resume, I still can only speculate about the meaning of the video tweeted about the dancing babies...I guess it was something that you just had to be there to fully appreciate... But please send me an explanatory tweet all the same as I would love to know more.

For those who missed the conference and want to get a sense of the virtual experience, the tweets have been archived and are available here: <http://eventifier.com/event/ehps2015/tweets>



References:

- Twitter. (2015). Twitter usage/company facts. Retrieved September 15, 2015, from <https://about.twitter.com/company>



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