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10/17/23

IST 343

Critical Essay: Self-Tracking

I decided to look into tracking my steps. I have self-tracked main things in my past. I have had the motivation of “debugging a problem” when I was younger adjusting my medication and changing my diet due to constant migraines. For this project, I wanted to try something new that I had never tracked before but could also make some improvement in my life or at least day to day. Being from New York City, I am very used to walking pretty much everywhere and having a high step count. However, when I am at Syracuse, being in a more suburban place, by steps significantly decrease. I wanted to track my steps to use “monitoring and evaluating” as my motivation type to be aware and try to increase my steps to live a healthier lifestyle while at college.

To start off with some knowledge about self-tracking and the platform it has gained. The “Quantified Self” is a “community, a group for people who self-track” (Neff & Nefus, 2016). This is a movement and a concept that revolves around the idea of using technology and self-tracking to collect and analyze data about various aspects of a person’s life, including health, behavior, and daily activities. This term was created by Gary Wolf and Kevin Kelly. The aspects of Quantified Self include self-tracking, knowledge, experimentation, community and collaboration, technology and tools. It is driven by the belief that by quantifying and tracking various aspects of life, people can make more informed decisions, improve their heal and well-being, optimize their performance, and gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

According to the textbook Neff & Nefus explain Monitoring and Evaluating as the motivation type that involves tracking and recording parts of a person’s life to assess a person’s progress, performance, or health and it can often be used to set certain goals. By using Monitoring and Evaluating, I decided to track my steps and see how many steps I can take in a day. I know that my step count has decreased significantly from this summer and even from last semester being abroad in London. Getting extra steps in is an easy and great way to stay in shape and keep myself healthy. Knowing that the suggested average is 10,000 steps a day I assumed my goal should be somewhere around there, but it was overall to try and improve my step count from what the current average was around 4000-5000 steps and after being more accountable and self-tracking I was able to adjust my step count by about a thousand making it 5000-6000 on average per week.

The textbook defines self-tracking as “how and why people record and reflect on data about themselves…self-tracking is a human activity, one far more interesting that the gadgets that have made it easier and more widespread. Self-tracking does not necessarily require technology more complex than pen and paper” (Neff & Nefus 2016). Self-tracking has been around forever, and people have used self-tracking by changing things in their day-to-day life or tracking when things happen to create personal needs and wants to improve a person’s quality and enjoyment of life. I have had to self-track in the past for personal reasons of wanting to be more effective and healthier or even on the medical side of my doctors having me record certain information like symptoms and dieting. I used to not enjoy self-tracking as before technology made it so easy, I would have to write it on paper or in my notes app. Having access to something like the health app that is already implemented into my phone and does the tracking without the extra lift of a finger makes me more willing to want to self-track and be interested in analyzing the data.

I was easily able to track my steps through my health app on my iPhone. In the health app it already tracks all movement that the phone senses and adds steps accordingly. Luckily, I almost always have my phone with me and believe it to be pretty accurate. There are always moments where I step away without my phone but majority of my day to day, I have my phone either in my pocket or bag. The only time I did not have my phone on me was when I was running on the treadmill. I learned through a simple google that on average a person takes around 1500 steps per ten-minute mile. Therefore, I would manually add those steps into the health app after running on the treadmill based on that. This helped me have a more accurate step count which was especially important for this study of self-tracking. The more accurate my step count was the more I am able to account for positive change.

When doing my self-tracking I realized that I was nowhere close to what is considered “normal” and was well under the 10,000 recommended steps daily for my liking. According to the textbook, normal means “what most people do, and at other times, it is used as a synonym for ideal” (Neff & Nefus, 2016). This can be a very controversial statement to use for many reasons. The idea of normal is very hard to break down. You have to look into the aspects of what is creating this normal and who fits the criteria of normal. Having the “ideal” daily steps be at 10,000, most people look at that number and never second guess where that is coming from or why they can or can’t hit the 10,000 themselves. People should be asking themselves why the 10,000 is set there and if they fit the criteria to be “normal” and have this be achievable. Things that can hinder the sense of normal such as age, disability, and prior commitments that make this ideal unrealistic. The textbook also discusses the idea of a “normal curve, in a mathematical sense is bell shaped, with most people being in the middle” (Neff & Nefus, 2016). When looking at research there is always some sort of curve or correlation a researcher can find within their data if they look close enough. Many researchers can even skew their own research based on their actual data to say what they want it to prove. This is also why the normal curve can also not be accurate and also needs to be looked at deeper to understand what the exact constraints of the graphs.

Having access to self-tracking is something that is very important to me and something that I know not everyone else has. I think that besides the tracking itself it is also important to have access to be able to become so educated on self-tracking. Just as I have previously stated self-tracking can be so important to one’s well-being, health, needs, and wants both day to day and lifelong. Knowing how to properly self-track and understand the motivations for self-tracking can help people properly track themselves and gain the most benefits. Another important aspect to self-tracking is access and power. Access to self-tracking can be very limited depending on people’s access to not only education but also technology. Yes, it is possible for people to track themselves with pen and paper and many people enjoy this way of self-tracking. However, with newfound technology of self-tracking devices it is almost impossible for some people to not self-tack. When given access to these technologies that are made to aid people in their tracking it becomes more accurate and easier. Then, the problem with using these technologies is who then has access to all of this data. Tech giants are able to create these “necessary” products where people are almost volunteering their data and letting tech giants invade their privacy at times. Many people are very careless about where this data is going, and this can become a major problem. For example, women who track their menstrual cycles on their phones or devices need to be proactive about their privacy and where that data is going as it might be one day used against them in court after the turn of roe v. wade if the wrong person is able to access a woman’s private data.

In conclusion, my decision to explore self-tracking and monitor my daily steps was motivated by a desire to make positive improvements in my life, particularly during my time at college, away from school. Drawing inspiration from the Quantified Self movement, which advocated using technology and self-tracking to gain self-knowledge and improve various aspects of my day-to-day life. With “Monitoring and Evaluating” as my primary motivation, I aimed to be more aware of my daily step count and work towards a healthier lifestyle. My self-tracking experiences was made more accessible and engaging through modern technology, such as the health app on my iPhone, which accurately recorded my movements. However, the concept of what’s considered “normal” in terms of daily step count is a complex issue, with various factors influencing an individual’s ability to meet certain ideals. Access to self-tracking tools and knowledge about how to use them is essential for harnessing the benefits of self-tracking, but it also raises concerns about data privacy and security. As self-tracking continues to evolve, it’s crucial for individuals to be vigilant about protecting their personal data, ensuring that the power and control remain in their hands. Self-tracking can be a powerful tool for self-improvement, but it must be approached with care and consideration of the broader implications.

References

Davis, M. (2017, March 11). *What is quantified self? The Complete Guide to lifelogging*. Rize · Maximize Your Productivity. https://rize.io/blog/quantified-self

Homepage. Quantified Self. (n.d.). https://quantifiedself.com/

Neff, Gina, & Nafus, Dawn. (2016). Self-Tracking. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Self-Tracking Evidence

Week Tracked:

A screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generatedA screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generatedA screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generated

Week prior: Average Week over summer:

A screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generatedA screenshot of a graph

Description automatically generated