



# WEIGHT LOSS BLOGGING

**Anne-Marie Oostveen, University of Oxford, writer of the HCI 2011 Best Short Paper, studies the beneficial effects of weight loss blogging and asks whether the Internet can empower stigmatised groups.**

Research shows that obesity has a social stigma in western society which leads to discriminatory attitudes towards overweight and obese people. In real life overweight people are in Goffman's (1968) terms '*discredited*' individuals (e.g. their differentness is evident on the spot). On the Internet, however, their weight problems are not immediately perceivable by those they communicate with: in this context they have become *discreditable* individuals who can actively manage information about their overweight by either telling or not telling.

Despite the offline reluctance of individuals to talk openly about weight issues (Maitland & Chalmers, 2008), there is an abundance of personal weblogs about weight loss with remarkably open accounts of everything to do with overweight. While the widespread use of personal blogs offers opportunities for interaction and communication it also raises privacy concerns. In my research I examined the extent of online disclosure among adult weight loss bloggers. What motivates people to disclose information which has a social stigma offline? Can the internet be regarded as an empowering technology for stigmatised groups? To address these questions, I conducted a survey among 79 bloggers with an active

personal weight loss blog written in English. An online questionnaire with both open-ended and closed questions captured the extent of personal information disclosure, as well as measures of feelings of stigma, privacy attitudes and privacy behaviour.

## **Obesity and stigma**

Worldwide 1.5 billion adults are overweight, of whom 500 million are obese (WHO, 2011). Despite the growing obesity epidemic, overweight persons are still labelled as deviating from the norm. Obese individuals are stigmatised and face prejudice and discrimination (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Weight bias is translated into inequities in employment settings, health-care facilities and educational institutions. Puhl and Heuer's study confirms what Goffman noted in the 1960s: people tend to impute a wide range of imperfections on the basis of the original one, such as the stereotypes that overweight and obese persons are lazy, unmotivated, lacking in self-discipline, less competent, non-compliant, and sloppy. When other people view obese persons as less intelligent or more incompetent, the result may be strained and uncomfortable social interactions, more constricted social networks, a compromised quality

of life, low self-esteem and depressive symptoms. Stigma can have an enormous impact on people's lives (Link & Phelan, 2006).

## **Little anonymity**

The participants (85% females) were between 21 and 57 years old. The oldest blog dates from June 2000 while the most recent blog was started in July 2010. All the bloggers allow others to write comments on their blogs. Bloggers are forthcoming with both personally identifiable information and non-personally identifiable data, only a minority post fully anonymously and most bloggers will be identifiable when several pieces of information are combined.

Most bloggers (72%) consider the information they provide 'somewhat' to 'extremely' private. Nearly a third of the respondents indicate that the level and sensitivity of what they reveal on their blog have increased over time:

**The more I blog, the more I tend to reveal about my weight loss and eating habits. I feel as though the people that read my blog know a side of me that many of my friends and family don't.**

The more blog followers I get and the more personally I interact with them, the more comfortable I feel. I find myself opening up even more once I get to know most of these people on a personal level.

Others (15%), however, decide to disclose less information when the blog becomes more popular:

I started out anonymously, so I wrote openly and honestly – there wasn't much traffic and very few fellow weight loss bloggers, so it was an ideal forum. Nine years later traffic has increased hugely and I'm completely public so cannot be as open as I once was, now that mother and landlord read it. Also being 9 years older and a little wiser, I don't feel the same urge to blurt out everything and want to claw back some privacy.

The negative effects of posting rather private information online (misuse) are felt by a fifth of the bloggers. Still, 95% of the bloggers are not concerned that their blog posts will be available for a long time.

### Feelings of stigmatisation

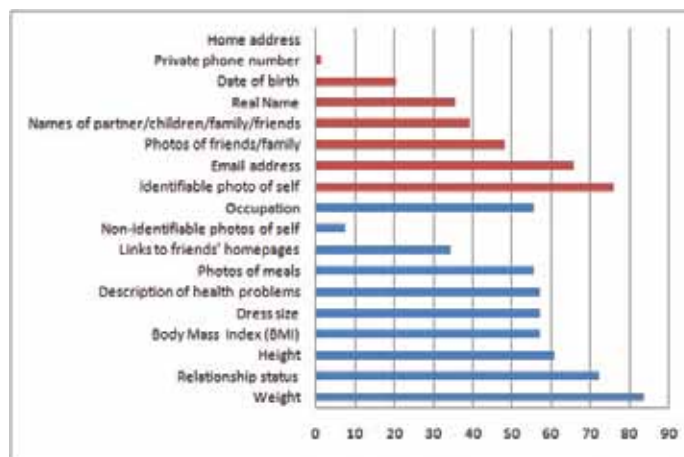
A large number of the respondents experience feelings of stigma related to their obesity. The indicators to measure stigma among the respondents are based on work by Handler and Hollingsworth (1969). First of all, about half of the respondents answered that they (sometimes) feel embarrassed or uncomfortable when they are with friends or other people who are not overweight:

**It is hard to be around others who don't have to watch what they eat. I often feel inadequate and fatter than I am.**

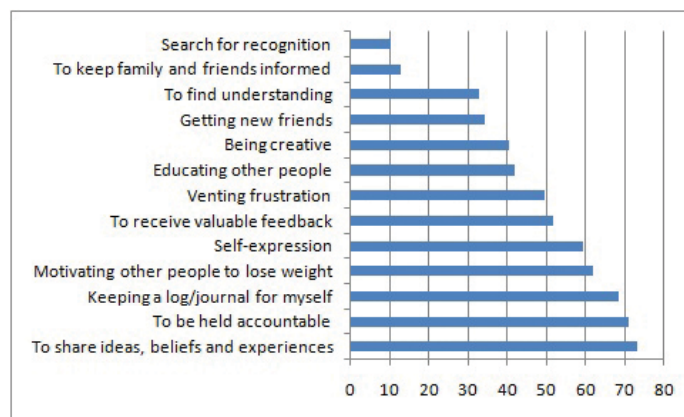
People feel they are not pretty, they feel disappointed in themselves or they feel awkward, self-conscious or envious around others. They fear that when others look at them they will 'only see the fat'. Still, some feel they are not defined by their physical body or are no longer overweight and therefore don't feel embarrassed any more:

**I tend to feel hyper-aware of my weight when around others. Not so much anymore, but when I was over 300 pounds.**

Secondly, when asked how the bloggers think people in our society feel about overweight and obese people, 75% of the respondents answered that people



**Figure 1**  
Information posted on weight loss blogs (N = 79, red bars = PII, blue bars = non-PII).



**Figure 2**  
Motivations for blogging about weight loss (N = 79).

are 'fairly' to 'very' hostile, while 20% think people are indifferent. Only 5% of the bloggers feel that people are fairly understanding. Another indication of stigma is the problems people encounter due to their overweight. The bloggers indicate that they have experienced *some* weight-related problems in health care settings (14%), educational settings (21%) and employment settings (30%) but *a lot* of weight-related problems in interpersonal relationships (75%).

### Motivations for weight loss blogging

Reasons for online disclosure are to share ideas, beliefs or experiences, and to be held accountable. Keeping a log for oneself provides a means to look back at accomplishments:

**After a while it became a log of my success, failures and proof of perseverance. If I was having a rough time, I could see right in front of me what I had accomplished. Going back to read posts from when I was in a more positive mindset was often enough to bring me out of a negative one. It's difficult to 'argue' with yourself.**

The community aspect of blogging turns out to be very important. Bloggers find

recognition and understanding from likeminded people:

**Understanding from those who identified with what I was going through was key to dusting of my knees if I fell.**

They receive valuable feedback and supportive comments:

**It truly does make a difference in moving forward when you hit inevitable bumps along the way. Roadblocks are an inevitable part of it and to have people cheer you on is incredibly motivating.**

Goffman points out that people need 'sympathetic others'. Obvious sympathetic others are of course those who share the same stigma. These people have had the same experiences and are ready 'to share with him the feeling that he is human and "essentially" normal in spite of appearances and in spite of his own self-doubt' (Goffman, 1963: 31). This moral support and acceptance is critical for someone's happiness and well-being. As one respondent points out:

**It is easier to live a life of health, wellness and weight loss when**



privacy' by individuals, it seems to be more a case of what Koskela (2004) calls 'empowering exhibitionism', whereby the bloggers receive benefits due to their voluntary disclosure of personal information. They make social connections and build up a community of likeminded people which helps them in their struggle to lose their excess weight. Bloggers seek, as well as provide support, advice and experiential knowledge, and due to the 24 hour availability of the Internet they have access as and when needed.

Among the respondents who had feelings of stigma (on either indicator) there was decidedly a notion of gaining more self-esteem through blogging about weight loss. Finding a strong online community with sympathetic others who give moral support, feedback and reinforcement not only boosts self-esteem and feelings of happiness, but will also help weight loss bloggers reach their goal. Studies have shown that those who have a social support system in place lose more weight than those who do not. In this sense the internet can be utilised as a technology for the improvement of well-being.

In our follow-up study where we will interview bloggers and analyse their blogs we will examine in further detail whether these gains are constrained to the online context or whether they also have an impact in the offline interpersonal context.

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surrounded by a community of like-minded people. People in my 'real life' don't necessarily understand or care all that I have to say about my weight loss efforts.

Making social connections is another important function of writing and reading weight loss blogs:

I met hundreds of people who identify with what I was experiencing, which was not readily available in my real life. Consequently I have made some best friends who I have gotten to know in 'real' life.

The community aspect is clearly a two-way street. Not only do bloggers seek support, they also feel inspired when they can help others by providing feedback, offering motivation and educating them.

I knew my life would be different if I lost the weight, but the degree to how much it has, and the joy it brings, is enough for me to encourage others to see that it is possible and I want to share that with as many people as possible.

Our survey shows that writing about weight loss on a blog has many positive consequences. It makes people feel proud, in control and better about themselves. However, there is a distinction between people who experience high or medium levels of stigma and those who experience no stigma. Those who feel stigmatised more often regret having revealed certain things on their blog. They also feel considerably more often that the information they share is sometimes too emotional and they experience more embarrassment and vulnerability. However, blogging helps them to improve their self-esteem twice as often as for those who don't feel stigmatised. The importance of having positive self-esteem cannot be underestimated: to develop self-esteem is to widen the capacity to be happy (Branden, 1990).

### Conclusions

Weight loss blogs empower many of their writers to use their voice to gain more self-confidence and become more open about stigmatised issues. Overall, weight loss blogging seems to bring more positives than negatives for our respondents. Instead of 'careless relinquishment of