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Blogging in the Fatosphere: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions of Personal Risks and Benefits for Women who Blog about Weight, Weight Loss, and Dieting Issues

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Blogging in the Fatosphere: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions of Personal Risks and Benefits

for Women who Blog about Weight, Weight Loss, and Dieting Issues

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by

Melissa Marie Sneed

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ABSTRACT

Blogging in the Fatosphere: A Qualitative Study of Perceptions of Personal Risks and Benefits

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by

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This study examines the perceptions of the personal risks and benefits of women who blog about weight, weight loss, and dieting issues. Many overweight women use blogs as a tool during their weight loss journeys to garner support. The experiences of 5 women who blog about weight and dieting issues were collected through 45 minute in-depth interviews. The author's own experiences with blogging is analyzed as well. A qualitative approach was taken when analyzing the data. Eight emergent themes came from the research data. The benefits of this study are significant for current and future research regarding the influence of blogs and vlogs in shaping the perceptions and experiences of women who identify as overweight.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

I dedicate this paper to my parents and my fiancé Chris Wilson. I am so thankful for all of their support and love throughout obtaining my masters and writing my thesis.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There is an old adage that one should never ask a woman her age or how much she weighs. However, in contemporary times many women and men are revealing these personal details on the Internet via their personal web logs, known as blogs. Blogs have steadily increased in use, popularity, and accessibility (Pew, 2012). They have become a way for people who identify as overweight to obtain knowledge and build support through virtual communities (Sanford, 2010). As of 2011, 33.9 % of adults in the United States were considered to be overweight or obese (Centers for Disease Control, 2011). Many overweight individuals turn to unconventional methods in order to get healthier, lose a few pounds, and obtain more information about dieting and healthy living. The reasons for people wanting to lose weight are as different as the bloggers in the so-called fatosphere. The participants in the fatosphere range from those who are accepting themselves as they are (Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis, & Holland, 2011) to those who are trying to lose weight and obtain healthier lifestyles (Harmon 2003, Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain 2011). For this study the participants of the fatosphere who blog as a tool to obtain a healthier lifestyle are the focus of research. Some users are training for their first marathon or triathlon; others are simply fighting what they see as a battle to get healthy and lose weight. Like many issues related to the physical body, people who struggle with weight cannot fight their battles in private. Each gain or loss of pounds is publicly on display. As a result, many overweight individuals decide to fight their battle to lose weight in a nontraditional setting.

While it can be challenging to manage weight and physical appearance, making a public commitment among peers to lose weight can also be difficult, as the extra scrutiny from public

audiences can put more pressure on the individual. This scrutiny can work as a positive influence in the journey of the individual or can inhibit their results. Many overweight people use the Internet as a way to find information about health and weight loss (Ballantine 2011; Harmon 2003; Lewis, Thomas, Blood, Castle, Hyde, & Komesaroff, 2011). Some even use their personal blogs to document their own weight loss struggles and triumphs and to garner support from other people going through a similar journey and process. Many bloggers in the fatosphere use their social media accounts or their own personal blogs in order to post stories about their struggles of gaining acceptance in a world in which some feel they must hide. From two and a half million people watching singer Carnie Wilson's gastric bypass surgery live on the Internet in 1999 (Bishop, 2011), to Weight Watchers adding an online component to its program, which presently boasts 763,000 members (weightwatchers.com), to the many blogs that now proliferate on the web, the Internet and online communities have changed how people talk about their weight, weight loss, and dieting issues.

Researchers who study the impact of online technologies find that support plays an important role in health-related communication (Brown & Wimpenny, 2011). Those interested in body image, personal identity, and dieting issues could benefit from an empirical exploration of the connections between Internet use and weight loss effects. I seek to find out how women view the role of online technology in their weight loss efforts. This thesis is divided into four chapters.

In what follows in the literature review, I examine the prior research on overweight women, blogs, online communities, and the theoretical framework that informs us about the role of blogging in the lives of women who identify as currently or formerly overweight. In Chapter 2 I explain the qualitative methodology that guided the research. As a part of this method, I explore my own relationship to the work both as a coparticipant in the study and as a researcher. In

Chapter 3 I identify and discuss the themes that emerged from the interviews of the participants as important issues that arose from their blog activity. In the fourth and final chapter I work to draw some conclusions that begin to address the research question. To begin my explanation of the perceptions of women who blog about weight and dieting issues, I turn now to a review of the literature.

<div align="center">Literature Review</div>

Previous research (Oliver, 2006) on overweight women has revealed that they face discrimination in their workplaces and in the public eye. Many women have difficulty trying to find support in their weight loss endeavors while having to deal with prejudice from others. As a result, many women seek to find relationships through the means of engaging in conversations online and through blogging. Blogs allow connections to be made through the interactive aspects of online media.

<u>Challenges of Being Overweight</u>

Many overweight and obese individuals have faced cruel discrimination from others through words or actions. Obese women are more likely to receive lower salaries, be perceived to have less leadership potential, and be denied employment (O'Brien, Latner, Ebneter, & Hunter 2012). These acts of discrimination have undoubtedly contributed to hostility in the lives of many, leading some bloggers to find their own voice online as an escape from those who judge them harshly. Height and weight discrimination grew considerably in the roughly 10 years spanning the turn of the new century, 1995 to 2006. (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008). While workplace discrimination against overweight individuals has been well-documented (see, for example, Oliver, 2006), most overweight individuals are more likely to experience discrimination in their interpersonal relationships than at their workplace. Oliver (2006)

pinpointed several reasons behind the dominant ideology's increasing distaste for the big and voluptuous, arguing in part that overweight and obese women are viewed as being lazy and unhealthy.

While the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) suggested that there are many health risks such as high blood pressure and diabetes to being obese (CDC, 2011), many women feel pressure to value thinness over healthiness, and it is no secret that many women engage in unhealthy diet and exercise programs as a result (Tabassum & Berenson, 2011). Obesity is not just a problem in the United States but one worldwide (Wilson, 2012). Ian Roberts as cited in Wilson (2012) said, "fatness is a political issue that needs urgent attention" (p. 1). The cost of health care is rising with an estimated 344 billion dollars that will be attributed to obesity-related diseases by 2018 if the trend of increasing numbers of overweight people in United States continues (Thorpe, 2009).

While the waist sizes of many Americans are expanding, the waist circumference of the average model is the smallest it has been in over 20 years. In the early 1990s, models weighed 8% less than the average woman; today that has jumped to 23% (Lovett, 2012). The visibility of models and celebrities who are unnaturally thin and seem unhealthy undoubtedly has an effect on the way in which women see themselves. The Internet is full of numerous websites dedicated to quick fixes and fad diets that promise immediate results with minimal effort. For some women, the assurance of dropping a few pounds quickly takes precedence over the healthfulness of a dieting program. Laz and Berenson (2011) found that unhealthy weight loss behaviors are practiced by individuals, especially adolescents, after they seek information about dieting online. Some celebrities, such Kim Kardashian, use Twitter as a platform to advertise their diet pills and special products. Kardashian's 15 million Twitter followers have been inundated with tweets

about her success with the weight loss product QuickTrim. Clearly, some of her followers did not have some of the same results, Kardashian herself claimed, as a five million dollar lawsuit against the Kardashians and QuickTrim is pending, claiming that the products are advertised under false pretenses and are not helpful in aiding weight loss (Kotz & Haupt 2012).

While various female celebrities either purposefully or aimlessly use their popularity in order to further a thinness agenda, some feminists such as Katherine M. Flegal (2010) claim that the emerging idea of an obesity epidemic is just another example of a patriarchal influence into the lives of women. There is a double standard when it comes to public perceptions of overweight women versus overweight men. Overweight women are more likely to experience discrimination and prejudice than overweight men are (Oliver, 2006). There is a certain societal stigma that plagues those who are overweight even though some research has suggested carrying extra weight is not as harmful as once believed (Rosman, 2010).

Discrimination is a part of the lives of many overweight women. Many of the millions of women who choose to pursue dieting are driven to make this choice for social acceptance and respect rather than for health reasons. Thinness is associated with a sense of pride. Fatness is associated feelings of disgrace. To exemplify, Elmen-Gruys (2008) wrote about her experience as a sales associate in a clothing store. She recalled the disdain many customers felt for having to shop at a plus-size store, and how one woman she interviewed discussed feeling as though she should turn her shopping bags toward herself when she walked to hide the logo on the bag, so that other people would not be able to see where she shopped. With discrimination as a part of the daily lives of many obese individuals, many bloggers find solace in the fatosphere and the sense of support and community it seems to promise.

Blogs

Blogs are "commonly interpreted as online diaries" (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008, p. 64).

They are written as a way to express emotion, to share personal anecdotes, and to engage the

readers. One striking difference between diaries and blogs is that diaries are written to be private,

while blogs are written to be shared. Blogging is a fragmented narrative, as each entry is written

as part of a continuing story. As of 2012, 18.9 million women identified themselves as bloggers

(Pew, 2012). The focus of many blog accounts is the life of its author. Some of the most popular

blog topics written by women include health issues and parenthood stories. Blogs serve a host of

functions for their authors; primarily they are a form of self-expression (Baym, 2010). Blogs also

allow overweight individuals to keep track of their journey because more often than not the blogs

are posted in reverse chronological order, featuring the most recently written post at the top of

the web page (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). This allows the author and the readers to be

able to see the author's progress, all the while being able to look back at the journey that the

author has been on.

Overweight individuals who are blogging share their dieting advice and tips as well as

their food and exercise struggles with their readers. The audience or readers of the blogs have the

ability to post comments on the author's original post to which the author can reply and continue

the dialogue by responding to additional comments posted by other readers. Blogs allow their

users to manage the content they want to share with their audience. The blog authors of the blog

essentially shape their own story and have the option to continually reshape them. They have the

ability to make edits to their blog posts that they may later realize do not fit their perceptions that

evolve as their journey continues. Those who blog about their personal and public life usually

find their identity within an online community of individuals who share common goals and

aspirations. Blogging in the fatosphere allows overweight individuals to share their struggles with those who have similar goals and interests, whereas they may not have the same opportunity outside of the fatosphere. Overweight bloggers may feel unable to share their true feelings about being overweight or how they plan to lose weight and get healthier.

Challenges of Blogging. Blogging is not without its challenges. There are three primary difficulties that many bloggers find once they begin writing (Baym, 2010). Predominantly, weight loss bloggers have trouble deciding how to address their body and obesity in general because it is unequivocally a touchy subject. Authors must find a balance between engaging in an accurate portrayal of their engagement with weight issues and avoiding self-loathing that may alienate their readers. Secondly, bloggers run into issues with how to present themselves authentically online. Many readers want transparency when it comes to hearing or reading about a writer's weight loss. Lastly, privacy and disclosure are interrelated when it comes to blog posting. Some bloggers may have difficulty with the idea of sharing such clandestine information while also trying to reveal their struggles and triumphs with their weight loss issues.

One of the greatest struggles that many bloggers face relates to how much information to share and which information to leave out (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). It certainly seems that the amount of self-disclosure offered by fellow bloggers influences a given writer's decision about what to share with her or his readers; too much or certain kinds of information could prompt negative reactions from readers.

Online Communities and Social Networks. Blogs, along with social networking websites and message boards, make up online communities. An online community is simply a group of individuals who interact through a specific media across their geographic locations in order to engage in events of mutual interests (Baym, 2010). People are now able to communicate with

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others all over the world, including those nearby but not necessarily face-to-face. It is easier and quicker to send an email or a text message than it is to call someone on the phone or walk across a building to another's office. As more and more people look for information about dieting and weight loss on the internet, these websites will play a "critical role in evaluating the impact of these communities and will lay the foundation for future interventions" (Hwang et al., 2011, p. 209). Some overweight individuals use their personal blogs to publicize their knowledge of dieting issues, others engage in dialogues on websites devoted to helping people lose weight and get healthy. The Internet has become an informational source for those looking for advice on health issues. An estimated 8 million adults in the United States use the Internet to find information about some health topic on a daily basis (Kirby, 2006). The popularity of the Internet as a source of information can be attributed in part to its convenience, a core assumption of Uses and Gratifications theory (Rubin, 2009).

While there is an abundance of information in cyberspace about dieting and weight loss, Lewis et al. (2011) found that many participants found the information they received online to be grossly inadequate in providing a sustainable, long-term solution to weight loss. Lewis et al. also found that participants in the study describe having a yearning to form connections with others online who share their same struggles with losing weight. The search for information is important but perhaps not more so than is the need for connection with and acceptance from others. Many of the websites that were visited by the participants were for paid commercial diets including *Weight Watchers* and *Jenny Craig*. More than half of the participants in the study stated that they had purchased online subscriptions to websites in addition to books, calorie counters, or other medicines to combat their obesity.

Hwang et al. (2011) found that participants who used the website *sparkpeople.com* had more support if they blogged several times a day than those who did not. *Sparkpeople.com* is a free website that allows its members to blog about their weight loss goals and post their food and exercise journals. Some of the participants in the study blogged because they reported not having support from others in their personal lives or the support in their inner circle proved to be less than beneficial in helping them to lose weight. Posting comments on the website allowed the participants to receive social support from other users as well as provide support to others. That support manifests its way in different ways. Baym (2010) notes that there are three facets of support that people who engage in online community behavior find: emotional support, esteem support, and informational support. Emotional support refers to the way in which bloggers interact on interpersonal levels and turn to others in times of stress and difficulty, such as when trying to lose weight. Esteem support relates to the way in which a user receives a boost in her or his self-esteem by receiving accepting and positive comments from other users through links or comments. Informational support is important for bloggers in the fatosphere to acquire information on healthy living as well as diet and exercise tips.

Just as *Weight Watchers Online* was found to be useful in helping individuals lose weight, using social networking websites such as Facebook, Myspace, and Twitter also can be beneficial. Ballantine and Stephenson (2011) found that engaging in conversations through social networks helps people find emotional support when trying to lose weight. They analyzed the postings on a *Weight Watchers* Facebook page and later divided the participants into three separate groups based on the types of comments the users posted on the Facebook page. The more engaged that a user was with reading and comments on posts, the more support the users reported. The more casual browsers of the Facebook page did not receive much social support.

Developing Support Online. Many people who blog are looking for some kind of supportive relationship from those who can relate to their journey or struggle. Sanford (2010) found that blogging effectively provides support to overweight individuals. The Internet provides a place for the obese to receive empathy rather than purely judgment from others. Some may not get the same support in their interpersonal relationships with friends, spouses, or partners. Finding a sense of support is essential to successfully obtaining a healthy lifestyle and losing weight and keeping it off. *Weight Watchers* famously uses the slogan, "lose 3x more weight" when coming to meetings than when trying to lose weight alone without the support and motivation of others. U.S. News and World Report ranked *Weight Watchers* as the best overall diet in 2012 and its push for community involvement quite likely helps the company to obtain this ranking. "Online communities have real social benefits, and also have powerful effect on people's sense of identity" (Kozinets, 2010, p. 29). From a social support perspective, what these communities are providing is a combination of emotional, informational, and appraisal support. Bloggers are forming relationships with others bloggers or readers and are receiving encouragement, tips, and feedback from them.

While some participants of the fatosphere have no problem revealing their own identities online, other bloggers use the anonymity that the Internet provides. It is easier for bloggers to post comments online when they have a sense of physical privacy and where the perception of being judged may seem less risky than when face-to-face. Anonymity provides a way for users to have freedom to divulge personal information that they may not divulge otherwise. Lewis et al. (2011) discovered that some participants felt a sense of desperation while others discussed feeling shame and embarrassment when they asked for help for their diet needs in a public setting. The Internet created a shield from outside scrutiny and allowed users to move forward

with their health aspirations. Many participants searched for a specific website after seeing an advertisement for a diet or weight loss plan. While some participants frequently sought out health information online, many said that the information they came across was not useful in helping them obtain permanent weight loss and only provided a temporary solution. Similarly, Laz and Berenson (2011) found that seeking information about dieting online encouraged unhealthy dieting practices in adolescents.

Consistent with findings by Lewis et al. (2011), Lynch (2010) found that the possibility of online community support often explains why bloggers divulge personal information to a world of people they may or may not know. Though blogs and journals are very similar, blogs are interactive and allow bloggers the ability to engage in conversations with others who have similar interests and hobbies. Most of the participants looked at their food blogging experience as a way to "have social support for their dietary practices" (p. 322). Nearly all of the participants in Lynch's study discussed how they felt awkward and shy when talking about their blogs with other friends who do not blog on a regular basis. There were several themes that emerged when analyzing the contents of the blogs. The participants believed that they were learning from others' blogs and also found support from others' blogs.

Providing Accountability. Just as support is essential when blogging about weight loss, the accountability and constructive criticism from others also play a part in it as well. Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain (2011) found that accountability plays an important role in blogging for weight loss purposes. After someone comments on a blog post, many readers will often click on the profile of the commenter and thus increase traffic to the commenter's website. The more popular a blog is, the more likely the audience will be more active when posting comments and

links. This support is pivotal to weight loss bloggers as it can provide inspiration to the bloggers to keep going.

In 2012 megachurch Saddleback based in Irvine, California, began a weight loss challenge lead by their pastor Rick Warren. Currently, there are 15,000 users online who participate in the Daniel plan program and use the message boards and forums (Kluger, Dias & Forest, 2012). Warren came up with the name Daniel plan after reading scripture from the book of Daniel in the Bible, who gave up the king's rich food in order to honor God's best plan for him. The Daniel plan revolves around eating healthy, organic meats and produce and getting daily exercise. Mark Hyman, a cardiologist who worked to expand the program says, "the community is the cure. The group is the medicine. There are feedback loops, accountability, support" (2012). In fact, one of the major reasons for the success of the Saddleback church members, who as a whole lost over 250,000 pounds collectively in one year, was the weekly meetings and support network that occurred both in person and online. Just as support was a pivotal piece in the success of the Daniel's diet program, it is also one of the most important aspects in the fatosphere.

Comments from a blog's readers provide both positive feedback and constructive criticism to its authors. Sanford (2010) reported that keeping a blog helped keep the bloggers accountable in their weight loss endeavors. They shared their struggles with "food choices, weight gains and plateaus" (p. 577). They also shared new recipes and introduced new foods to their readers. Numerous participants engaged in weight loss competitions sponsored by other bloggers as an extra incentive. Some weight loss bloggers have even found national media attention. One blogger in particular, Ida, wrote, "I guess it's just human nature to love to be loved, and so when I write something that garners positive attention […] I am energized to keep

going" (p. 579). The kind of attention many overweight and obese bloggers received on their online blogs is in direct contrast to the negative attention many may have received in their daily lives (Oliver, 2006).

Theoretical Frameworks that Inform Blogging About Weight Issues

One of the reasons blogging has become increasing popular is because it is easy to set up an account and begin writing and posting a blog. Also, as previously mentioned, many bloggers write about weight and dieting issues as a way to manifest accountability and gain support in their weight loss endeavors. Therefore, Social Support Theory and Uses and Gratifications model offer a framework for examining the perceptions of the blogging activity of overweight women.

Social Support Theory. Some overweight individuals may feel alone in their endeavors to gain a healthier lifestyle and may participate in blog activity in order to form connections with others who share similar goals. One of the core assumptions of Social Support Theory is that social support reduces the effects of stress (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Beginning a journey of losing weight is often stressful because the individual is required to change parts of her or his lifestyle. She or he must find time to exercise or learn new ways to shop or cook. How one views oneself is also a reflection on how others view her or him because the "social world and self are linked" (Lakey & Cohen, 2000, p. 36). The discrimination that many overweight women experience ostensibly affects their self-esteem and sense of identity.

Social support can manifest itself in four different areas: emotional, instrumental, informational, and appraisal (Brown & Wimpenny, 2011). Emotional support refers to an individual being able to discuss her or his feelings in a positive environment. The practical support that comes from the help of others makes up instrumental support. Informational support encompasses the means by which information is dispersed to individuals via television or

literature. Finally, appraisal support involves an interaction between individuals and allows for feedback in order to provide encouragement.

An expansion of Social Support Theory now includes an online component. The traditional aspects of the theory are still in place, but computer-mediated communication is now included as well. Online Social Support Theory refers to "the process of support that is characterized by interpersonal relationships with other unseen persons who are mostly unknown to each other" (LaCoursiere, 2001, p. 65). Social support plays an important part in health-related activities, especially to those who are trying to lose or manage their weight because it enables them to form relationships with others, obtain information, and receive feedback from others.

Uses and Gratifications Model. One of the reasons blogging has become popular is because of the ease with which blogs can be published. The Uses and Gratification model is grounded in the assumption that people will use the form of media that best meets their needs (Blumler & Katz, 1974). In today's society being able to stay connected either through a smart phone or computer is a necessity. However, there are some negative aspects involving the ability to constantly be in contact with others, as it can potentially cause impatience while waiting for a response and can also bring about frustration when a response does not come right away. The expansion of technology alters the way in which communities, organizations, and people function in society, collectively and individually (Rubin, 2009). The ease of use for online technologies provides a way for women to be able to connect with others who share in the similar interests that they do and that promotes a mutually beneficial relationship.

Summary of Literature Review

Many overweight individuals blog about their aspirations to get healthy and to share their dieting advice and tips and their food and exercise struggles. As Oliver (2005) established, obese individuals face much scrutiny in the United States interpersonally, in their workplace, and in the public eye. The fatosphere is a mostly welcoming environment that allows bloggers to share their struggles and their triumphs (Harmon 2003; Hwang et al., 2011). The sense of community, the support, the ability for anonymity all provide an atmosphere that allows for those engaging in communication in the fatosphere to find connections to those who are like-minded. Blogs represent just one genre among the thousands of websites devoted to helping people lose weight and get healthy. Many people who have accessed these websites have also created relationships with other participants in the fatosphere. Bloggers benefit by receiving social support in the fatosphere, and it plays a pivotal role in their weight loss. As assumed by the Uses and Gratifications model, accessibility of the Internet and other people's blogs make it easy to obtain information about health issues online. The plethora of information can create some risks related to engaging in online conversations about weight loss, especially among adolescents (Laz & Berenson 2011), because anyone can post information about diets regardless of their proven ability to help people lose weight. While much of the research on blogging in the fatosphere suggests a mostly positive atmosphere (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011; Hwang et al. 2011), what are the potentially negative aspects of blogging in the fatosphere and how does this affect the blogger?

Research Question

It is the goal of this researcher to analyze the perception of the risks and benefits that female bloggers experience while blogging in the fatosphere. In what ways do these bloggers

experience the blog activity as supportive? In what ways do they experience blog activity as

challenging? What functions do others' responses to blogging serve for these women?

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

<u>Purpose of the Study</u>

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of the personal risks and benefits of blogging among women who blog about weight, weight loss, and dieting issues. A qualitative approach to this type of research is appropriate because of its ability to paint an individualistic portrait that is rich and textured. Berg (2009) argues that "good qualitative research, like good quantitative research, is based on calculated strategies and methodological rigor" (p. 147). While qualitative research may not be generalizable in quite the same way quanitative research is, it does offer insight to bloggers about the experiences that other bloggers have; it reveals possible ways of viewing human interaction and experiences that enable readers to think about how one person's experiences might illuminate others' experiences. Much qualitative research embraces subjectivity, as the researcher's own views are welcomed into the research as a lens through which the data are analyzed. The current study combined authoethnographic and ethnographic methods as a way of providing several accounts of the ways in which blog activity affects women.

<u>Ethnography</u>

The nature of ethnographic research is "always situated in human activity, bearing both the strengths and limitations of human perceptions and feelings (Richardson, 2000, p. 254). I conducted in-depth interviews, did participant observation, and wrote field notes to better understand the implications of blogging about weight and dieting issues. My own history of weight and dieting issues influenced my research at every stage in the research process, from drafting the research questions, to talking with my interviewees, to asking the questions, to

writing the research memos and ultimately completing the written manuscript. Writers of ethnography have a commitment to seek the experiences of the research participants, including how their culture comes into play, and influence the story of the participants (Goodall, 2000), but the ethnographic life is not a separate entity from the self (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005).

Autoethnography

Autoethnography connects autobiographical and personal anecdotes of cultural, social, and political perspectives (Ellis, 2004). As an overweight child and preteen, to a teenager who found a healthy weight only to develop an eating disorder, my own experiences with dieting and my struggle with weight loss are a part of my understanding of and thinking about the analysis of the interviews I conducted. Ellis (2004) described autoethnographic research in her book the *Ethnographic I* as being "truthful, evocative and therapeutic" (p. 135). Engaging in this type of research allowed me to revisit previous events in my life through reading my previous journals written during my treatment and also looking at pictures of myself and remembering the stories behind those images. Qualitative methods can allow the researcher to recognize the influence her or his life has on the data. Ellis and Bochner (2000) wrote that in autoethnography validity is established when the "work seeks verisimilitude; it evokes in readers a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable and possible" (p. 751). In order to facilitate theses kind of responses in my readers, I incorporated some of my journal entries into the research as data.

Data Collection

The procedure of collecting information for this study was done in two phases. First, I recruited participants by advertising for this study by posting on my Facebook page and blog. Second, I conducted five in-depth interviews at various locations. The experiences of four female

bloggers and one female vlogger are the primary focus of this study. In addition, my own personal experience with blogging as well as vlogging about my own weight and dieting issues is also documented and considered along with those of my participants. Both processes are discussed more thoroughly in the following paragraphs. While the number of participants is minimal, this is consistent with qualitative methodologies. Sample sizes in qualitative research should not be too large that it is difficult to obtain rich data from the research participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007).

<u>Participant Recruitment</u>

To recruit participants for the study I targeted bloggers by posting a flyer on my Facebook page and personal blog (see Appendix A). Two women saw the advertisement for the study on my Facebook page and contacted me via email. One of these women was worried that she might not be able to participate because she did not keep her own blog. However, after I did some initial questioning, it became clear that this individual had some information to offer on the role that reading blogs and participating in their online discussions had on weight loss, thus extending whom to consider a blogger. In addition to these two participants, a friend of mine saw the advertisement and gave me an email address for one of her friends who maintains a blog on healthy eating. I contacted this individual to see if she would be interested in the study and she agreed to participate. The other two participants were recruited via convenience sampling.

<u>Participant Interviews</u>

This study focuses on female bloggers in particular because women are more likely than men to blog about dieting and weight issues and are more likely than men to face discrimination about their weight (Oliver, 2006). In addition to being female, participants in this study had to self-identify as either currently or formerly overweight. I conducted five in-depth, 45-minute

interviews with women who identified themselves as either formerly or currently overweight

bloggers who wrote about weight and dieting issues. The fifth participant did not have her own

blog but was an avid reader of and commenter on blogs, who frequently posted on online

message boards on websites dealing with dieting and weight loss information.

I followed the standardized interview questions model discussed by Berg (2009) (see

Appendix B for interview questions). I asked probing questions so as to retrieve preliminary

information from the participants. Being a blogger myself, I took a keen interest in how the

blogging affects the participants and why they blog. I took extra care to reiterate to the

participants that their names would not be used in the study because discussing weight and

dieting issues is such a personal topic. This practice seemed to put the participants at ease as

everyone answered all of my questions. I did ask follow-up questions when I discerned further

explanation would be useful. Engaging in in-depth interviews allowed me to gather important

information about the blogging behaviors of these women as well as how such behaviors affects

their dieting and weight loss and how they felt about and experienced these. Berg (2009) noted

that interviewing is a conversation with a purpose. While talking with my interviewees, I found

myself reflecting on my own experiences and empathizing with the women who still struggle

with weight issues. I found it challenging at times to refrain from jumping into the conversation

and talking to the participant about my own stories as a participant instead of as the researcher. It

was most difficult when the participant had experienced someone treating them badly and I

wanted to pacify the situation or tell my own similar story instead of focusing on the experiences

of the participant.

The interviews took place in locations that were convenient for and preferred by the

participants. Two occurred at a local restaurant; one at a workplace office; and two occurred via

Skype because the distant location of the participants did not allow for face-to-face interviews. The interviews via Skype, as with the face-to-face interviews, were tape-recorded and later transcribed. All interviewees signed the informed consent form as required by the East Tennessee State University Institutional Review Board (see Appendix C). Those who interviewed via Skype signed their consent forms electronically and emailed them to me. All participants were offered 10 dollars for their time; four of the five participants accepted this compensation.

<u>Synopses of the Participants</u>

The women I interviewed ranged in age from 24 to 41 years old. They are all Caucasian and from a middle class economic background. Three of the women identified themselves as currently overweight, while two others identified themselves as formerly overweight. Two of the women are mothers, and all of the women are married. Four of the five women hold at least a bachelor's degree, one an associate's degree, and one holds a master's degree. All are active Internet users who spend an average of 2 hours a day online, excluding time for work-related purposes. Pseudonyms are used in place of the participants' real names to protect their privacy. Lola, Kate, and Bethany are all bloggers, while Rebecca posts video blogs regularly. Patty, although not a blogger, actively participates in online conversations and seeks information on weight loss online. For purposes of this study, she is considered to be engaged in blogging activity. Each woman uses blogs, vlogs, or message boards for her own specific and unique purpose, but all of them are on a journey of healthy eating and exercise.

Lola is a 34-year-old paralegal who has had a long battle with her weight starting at an early age. She has been on numerous diets and has undergone gastric bypass surgery. **Kate** is a recently married lab coordinator who began gaining weight after high school and who is a fan of

trying new diets. **Bethany** is a stay-at-home mother to two boys. She identifies herself as formerly overweight and as someone whose consumption of holistic food and 'clean eating' helped her lose 60 pounds several years ago. She is the only blogger who receives money from her posts through the use of ads. **Patty** slowly began gaining weight around 5 years ago, she reports, due to her responsibility at work, inactivity, and not making time for herself. In the past 2 years she began working out and eating healthily and lost 40 pounds. She is an avid runner who has completed several half marathons and runs to maintain her weight loss. **Rebecca** is a newlywed who has posted over 150 separate videos in the past 5 months about her daily exercise, dietary habits, and weekly weighs-ins.

Participant Observation and Field Notes

My own history with food and weight struggles permeated my research process. Upon beginning my second semester of graduate school, I enrolled in a qualitative methods course. Our first class assignment was to write a paper about food and meaning. As someone who has previously had an eating disorder and a contrived relationship with food, the terms "food" and "meaning" brought up complicated emotions for me. This assignment forced me to revisit the role that food still played in my life and how it affects my interpersonal relationships. I was not sure that I wanted to include something so personal in a first class assignment.

Ultimately, I decided that not including my eating disorder meant that I was still allowing my illness to have control over my life 6 years after recovering from it. Once I let go of worrying about what my professor or classmates might think of me, I completed the paper and turned it in. I was surprised at how therapeutic writing that paper was for me. In the past I had been careful about whom I shared my eating disorder history with because I did not want to be known as the young woman who had had an eating disorder, given the stigma that comes with such a label.

Some people think that it is just about looking like a celebrity or being vain. For me, my eating disorder was about wanting control in my life. I felt as though writing that class paper helped me to move on and see my eating disorder in a different light. After I recovered from my eating disorder, my body settled into a healthy weight. I learned to find a balance between eating healthy and exercising.

Around the same time as beginning my research methods class, I began feeling extremely fatigued and was diagnosed with anemia. My doctor recommended that I examine my diet and exercise habits along and take a daily iron supplement to help combat the fatigue. Also at that time, my boyfriend and I began to discuss getting engaged. I could not help but think about my wedding dress and how white clothing does not, in my opinion, seem to flatter anyone. I had a friend who ordered her bridal gown three sizes too small as an inspiration to lose 30 pounds before her wedding. Needless to say, she only lost 5 pounds, and she had to cut out the zipper and put in a lace-up back so her dress would fit. I promised myself that when I bought my wedding dress I would buy the size I was in at that moment rather than put pressure on myself to lose weight. So between needing a remedy for constantly being tired all the time and facing a wedding in the next year or two, I was ready to lose some weight and feel better about myself both physically and emotionally. I was also wanting to let go of the insecurities I felt about my body that I knew still had a firm grasp on me.

I knew that discussing how I wanted to lose weight, even just 10 pounds, with my family and friends would make them nervous, given my history. Despite the fact that I have been recovered for 6 years, there still remains some worry from the people I am close to that I may engage in unhealthy behaviors when wanting to lose weight. I decided to look for support with my weight loss journey online. I had seen some YouTube videos from some infomercials, so I

decided to document my journey by posting blogs. I uploaded over 75 of my own vlogs onto *YouTube* documenting my diet and exercise journey and also wrote several blog post posts over a 5-month period. By documenting my own experiences, as a part of my research process, I believe I was able to better understand the experiences of the women who were interviewed and to see first-hand some of the roles that the fatosphere plays in weight loss and dieting experiences.

I engaged in many hours of participant observations and wrote field notes, a representation of the lived experiences of others (Goodall, 2000), about what I saw. Rebecca was one of the first vloggers to comment on one of my vlog posts. After her initial post, I began viewing her videos. I took an interest in her story and observed how other viewers were reacting to her posts. I also researched the blogs of the other three participants before interviewing them to better understand where they were in their weight loss journeys. I knew Lola and Kate had each been writing blogs for a few years. I had, on occasion, skimmed over their blog posts in the past. However, once I began researching this topic, I began to see their blogs beyond what was on the surface. The details on their blog became more important. I paid more attention to what was in the background, such as pictures or quotes that I had not noticed before. I also took note of who else was reading the blogs and what kinds of comments they were leaving. For me, my field notes were important in helping me remember specific details that played a part in the interviews. I intended to use my field notes as a guide when tying all of the interview data together. Goodall (2000) explains that the purpose of field notes is to "imprison a series of motions and actions for the purpose of making a scene, or an episode, or a turning point in this unfolding human drama" (p. 87).

I coded my field notes informed by Grounded Theory approaches (Charmaz, 2006). I identified emergent themes within the notes and then compared them with the coding schemes I used in my analysis of the participant interview transcripts. I discuss my coding and analytical process in more detail below.

<u>Data Analysis</u>

The process of analyzing the in-depth interviews, field notes, and memos involved various stages. The analysis of the interviews, field notes, and research memos was driven by grounded theory, one of the most used theories involving qualitative research (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Grounded theory involves an inductive form of reasoning that is guided by research questions rather than hypotheses. The meanings and analytical categories emerge from the data and are continuously shaped through the research process.

<u>Coding</u>

Upon transcribing the interviews verbatim, I put the transcripts onto the right side of a coding table that had two columns. In the blank left column I and typed important words and meanings that emerged through the data from the interview transcripts. I then went back and hand-coded the data from the interviews in four phases using initial, focused, axial, and theoretical coding to identify emergent themes as described by Charmaz (2006). Coding is a pivotal link between collecting data and developing emergent themes.   Initial coding involves a simple read-through to look for emerging themes. Line-by-line coding can bring up new ideas worth pursuing that may have been overlooked in the interview process. It also allows for more details to emerge from the data. In-vivo coding looks at the word choices of the participants when answering interview questions. Word choices, as Charmaz (2006) argues, are symbolic to each participant and illuminate her or his experiences. Axial coding involves incoporating data

into subcategories so that the data can emerge into a coherent analysis. The last step in the process involved theoretical coding that helps to further develop the themes that have emerged from the interviews. These types of codes add precision and clarity to the process. "The strength of grounded theory coding derives from this concentrated, active involvement in the process;" Charmaz (2007) continues, "you act upon your data rather than passively read them" (p. 59). Coding allowed me to see and make connections within and across the stories of the five women.

Eight dominant themes emerged from the data of the field notes, the memos, and the transcripts:

1. A New Chapter to the Same Old Story

2. Escape from judgment

3. Negativity

4. Feedback

5. Support

6. Scrutiny

7. Accountability

8. Challenges to a Blogging Routine

In writing up the findings, the themes of feedback and support were combined because when the participants discussed receiving support from the readers of their blogs, the majority of the participants cited feedback as one of the ways they felt supported. Similarly, the themes of scrutiny and accountability were combined because to many of the participants being scrutinized, or having their blogs followed by other bloggers or readers and receiving comments from them, made the participants feel accountable in their dieting endeavors, so these categories were

strongly interconnected. In total, I write about and discuss six themes in Chapter 3. While some of the themes were shared among all participants, others were unique to individuals.

<u>Research Memos</u>

After each interview was conducted and during the coding processes, I wrote what Charmaz (2007) refers to as research "memos," to make note of my own reflections and important relationships I was seeing in and across the data. Memos "chart, record and detail a major analytic phase of our journey;" they also require the researcher to engage in analysis of the data early in the research process (Charmaz, 2007, p.72). In addition to writing memos based on transcribed data, I also incorporated a practice of writing memos right after the live interviews. Also, in at least one instance, an occurrence happened before the interview took place that needed to be noted, so I wrote a memo at that time to make sure it was included as a part of the interview process. This event is detailed in the researcher reflections section below. Research memos play an important role in having a complete picture of the entire interview process, as more occurs in the interview process than just the words that are spoken and transcribed. I wrote at least five memos for each interview that I conducted. The content of the research memos ranged from the nonverbal communication that the participants engaged in during the interview to my own biases and emotions that emerged during the coding process.

The researcher is an important part of qualitative research and my own experiences were documented throughout the research, I offer here several insights through reflections on the research process.

<u>Researcher Reflections</u>

My state of mind with all of the participants influenced the demeanor in which I asked the interview questions. Before I pulled into the restaurant parking lot for the first interview, Lola called me. I thought she might have to cancel or was running late to our meeting. The latter was true, but Lola had another reason for calling. She told me she was on her way and asked if I had already arrived. I responded that I was just arriving. Lola told me to make sure to get a table at the restaurant when we got there. I did not understand her at first. I was trying to get in 'researcher' mode and think about which questions I would ask her first. She repeated herself and just said, "make sure you get a table for us to sit at and not a booth. See you soon" and she hung up the phone. As I started walking into the restaurant and noticed the booth, it became evident to me that something Lola must think about is something that I had not considered. There is not enough room for Lola to fit in a seat at a booth, so her only option was to sit at a table. I felt sympathy for her in that moment, knowing that sometimes restaurants are full and cannot accommodate everyone with a table. I also learned that my own issues with my body are not shared across weight loss bloggers. Concern about whether to ask for a booth or table is not something that I have ever had to deal with before. I found myself wanting to know more about Lola's struggle with her weight. Why had gastric bypass not worked for her when it seems to have worked for so many people? There were so numerous personal questions that I felt I could not ask, because I worried the questions might upset her and she would want to quit the interview. I went back and forth between wanting to dive into more personal questions and yet feeling I needed to censor myself. I believe more personal and in-depth questions would have been more appropriate at a later setting when Lola, and I, for that matter, would have felt more comfortable. After all, there is a quite a bit of trust that must occur for someone to reveal

personal information face-to-face. It is an amount of trust that I did not think I could obtain from Lola after a 45-minute interview.

An issue that further complicated my interview with Lola is that we have been friends for the past 3 years. Ellis et al. (2008) wrote about the ethical challenges that come from interviewing one's friends (p. 272). Writing about the lives of others is challenging enough, but when the researcher has prior relationships with the participants the ethical line is blurred. As a first-time qualitative researcher, I felt grossly inadequate when it came to focusing solely on the interview questions and not letting anything else get in the way of it, such as not wanting to hurt her feelings or bring up uncomfortable information.

Sympathy was just one area of emotion I felt during the interview process; I also confronted feelings of jealously of one of the women I interviewed. She was older than me by 15 years and was the mother of two children. Still, I was jealous of the fact that her body, in my opinion, looked "better" than mine. I found myself wanting to know exactly what she was doing to maintain that appearance more than wanting to know about her experiences as a blogger. Also, because she was the only participant whom I did not know before the interview, I was quite timid with my questions. It was difficult to form a connection with her during the interview process both because of how my own issues intruded on the interview and because our personalities did not seem to connect. As a researcher, it is important to note my own biases when it comes to presenting the data that comes from an interview where I struggle to maintain my responsibility with sticking to the appropriate questions. I cannot help but wonder if my own biases and inability to put out distractions from the interview process are why the data from her interview are limited.

Conversely, I discovered that I was being more receptive with my questioning during Rebecca's interview because we had much in common. We both have vlogs and are doing the same workout program. Both of us frequently comment on each other's videos encouraging one another. While having prior knowledge of Rebecca's weight loss journey seemed positive to me mentally, it also meant that I had developed prior opinions of her before beginning the interview. I took extra care to make sure I allowed her ample time to answer the questions instead of assuming I knew what she would say. Having previously reviewed Rebecca's videos, I felt more at ease when engaging in a conversation with her about her blogging. As previously mentioned, trust is an important aspect of ethnographic research because the participants' experiences are at the heart of the interviews. Because my perspectives influenced my interview with Lola, then it most likely influenced the interview I had with Rebecca. Although the interview was undoubtedly influenced in a more positive way, it still impacted the research I did and likely the conclusions I drew.

Patty rejected receiving compensation for participating in the study. She made it clear from the initial contact I had with her through email that she wanted to participate in the study because she wanted to share her experience and did not want compensation for participating. Consequently, even before sitting down for our interview, I had already formed positive feelings about Patty and saw her in a favorable light. She did not accept compensation, so I skated around the tough questions with her; I felt as though I owed her for not taking the compensation offered. Reflecting further on this occurrence, I should have encouraged Patty to take the compensation. At the time of doing the interview, I was unaware that something so basic as not accepting compensation for participating in the study could have affected the way in which I asked the research questions. It is possible that Patty had similar experiences to other bloggers, but I cannot

write about the connections because I neglected to ask her the tough questions that I asked the other bloggers. So much more goes into the interview process than just a series of questions followed by answers. Two people are coming together and bringing all of their preconceptions to the interview. Regardless of what goes on before or during an interview, the researcher has a responsibility to be truthful to the experiences of the participants while recognizing that "the truth" is an interpretation that is constructed between the reasearcher and the participants.

One of the researcher biases in the study involved my wanting to write about what I had anticipated would be the outcome of the interviews instead of what was recorded on the tape and transcribed. Having previously researched the participants' blogs, I thought I had an idea of what the women would want to talk about. Just as an author's fixed and subjective positions influence how she or he views and write about a character, so will the reader's life experiences influence how she or he reads the story. Everyone sees a story through different lenses and the researcher sees the similarities and differences between the stories and draws conclusions through the themes that emerge from the interview data.

For the most part the content of the participants' blogs matched the content of our interviews, but there were some differences. For example, Lola mentioned her weight (the physical number) numerous times in her postings as well as her progress in her weekly or bimonthly posts. However, not once during our interview did she ever disclose that number to me. There could be several reasons for this – one of which could have been that our interview started with her having to make sure I knew to get a table at the restaurant. The other women were also more forthcoming about their weight and diet history in our interview than they were on their blogs. What I learned from this was that for some of the women, blogs created a shield that allowed them to feel less vulnerable and be more willing to disclose information online than

in face-to-face conversations. As a researcher, my goal was to break through the shield and get at the depth of why they blog and what they hope to get out of it each time they do. Qualitative research is at the mercy of the participants. A great deal of obtaining information depends on the generosity of the participants and how much they are willing to share. As someone who shared a blogging experience with several of the participants, my job as a researcher during the interviews was to make sure that the participant's story was the focus of the conversation and that it was captured as truthfully as possible.

Given my history with an eating disorder, there were some family members and friends who were apprehensive about my blogging about weight issues. They worried about the pressure that I might be putting on myself. Some others just did not understand why I would want to blog about such a personal issue. Many of them said, "… as long as you do it the right way." Even though it has been close to 6 years after ending treatment for my eating disorder, writing about it brought up emotions that had long been buried. Carolyn Ellis (2004) writes about the therapeutic process in her book, *Ethnographic 1*. I never participated in group therapy to recover from my eating disorder; I had regular visits with my psychologist, but they were one-on-one sessions. Although I know the statistics that 4 out of 10 Americans either suffer from an eating disorder or know someone who does (National Eating Disorders Association, 2005) and 33.9 % of Americans are overweight (CDC, 2011), I have always felt alone in my struggle as a teenager and now as a woman trying to find an inner peace from being happy about my body. In doing this study I found comfort in learning about the struggles and triumphs from other women who had experienced similar stories to mine.

I had such a positive experience with learning about the participants' stories that I originally anticipated providing the participants with a synopsis of my findings as a "pay it

forward" way of thanking them for contributing to the study. Tracy (2010) wrote about how "member reflections" are a way to enhance the credibility of qualitative research (p. 844). However, my participants did not respond with any feedback, other than brief comments that the work was "well written." I had been hoping for more self-reflective comments about how they felt knowing the experiences of other bloggers because I found the process to be quite positive and therapeutic to know that other women struggle with the same things that I do. I had anticipated that my participants would affirm the conclusions that I drew from our interviews. Instead, my experience of attempting to find validation through the participants left me feeling that if my research does not matter to my participants to whom will it matter? There are so many layers to ethnographic work and much that comes out during the writing process. Ellis and Bochner (2000) noted that a question for researchers to ask themselves is "what are the consequences my story produces? What kind of person does it shape me into?" (p. 746). Hopefully, the readers of this piece will find the importance of sharing the stories of individuals who endure public scrutiny and find a way to have their unique voices heard. Also this piece may help readers who struggle with weight and dieting issues, as I did, find comfort in knowing that there are women who struggle with the same issues we do.

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

While the stories of the five women who were interviewed were all different, there were similar experiences between their stories and mine. This study taught me that connections can be made with other people online and that women who blog about weight and dieting issues share common experiences. Six dominant themes emerged from the data: A new chapter to the same old story; escape from judgment; negative responses; feedback and support; scrutiny and accountability; and challenges to a blogging routine. In what follows I explore the connections between the stories of these women and myself and how our experiences with blogging about weight and dieting issues influenced our lives.

A New Chapter to the Same Old Story

Most of the women who were interviewed talked about struggling with their weight from an early age and having a continuous cycle of weight losses and gains for most of their lives. Some of the women could pinpoint the beginning of their struggle with a certain event, while others reported that their weight gain was a gradual process that occurred over time. Lola's weight began steadily climbing when she was just 5 years old. After the death of her brother, her weight climbed to close to 400 pounds. Her mother had her on many different dieting programs growing up. Lola exclaimed, "Food made me happy" and allowed for her to have an escape through trying times. One of the most difficult experiences that Lola endured was undergoing gastric bypass surgery which enabled her to lose 150 pounds only to have the weight came back within 3 years. After that experience, Lola has tried more diets and has been using her blog in an attempt to win her battle with weight.

In contrast to what Lola experienced, Bethany did not battle her weight until her late 20s after she had two babies by cesarean section.

I was always on some kind of diet after that. I tried Weight Watchers, South Beach, diet pills, Slim Fast. You name it, I tried it with very little success. I was always on a quest to be healthy being a nurse. I worked in the emergency room and never wanted to be a patient. I saw an increase in diseases such as obesity, cancer and asthma in younger and younger patients. I started researching on my own and discovered there was a rise in diseases when there was a rise in processed food consumption.

Upon changing her diet and eliminating processed foods, Bethany was able to lose 50 pounds in the span of a year. Bethany feels she has won her weight battle; Lola's, on the other hand, continues. While blogging may not have been the driving force behind their weight loss, it functioned as a tool that has provided much support throughout their journeys.

Rebecca got within 15 pounds of her goal weight before putting all of her weight back on that she had previously lost. She now feels as though 'her outside does not reflect the inside' and she is working on losing that weight permanently. She uses her vlog as a way to encourage others to not follow in her footsteps of working hard to lose a substantial amount of weight only to put it back on again. She wants her viewers to learn from her past mistakes. She wants to be an inspiration to them. She noted in her blog:

And I know you have those days when you feel like you're not worth it. You feel like you're not worth anything. You know, you just can't do it. You can never do anything right. It's never going to happen. But it will.

Patty got to her highest weight, by her own admission, because she was simply not being active and got too busy to maintain a healthy eating schedule. She had worked as a fitness

instructor years ago, but she started focusing on her family and work responsibilities and put herself last. "I found myself at my heaviest, 192 pounds, as a result of business and inactivity, and began a process of really changing my lifestyle," she explained. Patty now runs 3 or 4 days a week and reads information about healthy eating online. While she does not keep a blog, she frequently writes posts in online communities and on message boards.

My own struggle with weight issues goes all the way back to middle school. I do not remember being self-conscious about my weight until a boy in my seventh grade class called my attention to the fact that my stomach was bigger than the other girls'. At the time, I weighed close to 200 pounds. A visit to the doctor with the news that my triglycerides were off the charts led me to begin exercising on a daily basis and changing my diet. Little by little, my weight got down to a healthier 175 pounds, still heavier than most of my 13 year-old classmates. I was more self-conscious about myself after losing weight than I was when at my heaviest. I despised eating in front of other people, especially during lunch at school. It drove me crazy that my friends could eat whatever they wanted while I was held captive by salads with dressing on the side.

I wanted so desperately to be a single-digit size clothing because I thought that was what a normal size was. In contrast to the size zeros on network television, the average woman is five foot three inches tall, weighs 163 pounds, and is a size 14 (Centers for Disease Control, 2011). I frequently bought fashion magazines such as *Seventeen* and *CosmoGirl* to try and learn ways to dress more hip and stylish as a way to feel more positive about my appearance. It seemed like each magazine would include some kind of story about how to lose weight. In high school, I joined the tennis team and felt very insecure about how I looked in our team uniforms. My every physical lump and bump was on full display. I wondered why could I not be like the other players who had perfect bodies. Being a student athlete brought about criticisms of my weight

from my coaches, my teammates, and most of all myself. I always felt like the other girls were talking about me behind my back. I was the last one to finish the running drills at the end of practice; I was out of breath as I made my way to the bleachers to find my already empty water bottle. I had such a distorted view of myself. Even now, seeing pictures of myself from high school makes me realize that I was not that fat. I was simply surrounded by classmates and some coaches who saw thinness as being healthy and being 20 pounds overweight as being morbidly obese. My experience was not unlike that which Oliver (2006) wrote about, in which overweight individuals are likely to receive harsh comments and experience discrimination from their peers.

<u>Escape from Judgment</u>

While an estimated 50% of Americans are on a diet at any given time (CDC 2011), discussing weight issues and feelings of insecurity in a public setting remains taboo for many people. Several of the women I interviewed reported that blogging enabled them to escape the harsh comments to which overweight people often are subjected. Kate revisited a painful story about a visit to McDonald's where she endured some unpleasant comments.

> One time… I went to McDonald's once and my husband wanted an ice cream and they had left it out. I circled back around to get it and their response was the "fat girl needs her ice cream." It wasn't even for me. But you get that. You get those looks when you order something that someone thinks you shouldn't eat that but they don't know what you've eaten all day anyways.

Kate blogged on a consistent basis throughout her journey of losing 65 pounds in the past 12 months. She frequently shared her weight loss progress on Facebook and also received encouragement from her Facebook friends. The support Kate received helped her succeed on her journey. Ballantine and Stephenson (2011) explained "social networks can provide informational

and emotional support to its members" (p. 336). The community of her Facebook friends counteracted the sometimes judgmental actions of others.

For Bethany blogging provides a way to connect with other bloggers who share her passion for natural foods. In contrast to her life outside of the fatosphere where she received unkind comments about her diet, blogging provides an outlet for Bethany to share her recipes and ideas with an audience that is receptive to the choices she is making and that wants to learn more about eating a clean diet. On her blog Bethany can write about what is important to her without feeling like others are going to judge the decisions she is making and worrying about them policing her food choices.

Rebecca found that vlogging provided her with a way to escape from uncomfortable looks and judgments she anticipated she would receive from friends who knew her before she gained back the weight she had lost. She chose to vlog because she was embarrassed to go back to the gym after she gained back most of the weight she had lost while working out.

It's taken me six months to stop being so ashamed of myself. I didn't want to go to the gym I had been to before because I didn't want people who saw 'skinny' me to now see what I've done to myself. So basically that's my story. Now I'm determined. I'm not going back to who I used to be.

While she may not have faced judgment at her gym, the possibility of a shocked look from someone was enough for her to invest in home workout equipment and to post weekly videos where she felt free from the judgment of others.

For me, as a researcher and blogger, blogging and vlogging allowed me to create a connection with other women who had similar stories and shared personal experiences. In my high school and college athletic years, my social circle revolved around people who were mostly

in shape and did not have problems with their weight. When talking then about wanting to get in better shape or going on a diet, my comments were met with, 'If you just exercise more you'll thin up' or 'Don't worry about it, you're an athlete; you're healthy.' I did not have people to whom I could relate and with whom I could share my feelings about this issue. It was a rather lonely experience trying to lose weight on my own without the support of people with whom I spent much of my time.

Years later, remembering the feedback I received from discussing my dieting issues, I knew that it would serve me better to seek advice from others who understood my struggle of overcoming my weight and body image issues. Blogging enabled me to find other people who had similar experiences to myself and who knew what I was going through and how I was feeling throughout the process. My experience, along with Kate's and Bethany's, echoed the research of Barak, Boniel-Nissim, and Suler (2008) who found that "participation in an online support group reduces feelings of loneliness and social isolation" (p. 1875). These participants and I found it helpful to know that there were other women out there who had a similar background to us, and who seemed to genuinely care about how we were doing. While I was unable to discuss my weight issues with some of my friends because of my concerns about what they would say, I felt as though I had freedom to divulge my true feelings online without being scared of being judged.

<u>Negative Responses</u>

While many bloggers enter the fatosphere trying to escape from what they experience as the meanness of the outside world, sometimes harsh comments can infiltrate it. The cruelty can sometimes come from the bloggers themselves, who are unhappy with their progress or who feel like giving up. Self-esteem is wrapped up with weight loss issues.

As previously discussed, it was some of the negative responses from her friends that drove Bethany to begin blogging in the first place. She talked about how she felt that some of her friends were jealous of her 50 pound weight loss and that they grew tired of hearing her explain to others how she had lost so much weight. Some of her friends would tell her she was getting too thin and needed to stop trying to lose weight. They asked for her advice, she said, but then told her they did not want to give up the foods they loved to eat. "Even now when I go out, because I blog, people watch everything I eat. They also hide their food from me when we are out at activities because they think I am going to police their choices or something," she said. These responses made Bethany feel self-conscious about her diet, like she needed to downplay this part of her life when she is out in public. Bethany decided that a blog was the easiest way for her to disperse information to her family members and friends who wanted to learn more about her new lifestyle; people could choose whether or not they wanted to seek out the information.

Lola reluctantly divulged that she had received some negative responses from a blog post from one individual in her life. Her friend told her "how I need to do it [lose weight] and quit whining about it and that she'll be my cheerleader but only this one more time and then she's done with it," Lola stated. While Lola seemed to laugh off this threat, her eyes suggested a much deeper hurt than her words indicated. Blogging involves written words, and although words can be written in capital letters, with emoticons or exclamation points, the depth of hurt and agony that is present in these women's lives does not show up on blogs. In addition to writing her blog, Lola uses her Facebook account to subscribe to various motivational pages, including her gym that posts different pictures and graphics to serve as motivational tools. She also posted her blog updates on her Facebook page as well and has received supportive comments from her Facebook

community of friends which help to combat some of the negative responses she has received in public.

Joining in the quest to get healthier, I engaged in some blogging of my own. I posted updates to my Facebook pages and eagerly waited for the little red box to pop up indicating that someone had 'liked' my link or commented on it. The responses I got from my Facebook friends were not a problem because they were negative but rather because they were nonexistent. Many of my blog updates were met with no response at all from my Facebook friends. I had certain expectations when beginning my blog. I had witnessed the responses that some of my Facebook friends' blogs received when they posted about doing diets that involved fasting and other fad approaches. These endeavors apparently yielded them quick weight loss results to the cheers and accolades of their many Facebook friends. I expected my experiences would be similar, that I would receive equivalent support and accolades. To my surprise this was not the case. I do not understand why people cheer on dieters who do extreme measures like juice fasting or injecting themselves with pregnant women's hormones. However, when I blogged about losing nine pounds in 4 months, no one said anything. Not a "You can do it, girl," or any other encouraging word. I began to question whether my Facebook friends cared about me. I took the ignored blog post very personally. I felt like a lack of 'liking' my blog post reflected their lack of liking for me. My insecurities about my body came to a head when I contemplated the reasons behind the lack of support I received about my blog. It could have been because I did not have as much weight to lose as some of the women who also blogged. Perhaps it was because people who read my posts knew my history with an eating disorder and did not want to contribute to making me feel as though I had to lose more weight. Frankly, I think it is irresponsible for people to cheer on others who use extreme measures to lose weight. I wondered if I would have gotten more 'likes'

had I blogged about pursuing an extreme diet. The lack of enthusiastic responses to my blogging

led me to create video blogs where I received a greater amount of feedback.

Ironically, some of the participants and I blogged to get away from the negativity we

found outside of the fatosphere. However, Bethany, Lola, and I were on the receiving end of

some unconstructive comments from our readers and peers. These experiences contradicted the

inclusive supportive nature that found in previous research (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011;

Baym 2010; Sanford 2010,). In spite of some negative occurrences, Lola and Bethany were able

to find a supportive audience with their blogging, just as I did with my vlogging.

<u>Feedback and Support</u>

Lola found her blog was a way to obtain support from others: "A lot of the weight loss

and motivation stuff with me is emotional and mental," she said. The supportive comments that

Lola received on her blog gave her encouragement and helped her to continue on her weight loss

journey. Lola also found that writing blog posts and receiving comments was motivating to her,

especially on the days when she felt worn down and not as eager to head to the gym. She said,

"[My blog] just helped me to get feedback from others; it motivated me as a way to say you can

do this and be successful."

Patty was able to connect with other women who were also on a quest to eat healthy and

exercise by using online tools to track her running schedule and caloric intake. These online tools

helped her along her journey of losing 40 pounds and completing several half marathons. Her

online community was also enhanced by some of her friends who introduced her to an online

tool that kept track of the miles she ran so she could train for various races. Such online

communities provided a platform for these women to be able to communicate with one another.

Bethany works part time as health coordinator in her community. She also offers health counseling to families and individuals. She gives her readers an opportunity to share their stories with her followers, thus allowing them to receive comments and support from others.

I have a Facebook group and allow people to post their progress. You are never going to have someone come back like you do on a fad diet and say this was a bad idea. Who can argue that consuming foods the way God created them was a bad idea and you should eat more chemicals.

Most of the feedback from her blog has been positive, except from some of the women who just could not give up processed foods. Undoubtedly, support is one of the most important facets when beginning and continuing weight loss program.

The absence of support I received in response to my blog posts, as I have noted, led me to engage in a different type of blogging–vlogging . Video blogs are relatively new and allow users to record videos discussing whatever is on their minds. I quickly did a search on *YouTube* and found numerous vlogs by women who were doing the same exercise program I was attempting. I posted an introductory video explaining my reasons for wanting to get healthier and my fears about making a public commitment to begin a healthier lifestyle. Almost immediately, my video received comments from several women who were excited to see my journey unfold. Several of my viewers included links to their own blogs with their comments so others could follow their journey as well as mine.

Vlogs and blogs allow users to engage in two-way communication and bring about a mutually beneficial relationship if both parties engage in conversation. Rebecca frequently ended her vlog posts with gratitude for the support she received from her viewers: "Thank you so much to everyone who subscribed and shared your stories with me. You inspire me to keep going."

The support of her viewers helped her to continue with her diet and exercise endeavors. Support plays an important part when beginning an exercise and diet plan. Lewis (2011) found that "participants had a strong desire to connect with a community of others to share experiences for support and accurate health information" (p. 348). Rebecca also uses her vlog as a way to give support to her viewers. In one of her video posts about motivation, she said "I really want to encourage everyone to keep going." Her vlog posts included updates on exercises she could not accomplish before and how much stronger she had gotten once she began working out.

I received many positive notes from my vlog viewers including "So great for your first week!" "Great job girl! and "Keep up the good work!" These words of support and encouragement helped me to have a positive outlook on my journey. A few people outside of the fatosphere noticed me getting into better shape, but the comments I received predominately resided in the fatosphere. I felt as though those outside the fatosphere would not understand, just like those high school teammates of mine did not understand. The support I received from my vlog viewers made me feel a part of a group that shared common goals. Keeping a vlog helped me feel less on my own and that I had people with whom I could lean on for encouragement. As an anonymous blogger stated in a *New York Times* article about finding support in the fatosphere, "It's nice to know you're not alone." (Harmon, 2003, p. 3). A support system is a critical component of any weight loss program as it can provide feedback as well as accountability.

<u>Scrutiny and Accountability</u>

It seems as though whenever a celebrity goes on a new diet and gets in shape, the world is suddenly watching, wondering how long it will take for her or him to lose the weight and whether she or he will be able to keep it off. When Jessica Simpson signed a 4 million dollar contract with Weight Watchers after having a baby and had lost minimal weight in the 2 months

postbirth, gossip blogs ran amuck with stories of her gaining too much weight from being

pregnant as well as retaining losing the baby weight longer than they felt she should (Messer,

2012). There is an exorbitant amount of pressure on women, whether celebrity or not, to lose

weight after having a baby. Much of this has to deal with the prejudice that many people have

against overweight women (Oliver, 2006).

While many weight loss bloggers may not receive the same scrutiny as Jessica Simpson

or other celebrities, there are still some comments of criticism that come from the readers of their

blogs. One reason for this may be that bloggers and vloggers are at different steps of their

journey and envy can sometimes show up in message boards and on the comments portion of the

blogs. As blogger Robyn Anderson found out, "There is an unspoken 'I can't wait until you put

it all back on and more' out there" (Harmon, 2003, p. 2). While making a public declaration to

lose weight, exercise more, or diet can increase scrutiny of the individual's goals, the attention

can also make the blogger feel more accountable to her or his readers and audience. Knowing

that people are watching their food intake and exercise habits can motivate the bloggers to make

healthier choices. The accountability factor that comes from making goals in the presence of

others has lead many companies and organizations to lead weight loss competitions and events in

the workplace just as Saddleback church did (Hyman, 2012). In this case the participants in the

programs are welcoming the added accountability as a tool to help them reach their goals.

When Patty regained 10 pounds after losing 40 pounds, she wondered if people would

comment on her recent weight gain. While she does not divulge the actual numbers of her weight

loss on Facebook, her running friends post pictures of her at races and thus her friends can see

her progression over the past few years. She said "I bet old friends find it interesting that 10

pounds have came [sic] back on, after being my thinnest in years." She also talked about why

she does not use a Facebook application that allows her run meter to post her results on her Facebook page. She said, "I often find myself scrutinizing others who post wondering if they just needed an ego boost." She continued, "I just don't care if everyone is proud of me for running 10 miles on Saturday." For Patty, her accountability comes more from the people whom she sees face-to-face than from those with whom she interacts online. She reads blogs primarily as a tool for information support while finding her emotional support through her fellow runners outside of the fatosphere (Brown & Wimpenny, 2011).

Kate found out that more people were reading her blog than she first thought because they noticed when she took a break from posting. She explained, "I got busy at work and didn't have time to blog and they called me, yelling at me, 'Where is your new post about your diet?' And I didn't think anyone read it but me." As the bloggers discovered more people read their blogs, they became more aware of how involved their readers happened to be with their journeys. "Their weight loss success or failures did not just affect them, it also affected their readers" (Sanford, 2010, p. 575). Kate's blogging experience helped her go further than she thought she could go because her friends held her accountable to follow through on her goals.

Whether the scrutiny from other bloggers or from those not participating in the fatosphere is viewed as a positive or negative attribute is up to the blogger and how she or he chooses to interpret the comments. For some the added scrutiny made them feel more responsible for their goals, as it did with Kate. For others it created pressure that seemed to set them up for failure. For example, at the encouragement of one of her friends, Lola embarked on a 60-day juice fast in hopes of resetting her body. Her quick weight loss results brought about praise from her friends, but as she immediately regained all of the weight she lost, she received some comments of 'I told you so' from other bloggers and followers of her Facebook page. Regardless of the mindset with

blogging or vlogging, accountability plays an important part in any weight loss or health endeavor.

Rebecca not only vlogs about her daily exercise regimen but also uses an online fitness tool to document every calorie she eats. For her receiving positive comments from her vlog viewers played a major role in helping her to lose 38 pounds in the past 5 months. She even made a point of divulging the fact that everything she posts on her diet tracking account was truthful because she wants her readers to know that she is being honest with what she is posting. On the days where she would cheat on her diet and eat some baked chips, she would discuss how she felt like a failure for not keeping up with her diet like she needed to be doing. Her viewers would respond to her self-loathing attitude with encouraging comments and support. She indicated that such responses had a major effect on her ability to continue pursuing with her weight loss goals.

When posting for my own blog, I was concerned that making a declaration of wanting to get healthy and lose some weight would set me up to have to endure scrutiny from other people. I wondered if other people knowing I was on a diet would give them a reason to comment on my food choices. Making a public commitment about how much weight to lose or other fitness goals through a blog brings the readers' attention to the blogger's ambitions and can encourage the blogger to persevere. The readers want to know if a certain diet program or exercise regime is helping the blogger attain her goals and whether it can work for them in the future. The reason that Bethany blogs, for example, is that it allows her to share with friends and family the wealth of knowledge that she has learned. Some bloggers choose to keep their goals private because they do not want the negative scrutiny from others. Others need to have cheerleaders and accountability to help reach their goals.

<center>Challenges to a Blogging Routine</center>

There are many positive aspects of blogging. Many of the women interviewed found that they were able to connect with other women who shared their visions for having a healthier lifestyle. However there are also some negative drawbacks to blogging as well. Blogging takes time and many of the women found it difficult to make time in their busy schedules to participate on a consistent basis. In fact, one of the reasons that many people find it difficult to stick with a diet or exercise program in general is because of a lack of time (Baym, 2010). Bethany, a stay-at-home mom to two boys, found the most difficult thing about blogging to be finding the time to post on a recurring basis. Bethany is the only woman interviewed who turned her blog into a business venture. She offers clean eating coaching to others as well as cooking and preparing meals for her clients. The same rang true for many bloggers and vloggers who talked about how challenging it was to keep up their posts on a daily or even weekly basis.

While finding time to blog on a consistent basis was a difficulty Bethany had, Lola found it challenging to come up with new writing topics. Her fitness routines became mundane, the same old thing all the time, she said. "Challenging is the motivation to keep [the blog] up. To keep it fresh." She felt responsibility to her readers to keep them engaged with her blog posts and does not want to bore her readers with her routine posts that say nothing new.

Kate also found keeping her blog current to be a tedious process. She did not like to blog on the days when she felt very hungry because she did not want her readers to view her as being "whiny." The perception her readers had of her mattered to her. Kate was also reluctant to share every detail of her experience with a diet because she knew some of her friends had mentioned to her that they wanted to try it and she did not want to influence them. She censored herself on the days the diet proved to be challenging for her. Kate thought that just because the diet was

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challenging for her did not mean it would be challenging for her readers. She did not want to give them unrealistic expectations of how the diet would be for them. Kate knows that everyone's experience with dieting programs is different.

Personally, I found vlogging less time consuming than blogging because I did not have to worry about grammar or reread my posts before I felt happy enough to publish it. With vlogging I just sat down in front of my computer and recorded my thoughts. I felt more freedom. For around 3 months I would upload my videos right after I exercised. What I wanted to say was fresh on my mind. I chose to be in my workout attire when I uploaded my videos because I wanted my viewers to see that I was sweating profusely and that I had given my all in my workout. However, after taking a 3-week break from uploading videos, due to a trip that did not lend itself to exercising as I had been, I stopped uploading videos. I made a couple of half-hearted attempts to join back up again, but I felt disconnected with my viewers and myself as a vlogger. Suddenly vlogging felt more like a chore instead of a tool that was helping me get healthier.

These findings were consistent with Leggatt-Cook and Chamberlain (2011) as one of the most challenging aspects of blogging involved decided how much information to disclose and what to leave out. Many bloggers feel a responsibility to their readers and also want to tell their own story. One of the reasons Bethany might struggle with keeping up her blog is that she knows she has a large audience who view her page and she feels a greater responsibility to disperse the information to her readers in an engaging and interesting way.

The common experiences shared between these women demonstrate the personal benefits and risks that are associated with blogging about weight and dieting issues. Many found support

through the comments from others, but they also experienced some negative aspects of blogging

such as critical feedback from their readers as well as those outside of the fatosphere.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

In what ways do these bloggers experience the blog activity as supportive? In what ways do they experience blog activity as challenging? What functions do others' responses to blogging serve for these women?

There are many different motivational factors as to why women choose to blog and vlog about their health and dieting issues. The ability to share my feelings in an environment that felt safe to disclose how I was doing was the prime reason I chose to blog and vlog about my weight and dieting issues. Others' reasons may be different from mine, but all six women who participated in this study, myself included, found blogging to be an outlet from everyday life as well as and gave us a voice in a culture that tries to stifle our feelings and opinions. The discrimination that many overweight and obese women receive on a daily basis encourages many of them to blog in the fatosphere in order to find a community of others who are similar to themselves, to build relationships, and to find motivation in their weight loss endeavors. One of the reasons there is so much support in the fatosphere is that many women can relate to others' struggles. The bloggers share a common goal of trying to obtain a healthier lifestyle. The more personal information the blogger divulges the greater the likelihood that the other person will share her or his story as well (Altman & Taylor, 1973). As the relationship grows, so does the amount of information each party is willing to disclose to one another. This enables emotional support to grow between the bloggers because they are sharing information that allows them to form deeper connections than they would otherwise. Some bloggers may feel that it is risky disclosing personal information online because they might be judged for it, but the bloggers

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interviewed felt as though the benefits of receiving emotional and informational support outweighed the risks of what they might face by blogging in the fatosphere.

<div align="center">Emotional Support</div>

Emotional support plays a pivotal part in weight loss success (Brown & Wimpenny, 2011 Hwang et al., 2008, Kirby 2006). For some of the women who blogged about their weight and dieting issues, this support helped to counteract the negative experiences they may have had outside of the fatosphere. Rebecca found much emotional support from her viewers as well, mostly because they were doing the same exercise program as she was. They could relate to the difficulty of the exercises she was doing as well as the challenge of trying to completely revamp her food choices. Furthermore, Rebecca used her blog as a way to have an open and honest discussion about her weight issues.

Lola had been on the receiving end of some discrimination in public. Writing her blog posts allows her the opportunity to put words to her story instead of being judged by her outward appearance. Blogging was a way for her to obtain support from others: "A lot of the weight loss and motivation stuff with me is emotional and mental," she said. The supportive comments that Lola received on her blog gave her encouragement and helped her to continue on her weight loss journey. Lola also found that writing blog posts and receiving comments was motivating to her, especially on the days when she felt worn down and not as eager to head to the gym.

I found the people in the fatosphere to be more receptive to my goals than in those outside of the fatosphere. Much of the support I received came in response to my video blogs. I had always been surrounded by women who did not struggle with their weight and it was a different experience to converse with other people who understood the struggle of not fitting into clothes or feeling insecure about their bodies. The audience of my vlogs understood my struggle

because most of them were engaging in their own vlogging as well. I felt as though they sympathized with my feelings of insecurity. I was accepted and valued by the people who viewed my vlogs, which is an important aspect of emotional support (Brown & Wimpenny, 2011).

<div align="center">Informational Support</div>

As previously mentioned, the women who were interviewed used their blogs and other Internet sources as a way to find informational support about their weight and dieting issues. All 5 women interviewed reported spending at least an hour on the Internet per day. Some access it from their iPhones or from their laptops. Information from the Internet is easy to obtain and is one of the reasons many people use it. The ease of use of a certain form of media promotes its use (Rubin, 2009). One of the most popular websites visited by the women who were interviewed was Pinterest. Pinterest is a relatively new website that enables its users to 'pin' things onto boards they have designed. There are various categories including health and fitness boards. Most of the women reported that they used Pinterest in order to find recipes and workout tips.

The bloggers who were the most successful at losing weight and keeping it off for a period of time reported that they did not follow a specific diet but were rather students of learning about nutrition and healthy eating. As Brown and Wimpenny (2011) noted, "providing information alone does not always change behavior" (p. 14). They followed healthy low calorie diets and exercised. The Internet allows the sharing of information to become widespread and in many cases diets can become generalized.

One of the reasons Bethany began her blog was to disseminate information to her family and friends about "clean eating." She wanted to provide them with informational support about

holistic eating. There was not a website present in cyberspace that met Bethany's needs, so she decided to create one. Her blog allowed her family and friends "easy access" to all of the information and recipes that Bethany had pertaining to her new way of eating. Bethany also frequently visits numerous websites to obtain new ideas about how to incorporate more things into her organic lifestyle.

Most of the women interviewed were frequent visitors to other peoples' blogs as well. Patty frequently discussed the Internet as being a 'great resource' for finding healthy recipes and exercise tips. She sent an email to an Olympic marathon runner and was surprised to hear back from him with advice for running long-distance races. The Internet provides feedback instantaneously from searches, which is another reason many bloggers find it to be such a useful tool. One of the reasons Patty chose to not use her own personal blog was because she was trying to keep her journey private and she did not want to open herself up for scrutiny from others. That being said, she did find informational support by joining in conversations on message boards and learning from others' experiences. Other runners would post tips on how to improve race time as well as what to eat before a race.

<u>Risks of Blogging in the Fatosphere</u>

One of the challenges with so much information online is how the bloggers separate the information they find into what will work for them and which foods and activities they should avoid. Research shows that individuals will sometimes engage in unhealthy diet practices after they seek information about dieting online (Laz & Berenson, 2011). Several of the women who were interviewed reported that they had began a diet that they had found out about it and researched it online. Kate had heard about the HCG diet after reading about on a news website. She also posted a status update on her Facebook page asking her followers what they thought

about the diet. She received 20 comments, some positive and some negative. Most had not done the diet and Kate was left to fiend for herself as to whether or not she would do the diet. Lola, after the encouragement of a friend's nutritionist, began an intensive juice fast. She had watched a documentary about other people who had done a juice fast and had unrealistic expectations about how the juice fast would work.

None of the women interviewed reported that blogging about their weight loss brought about unhealthy behaviors. Most of the women reported finding a receptive audience online and thus were able to share their victories in their weight loss as well as their difficult moments. When Rebecca had a day when she would go off her diet and eat a bag of potato chips, her admission was always meant with encouragement from her viewers to not beat herself up about it and to get back on the wagon. I never felt encouraged to engage in unhealthy weight loss behavior, but there were moments when I would felt frustrated that other women were be losing more weight than me. I would have thoughts about wanting to speed up my weight loss, but I knew that fad diets quickly led to gaining the weight back again. Given my history with an eating disorder, several family members and friends were apprehensive about my engaging in a diet and exercise program. They were supportive, but there were many comments such as "make sure you do it the right way."

The Benefits Outweigh the Risks

Most of the women found the information they encountered online to be helpful with their journeys. However, simply blogging about weight and dieting issues is not enough for the weight loss to remain permanent. It is a tool that allows bloggers to get to where they want to be by providing them with accountability and a plethora of information about healthy living. Emotional and informational support provided motivation and encouragement to the bloggers

and helped them along their journey. For these women, the support they received from the fatosphere was most effective when it was coupled with instrumental support they received offline from friends or family members. Most the women used their blogs and online activities to find emotional and informational support. The emotional support of being valued and feeling accepted enabled the women to form connections with other bloggers who shared their struggles. Blogging was also a way for them to receive much needed advice. The bloggers were able to find new recipes and other tips to help them reach their goals. The support motivated the bloggers to continue on with their journeys. For these women and myself emotional and informational support played an important part in choosing to blog about weight loss and dieting.

As evident with the women interviewed, blogging can be a useful tool in helping overweight women reach their weight loss goals. Blogging provided an escape from the judgment of others and allowed the bloggers to be in control of their own stories. The women who were interviewed felt as though their blogging and vlogging efforts made them accountable to others and made it easier for them to keep up with their weight loss and fitness goals. The two-way communication that occurred between the bloggers and their audience also helped to motivate the bloggers, encouraged self-disclosure, and thus enabled the bloggers to receive emotional and informational support from their readers.

There were some negative features that the bloggers reported experiencing, such as difficulty writing on their blogs consistently. Other more personal negative aspects of blogging were that some of the women received unenthusiastic responses from friends on their blogs and in public. Some of the women chose to blog in order to garner support from others and to help alleviate the discrimination they endured in public. The comments varied from thinking the blogger had lost too much weight or that they were not eating a healthy diet. None of the women

stopped blogging because of negative feedback from others. Deciding to post such personal information as weight issues can bring about scrutiny from other people as they can feel the need to comment on food choices made by the blogger. Some of the bloggers used this feedback as a way to be more accountable in their daily dieting efforts.

However, even with some of the negative aspects that come with blogging in the fatosphere, it does offer support that otherwise may not be there and it also allows the bloggers to own their own story in their own words. The overarching theme throughout all of the interviews was that social support from others played a large role in their decision to begin and keep blogging.

Limitations

Although there were a number of consistent themes that emerged from the data, the results from this study do have some limitations. First, some of women who were interviewed were derived from convenience sampling. A more random sample would provide more diverse results. Secondly, the length of each interview was only 30 minutes to 45 minutes long. Therefore, there was a limited amount of time to discuss the participant's blogging experience. All of the women interviewed were Caucasian and this could constrain the results of the study as well, because different ethnic groups have conflicting views on food and culture.

Future Research

This study, like many others, demonstrates the importance that blogging, vlogging, and online communities have in the lives of overweight and previously overweight women. Additional research should be looked into in order to discover the impact that blogging has on the interpersonal relationships of women outside of the fatosphere. It would be beneficial to do a content analysis of the blog and vlog posts of the women who participated in the interviews and

to code the data from the blogs and vlogs to determine emergent themes. A comparison of the themes from the blogs could be done with the themes that emerged with those from the interviews. A more hybrid approach combining a quantitative and qualitative method would be worthwhile in order to have a more complete picture of how blogging affects these women.

No information about the weight of the women was provided except in the case of one of the women interviewed who voluntarily shared it. Future research could analyze the amount of weight loss during the time the women were actively blogging. Furthermore, this study only looked at the experiences of women who blogged and vlogged about weight loss issues. Comparing their experiences with those of women who do not blog would provide some insight regarding the correlation of blogging and weight loss success versus those who do not blog. Lastly, a more longitudinal study that follows the bloggers for a period of months would be beneficial, as well as tracking the weight loss of those being interviewed to measure their progress.

It would be worthwhile to interview women of different ethnic backgrounds. Culture plays an important part in food choices and there would undoubtedly be differences with how women of different ethnicities deal with their weight and dieting issues. Furthermore, the economic status of participants would also be meaningful to investigate, as healthy food is more costly than processed foods. It would also be interesting to analyze the blogging behaviors of men and how their behaviors differ from those of women who blog about weight issues. Women are more likely than men to deal with public discrimination and it would be valuable to investigate the stigma placed on women who identify as overweight across gender and ethnic backgrounds.

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Advertisement

Women, Blogging & Body Image
Be a part of an important Research Study

*Are you female?
*Are you over the age of 18?
*Do you have a blog that discusses weight, food or health information?

If you answered YES to these questions you may be eligible to participate in a blogging research study.

The purpose of this research study is to look at the benefits for women who blog about health and weight issues. I would like to interview 10 bloggers about 45 minutes. These will be one-on-one interviews.

Participants will be compensated ten dollars for the interview.

Interviews will take place at ETSU.

The study is being conducted in conjunction with East Tennessee State University

Please call Melissa Sneed at 423.***.**** or email zmms27@goldmail.etsu.edu for more information or to sign up.

Interview Questions

(Opening Questions)
- Hi. Would you mind telling me a little about your self?
    o Age
    o Educational background
    o Occupation

(Probing questions)
- How much time do you spend on the Internet?
- Do have any favorite websites?
- Do you have a Facebook account?
- How often are you on Facebook, etc?

(Interview Questions)
- So how long have you been blogging?
    o What made you decide to start a blog?
- Can you talk to me a little about your weight loss history, etc. ?
- What was the role of blogging in that history?
- What kind of connections do you have with other bloggers?
    o Such as seeing them in person?
    o Do your friends read your blogs?
    o Do your family members read your blog as well?
    o In what way does knowing that these particular people, or other ones, are reading your blog influence what you write
- What type of feedback did you receive from your readers about your weight loss?
    o Did they post comments on your blog?
    o Did they tell you in person?
- Do you ever have trouble thinking about something to write about?
    o What was the most challenging thing about having a blog?
    o To what extent do you feel like you are scrutinized, if at all?
    o What type of positive attention from it?
    o What type of negative attention from it?
- Do you journal and if so, how does blogging compare?

APPENDIX C

IRB Approval

East Tennessee State University
Office for the Protection of Human Research Subjects • Box 70565 • Johnson City, Tennessee 37614-1707
Phone: (423) 439-6053 Fax: (423) 439-6060

IRB APPROVAL – Initial Expedited Review

May 1, 2012

Melissa Sneed

Re: Blogging in the Fatosphere: The perceptions of the personal risks and benefits of women who blog about weight, weight loss and dieting issues.
IRB#: c0412.5s
ORSPA #: N/A

The following items were reviewed and approved by an expedited process:
- Form 103; Narrative (04/18/12 approved 04/29/12)*; Informed Consent (ver. 02/20/12 stamped approved 04/29/12)*; Flyer (stamped approved 04/29/12); Assurance Statement; Potential Conflict of Interest (none identified); CV; Interview Questions

The item(s) with an asterisk(*) above noted changes requested by the expedited reviewers.

On **April 29, 2012**, a final approval was granted for a period not to exceed 12 months and will expire on **April 28, 2013**. The expedited approval of the study *and* requested changes will be reported to the convened board on the next agenda.

The following **enclosed stamped, approved Informed Consent Documents** have been stamped with the approval and expiration date and these documents must be copied and provided to each participant prior to participant enrollment:
- Informed Consent Document (ver. 02/20/12 stamped approved 04/29/12)

Federal regulations require that the original copy of the participant's consent be maintained in the principal investigator's files and that a copy is given to the subject at the time of consent.

The flyer has also been stamped with the approval and expiration date.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks to Subjects or Others must be reported to the IRB (and VA R&D if applicable) within 10 working days.

Accredited Since December 2005

VITA

MELISSA MARIE SNEED

Personal Data:	Date of Birth: April 11, 1989
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