

# The Internet as an Empowering Technology for Stigmatized Groups: a Case Study of Weight Loss Bloggers

Anne-Marie Oostveen  
Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford  
1 St.Giles, OX1 3JS  
anne-marie.oostveen@oii.ox.ac.uk

**Despite the offline reluctance of individuals to talk openly about weight issues, 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 offer opportunities for interaction and communication they also raise privacy concerns. There are both potential positive and negative consequences for stigmatized individuals of online (self-) disclosure. Why are people willing to disclose information which has a social stigma offline? And can the Internet function as an empowering technology for those who are being stigmatized?**

*Stigma. Obesity. Weight loss. Weblogs. Online disclosure.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

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 Goffmans' terms (1968) *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, 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 offer opportunities for interaction and communication they also raise privacy concerns. There are both potential positive and negative consequences for stigmatized individuals of online (self-) disclosure.

This short paper uses a survey with both open-ended and closed questions to examine the extent of online disclosure among adult weight loss bloggers. We are interested to find out why people are willing to disclose information which has a

social stigma offline? Do the bloggers remain anonymous or do they disclose their identities? Can we speak of 'careless relinquishment of privacy' by individuals, or is it more a case of 'empowering exhibitionism' (Koskela, 2004) whereby the bloggers receive benefits due to their voluntary disclosure of personal information?

## 2. OBESITY AND STIGMA

Figures by the World Health Organisation show that worldwide in 2008 1.5 billion adults were overweight. Of these, over 200 million men and nearly 300 million women were obese (WHO, 2011). Despite the growing obesity epidemic, obese persons are still identified and labelled as deviating from the norm. Based on a review of several decades of research documenting bias and stigma toward overweight and obese persons, Puhl and Heuer (2009) show that obese individuals are highly stigmatized and face multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination. Weight bias is translated into inequities in employment settings, health-care facilities and educational institutions. Puhl and Heuer's study confirms what Goffman already 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 are likely to 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).

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This paper is based on a survey among 79 weight loss bloggers. We used an online questionnaire with both open ended and closed questions to capture disclosure of personal information, as well as measures of feelings of stigma, privacy attitudes and privacy behaviour among adult weight loss bloggers. To be included in the study the participants needed to have an active personal weight loss blog written in English. To recruit participants for the study, the URL of the questionnaire was posted on relevant online forums and sent directly to weight loss bloggers. These bloggers were found with search engines and by using the blogrolls of weight loss bloggers. Furthermore, we asked bloggers to post a recruitment message on their own blogs or to forward the URL to other weight loss bloggers they might know (snowball system).

The questionnaire consisted partly of questions which have been developed by other researchers (Buchanan et al, 2006; Handler and Hollingsworth, 1969) as well as questions unique to this bloggers online disclosure case. The questionnaire was piloted among 10 people and after making some small adjustments put online from August till October 2010. The survey took about 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The survey contained around 30 questions: an initial screening question; a set of demographic questions, a set of questions about the bloggers' online disclosure; and more in-depth questions about the use of weight loss blogs and posting about others. Finally, the survey contained a set of questions about privacy behaviour and privacy concern. In this short paper, it is not possible to elaborate on each of these issues. This paper will therefore only touch on the privacy issues examined by the survey and will instead focus on the motivations of bloggers to write personal accounts about their weight loss efforts and the influence this online disclosure might have on their well being and happiness.

### 4. RESULTS

#### 4.1 Participants

The ages of the participants (85% females) range from 21 to 57 year old. Most of the participants are

American (54%), Canadian (16%), British (7%) or from Australia or New Zealand (6%). The oldest blog dates from June 2000 while the most recently started blog is from July 2010. All of the bloggers allow others to write comments on their blogs. The key target audience of the bloggers are people who are also trying to lose weight (77%) and other weight loss bloggers (75%). Friends (34%), family (21%) and total strangers (38%) are also considered as readers. Only a minority of the bloggers post fully anonymous. About 14 percent claim that they can't be identified from their blogs, the other bloggers either use their full names, their first name (but often in combination with identifiable photos of themselves) or a nickname known by friends.

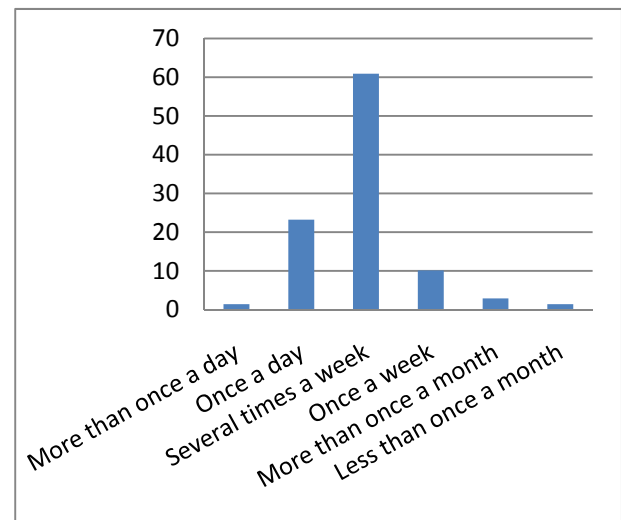


Figure 1: Frequency of blog posts (N=79)

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, the bloggers were asked how they feel when they are with friends or other people who are not overweight. Secondly, the bloggers had to indicate how, in general, they think people in our society feel about overweight/obese individuals. Goffman (1968) points out that the stigmatized individual with a 'visible' stigma will have special reasons for feeling that mixed social situations make for anxious unanchored interaction. About half of the respondents answered that they do indeed feel (sometimes) 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' (Female, 40) and 'I do not feel embarrassed per se, especially around my friends, but I may feel sometimes uncomfortable if I'm around people who obviously are judging other people around them' (Female,

31). People feel they are not pretty, they feel disappointed in themselves or they feel awkward and self-conscious around others. They fear that when others look at them they will 'only see the fat' (Female, 29). They also sometimes feel envious being around 'skinny' friends. However, other respondents feel they are not defined by their physical body or are no longer overweight and therefore don't feel embarrassed anymore: 'I tend to feel hyper-aware of my weight when around others. Not so much anymore, but when I was over 300 pounds' (Male, 28).

When asked how the bloggers think people in our society feel about overweight and obese people, 75% of the respondents answered that people are 'fairly' to 'very' hostile, while 20% think people are indifferent. Only 5% of the bloggers feel that people are fairly understanding. The two stigma indicators are strongly related. Those who feel embarrassed or uncomfortable with friends who are not overweight also tend to perceive society in general as hostile toward overweight and obese people. 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%).

#### 4.2 Reported level of online disclosure

After having established how often the weight loss bloggers post information online, the next question is obviously what kind of information they disclose (Figure 2). The data can be split in two categories. First of all, there is the unique identifiable information. In social psychology *personally identifiable information* (PII) is any piece of information which can potentially be used to uniquely identify, contact, or locate a single person. Although the concept of PII is ancient, it has become much more important as information technology and the Internet have made it easier to collect PII, leading to a profitable market in collecting and reselling PII. Items which might be considered PII include, but are not limited to, a person's full name (if not common), national identification number, telephone number, street address, email address, etc. Secondly, there is the information which is still quite personal but doesn't give uniquely identifying clues because many people share the same data such as gender, race, age, religious views, political views, relationship status, etc. Note that information can still be *private*, in the sense that a person may not wish for it to become publicly known, without being personally identifiable. Moreover, sometimes multiple pieces of information, none of which are

PII, may uniquely identify a person when brought together. In our research, bloggers are slightly less forthcoming with providing personally identifiable information as they are with non-personally identifiable data (see Figure 2), but most people will be identifiable when certain pieces of information are combined. One respondent commented upon this: 'I removed the name of my city and specifics about my job, but you could probably figure out at least where I live fairly easy' (Female, 27).

When asked how private the bloggers considered the information they provide on their weight loss blogs 72 percent find the information 'somewhat' to 'extremely' private. Only 9 percent doesn't consider the information private at all. We then asked the bloggers whether the level and sensitivity of what they disclose on their blog has changed over time. Nearly a third of the respondents say that they now reveal more information than they used to when just starting out with their blog: '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' (Female, 32). 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' (Female, 34).

The participants in our study prove to be active contributors to the content on the internet. Most of them (84%) use Social Network Sites and partake in micro-blogging (68%), they often have another weblog and use photo and video sharing websites. From a privacy perspective this is not without danger. Computer scientists over the last fifteen years have shown a serious flaw in the basic idea behind "personal information": almost all information can become "personal" when combined with enough other relevant bits of data. Sweeney (2000) showed that only a few characteristics are needed to uniquely identify a person. She found that half of the population in the United States could be identified based only on city, gender and date of birth, while even at county level still 18% of the US population can be uniquely identified when their county, gender and date of birth is known. The sort of information our bloggers are freely giving out.

The negative effects of posting rather private information online are felt by a fifth of the bloggers with 10 percent claiming that information they had posted on their blog was misused *once* by another person, and 10 percent claiming that this had

happened *more than once*. Still, 95% of the bloggers are not concerned that the things they post on their blogs will be available for a long time.

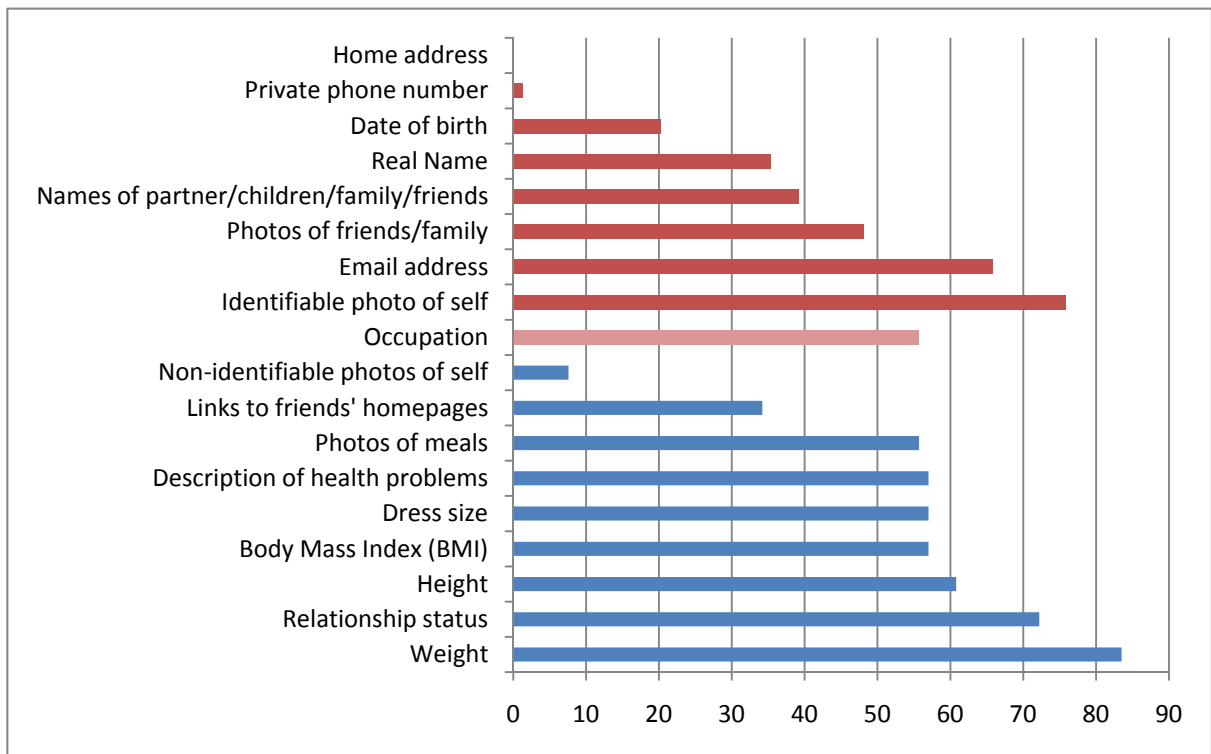


Figure 2: Information posted on weight loss blogs (N = 79, red bars = PII, blue bars = non-PII)

### 4.3 Motivations for blogging about weight loss

What are the motivations for bloggers to post information about their weight loss online? People blog for multiple reasons. Our survey shows that the main reason for online disclosure is to share ideas, beliefs and experiences. As one respondent argues: 'That is how you learn and grow, you can not do this journey solely by yourself' (Female, 28). Another important motivation to write a weight loss blog is to be held accountable: 'Knowing that other people are watching my progress (or set backs) keeps me accountable' (Female, 32) and 'It was a public place where I would commit to following my plan' (Female, 31). Keeping a log for oneself provides a means for bloggers to look back and see what they have accomplished over time: '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' (Female, 30).

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

recognition and understanding from likeminded people: 'Understanding from those who identified with what I was going through was key to dusting off my knees if I fell' (Female, 31). They receive valuable feedback and comments: 'I receive the most supportive comments and feedback from my readers. 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' (Female, 31). Many bloggers raised the value of hearing about the experiences of others. 'Readers provide advice and tips that can help you move past a specific issue that might arise in the process' (Female, 31). This need for having access to practical advice and experiential information from others with similar health issues has previously been highlighted by Rozmovits and Ziebland's study on the use of the Internet by cancer patients (2004). Making social connections is another important function of writing and reading weight loss blogs. Often the respondents end up making new friends for life who they even meet offline: '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' (Female, 31). 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' (Female, 31).

That there is a true sense of community among the bloggers can be seen from the sense they have of 'knowing' their readers. We asked how well the bloggers feel they know their blog's audience. About 74 percent feel that they know their audience 'somewhat' to 'extremely well' and only 7

percent feels they know their readers slightly or not at all. The importance of being part of a community also leads some people to disclose more information than they did initially. 'Over time, and as I have networked with other bloggers to develop a community, I have revealed more information than I did when I started the blog. I know that the information is public to the entire world with the click of a mouse, but I am honest with my blogging community' (Female, 27) and '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' (Female, 28).

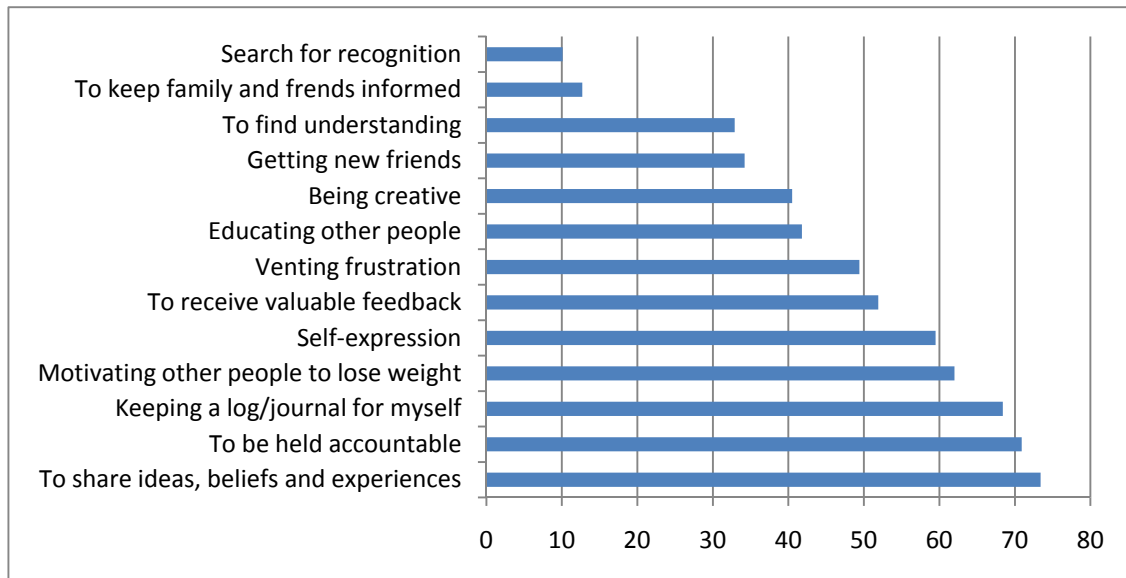


Figure 3: Motivations for blogging about weight loss (N = 79)

#### 4.4 Weight loss blogging and well being

Being part of a weight loss community is of great importance for people who experience stigma in their daily lives. 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 surrounded by a community of like-minded people. People in my "real life" life don't necessarily understand or care all that I have to say about my weight loss efforts' (Female, 27). Another blogger says: 'I am much more open about my weight and weight issues. Online is a place where you don't feel that people are judging

you' (Female, 32). The blogs clearly give voice to shared feelings which strengthens the bloggers attachment to the community: 'As I have gotten into things and become more familiar with the others in the weight loss blogging community, I am finding myself open up more and share more information about myself' (Male, 29).

From Figure 4 we can see that writing about weight loss on a blog has many positive consequences. It makes people feel proud, in control and better about themselves. However, when we take the differences in level of stigmatization that individuals experience into account, there is a distinction between people who experience high or medium levels of stigma and those who experience no stigma.

Our study shows that those who feel stigmatized 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. For the bloggers who do not feel

stigmatized the information they post on their blogs never makes them feel sad (as opposed to 42% of bloggers experiencing a high level of stigma and 7% of those experiencing a medium level of stigma). The bloggers who do not feel stigmatized also feel less embarrassment and vulnerability.

However, for the bloggers who experience high or medium feelings of stigma it is shown that blogging helps them to improve their feeling of self-worth (also self-esteem) twice as often as for those who don't feel stigmatized. So although the other positives (feeling proud, feeling in control, feeling better about oneself and informing and educating others) do not substantially differ between the groups, writing an online personal account of weight loss helps those who suffer from low self-worth. The importance of having positive self-esteem cannot be underestimated. According to Branden (1990) to develop self-esteem is to widen the capacity to be happy. Self-esteem allows people to be convinced about deserving happiness.

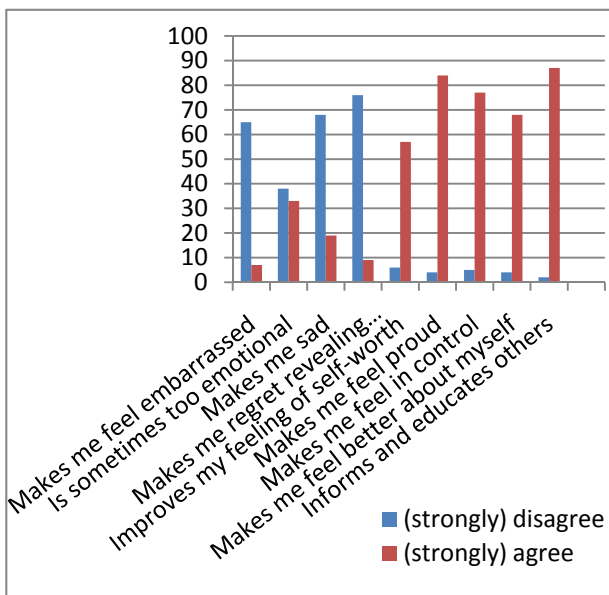


Figure 4: The information I share about myself on my weblog... (N = 68)

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we have argued that weight loss blogs empower many of its writers to use their voice to gain more self-confidence and become more open about stigmatized issues. Overall, weight loss blogging seems to bring more positives than negatives for our respondents. Instead of 'careless relinquishment of 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 likeminded people who give moral support, feedback and reinforcement, does not only boost 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 utilized as a technology for the improvement of well-being. In our follow-up study whereby 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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