



Dr. Sherry Pagoto, Director of the [UConn Center for mHealth and Social Media](#) and President of the Society for Behavioral Medicine, will deliver the Morning Keynote Presentation *A Call for a Science of Online Patient Engagement* at the [4th Integrative Conference on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health](#). Her research focuses on using online platforms and social media to deliver behavioral health interventions and health communication programs.



The [Center's](#) Julia Holber had the opportunity to ask Dr. Pagoto about her current research projects, Keynote Presentation, and what she sees as the biggest challenges and opportunities in the field of digital health.

Julia: Tell us about the UConn Center for mHealth and Social Media. What does the Center aim to do?

Sherry: Our center is a research collaborative around the topics of mhealth and social media research. Our main goals are to build collaborations and generate networking and training opportunities to elevate this area of research on our campus, with our collaborators, and across the field.

Julia: What are some of the Center's current research projects?

Sherry: Our current projects cover a range of topics. First, we're studying online communities and social media platforms for the delivery of behavioral interventions and health communication programming. For example, we have some studies doing this for weight management, and in one case are working with post-partum moms as they attempt to shed their baby weight. We have some studies targeting mothers of teenage daughters using Facebook groups to deliver cancer prevention communication. The purpose of that study is to help moms communicate with their daughters about the use of tobacco, tanning beds, and HPV vaccines.

Julia: Can you elaborate on the concept of an online community?

Sherry: Well, for example, we're collaborating with investigators at Rutgers to create a Facebook-delivered intervention for melanoma patients and their family members. If you have a family member with melanoma, you're at an increased risk of melanoma yourself, and so it's really important that these folks are doing self-exams, getting physician exams, and are practicing sun safety. We're using Facebook groups to deliver that information, interface with physicians to answer their questions on these topics, and bring their family members into these conversations.

Julia: Really interesting! Have you done any work involving mobile apps?

Sherry: Yes! Our apps have typically focused on weight management. In our studies using apps, we have been examining more complex behavioral strategies and seeing if we can have the app facilitate those strategies. For example, a lot of commercial apps focus on self-monitoring and goal setting, and they do a really great job with those. We're interested in some strategies that involve more counselor facilitation- things like problem solving and managing stress and emotional eating behaviors. We want to see how we can better assist patients who have challenges with these issues, as well as those patients who may not be using the self-monitoring apps consistently enough to be getting a benefit from them.

Julia: What do you see as some of the biggest challenges with using digital health tools and technology to deliver behavioral interventions?

Sherry: Social media is a really new area of research, so I think there are a lot of challenges involving data and research ethics, data access, and decisions on how to optimally deliver behavioral interventions and health communications through these modalities. With technology, the devil is often in the details. You think, “Oh, it’s easier to communicate. People have their phones with them all the time!” But, it gets complicated really fast. People communicate in certain ways about certain topics. If we want to create conversations about certain topics, we have to really understand how people use those tools and make sure the way we’re trying to position those tools is consistent with how they’re normally used. Another challenge is striking a balance between technology and human involvement. How much can we automate? When have we automated too much? These answers may change over time as technology improves.

Julia: What are some of the opportunities?

Sherry: There are a few advantages to using social media when studying conversations about health. People talk about healthy and unhealthy behaviors on social media, and it gives us a new way to assess and understand attitudes that often removes biases we encounter when doing interviews or surveys. People are speaking very naturally on social media. We’re also able to capture folks who might not participate in research, so we have the opportunity to do inclusive observational work. More broadly, there are enormous opportunities just because there’s so much unknown. There are so many research questions to explore. I think the opportunities can only be realized, however, through creating the right teams with the right expertise. Do you have a behavioral scientist? An engineer? Using technology and realizing the full potential of a project requires getting everyone to the table at the earliest stage possible.

Julia: We’re excited about you coming to Pittsburgh for the [4th Integrative Conference on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health](#). Can you give us a preview of what you’ll be speaking about?

Sherry: Like I’ve mentioned, I’m really interested in how patients use social media to talk about their health and to connect with other patients. I’ll be presenting our findings, as well as how we have been setting up online communities for behavior change. I’ll also be addressing patient engagement- how patients engage in online communities and what type of engagement is meaningful and actually associated with change in behavior, knowledge, or attitude. If we can understand what qualifies as meaningful engagement, we can tailor our interventions to elicit it and hopefully help people as they’re trying to improve their health.

Want to learn more about Dr. Pagoto’s work? [Register](#) for the 4th Integrative Conference on Technology, Social Media, and Behavioral Health to hear her Keynote Presentation *A Call for a Science of Online Patient Engagement!*