Teenage girls’ first-person narratives about weight perception and dangerous weight loss practices: A study of five blogs from LiveJournal.com

By

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Abstract

In Western cultures, social significations are associated with body weight and shape (Woof, 1990, as cited by Malson, 1998). Thinness is especially valued and especially for women and girls. As a result, many teenage girls aim to be thinner. This thesis examines five blogs on the website LiveJournal that are written by teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight and who use blogs to talk about their attempts to lose weight. All five of these girls say that they practice at least one extreme method of weight loss and all of them have dangerously low weight loss goals. Two research questions motivated this study: 1) how do teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight use blogs in their journeys to lose weight? 2) Can LiveJournal, or any other personal blogging site, provide a useful source for researchers so that they can learn about eating disorders in girls’ own words? The blogs provided a tool by which I could discover first-hand experiences of teenage girls who are trying to lose weight. Essentially, the blogs were used as both the data and the mean by which the data was collected. My results suggest that girls rarely discuss their weight loss practices with family or friends and thus their blogs provide a space where they can share their experiences and receive support and encouragement from other members of their online community who will not judge or stigmatize them. The results of this study are useful for social science researchers in two ways. First, the results provide important information pertaining to first-personal narratives about body image, weight loss and the practice of extreme methods of weight loss by teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight. Second, the results provide useful information for social researchers seeking to use blog research for their projects. This project highlights the benefits of blog research and provides a sort of how-to for future researchers hoping to use the method.
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To the faces behind the words: we’ve never met but I truly feel like I know the five of you. Thanks to your incredible stories, I have been able to produce a study that is not only meaningful to myself but hopefully to other social science researchers hoping to learn about your experiences or about the usefulness of blogs in social research. I believe your honesty is what set you apart from any other types of study participants and for that I am thankful.

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Chapter One

Introduction

When I was sixteen I became interested in teen angst. While battling my own bouts of depression, I was interested in learning about others going through similar experiences. A Google search brought me to the website called LiveJournal, which, at the time, was considered a revolutionary concept on the Internet. LiveJournal is a blogging website. Before the term blogging was popularized, users understood the website to be a place where one could keep and/or publish an anonymous diary online. I was fascinated by the concept of reading about other people’s personal experiences, especially on topics I could relate to and that my friends weren’t bringing up in conversation. I would read the journals on depression, self-harm, and anorexia as they all displayed real stories of teen angst, unlike the kinds I watched in movies or read in fiction books. I was able to relate to the emotions people were writing about, regardless of the reasons for their sufferings, and so for years I turned to the website whenever I felt down in order to re-discover that I wasn’t alone.

Today, LiveJournal continues to prosper as one of the most popular blogging websites. As one of the first online journal-keeping sites, LiveJournal has kept its original format, allowing users to interact with each other through forums and through comments on each other’s journals. It has become known as a place for users to connect with each other over shared interests and experiences. While I no longer feel the need to use the website therapeutically, I continue to read the journals out of pure interest and to remind myself that I am now better than I used to be.

This study will look at five bloggers between the ages of sixteen and eighteen who keep personal blogs on LiveJournal. The five bloggers use LiveJournal as a tool to anonymously
publish their writing. They write about their experiences with eating disorders and weight loss and some of the bloggers use the website as tool to interact with other users going through similar experiences.

The idea to study personal diaries for my Master’s research did not come automatically. When I applied to do my Master’s degree, I wanted to study body image. I was concerned that some people harm their bodies in order to achieve the body ideals set out by society. While pondering the different sources I could use to study raw and honest emotions, I remembered the realness in the writing on LiveJournal. Interestingly, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to focus on men, women, adults, teenagers or children, but I knew that I wanted to study body image and I knew that I wanted to learn about it as close to first-hand and as honestly as possible.

I then turned to the weight-related communities on LiveJournal to check out what types of contributions could be found on the site. My first thought was that it would be ideal to study men since most published studies on body image deal with women; however, I spent some time searching through LiveJournal only to discover that few men seemed to use the site. The weight-related communities I discovered on LiveJournal were for the most part places where girls and women contribute to discussions related to weight loss and/or eating disorders. Most users appear to use the communities as a way to reach out to others going through similar experiences of trying to lose weight. I noticed that, generally, the users post in order to offer advice to and ask questions of their online peers. What struck me as shocking was the extent to which some users were sharing stories of extreme weight loss practices like binging and purging and using laxatives. I was also surprised by the support offered to those seeking what seemed to me to be dangerously low weight goals. Users were congratulating each other for losing pounds and they were expressing jealousy over each other’s success.
From the weight numbers (current weights and goal weights) that the girls shared, it seemed that not all of them would have been classified as clinically overweight; rather, it was their weight perception that was driving them to dangerous eating and weight loss practices. The girls appeared to be very open about the weight loss practices that they engaged in. Some talked explicitly about eating disorders. My reading of the blogs suggested that the girls were using their blogs to record their weight loss journeys and the everyday events that related to how they perceived their weights. I began to wonder what role the blogs might have been playing in their experiences.

Here is where my research question became clear: how do teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight use blogs in their attempts to lose weight? I thought that the blogs might play some sort of therapeutic purpose in the girls’ processes of dealing with their attempts at weight loss and their eating disorders, just as they had helped me when I had been feeling depressed.

**Online Journals as Sources**

Although I have never kept an online journal, from ages nine to eighteen I wrote in a hand-written diary almost every day. When I was younger, I enjoyed writing little stories about my family and friends and writing about my nightly dreams and school. It wasn’t until I was fifteen that I started recording the emotions that related to my life experiences. Previously, I had felt comfortable divulging my thoughts and feelings to my friends; however, at fifteen, once my thoughts began to become more mature, darker and deeper, I didn’t feel comfortable sharing with anyone anything I felt. My diary became a place where I could express my thoughts. I remember
thinking that if anyone were to read my diaries that they would learn a whole different side of me that they otherwise wouldn’t know. I dreaded the potential embarrassment that could arise from their discovery, and so I kept my diaries as hidden as I could in my bedroom. The thoughts in my diaries were never shared and so I suffered in silence and always kept part of myself hidden.

So, before beginning my thesis project, I understood that a reader can learn a lot about a person from that person’s diary. A reader can learn about things that otherwise may not come up in conversation. From my own experience I understood that thoughts and emotions, for some people, are more easily expressed through writing. As a result of my experiences keeping a journal and reading journals on LiveJournal, I suspected that studying blogs could offer different ‘data’ than I could gather with more traditional academic research sources, like interviews. As my thesis progressed, it became clear that my analysis and results would answer another important question: can LiveJournal, or any other personal blogging site, provide a useful source for researchers so that they can learn about eating disorders in girls’ own words? Standard academic research methods, like surveys and interviews, have limitations in terms of capturing girls’ own perspectives on eating disorders or experiences with weight loss or weight perception. Blogs like LiveJournal are a unique source for researchers to gather data about eating disorders since the data comes from the girls’ own words. The majority of the studies cited in my literature review analyzed national health surveys that were conducted in the form of questionnaires. In fact, most of these studies cited the exact same survey. I believe these surveys do not provide the same type of data as blogs do because the data is not always presented in the girls’ own words. I also believe that there are limitations that can be avoided by choosing to use blog research instead of distributing questionnaires. I will discuss this in Chapter Six.
My Research Project

My research project is about five blogs that appear to have been written by teenage girls who are between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. The blogs are about the girls’ efforts to lose weight and are all published and open to the public on LiveJournal.com. I am interested to understand better how teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight use blogs as part of their experiences of trying to get thin.

This project is based on the assumption that the authors of the blogs are who they say they are. I am aware that the authors (like anyone writing on the Internet) could be providing false descriptions of themselves and that they could potentially not be who they say they are. I am aware that the content of the blogs might be exaggerated or made up. Nevertheless, I studied the blogs for what they appeared to be with the belief that even imaginary stories are based on some sort of reality. This point will be further discussed when I talk about the methodological concerns associated with online qualitative research. What I want to argue here is that both narratives of truth and narratives that are exaggerated or are fabrications can say something about the contexts in which they have been written. If the authors of these blogs are not teenage girls, the bloggers may have learnt how to write and act like teenage girls through examples in the media or from people they know at home or in school. In these cases, the personas presented may be impersonations of other teenage girls. Behaviors and personalities can be mimicked using both imagination and information that is readily available in society.

Body image dissatisfaction is common during adolescence, especially for girls. Weight gain may lead teenage girls to a heightened awareness of body image and may serve as a cue to compare themselves to others (Zullig, Ubbes, Pyle, & Valois, 2006). Pressures to conform to the
norm can come from peers, parents and the media, and it is possible that girls who wouldn’t be defined as clinically overweight can begin to perceive themselves as too heavy. Girls who feel they are too big can be at risk of adopting weight loss habits that are unhealthy and dangerous, some of which they hide from their family and peers (Brener, Eton, Lowry, & McManus, 2004).

In the blogs I read for this project, I learnt that the girls’ weight perceptions play a tremendous role in their everyday thinking and acting. Their desires to lose weight seem to supersede their desires to maintain healthy relationships with their families and friends, and they seem more important than having a healthy body or having stress-free experiences. The girls’ daily routines are heavily affected by their weight loss regimens. The thoughts, emotions, and experiences that result from their body image dissatisfactions seem not to be shared with others aside from the anonymous audiences they write to on LiveJournal. All five blogs talk about how the girls cannot divulge their weight-related thoughts to their friends or family for one reason or another. Some of the girls keep their weight-perception and dangerous weight loss habits a secret for fear of repercussions from parents or social rejection from peers. I would argue that the embarrassing nature of eating disorders is part of what causes the girls to record their thoughts, emotions, and experiences in a journal. It is the need for advice, motivation, and reassurance that pushes them to disclose their writing to anonymous audiences on the Internet.

Not all groups of people have the same beliefs and perceptions about thinness and weight. There may be groups in society, cultures, or races, who desire types of bodies that are not thin. For example, African-American perceptions of beauty may be different from white perceptions of beauty (Nichter, 2000). Regardless of the type of body, the pursuit to changing one’s body can be dangerous. It may be possible for a large body to be associated with positive characteristics. Being overweight or obese can create negative health responses. Regardless of
the variation of bodies that different people may seek, or perceive to be ideal, this project focuses solely on teenage girls who seek thin bodies.

**My Theoretical Perspective**

In my understanding, the widespread problems that come of girls’ body image and weight concerns are related to the fight of women to achieve equal opportunities in areas that were previously reserved for men. In my opinion, this fight has yet to end. In this section, I will describe how a feminist theoretical perspective relates to my project and how it can be used to situate body image and weight concerns for women in history.

In the 1970s, Western women gained legal and reproductive rights, pursued higher education, entered the trades and professions and overturned ancient definitions of their social roles (Wolf, 2002). I believe that women still need to work harder than men in order to succeed. Today, women are expected to be beautiful, smart, and well groomed, and to devote a great deal of time to their personal appearance while at the same time competing in business and professions (Dolan & Gitzinger, 1994). Men are not held by these same expectations. The importance of appearance is more strongly enforced on women. Many women feel the need to dress and act a certain way in order to be recognized for their intelligence and to be successful in the workforce. “More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than (they) ever had before; but in terms of how (they) feel about (themselves) physically, (they) may actually be worse off than (their) unliberated grandmothers” (Wolf, 2002, p. 10). Beauty and body image continue to impact how women are treated by others regardless of the progress they've made in history.
Although women today have the legal freedom to act based on their own will, they are judged and discriminated against based on their appearance and personalities as traditional expectations persist and women are expected to look and act in certain ways. The ideal of femininity has typically excluded the adoption of “masculine” virtues such as independence, effectiveness and the expression of anger and aggression (Wooley & Wooley, 1985 as cited by Dolan & Gitzinger, 1994). In this context, some women learn to use their bodies to get what they want. Women are surrounded by images of what constitutes attractiveness in today’s society. Not all women are able to achieve this “ideal” body and I think that the quest for success and acceptance is the reason for why many women today struggle with their body image and become concerned, if not obsessed, with their weight.

One of the most prominent ways that the female body is discursively constructed and regulated in contemporary Western culture is through the social significations associated with body weight and shape (Woolf, 1990, as cited by Malson, 1998). Young girls are learning that thinness is ideal, and that fat is undesirable. At very young ages, children are developing fears of becoming overweight and are beginning to be concerned with their appearances. They may also learn that obese people are stigmatized. As they grow older, they may learn more about the consequences of having certain body types. From pre-adolescence, girls learn the importance of appearance for success and how appearance can influence others (Rudd & Lennon, 1999). By the time teenage girls reach adolescence, they may begin to act on the belief that a thin body is crucial to social success and associated with desirable characteristics. They learn that if they can control their weight, they might be able to control their lives.

Those who do not conform to the thin body ideal are at risk of being treated less seriously by society. Obese women, for example, suffer from stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination
Stigma associated with their body size can prevent them from attaining jobs, being treated respectably, and from being seen as desirable as mates. Obese women have been ascribed negative character traits based solely on their body size, such as lazy, stupid, and unfriendly (Breseman, Lennon, & Schulz, 1999). Thin bodies, on the other hand, are presented as attractive in Western culture. Attractive people are perceived to have all the character traits that are socially desirable such as being interesting, strong, poised, kind, socially outgoing, and sexually warm (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). Unlike obese women, who are discriminated against in the workplace as being lazy employees, having low energy and being incapable of performing well on the job (Jonas, 1997 as cited by Breseman, Lennon, & Schulz, 1999), conventionally attractive people may have a better chance of getting a job, and they tend to be hired at higher starting salaries (Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wibach, 1975, as cited by Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984).

There appears to be no set of data since the 1970s containing information on earnings and beauty; however, by learning what were the effects of beauty on earning, we get a picture of how they can be related (Hamermesh, 2011). Since women learn that they may be judged based on their body sizes and appearances, they may try to control how they are treated by controlling their bodies.

For centuries, women have learned to alter their bodies in order to meet social standards of beauty. In North America and Europe, for instance, corseting was once used to help middle and upper class women achieve body ideals. Ehrenreich and English (1978) describe the short-term results of corseting as shortness of breath, constipation, weakness, and a tendency to violent indigestion, and they say the long-term effects included bent or fractured ribs, displacement of the liver and uterine prolapse (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984). Women who used
corsets may have known about these side-effects; however, corseting was widely practiced and was considered a successful method of achieving beauty. Today, dieting resembles corseting in that it also represents an instance in a long history of women mutilating their bodies for the sake of beauty (Brownmiller, 1984).

Although doctors may recommend dieting as a safe and efficient method of weight loss, dieting can be dangerous; when practiced improperly, it can be life-threatening. It is a practice that can result in inadequate nutrition, depression, loss of sexual desire, and sudden death from cardiac arrhythmia (Ciliska, 1990 as cited by Smith, 2004). With advice from their doctors, some women are restricting their food intake in order to achieve social standards of beauty and, ultimately, to achieve power and success. Feelings of power are acquired by conforming to the ideal appearance and for those who may feel powerless, controlling their eating and activity levels, and ultimately their body size, is one way of gaining a sense of power and control (Rudd & Lennon, 1999).

Losing weight to conform to social norms, to be successful and to achieve power in society is not exclusive to women. Many men also struggle to conform and use extreme methods of weight loss to achieve desired bodies. While weight has become somewhat of a general concern in society nowadays, studies have determined that throughout life span, women are more concerned about eating and body weight due to a differential importance of physical attractiveness for men and women (Pliner, Chaiken, & Flett, 1990).
Chapter Outline

In Chapter Two, I provide background on the weight-related themes I identify in the blogs. These weight-related themes are essential to answering my research question as I specifically study blogs about teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight and who practice fairly extreme methods of weight loss. In Chapter Two, I discuss discourses surrounding weight-perception and body image dissatisfaction, to learn about the social and psychological implications of feeling or being overweight. I first look at three important influences on girls’ body image dissatisfaction, which I’ve identified as the media, the family and peers. I then look at the social consequences of having a body that deviates from the norm, such as stigmatization and bullying. I talk a little bit about the concept of weight perception and then how weight perception can lead to the practice of dangerous weight loss practices. I look at different categories of dangerous weight loss practices in order to explain why they are dangerous and how girls begin to practice them. I then describe the eating disorders that are characterized by the weight loss practices already discussed.

In Chapter Three, I begin my blog discussion with an introduction to the use of the Internet as a research tool. I continue the chapter with a brief history of diary research and the concept of blogging as contemporary diary writing. This helps me to conceptualize blogs as a place where thoughts, emotions and experiences can be recorded. I answer some general questions such as “why blog?” and “why study blogs?” and I specifically discuss the reasons why adolescents today may blog.

The second section of this chapter deals with the methodological concerns associated with blog research as well as the decisions I made concerning my project. I discuss the idea of
trustworthiness and truth in blogs. I cover the private versus public debate concerning the status of the Internet, which is directly related to decisions that are important to make when studying online subjects such as informed consent and soliciting or not soliciting research subjects. I discuss the layout of blogs and the features that are unique to keeping diaries online and their relevance to research projects. All of these concerns are directly related to my project and the answers contribute to my secondary research question on the value of blogs for researchers. The literature on blog research is still relatively small but I was able to draw on advice from different authors to help me carry out my own project.

I also use Chapter Three to describe my decisions. I take all the methodological concerns I discuss in this chapter and show how I addressed them as I conducted my project. I discuss the characteristics of the blogs I used and give detailed explanations about how I chose them and why. I discuss questions of consent in relation to research with online blogs. I show my stance on the private versus public debate concerning online material as well as my positions on the concept of trust and truth. I present the reasons why this project did not require ethics clearance and how I keep the anonymity of my participants. I also offer a “how-to” section for future students hoping to learn about blog research.

At the end of Chapter Three, I discuss blogging language and how I dealt with it. I also discuss how I interpreted the blog narratives and used the literature on blogs, body image, gender and weight, and weight perception to contextualize my findings. I finish the chapter with a brief explanation of how girls, body image, and blogs are linked in order to set the scene for Chapter Four where I present the five narratives.
In Chapter Four I discuss the different themes that emerged from my reading of the five blogs. These themes, for the most part, correlate to the literature discussed in Chapter Two where I first present the concept of weight-perception in teenage girls and the practice of dangerous weight loss methods. I discuss the roles of the media, peers and parents in the contribution to girls’ body image dissatisfaction, I talk about the social and psychological effects of perceiving oneself to be overweight, and about the dangerous weight loss practices that are discussed in the blogs and their health-related side-effects. The information in this chapter is used to answer my research question in Chapter Five.

In Chapter Five, I present my reading of the blogs in light of theories on blog use in order to answer my research question. I look at the blogs as a way of considering the experiences of five adolescent female bloggers, examining the reasons the girls give for blogging and the role that their audiences seem to play. I also discuss the features of the blogs and describe how the blogs seem to have been used by the five teenage girls who were trying to get thin.

Chapter Six is the conclusion where I re-iterate the answer to my research question, and discuss implications for future research as well as the limitations of my study. I talk about how I hope to have contributed to the literature on blog research and how I hope that my research study will be useful to someone else hoping to conduct a project with the same or similar research method.
Chapter Two

Literature Review

This chapter explores literature about teenage girls and body image dissatisfaction, weight perception, eating disorders and dangerous methods of weight loss. The purpose of this chapter is to explore the influences that contribute to the experiences of the bloggers. For the most part, the content of the five blogs relates to girls’ experiences pertaining to weight. Since I know that these girls perceive themselves as overweight, that they practice unsafe methods of weight loss and that they are in the process of trying to lose weight, I find it necessary to understand the factors related to the issues these girls face on a daily basis. In order to understand their experiences, it is important to understand what brought the girls to where they were while they kept their journals both in terms of how they came to have weight-related issues and concerns, and how and why they began blogging their experiences. It is for these reasons that I choose to discuss the topics found in this chapter.

I am mostly interested in the influences on weight perception, body image dissatisfaction, and the eating habits of teenage girls. In the literature, there is a heavy emphasis on the influences of weight dissatisfaction. I studied research about these influences to learn how girls begin practicing dangerous methods of weight loss and eventually, why they blog about their weight loss attempts and weight-related experiences.

In the blogs, the data comes from the girls’ own words. Typically, in the literature that I review in this chapter, girls’ words are not analyzed. Rather, statistics are gathered and conclusions are derived from numbers. I believe that standard research methods such as distributing questionnaires or conducting interviews do not capture the raw emotions or the more
complex accounts of personal experiences that I hoped to find in the blogs. The review of the literature in this chapter is used to explore different theories and ideas on body image dissatisfaction, weight perception, eating disorders and dangerous methods of weight loss that might help me put the content of the blogs into a wider context. The themes I explore in this chapter reaffirm that it may not be enough to ask girls questions about their experiences with weight, but rather it is important to look at what girls have to say in what is described by the literature as a “safe place,” a place where honesty and privacy is expected. I believe that blogs can enable the researcher to gain a different understanding of girls’ experiences. Throughout this chapter I show how the current literature does not always capture what teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight have to say about their experiences with weight perception, eating disorders, and weight loss.

First I explore three influences on girls’ body image dissatisfaction: the media, peers and the family. Through my discussion on weight perception, I begin to uncover some of the potential limitations in conducting surveys and the benefits of studying girls’ own words. I proceed to discuss the different types of weight loss practices which are characteristic of eating disorders in order to shape my understanding of the significance of dangerous weight loss practices and eating disorders for teenage girls. The literature in this review provides me with information through which I am able conceptualize and better understand the experience documented in the blogs.
Body Image Dissatisfaction

Body image dissatisfaction is common during adolescence. Body dissatisfaction is a negative subjective evaluation of one’s physical body including figure, weight, stomach, and hips (Robert-McComb, 2008). Adolescence is a time when people develop and construct their identities and they may feel confused as they leave childhoods behind (Erikson, 1950, 1968, as cited in Thiel, 2005). It is also a time of bodily changes. Average weight gain for adolescent girls going through puberty is approximately thirty-one pounds (Zullig, Ubbes, Pyle, & Valois, 2006). Weight gain during puberty may lead teenage girls to a heightened awareness of body image and may serve as a cue to compare themselves to others. For the purpose of my research, body image is defined as the way an individual defines his or her body. It includes a person’s perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about his or her body (Schilder, 1935; Grogan, 2008). The construction of body image ideals for teenage girls is highly influenced by the following three factors: the media, peers, and family. These factors can contribute to body dissatisfaction.

Media

The mass media has a great influence on the construction of body image ideals for adolescents. Teenagers are surrounded by messages detailing what they should look like (McSharry, 2009). Ideas about body shape come from the television, the Internet, and magazines, most particularly in the form of advertisements. The media is often blamed for reproducing and extolling representations of unrealistic female bodies (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). There is evidence that suggests that teen magazines are recognized by their readers as providing them with images of ideal body shapes (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). The body shape ideals that are shown in these
images may increase teenage girls’ consciousness about their appearance and reinforce the girls’ desires to be slim. Teenagers who do not conform to thin body ideals may be dissatisfied with their bodies, and may practice unhealthy methods of weight loss. Exposure to magazine articles on dieting and weight loss has been found to be a risk factor for disordered eating amongst overweight adolescents (Neumark-Sztainer, Wall, Story, & Sherwood, 2009). The media is a major factor in the practice of disordered eating and dangerous weight loss behaviors.

In modern media, models with thin body types are typically chosen to display products and sell goods. Models embody the ideal feminine form and have an effect on the ways girls learn to evaluate their attractiveness (Bentley, 1999). The emphasis on thinness in the media has a strong influence on how adolescents construct their ideal body weight (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). According to Connor and colleagues (2004), teenage girls who regularly see advertisements become preoccupied with achieving the ideal body type and learn that without conforming to it there may be negative social consequences. Advertisements aimed towards teenagers are teaching them that thin body types are synonymous with beauty, happiness and success. Constant watchfulness over appetite and work on the body itself is necessary to conform to the ideal thin body (Bordo, 1993). The advertisements play on their audiences’ fears of not fitting in and seem to offer ways of finding security and happiness. This may be either through the acquisition of a thin body or by accumulating the material objects being advertised. Advertisers also play on popular insecurities and anxieties by constantly reminding audiences that their lives could be better.

Teenagers also learn about thin body ideals through representations of celebrities in the media. Researchers argue that the prevalence of thin celebrities in the media can give the impression that success is associated with a thin body. Teenage girls in particular are vulnerable
to pressures to be thin because of the abundance of media images portraying thin teenage girls throughout society. Some popular television series, such as Gossip Girl, the O.C. and 90210, portray popular and wealthy teenage girls who are thin. Unfortunately, the ideal body that is represented on such shows is unreachable for many.

Peers

During adolescence, body dissatisfaction may be influenced by peers. Adolescence is a time when youth depend less on their parents for acceptance and support and depend more on their peers (McSharry, 2009). Bukowski (1993) determined that peer acceptance is one of the central concerns of adolescents (as cited in Jones, 2004). Eisenberg and colleagues (2003) note that previous research has identified teasing as a risk factor for body dissatisfaction (and disordered eating). It is common for teenagers to be criticized by peers for not meeting body ideals and subsequently they may become dissatisfied with their bodies. During adolescence, friends create a social world governed by norms and expectations and engage in a practice that Jones (2004) called “appearance training”. Appearance training takes place when adolescents have conversations about clothes, attractiveness, and looks; these can contribute to the development of appearance concerns (Jones, 2004). Jones’ previous research has indicated that adolescents who reported more frequent conversations with friends about their appearances also reported greater internalized appearance ideals and greater body dissatisfaction. Through the media, girls may learn that certain behaviors and attributes are associated with different body types. This may in turn create fear of certain body types due to a fear of judgment by peers. Wykes and Gunter (2005) explain how a person’s physical attributes can be used to judge their
character and abilities. For example, (as depicted in the media) being overweight is often associated with self-indulgence and laziness (Wykes & Gunter, 2005). It is common for teenagers to be influenced by the opinions of their peers and with a fear of not fitting in or being misjudged, they may be persuaded to try to change their bodies.

Mimi Nichter (2000) spent three years interviewing hundreds of teenage girls about their feelings on appearance, eating habits, and dieting. While both listening to her friends and the girls in her study talking about weight, Nichter (2000) coined the term Fat Talk to describe the practice of girls talking about their own weight as well as about other people’s weight. The comments that girls say about their weight can be shaped by social practices. Some girls may feel compelled by social influences to lie or to present themselves in certain ways. Nichter (2000) discusses how some girls may call themselves fat in front of other to seek affirmation from others that they are in fact not fat. Some girls may refer to themselves as fat in front of others as a way to be the first to call attention to their imperfections and some girls may make verbal apologies or excuses before indulging themselves in a big meal (Nichter, 2000). It is possible that some girls may put on weight-concerned personas in order to fit in with their peers or to prevent discrimination for their food indulgences or imperfections.

**Family**

A girl’s body image can also be influenced by her family members. Interviewing young girls’ about their weight, Courtney E. Martin (2007) found that mothers were a strong influence on the girls’ weight preoccupation. Parents and siblings can pressure teenage girls to lose weight and lead them to be dissatisfied with their bodies. Keel and colleagues (1997) found that dieting
and body image dissatisfaction were displayed by daughters who had parents who commented about their weight (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). Family members may act as body image role models and inadvertently contribute to the creation of negative body image through the atmospheres they create at home. Littleton & Ollendick (2003) have found that parental eating habits can also contribute to the development of negative body image and body dissatisfaction and that paternal weight dissatisfaction has been associated with weight dissatisfaction in their daughters. Researchers argue that positive family relationships can help children develop more stable identities in which physical appearance is not associated with self-esteem (Littleton & Ollendick, 2003). Parents should be careful not to influence their children into adopting negative habits and not to make them feel unhappy with how they look.

After looking at the ways in which teenage girls may be influenced to perceive themselves as overweight or be dissatisfied with their body image, I will now look at some of the social consequences associated with not conforming to the norm.

**Stigmatization and Bullying**

Teenagers may be stigmatized for not conforming to dominant body shape ideals. Weight-related stigmatization can come in the form of harsh criticisms, teasing, and/or discrimination. It occurs when an individual has an attribute that compromises their humanity in the eyes of others (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Teenagers who are overweight, underweight, or who have body types that do not fit society’s standards, are at risk of being stigmatized. Very overweight youth are at the greatest risk of being teased about their weight (Neumark-Sztainer, Falkner, Story, Perry, Hannan, & Mulert, 2002). Teenagers spend a lot of
time in school and at home, where they may be stigmatized by their peers and by family members.

Adolescents report that they get teased about their weight or experience other forms of weight-related stigmatization at school more than any other place (Neumark-Sztainer & Eisenberg, 2005). In school, teenagers may feel pressured to conform to body shape ideals by their peers; they may also have a fear of not fitting in. Teenagers may try to fit the image of what they think their peers will accept, fearing rejection or discrimination. Bentley (1999) identifies schools as being the most difficult places for girls to be authentic. Girls who do not conform to body shape ideals may be treated poorly by their friends. Adolescents who are labeled as “fat” may be excluded from group activities (McSharry, 2009). Teenagers may also feel self-conscious and uncomfortable with themselves as a result of being teased for their weight. A study showed that teasing and bullying were barriers to middle school students fully participating in physical education class (Bauer, Yang, & Austin, 2004). Teenage girls may therefore attempt to alter their bodies to avoid stigmatization and being isolated by their peers. Girls may self-monitor their food intake, their exercise, and the appearance of their bodies as a means to achieve social, economic, and relational success (Bentley, 1999). Teenagers spend the majority of their time in environments where a thin body is encouraged and for those who are overweight, or who perceive themselves to be overweight; there may be a constant struggle to fit in.

Weight-related stigmatization can affect the emotional and physical health of teenagers. Teasing may pose a threat to the health and well-being of adolescents (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003). Teenagers who are teased for their body weight may feel hurt and isolated. Stigma and discrimination may trigger feelings of depression, low levels of self-esteem or disturbed body images among those who identify their bodies as non-conformant to societal
ideals (Atlantis & Ball, 2008). The preference for a thin body type, as emphasized in the media and by peers and family members, can shape teenagers’ concepts of acceptable appearance. Several studies have determined the consequences of being stigmatized based on weight. McSharry (2009) found that being stigmatized can result in low self-esteem, feelings of embarrassment, and heightened body consciousness, Eisenberg and colleagues (2006) found that lower self-esteem, lower body satisfaction, and depressive symptoms were found in students who were teased about their weight and a study conducted with more than 120,000 adolescents in Minnesota determined that in the case of teenage girls, there was a strong correlation between poor emotional well being, low self-esteem and suicide risk (Neumark-Sztainer, Story, French, & Resnick, 1997). There is also an association between weight-related teasing and disordered eating. Neumark-Sztainer and colleagues (2002) found that youth who are teased about their weight are significantly more likely to engage in disordered eating behaviors like binge-eating. Teenagers who are stigmatized for not conforming to body shape ideals are at risk of social ostracization, developing psychological issues, or adopting disordered eating behaviors.

Not all girls who are overweight are stigmatized for their looks, and not all girls who are stigmatized for their looks are necessarily overweight. Social ideals surrounding weight are not necessarily based on medical standards, as demonstrated at the beginning of the chapter in the discussion on the concept of weight-perception. Teenage girls who are teased for their weight are not always clinically overweight and for some, weight loss could be dangerously unhealthy. Sometimes the pressure to be thin that results from either teasing, or the threat of being teased, can cause girls who are overweight, of normal weight, or sometimes even underweight, to perceive themselves as needing to be thinner and can contribute to their use of dangerous
methods of weight loss. The following section will look at the correlation between weight perception and the practice of dangerous methods of weight loss.

The literature I reviewed on weight perception and body image did not always involve what girls were saying, rather much of the data reflected the positions of the authors based on statistics or, sometimes, on more qualitative surveys. One of the few studies that (appeared to) come from teenage girls’ perspectives was a study by Courtney E. Martin (2007). Martin interviewed girls to determine the influence of their mothers on their weight perception. Since family life takes place in a more private setting, it did not surprise me that Martin’s data came from girls’ own words. It would be very difficult to gather this type of information using more traditional quantitative survey methods.

Martin (2007) headed several group interviewing sessions in which she learnt about teenage girls, their eating habits, and how they perceive their peers’ bodies. In one session, Martin (2007) sat down with a group of ninth grade girls and asked them to talk about their eating habits with the hope of gaining an insider’s view on how girls, who do not have mothers watching their eating habits, eat. In another session, she asked the girls to comment on each other’s bodies. Some girls talked about their self-consciousness and others bragged that they didn’t care about what they ate or how they look (Martin, 2007). These interviews show how allowing girls to speak freely gives room for more layered and emotional material.

McSharry (2009) uses quotes from adolescents to support her research on the media and body image. When asking adolescents on how they see the role of the media on body image, she is able to extract information based on their personal experiences, reactions and opinions. The girls tell personal stories that relate to body representation in the media, and it is through these
stories that McSharry (2009) learns the answer to her question. It does not appear as though McSharry (2009) or Martin (2007) experienced any limitations in their interviews since they do not mention any hurdles and they make it seem clear that they were able to gather the information they sought.

In my view, the difference between data extracted from interviews, such as the ones conducted by McSharry (2009) and Martin (2007), and data extracted from surveys, such as in the studies discussed in the next section, conducted by Foti and Lowry (2010) and Talamayan and colleagues (2006), lies in the results. The two surveys produced statistics about girls’ weight perception and weight loss habits; however, they fail to go beneath the numerical facts to determine what affects girls’ weight perceptions and how they begin to practice dangerous weight loss practices. Studying what girls have to say themselves may offer more to the social researcher aiming to explain social phenomena.

**Weight Perception**

Teenage girls who are underweight or of normal weight but who perceive themselves as overweight may unnecessarily use weight loss methods. These girls are dissatisfied with their bodies and may be at risk for developing eating disorders and practicing unnecessary, unhealthy, and possibly dangerous methods of weight loss. A study conducted in London with 4167 students aged fourteen to fifteen found that a significant proportion of normal-weight adolescents (according to BMI) felt too fat (Standley, Sullivan, & Wardle, 2009).

Weight-perception as a predictor for weight loss behavior is constantly reaffirmed through the research. A longitudinal American study that surveyed high school students five
times over a period of nine years determined that 23.8% of normal weight (according to clinical definitions) female students in their study perceived themselves to be overweight (Foti & Lowry, 2010). Another study found that roughly one-third of adolescents inaccurately perceive their weight (Frisco, Houle, & Martin, 2010). Weight-perception can be more important than actual weight in predicting whether teenage girls want to lose weight. Brener and colleagues (2004) found that girls who are underweight or of normal weight but who perceive themselves as overweight are also at risk for eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa. Research is consistently finding that in the case of high school students, perception of weight is a better predictor than actual weight for the practice of dieting or exercising to control weight (Strauss, Waters, Edmunds, Kelly, Brown, & Campbell 1999, Desmond, Price, Gray, & O’Connell, 1986 as cited by Foti & Lowry, 2010). Overweight teenage girls are not the only ones who perceive themselves as needing to be thinner. Any teenage girl can be susceptible to feeling too big or to feel like she needs to engage in severe weight loss practices.

While the studies above reported useful facts and statistics about teenagers and weight-perception, they do not report the influences on weight-perception and weight loss practices. I would argue that the interviews conducted by Martin (2007) and McSharry (2009), and perhaps the blogs that I used in this study (and others like them), provide a deeper insight as to how teenage girls, who perceive themselves as overweight, come to practice certain weight loss practices.

The following section will look at the dangerous weight loss practices mentioned in Talamayan and colleague’s (2006) study on the methods of weight loss reported by normal weight teenage girls.
Dangerous Weight Loss Practices

Exercise and dieting are not the only weight loss methods that teenage girls practice. Some teenage girls may adopt unhealthy weight control habits including reducing food intake, skipping meals, and fasting, and other habits such as vomiting, taking laxatives or diet pills (Zullig, Ubbes, Pyle, & Valois, 2006). These habits are characteristic of certain eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa which can cause considerable damage to a girl’s body. Another harmful weight loss habit is over-exercising. The human body requires a certain number of calories to perform daily functions. If that requirement is not met on a daily basis, or if too many calories are being burned through exercise, the human body will not have sufficient energy to function or survive.

In one American study, 55% of normal weight teenage girls (based on the BMI scale) were actively trying to lose weight through the following methods: 65.8% were exercising to lose weight, 53.4% were dieting to lose weight, 16.6% were fasting to lose weight, 10% were taking diet medicines to lose weight, and 7.6% were forcing themselves to vomit or were taking laxatives to lose weight (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). With the exception of moderate exercising and dieting, all of these weight loss methods could be considered harmful. Fasting, purging and the use of diet pills, for example, may adversely affect adolescents’ physical and psychosocial development (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). These behaviors are characteristic of several eating disorders which may be diagnosed in teenage girls who are underweight, of normal weight, overweight, and obese.
Excessive Exercise

Exercise may be considered a safe method of weight loss when practiced safely and in moderation. Many teenagers use exercise to lose weight. According to an American study conducted by Krowchuk and colleagues (1998), 90% of middle school adolescents (boys and girls) were exercising to try to lose weight. Unfortunately, some of these teenagers may in fact be over-exercising, that is their exercising may be more harmful to their bodies than beneficial. Adkins and Keel (2005) define excessive exercise quantitatively and qualitatively.

“On the quantitative dimension, exercise becomes excessive when its duration, frequency, or intensity exceeds what is required for physical health and increases the risk of physical injury” (Davis & Fox, 2003, Davis, Fox, Cowles, Hastings, & Schwass, 1990, as cited by Adkins & Keel, 2005, p. 24).

“On the qualitative dimension, exercise becomes compulsive when it is characterized by maintenance of a rigid exercise schedule, increasing priority over other activities to maintain the pattern of exercise, detailed record keeping, and feelings of guilt and anxiety over missed exercise sessions” (Wyatt, 1997 as cited by Adkins & Keel, 2005, p. 24).

Excessive exercise may accompany eating disorders. Long and colleagues (1993) questioned twenty-one in-patient females, who had been diagnosed with anorexia nervosa (using the criteria from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), about their pre-admission exercise behavior and determined that anorexic girls, in comparison to healthy exercising females, were more likely to exercise in secret and to report having continued to exercise while sick or injured, and to have experienced withdrawal symptoms if their exercise was prevented (Long, Smith, Midgley, & Cassidy, 1993).
A teenage girl who desires to acquire a slimmer figure may get the impression that exercise is the healthiest method of doing so. Exercise and physical activity are promoted by health-care professionals as healthy methods for preventing obesity and for aiding in weight loss. A teenage girl may not understand that there are guidelines for healthy exercising and that when practiced in excess, exercising can become more harmful than beneficial. One example of the effects of over-exercising is amenorrhea. Amenorrhea is diagnosed when non-pregnant women don’t menstruate. Some of its causes include exercise, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Robert-McComb, 2008). A major cause of amenorrhea is low energy availability. This occurs when not enough energy is available to the body to perform daily activities. During extended periods of reduced energy availability, the body prioritizes energy expenditure for activities that are necessary for survival. Reproductive function is not prioritized and is therefore compromised (Robert-McComb, 2008). Low energy levels can also be caused by poor nutrition, and can be accompanied by deficiencies in essential nutrients.

**Harmful Dieting**

Dieting to lose weight is a common practice amongst teenage girls. It can be a safe and effective way to try to lose weight. Reducing one’s fat intake for example, is considered by many to be a healthy dietary change (Krowchuk, Kreiter, Woods, Sinal, & DuRant, 1998). Some dieting practices, however, can be harmful. During adolescence, nutrition is especially important since the body is not yet fully developed. “The physical growth of adolescents is characterized by an intense anabolic phase, and adequate amounts of energy, nutrients, vitamins and minerals are required” (Boschi, et al., 2003, p. 285). It is important for adolescents to make the
appropriate food choices in order to sustain healthy bodies and allow for growth and maturation. When adolescents diet to lose weight, their nutrient intake may be compromised (Krowchuk, Kreiter, Woods, Sinal, & DuRant, 1998). Certain nutrients are required to maintain a healthy body. Carbohydrates, fats, and proteins are primary sources of energy to the body (Robert-McComb, 2008). An absence or insufficient intake of these nutrients can cause vitamin and mineral deficiencies and ultimately impair bodily functions. Research has found that dieting can lead to the practice of other dangerous weight loss methods such as fasting and self-induced vomiting, and in some cases it may be their precursor to an eating disorder. For example, research shows that dieting is a risk factor for developing bulimia (Stice, Mazotti, Krebs, & Martin, 1998). It is important that adolescents be educated on safe dieting. Unfortunately, teenage girls are constantly surrounded by influences that pressure them to begin dieting.

Teenagers who are dissatisfied with their bodies, may learn that dieting can help them acquire the bodies they desire: “…dissatisfaction with body dimensions motivates adolescents to initiate dieting behaviors in an effort to remedy their perceived weight problem” (Stice, Mazotti, Krebs, & Martin, 1998, p. 201). An Australian study looked at 1644 female high school students and their dieting practices and determined that social influences were reliably and strongly related to dieting status (Huon, Lim, & Gunewardene, 2000). The ideas and opinions that parents, peers, and the media provide about dieting, may influence girls to engage in dieting behaviors.

Not only does the media teach girls about how their bodies ‘should’ look, it also teaches girls how to achieve the thin bodies that are represented in magazines and on television. Girls are constantly bombarded with weight loss advertisements in the media. Diet commercials on television use celebrities to sell their diet regimens and meal-plans. Girls may learn to associate
these celebrities with the diets they used to achieve thinner bodies, and girls may subsequently attempt to achieve such bodies through the methods being advertised. Chow (2004) argues that “the mass media, which has an enormous potential influence on adolescents’ perceptions about themselves and the world, has been largely ignored by health care providers” (Chow, 2004, p. 132). It is important that health care providers teach adolescents that the diet plans being advertised in the media may be both ineffective and/or harmful. Young girls may not realize that not all diets are geared towards every age group. While certain diets may be healthy for middle-aged women, they may be dangerous for teenage girls whose bodies are still developing. Teenage girls who read magazines are likely to come across articles about weight loss regimens in addition to print ads selling diet programs. These articles may not be written or approved by health care professionals, and while they may appear to provide healthy weight loss tips, they may in fact be promoting unhealthy and dangerous eating patterns.

Parents may also influence their teenage daughters to be dissatisfied with their bodies, and may knowingly or unknowingly convince their daughters to begin dieting. Teenage girls may look up to their parents as role models and turn to them for advice. But, not all parents have accurate advice about dieting. Families are major influences in the lives of adolescents and a strong family involvement is essential to health promotion (Massey-Stokes, 2008). It is therefore important for parents to provide their children with accurate facts and to promote family closeness in order to help their children to avoid adopting unhealthy behaviors. Field and colleagues (2001) advise parents to remind themselves that they serve as role models to their children and that they should therefore adopt diet and activity patterns that they would like their children to emulate. It may also be helpful for parents to be mindful of their children’s eating habits to stop unhealthy patterns before they become detrimental.
Research suggests that it is helpful for families to show that they accept their children regardless of how they look and to avoid voicing critiques about their children’s’ bodies or stating opinions that may cause their children to be upset with the way they look. Research by Pike & Rodin (1991) show that mothers may influence their daughters’ eating behaviors by putting pressure on them to be thin and that mothers’ concerns about their daughters’ weight and body shape may influence their daughters’ weight management practices (Byely, Bastiani Archibald, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Field and colleagues (2001) determined that parents’ own weight-related issues can be transmitted to their children; children who perceived that their mothers were frequently trying to lose weight were more likely to become concerned with dieting. Several studies found that children’s perceptions of their fathers beliefs in the importance of thinness were more important that their mothers’ perceptions (Field, Camargo Jr., Barr Taylor, Berkley, Roberts, & Colditz, 2001). A study conducted by Dixon and colleagues (2003) found that fathers who strongly believed in the importance of physical appearance and that women should control their food intake, were significantly more likely to have daughters who were vomiting to lose weight, than fathers who did not find these factors important.

As children grow older, they detach from their families and spend more times with their peers. As a consequence, teenagers look to their peers for advice; they may learn unhealthy eating behaviors from their friends. Mooney and colleagues (2004) found that some teenage girls discussed dieting methods among themselves but not with their parents for fear that their parents would stop them. Peer groups may be formed on the basis of shared interests, beliefs, or characteristics. Paxton and colleagues (1999) looked at weight-related characteristics of teenage girl friendship clusters and found that “…groups displaying higher levels of body image concerns and weight loss behaviors (a) reported talking about weight loss and dieting with their
friends, (b) comparing their bodies more often with others, (c) reported receiving more teasing from friends about weight and shape, (d) reported friends as being more important in influencing their decisions to diet, and (e) perceived their friends to be more preoccupied with dieting and weight loss” (Paxton, Schultz, Wertheim, & Muir, 1999 p. 62). In Byely and colleagues’ (2000) study, social influences were found to play an important role in the dieting behaviors of adolescent girls. Teenage girls may be learning dieting tips from their friends or they may start mimicking their friends’ dieting practices. A high prevalence of a behavior among a group of young people may send a subtle message that the behavior is accepted and expected, and teenagers may feel encouraged to adopt the behavior (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Perry, 2005).

**Other Weight Loss Practices: Taking Diet Pills, Fasting/Food Restriction, Self-Induced Vomiting and Using Laxatives**

Other than dieting and exercising, which when practiced properly can provide beneficial health consequences for teenagers, there are other weight loss practices that are almost always considered dangerous such as: taking diet pills, fasting, purging, and taking laxatives. Overweight teenagers are at a greater risk for adopting unhealthy weight loss practices, such as taking diet pills, laxatives, and purging, than non-overweight teenagers (Boutelle, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2002). This may be because they are farther from their ideal weight, and searching for quick solutions (Boutelle, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2002). But, some normal weight and underweight teenage girls also practice dangerous methods of weight loss.
Diet pills often provide false hope to teenage girls trying to lose weight. In an American study that looked at 6597 middle school students, 8% of girls were taking diet pills to lose weight (Garry, Morrissey, & Whetstone, 2003). Adolescents may be unaware of the pills’ ill effects, and they may consider taking diet pills as a fast and easy way to lose weight (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). Teenagers may learn about diet pills from the media. A study on beauty and fashion magazine readership among adolescent females and its effects on dieting methods, discovered a positive association between reading frequency and the frequency with which subjects used appetite control pills or weight loss pills (Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). Girls who were more anxious about their weight and more frequently read beauty and fashion magazines, were more likely to use diet pills (Thomsen, Weber, & Brown, 2002). Girls may read about the pills in magazine articles or may learn about them in advertisements. Some advertisements often contain user testimonials that convince readers of the success of the products. These testimonials are not always real and teenage girls may fall into a marketing trap and unknowingly take pills that are harmful to their bodies.

Fasting is a form of food restriction that can involve not eating for long periods of time or avoiding certain foods or meals. Some girls restrict their caloric intake in their efforts to lose weight and/or avoid weight gain. Mooney and colleagues (2004) ran a study in which home economics teachers conducted one-on-one interviews with sixteen students about their opinions on body weight, dieting, and eating practices based on their in-class discussions. They discovered a trend of teenage girls fasting or severely reducing their food intake for a short time before an event with the aim of looking good for that day (Mooney, Farley, & Strugnell, 2004). This finding may imply that some teenage girls believe food restriction to be a quick and effective method of weight. Boutelle and colleagues (2002) found that overweight adolescents
are less likely than nonoverweight adolescents to eat breakfast in the morning and the reason for this may be because they believe that skipping meals may help them to manage their weight. As mentioned, food restriction can be dangerous. It can lead to inadequate nutrient intake as well as inadequate energy levels for bodily functions. It is especially important for teenagers to be mindful of their diets as their bodies are going through crucial developmental stages.

Self-induced vomiting and use of laxatives, diuretics, and enemas, are weight loss practices that involve the intentional removal of food from one’s body. An American study with 2331 middle school students who were questioned on weight-loss behaviors, found that vomiting or laxative use was associated with other weight-control behaviors such as diet pill use and dieting (Krowchuk, Kreiter, Woods, Sinal, & DuRant, 1998). Individuals with eating disorders often use laxatives and self-induce vomiting in an attempt to control their weight or to counteract the effects of binge-eating (Tozzi, et al., 2006). Binge-eating often occurs in conjunction with other dangerous weight loss practices. For example, restrained eating has been found to increase the likelihood of binge-eating because it may be a way of the body attempting to restore itself to a more biologically appropriate weight (Polivy and Herman, 1985 as cited by Malson, 1998). As a consequence of binge-eating, individuals may urgently seek methods to quickly rid their bodies of the calories ingested for fear of weight gain. Others may feel guilty or angry about having consumed food and may turn to dangerous purging practices as a form of self-harm. Tozzi and colleagues (2006) describe the over-use of laxatives as self-punishment or self-aggression by patients. It is also important to note that those who purge food from their bodies may believe that the ideal is to have no food inside of them (Malson, 1998). This is an extremely dangerous belief as it may lead to the practice of unhealthy and detrimental weight loss practices.
Clinical Eating Disorders

The dangerous weight loss practices discussed above (and later in relation to the blogs) are characteristic of eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa. According to the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), the average age of onset for anorexia nervosa is 14-18 years (Massey-Stokes, 2008) and diagnoses of eating disorders are most prevalent amongst young women and girls (Malson, 1998). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR™) published by the American Psychiatric Association in 2000 outlines the diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa in section 307.1 as:

“(a) refusal to maintain a body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height, (b) intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat, even though underweight, (C) disturbance in the way in which one’s body weight or shape is experienced, undue influences of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, or denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight, (and) (d) in postmenarcheal females, amenorrhea, i.e., the absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles.”

Anorexia is also characterized by fasting, vomiting, and using laxatives to lose weight as well as by rituals and obsessive compulsive thoughts about food and exercise (Kinoy, Holman & Lemberg, 1999 as cited by Neu Menassa, 2004). Bulimia nervosa differs in that it includes a cycle of binge eating (eating amounts of food in a period of time that are considered larger than what others would consume in that period of time), and the use of fasting, vomiting, laxatives and/or excessive exercise to prevent weight gain (American Psychiatric Association (2000) as cited by Neu Menassa, 2004).
Since most of these dangerous weight loss practices are experienced in secret and kept hidden from others, I suspect that learning about them in the blogs, in the girls’ own words, would offer me a unique perspective that the surveys and interviews used to collect the data could not capture. A yes or no answer on a survey can provide only a limited understanding of why girls might come to practice these weight loss methods and when, how, and how frequently they are practiced. I decided to read blogs so that I might find information that cannot be made evident on a survey or questionnaire. Statistics do not provide explanations. Simply stating that a certain percentage of girls practice certain weight loss practices does not explain why they began practicing or how they learned to practice them. Learning about girls’ experiences with weight loss practices may provide insight on when they began practicing, how they practice them, and why they practice them. This type of information may be useful to explain trends and to understand how eating disorders may be prevented or treated.

The next chapter will look into the practice of blogging as well as the practice of using blogs for research. In order to understand how the girls use the blogs in their weight loss journeys, it is important to take into account the general practice of blogging to see how it applies to these five girls. I will also discuss the practice of blog research to show how it is conducted generally, how I specifically conducted my study using the guidelines previously discussed and how blogs are a useful source for researchers.
Chapter Three

Method

Blog research is a relatively new research method in the social sciences. Many recently published articles on blog research provided me with direction and guidance as to how I should conduct my research. This chapter will go through the general methodological concerns associated with blog research. I will discuss how I dealt with the methodological concerns and issues and made decisions that pertained to my project. This chapter also provides a general discussion on pre-Internet diary research and the practice of blogging. I discuss what blogs are and how they are used, especially by adolescents. At the end of the chapter, I go through a step by step description of how I conducted my own research. I hope to provide advice to potential future blog researchers.

The Internet

Social science researchers have recently begun using the Internet as a medium for collecting data in qualitative research. The Internet has created a virtual laboratory in which social scientists can collect data twenty-four hours a day, across the globe (Joinson, 2005). Internet research can also cost much less than many other traditional research methods (Joinson, 2005). The Internet is a “constant changing medium” (Jones, 1999, p. 6) and social science researchers are continuously being offered new environments, subjects, and information to be studied.

The Internet has become integral to many people’s lives. It ranks as one of the greatest technologies of all time for the way it has changed society (Plant, 2004). The Internet has, for
example, facilitated the search for information. It is the most comprehensive electronic archive of written material that represents our world and people’s opinions, concerns, and desires (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Users are able to upload and share information with their families, friends, and the public. Search engines allow users to find information quickly through the use of keywords or phrases. Without the Internet, information needs to be found elsewhere and efforts to find it can be time consuming and/or come at a cost. Going to the library, for example, may require transportation costs and it may take time before the information needed is found. The Internet can provide us with information in our homes, often in a matter of seconds. Many companies now have corporate web pages filled with information, promotions, and advertisements. Some web sites allow users to pay their bills or make purchases online. These sites eliminate the need to travel to financial institutions or shopping centers, ultimately decreasing time and costs associated with certain tasks. Hunsinger (2005) believes the computer to be rapidly devolving toward an everyday appliance like a refrigerator. For some social scientists, the Internet has become a vital and convenient tool for carrying out research.

As a Research Tool

The Internet can facilitate recruiting and contacting participants for studies. Researchers can recruit participants for their studies either by posting advertisements on websites or by directly contacting users. Internet users often make themselves available for contact by posting their usernames, e-mail addresses or links to personal pages. Beddows (2008) identifies one advantage of conducting research using the Internet as the ease with which researchers can communicate with potential participants. The Internet not only facilitates the recruitment stage,
but also helps researchers communicate with their participants throughout the study. As mentioned, researchers can communicate with participants through websites that allow for communication or through e-mails. Researchers can send files to their participants via email, eliminating the need to meet in person or to send packages through the mail. The quick-send feature of e-mailing can reduce the time-span of a study. The Internet can also help researchers locate participants who may belong to very specific groups. Search engines or social networking communities can be used to find users who meet certain criteria. Social networking sites are often used by Internet users to create communities based on common interests. If a user subscribes to or indicates that they “like” a certain community, it may help researchers to determine which users can potentially be beneficial to their studies. The researcher can invite participation (recruitment) by sending personalized e-mail messages (communication) to the users in these specialized communities (finding participants) (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004).

The anonymity of the Internet provides two benefits to researchers in terms of recruiting participants. First, it may influence individuals to be more willing to participate in research projects. In Illingworth’s (2001) Internet-based study on the use of the Internet as a research tool, a number of respondents said they would have been reluctant to participate had the research been conducted more conventionally in a face-to-face setting. Second, the anonymity of the Internet has allowed previously hidden or unheard groups to go public. Diarists, for example, may use the Internet to publically post their writing. The Internet allows diarists to make public personal thoughts and emotions that might otherwise never be heard (Serfaty, 2004). The Internet has made it easier to investigate issues and groups that would not otherwise be visible (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004).
Using the Internet as a research tool can also lower the cost of a research project. In certain cases, cost may be a barrier to conducting research. Surveys, for example, can be very costly to run. Kraut and colleagues (2004) identify the primary advantage of using the Internet for both survey and experimental research as being the low marginal cost of each additional research subject. Cobanoglu, Warde, and Moreo (2001) estimated that each postal mail survey cost one dollar and ninety three cents and that telephone surveys cost between forty and one hundred dollars per participant (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). Web-based surveys, however, can be conducted for almost nothing. Internet connections and computers do cost money; however, researchers may have free access to both at academic facilities, public libraries, or, they may already own a personal computer and may already be subscribed to an Internet service. The Internet facilitates the search for participants, and so it can also decrease the cost of recruiting large, diverse, or specialized samples of research subjects (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). The Internet may be beneficial to researchers who do not have a lot of funds to carry out their projects.

The Internet has become a source for researchers to obtain access to all sorts of documents that may otherwise be inaccessible or difficult to access. Many academic journals, for example, publish their issues on the Internet. This replaces a need to locate specific journals in libraries. Complete books can also be found on the Internet. The concept of researching has been entirely reshaped by the Internet. The Internet has replaced the need for the index card system in libraries since key words allow researchers to more easily and quickly find information needed. The Internet is therefore both a library of documents and an index to finding documents. Blogs are but one type of document that exclusively exists on the Internet and due to the easy search
functions on websites such as LiveJournal, it may be easy for researchers to find blogs relevant to their research questions.

Blogs

Blogs are a particularly useful Internet resource for researchers. The internet gives researchers access to people’s own words. Blogging has grown tremendously in the last few years (Cenite, Detenber, Koh, Lim, & Soon, 2009). A blog is a website that contains a series of frequently updated reverse-chronologically-ordered posts on a common web page, usually written by a single author (Hookway, 2008). Blogs can be accessed from any computer with a live Internet connection. Blog research is relatively new and increasingly being used by researchers. According to Wakeford and Cohen (2008), many graduate students are now using blogs for their research, but few have written about their experience using them. Hookway (2008) writes that blogs offer social science researchers a new kind of diary research that offers substantial benefits as compared to its offline equivalent.

Diary Research

The use of personal documents in sociological research dates back to the late nineteenth century. Originally, they had been used in historical, anthropological, and psychological studies. According to Kenneth Plummer (1983), a book titled The Polish Peasant in Europe and America, by William Isaac Thomas and Florian Znaniecki (1918-1920, later republished in 1958), was the first research project involving the use of personal documents that gained full
recognition in sociology. Thomas and Znaniecki used personal documents such as letters along with newspaper materials and documents from social agencies to study social and individual phenomena regarding the experience of Polish immigrants in the United States (Plummer, 1983). Thomas and Znaniecki were among the first sociologists to believe in the importance, necessity, and accuracy of personal documents in social research:

> We are safe in saying that personal life-records, as complete as possible, constitute the perfect type of sociological material, and that if social science has to use other materials at all it is only because of the practical difficulty of obtaining at the moment a sufficient number of such records to cover the totality of sociological problems, and of the enormous amount of work demanded for an adequate analysis of all the personal materials necessary to characterize the life of a social group. (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958, p. 1832-33)

A diary is a form of a personal document. Diaries have been used in social research to gather information about daily life, personal experience, thoughts and emotions. Serfaty (2004) considers diaries to be a form of self-representational writing that is intimate by nature. “A diary is a chronologically ordered sequence of dated entries addressed to an unspecified audience” (Rosenwald, 1988 as cited by Serfaty, 2004 p. 6). The beginning of a diary may indicate the purpose for its being written. The diarist’s motivations may be located in the preamble to the diary which may clarify the goals of the writing (Serfaty, 2004). Authors may use their diaries to record events in their lives, private thoughts, or personal stories.

Some blogs are personal narratives that function like diaries. Cenite and colleagues (2009) define blogs as online personal diaries that focus on daily events and reflections. Blogs
are similar to their offline parallel, the diary, in that they can be used by their authors to record personal information. In a study of personal and non-personal bloggers, Cenite and colleagues (2009) determined that 36% of the main reasons given for blogging were to express thoughts and feelings and 22% to document daily life. Serfaty (2004) notes that self-representation writing has flourished on the Internet and she argues that blogs can be considered to be a new form of diary writing. Both blogs and written diaries are open ended, meaning that there is no clear idea from the start as to when they are going to end (Serfaty, 2004) Also, both blogs and offline diaries may indicate from the start what they are going to be about. Serfaty (2004) believes the distinction between diaries and blogs to be increasingly meaningless, as one form seems to have morphed into the other. Diarists may choose blogging over hand-writing or simply typing their diaries because of the many features and options available on blogging sites. Online entries may be edited while being written or after having been posted. Bloggers have the option of removing or adding information at any point. This may be difficult or impossible for entries hand-written in a journal since tearing out pages or crossing out lines can be messy. Blogs can also contain media files such as pictures, videos or sounds, or links to other web pages. These extra features allow authors to connect other content to their writing in places that are relevant. Serfaty (2004) refers to this practice as accumulation, making the point that text is no longer the only mode of expression for diarists. Bloggers also often have the option of designing blogs by using templates. The templates available on blogging sites provide a choice of colors, images, fonts, and layouts for one’s blog. Designs may reflect a blogger’s personality or interests. One final benefit of online diaries is that they eliminate the issue of illegible handwriting which can make reading traditional diaries tough for both diarists and researchers.
Why Blog?

There are many motivations for keeping online diaries. Some people may choose the Internet to keep diaries because it can be a safe place to store personal information without the possibility of it being stolen or lost. Others may choose the Internet to disclose personal information because they can post to an audience. Online diarists have the option to publish their blogs online where other users can view them and comment on them. To be noticed, users can create public profiles about themselves. These profiles, which are typically called “about” or “bio” sections, enable users to introduce themselves and describe the meanings behind their writing (Serfaty, 2004). Publishing personal journals for public viewing may be appealing for people who desire feedback. Serfaty (2004) compares this practice to a support system where audiences can offer various kinds of support to diarists. Readers may provide advice, commentary, or opinions based on what they read. Bloggers may consider audience attention, feedback, and feelings while writing their journal entries (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Some online diarists may include a commenting feature in their diaries for the purpose of recognition (Serfaty, 2004). Some online-diarists may seek companionship or attention from others and may post entries to provoke a discussion between users. It is also possible that bloggers may start their blogs for the purpose of meeting new people with similar interests. Authors often tag their entries with keywords so that users can locate entries that discuss certain subjects. One reason for this is so that users with similar interests can read each other’s blogs and post comments or reactions. According to Rosenwald, in the nineteenth century, diaries were sometimes written as a social practice where individuals would swap diaries and seek feedback (cited in Serfaty, 2004). Bloggers can mimic this practice by sharing their diaries online and allowing for other uses to comment.
Some people may choose to blog for anonymous self-disclosure. Self-disclosure refers to the communication of personal information, thoughts, and feelings to other people (Berg & Archer, 1983, Jourard, 1071, Laurenceau, Barrett & Peitromonaco, 1998 as cited by Qian & Scott, 2007). Bloggers can anonymously post their entries without the threat of them being read and judged by people they know. Serfaty (2004) notes that many offline diarists include preambles in their (hand-written) diaries warning anyone opening them that they should not read them. This may be because of a fear of having personal thoughts revealed, or a desire to avoid any sort of conflict or judgement. Self-disclosure can be risky because it may invite ridicule or rejection (Pennebaker, 1989 as cited by Qian & Scott, 2007). Keeping one’s diary anonymously online may help avoid confrontation with friends or family (who would likely ignore messages in a hand-written diary telling them to stay away). Research has shown that online communication can lend itself to self-disclosure (Joinson, 2001, McKenna & Bargh, 2000, Tidwell & Walthier, 2002, Wallace, 1995, as cited by Qian & Scott, 2007).

Adolescent Bloggers

Internet-based research on adolescents has largely focused on how the web can facilitate creative expression and provide opportunities for adolescents to explore and experiment with their identities through email, chat rooms and blogging (Collin & Burns, 2009). Adolescence is a time of bodily change and also of identity reformation (Bentley, 1999). The Internet has been considered by some young people as a “safehaven” for open expression (Evard, 1996; Turkle, 1995 as cited by Thiel, 2005 p. 181). It has become a “safe place” for some adolescents to experiment with their identities (Thiel, 2005 p. 181) and to express themselves outside of the
larger culture (Bentley, 1999). Since blogging websites are located in a separate (online) realm, outside of “real” life, adolescents have a place where they can reflect on their identities and explore their emotions and thoughts through writing. Bentley (1999) believes that girls need safe spaces outside of traditional spaces where they have the opportunity to express themselves without self-censoring, silencing, or monitoring. Teenagers can use blogs to anonymously post their thoughts and feelings without jeopardizing their “real” life reputations, and to discover and develop their identities.

**Methodological Concerns of Blog Research**

In this section I will go over the methodological concerns associated with blog research and decisions I made for my project regarding them.

**Trustworthiness and Truth**

Trustworthiness and truth are two of many concerns qualitative researchers are faced with when analyzing data. Blogs are not the only sources that present researchers with the difficulty of deeming what information is true. This concern may also be a factor in other qualitative research methods such as questionnaires or interviews where the researcher is unable to know if participants are exaggerating or lying. Accepting information as it is presented is a risk that all qualitative researchers take. In the case of blogs, for instance, the researcher has no way of knowing whether bloggers are lying, exaggerating or inventing stories. Nevertheless, even their fabrications can still tell us something about the manner in which specific social and cultural
ideas are constructed (Hookway, 2008); even stories that are made-up are influenced by some version of reality.

Researchers are faced with the issue of whether or not blogs correspond to offline realities. Kendall (1999) points out that participants in online interactions draw on their offline experiences to negotiate and interpret their online interactions. Bloggers draw on their own experiences when constructing their entries. Blogs are not necessarily mirrors of reality; while they might represent ‘reality,’ they might also represent an imagined reality. Bar-Ilan (2005) mentions several lists of motivations and reasons people give for writing personal blogs. In my opinion, the most clear and concise list is that of Nardi and colleagues (2004) (as cited by Bar-Ilan, 2005). Nardi and colleagues (2004) studied twenty-three bloggers and identified the following five major categories: “documenting one’s life, providing commentary and opinions, expressing deeply felt emotions, articulating ideas through writing and forming and maintaining community forums” (Bar-Ilan, 2005 p. 299). These purposes are first and foremost beneficial to the writers themselves. Whether they are looking to provide commentary or to find companionship, these bloggers are writing for their own benefits. It seems unlikely that bloggers writing for these purposes could gain anything from making things up. Indeed, as I mentioned previously, blogs allow for a lot of anonymity and this is likely to provoke bloggers to be honest. This may mean that users may feel less self-conscious and more free to write about anything without having their real identities exposed. The Internet can act as a stage where individuals have the opportunity to act privately in a public setting. The illusion of privacy may provoke some users to disclose personal information. Hookway (2008) describes blogging as having a confessional quality. Bloggers may refrain from censoring their personal thoughts if there is no
visible audience to judge them; therefore, a lack of an obvious audience might provoke honest and truthful writing.

At first, I was concerned about the extent to which the contents of the blogs would represent reality. Trustworthiness and truth are two of many concerns qualitative researchers are faced with when analyzing the data they have collected. I agree with Hookway (2008), that even if bloggers were to exaggerate or invent stories, their fabrications could still tell me something about the manner in which specific social and cultural ideas are constructed. Exaggerated and invented stories are still based on something or someone (real or fictional), and so even if the stories in the blogs are fabrications, they would still provide some kind of window of reality.

Private vs. Public

The Internet has made vast amounts of personal information publicly accessible. Individuals can post information into public forums that can be read by anyone with an Internet connection. The fact that private information is publicly available online poses complex methodological concerns for qualitative research. It is unclear whether the information posted publically in blogs belongs to the writers or to the Internet. Social scientists have reached no consensus about what information online is considered private and what is considered public (Hookway, 2008); however, generally, and for the most-part, in the material I have read, blogs are treated like any other public content.

When bloggers post content online for public viewing, they are aware that their writing can be read by others. Blogging software allows three levels of privacy: password protected (most private), unlisted (private, but still traceable), and listed (public, and easily found by search
Bloggers are given these options when they set up their accounts. Those who open their blogs to being viewed are aware beforehand that what they post is going to be public. This is similar to the way in which people speaking on the radio or on television know that their information will be public (McKee & Porter, 2009). If someone doesn’t want their blog to be utilized without their permission, then it is in their best interest to protect it by password (which could be shared with chosen individuals). Nardi and colleagues (2004) asked the participants in their study how they felt about the fact that 900 million people [the number of people worldwide with Internet connectivity (NITLE Blog Census)] could read any blog that is not password protected. They found that, in general, bloggers in their sample seemed fairly unconcerned about privacy. Only one of twenty-three participants had a password-protected blog (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). Bloggers choose whether or not to make their content public or private and so it can be argued that if a blogger chooses to list and share their blogs with the public, the blog itself can be considered public content.

Some Internet researchers consider everything published onto the Internet as in the public domain, while others consider personal material to be private property. Blog research has only recently become a method of research in the social sciences and so I had difficulty determining from the literature if blogs are to be considered public or private material for the purpose of my project. I thoroughly searched academic journals for articles written on blog research hoping to learn about how it is conducted and what types of ethics procedures are necessary. I learnt that the first step to learning what type of procedures to go through is to decide whether or not to ask for informed consent. This discussion is related to the debate over whether the Internet constitutes a public space or a private domain. I discovered that there appears to be no consensus amongst Internet researchers. The literature informed me that since there is no dominant opinion...
and no official declaration by the Canadian Tri-council funding agencies, that it lies in the researcher’s judgment to decide if they should treat the Internet as a private or public space. After reading the literature on blogs, my own view is that blogs constitute public material. Bloggers are aware that their blogs are publically accessible.

**Informed Consent**

When blogs are published on the Internet, bloggers consent to their information being publically available. If authors desire not to have their writing publicly available, they have two options: not publishing their material on the Internet or electing to hide their information from the public by making it accessible only with a password, or open only to themselves or to friends to whom they give explicit permission. It is generally understood that blogging is a public act of writing for an implied audience and that if someone does not want their information to be read, then they should not publish it in an open blog (Hookway, 2008). Many researchers have argued that the public character of the Internet means that data postings are “fair research game,” and that given the public nature of blog postings, researchers are excused from having to involve institutional consent procedures (Finn & Lavitt, 2004, Bogat & Reid, 1997, and Sharf, 1997 as cited by Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004, p. 130).

Some researchers, however, argue that it is unethical to use blogs in research. This could be because posters may never have intended that their writing be used for research or education (Flicker, Haans, & Skinner, 2004). Yet, it is acceptable for a researcher to conduct observational research in any public setting without consent. Some have argued that scientists can record public Internet based communication without the knowledge or consent of subjects because it
constitutes observation of public behavior (Herring, 1996, as cited by Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). McKee (2009) believes that in the case of publically available web material, informed consent of participants is not required because of the privacy settings the authors have chosen. Bloggers relinquish their right to privacy by contributing their blogs to public space (McKee & Porter, 2009). It is up to researchers to decide their position on public/private nature of blogs in order to choose whether or not to use blogs in their research, with or without consent. There are no official guidelines or regulations on Internet research and so it is ultimately up to the researchers to determine for themselves how to abide by ethics procedures.

My position is that observing public blogs is no different than observing people in other public settings. Generally, scientists can record public Internet-based communication without the knowledge or consent of subjects because it constitutes observation of public behavior (Herring, 1996, as cited by Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). I have decided that the case of a blogger choosing to publish a blog online is no different than an individual committing any other type of act in a public setting that can be observed by any passerby, including by a researcher.

**Ethics**

As discussed, I followed the steps in the literature which suggested I choose whether or not to ask for consent and to decide whether I consider blogs to be public or private material. I chose not to seek consent and to consider blogs to be public. I also ensured that I was following
the guidelines of both the website I would be using, LiveJournal, and the Queen’s University Research Ethics Board’s (REB) documents.

Most students at Queen’s University are required to go through ethics procedures to ensure the safety and well-being of their research participants. Since my participants are anonymous, are unaware that they are being studied, are never quoted directly by me and are being publically observed, I used the following points to confirm that I am exempt from such procedures:

Research Exempt from REB Review:

- “Exemption from REB review is based on the information being accessible in the public domain, and that the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010 p. 17).

- “Article 2.2: Research that relies exclusively on publically available information does not require REB review when:
  
  (a) The information is legally accessible to the public and appropriately protected by law;

  or

  (b) The information is publically accessible and there is no reasonable expectation of privacy” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010 p. 17).

- “Cyber-material such as documents, records, performances, online archival materials or published third party interviews to which the public is given uncontrolled access on the Internet for which there is no expectation of privacy is considered to be publically available information” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2010 p. 18).
Option (b) states that if the information published (such as blogs posted online) are publically accessible (by any Internet user, such as myself), and if there is no reasonable expectation of privacy (the bloggers are aware that they are publishing their blogs for public viewing, and not electing to hide them by password), a researcher does not require an REB review.

I also decided to look at LiveJournal’s policy to ensure that I would not be harming their users or going against their policy. The following points demonstrate what users consent to when posting on LiveJournal’s website. On a page titled Privacy Policy on LiveJournal (http://www.livejournal.com/legal/privacy.bml), “Public Content” is defined as follows:

“Whenever you post content on the Service and set the privacy setting to “Public” or “Everybody,” you understand that this information may be accessible by anyone with Internet access, whether or not they are logged into LiveJournal. In addition, any content you post publically may result in unsolicited communications from other parties. You should further understand that any personally identifiable information and/or content that you post on LiveJournal that is viewable by other users may be copied and/or shared without your consent. LiveJournal cannot be responsible for any loss or damages related to any information you post on the Service. LiveJournal may repost public entries, in whole or in part, on the LiveJournal homepage or other LiveJournal pages in order to help users find friends and communities based on mutual interests.”

The page also comments on “Internet Security”:

“Any content posted over the Internet or a wireless network cannot be guaranteed 100% private or secure.”
LiveJournal makes their users aware that their writing can be seen by others on the website and by anonymous users. People are not required to sign-up or log-in to the website in order to read entries. Users are informed that their personal information could be copied and/or shared without their consent and that their writing can be shared with anyone who has access to the Internet. The Privacy Policy on LiveJournal confirms that by publically posting their blogs to the website, bloggers are consenting to their blogs being read or copied by any Internet user. LiveJournal treats their website’s content as public, and their policy reaffirms that a researcher may use the user’s blogs without having to ask for consent. Furthermore, a statement is posted on the LiveJournal website reminding users that, in general, content posted on the Internet is not guaranteed to be private or secure. The website also encourages bloggers to provide non-identifiable personal information. This reminds users that there are risks associated with posting personal and identifiable information. The Privacy Policy as well as the general Internet Security warning support the argument in the literature that blogs can be considered public material. I am aware that certain websites may contain trademarks, copyrights, and certain laws prohibiting the copying and sharing of certain information; however, I have confirmed that LiveJournal has no such restrictions on their blogs and clearly, and repetitively, tells both bloggers and readers that the content of their website, including what is posted by its users, is considered public domain.

Out of curiosity, I looked to see how bloggers are made aware of the policy when publishing their blogs, so I could learn if and how bloggers become aware that by publishing their content online they are surrendering their privacy. I accessed LiveJournal’s Privacy Policy through a small link at the bottom of the page; I suspected that not all users may notice it and/or click on it before signing up. I clicked on “create an account” and filled out my information. Before prompting me to click on “Create Account,” I was informed that “by creating a
LiveJournal account, (I) agree to (their) Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.” I looked at the Terms of Service which describes the purpose of the website, the rules of the website, how accounts can be terminated for breaking the rules, and provides information about the advertisements, links, and trademarked names and logos on the pages. After creating my account, I clicked on “My Account Settings” and then selected the “Privacy” tab. The first option was for me to decide if I wanted my entries to be posted to “everyone (public),” “friends,” or to “just me (private).” I was given the choice to include my entries and/or comments in search engine results, to have my content promoted on LiveJournal’s website, to subscribe my blogs to www.Weblogs.com, to enable comments to everybody, registered users, friends, or nobody, and to consent to having my journal found through my e-mail address. These options demonstrate that all users are given the choice whether or not to have their blogs visible to the public. If users are unaware of the “My Account Settings” section, they are also prompted each time they post an entry to choose if they’d like to post to the public, to their friends, or just to themselves. They are also given the option, before posting, to select whether or not they’d like to activate the commenting feature. LiveJournal users are, in my opinion, well aware of their privacy options. It seems reasonable to assume they knowingly consent to having their content read by anonymous users and knowingly elect to permit the commenting feature in their entries.

As with any research project, I am still responsible for the safety and well-being of my participants. Whether or not a person consents to having their information being publically accessible, it is always important that risks to the subject be minimized (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). When consent has not been acquired, it is imperative that researchers ensure the protection of participants’ personal information. There are a number of precautions researchers can take to secure a blogger’s anonymity in a study. Any personal
information contained within the blog posting that identifies an individual should be removed. Information such as names and email addresses should also be omitted (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). It is also important that researchers refrain from including verbatim quotes to protect the anonymity of bloggers (Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). Eysenbach and Till (2001) believe that consent should be acquired if a researcher wants to directly quote a blog in their study. Search engines can make quotes easy to find and allow someone to find the original web pages they come from (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). As a result, internet users may find personal information about bloggers including their names (Serfaty, 2004). It is up to the researcher to ensure the safety of their participants and to reduce harm in every way possible.

I took several precautions to ensure that my participants could not be identified through my project. I omitted all personal information such as names, cities, birthdays, and schools when transcribing my data. I also do not refer to my participants by their actual usernames and I do not mention their e-mail addresses to ensure that they could not be found through the website’s search features. Sixsmith & Murray (2001) note the importance of refraining from including verbatim quotes to protect the anonymity of bloggers, and so I chose not to include any direct quotations. I ensure that all my participants’ personal information remains untraceable, and I took all precautions possible to ensure that my participants could not be identified.

I elected to share the name of the website I used because I felt that the features and policies of the site were relevant to how I conducted my research and because I aim to have other researchers learn about the method of blog research through my project. Since blog research is a relatively new method of research, and because I hope my project might act as a sort of “how-to” guide for future blog researchers, I felt that it was important to share that I used LiveJournal so
that other researchers using this website, or another like it, could see how I carried out my project.

Solicited vs. Unsolicited Research Materials

There are two types of diaries that can be used in diary research: solicited and unsolicited. Unsolicited diaries are “documents of life” (Allport, 1942) which are spontaneously maintained, and solicited diaries are “research-driven diaries (Elliot, 1997),” created and maintained at the researcher’s request (Hookway, 2008, p. 95). Solicited diaries present the possibility of having the contents heavily influenced by the researcher’s interests. Unsolicited diaries do not raise the same concern. While it may be difficult to find and access unsolicited diaries that contain information relevant to a research project, the advantage of these sources is that the writers are not told what to write about and therefore the content reflects the writer’s interests independent of those of the researcher.

I believe that using unsolicited blogs is ideal for my research because of their ‘naturally-occurring’ trait. I came to the decision to use unsolicited blogs rather than solicited blogs while learning about the disadvantages associated with soliciting blogs. Solicited blogs run the risk of reflecting the researcher’s interests more than the blogger’s. While writing for a researcher, a blogger could censor their thoughts out of embarrassment or could lie in attempt to benefit the project. The benefit of solicited blogs for the project would have been to guarantee that my authors are females and teenagers; however, soliciting blogs from girls under the age of eighteen would have presented the need to obtain consent from parents or legal guardians. Involving parents or guardians could also have influenced the contents of the blogs.
In order to obtain consent from girls under the age of eighteen, I would have required a signature from the girl herself or from a parent or legal guardian. I worried that having the girls’ parents or guardians aware that the girls would be writing about a personal and sensitive issue would have affected what the girls wrote about. Knowing that their parents or legal guardians might have read their writing could have caused the girls to censor their thoughts. One of the main reasons why diarists choose to write their diaries online is because of a lack of a visible audience to judge them. As discussed in the previous chapter, a lack of an obvious audience can provoke honest and truthful writing. Weight and weight loss issues are sensitive subjects. My assumption has been that I would learn more about girls’ experiences with and understandings of these issues by looking at material they chose to write themselves.

**Understanding Blogging Language and Content**

One of the issues that may arise for researchers who use blogs is understanding blogging language. Bloggers have invented and popularized acronyms, neologisms, and shortened versions of commonly used words (Myers, 2010). The language used in blogs is sometimes referred to as netspeak. Netspeak is the language that entails both traditional and adapted forms of linguistics that are considered slang or non-standard (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Practice can be enough to understand the language; therefore, it is imperative for researchers to have experience reading or writing blogs to become acquainted with other types of Internet writing that use the same sort of language.

In addition to words, blogs can contain images, sounds, videos, or emoticons. Emoticons are small images, like the smiley face, that can be used to relay sentiment. David Crystal (2001)
suggests that emoticons are used to fill a void in online communication where facial and body gestures cannot be used to express thoughts or feelings (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Bloggers may use emoticons to show moods associated with what they write about. In Huffaker and Calvert’s (2005) study of language use among male and female teenagers who created and maintained personal journals made publicly accessible online (2005), 63% of seventy participants used emoticons in their blogs to express feelings such as happiness and sadness.

Blogging websites give bloggers the option to personalize their pages. Bloggers are encouraged to use visual expressions such as images, templates, designs, and colors (Hookway, 2008). Using these options, bloggers can show their personalities to their readers. For example, bloggers can include images of bands to show the type of music they’re interested in and they can use colors to set the tone of the blog. Every blogger chooses their own blog layouts; depending on which blogging site they use, different options are available. Some bloggers also add pictures or videos throughout their texts. Pictures and videos can be personal files or files taken from the Internet.

According to Wooffitt (2005), online texts are regarded as “multi-semiotic” because they may contain many forms of representation. Serfaty (2004) refers to this practice as “accumulation” where two or more types of media appear side by side (p. 24). Language is always accompanied by other semiotic modes, and in writing, messages are not only expressed linguistically, but also through “marks on a page” (Kress & Leeuwen, 1998, p. 188). To study the blogs, it is important to use multimodal discourse analysis to discover the way bloggers represent themselves. “Multimodal discourse analysis is an emerging paradigm in discourse studies which extends the study of language per se to the study of language in combination with other resources, such as images, scientific symbolism, gesture, action, music, and sound”
(O’Halloran, 2011, p. 1). It attempts to account for the way in which different modes of expression share in the production of meaning (Bowcher, 2007). Theo van Leeuwen and Gunther Kress, who have published several textbooks on the analysis of visual design, argue that with the increase in use of visual modes with texts, it is essential to look at the interplay between the verbal and the visual (Garrett & Bell, 1998). For example: an image of a thin celebrity would correspond to a discussion on the effects of the media on body image. Royce (1998) refers to this relationship as “intersemiotic complementarity” (Bowcher, 2007). According to Royce (1998), the way to understand intersemiotic complementarity is to analyze the visual in the text, analyze the written text, and then analyze the relationship between both (Bowcher, 2007).

**Blog Research: How-To**

According to Hookway (2008), the first step for using blogs in research is to establish where and how to locate the blogs. I chose LiveJournal based on the usefulness of its search functions and the familiarity that I have developed from using it personally. I used the search function to locate communities that deal with issues pertaining to body image dissatisfaction. In the communities I was able to locate users who blog about feeling overweight. This process is known as “blog trawling.” I used the following key words to locate relevant communities: “fat,” “overweight,” and “weight loss.” Once inside the communities, I clicked on the usernames of the contributors to discover if they had a blogging page of their own. Once determining that they had a personal page, I would first check that they had at least five entries. Then, I would look to see if the blogger was female. Determining the girls’ ages was often difficult. Age was not always explicitly mentioned in their personal details. I often inferred age from facts about schooling or
adolescent-related events such as prom or high school graduation. I decided that any girl who
attended either middle school or high school would be eligible for my study. After determining
that the bloggers were teenage girls, I would read their entries more thoroughly to determine if
the blogger was writing about her experience with weight issues. In each case, this was
determined either through an explicit acknowledgement by the girl that she has an eating
disorder or through her discussion of her own weight loss behaviors that are associated with
eating disorders. Bulimia nervosa, for example, includes a cycle of binge eating and the use of
fasting, vomiting, laxatives and/or excessive exercise to prevent weight gain (American
Psychiatric Association, 2000 as cited by Neu Menassa, 2004). I used the acknowledgment of an
eating disorder and/or discussion of weight loss practices as proxy evidence that the girls wanted
to be thinner. Once confirming that the blogs were written by teenage girls who perceive
themselves as overweight, I would check to see if their five or more entries had significant
material to include in my study. It is important to mention that even when bloggers indicate
personal characteristics such as age and sex in their blogs, there is no way of confirming a
blogger’s actual identity. As with any qualitative research, there is no way to determine whether
or not the blogs are providing the truth. Following Hookway, I decided to take the stated
identities of the bloggers at face value. As I have already discussed, we may still learn something
from the blogs that are exaggerated or not exact representations of what is real.

Reading blogs takes a tremendous amount of time. Hookway (2008) writes that it took
him four months to read 200 blogs, of which only eleven were relevant to his research topic.
According to my browser history, I looked at more than 250 blogs over a period of three months.
I decided to stop searching for blogs after determining that twelve blogs were relevant to my
project. Given the sheer amount of material, I narrowed down my sample by eliminating the
blogs by girls under the age of sixteen, in the hopes that the blogs written by older girls would show more maturity. I also eliminated blogs in which more than 50% of the entries were unrelated to weight issues. After these eliminations, I was left with five blogs. The common features of these blogs are that they are written by girls between the ages of sixteen and eighteen who perceive themselves as overweight and who practice methods of weight loss that go beyond moderate dieting and exercise. The girls write about practices related to eating disorders and they have very low goal weights.

After I chose the five blogs, I had to read and code the blogs. I initially read each blog through to get a feel for the type of data I would be dealing with. The second reading involved writing down some key points and themes that I expected to develop. During the third reading I began the formal process of coding by underlining all the keywords while at the same time thinking about the different themes that were emerging. A fourth read-through allowed me to sort the keywords and place them into thematic categories. Initially, I did not pay attention to images or media content. I only focused on the actual writing. Once I finished coding the words and placing them into categories, I then went back to document the other modes of expression.

Conclusion

After having outlined the ethical concerns associated with blog research as well as the characteristics associated with personal blogs, I am prepared to look at the actual blogs. I will look at the blogs in two ways: first, I will pay attention specifically to how the practice of blogging relates to the girls’ experiences with weight loss and secondly, I will look at the value of these types of blogs as a tool for researchers. I approach the blogs with the advice of the
researchers discussed throughout this chapter without expectations or preconceptions regarding
the content.
Chapter Four

What is in the Blogs?

In this chapter, I present the content of the blogs. Some of the content supports what I learned from the literature about the roles of the media, peers, and parents in the contribution to body image dissatisfaction in teenage girls, and the social and psychological repercussions associated with perceiving oneself as overweight. I look at the dangerous weight loss practices that the five girls write about and at the health-related symptoms that they talk about. The literature in Chapter Two helped me to conceptualize body image dissatisfaction and weight-perception as social, psychological and health-related issues. I feel it is imperative to acknowledge the severity of the issue in order to get a better understanding of how these blogs might contribute to the girls’ experiences. The majority of the studies cited in my literature review analyzed national health surveys that were conducted in the form of questionnaires. The studies conducted by Foti & Lowry (2010), Zullig and colleagues (2006), and Talamayan and colleagues (2006), for example, analyzed sections from an American national survey called the Youth Risk Behaviour Survey (YRBS). YRBS used a sample of adolescents from grades 9-12 to monitor priority health-risk behaviors among youth (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). I rarely came across pieces of literature that present teenage girls’ own words about their experiences with weight. I hope to contribute to this filling gap in the literature by learning what teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight say about their experiences pertaining to weight. In this chapter, I refrain from using verbatim quotes taken directly from the blogs so as to protect the privacy and identities of the five bloggers. Instead I do my best to paraphrase the girls’ words and to represent the meaning I took from them.
Adolescence is the transition from youth to adulthood. This in between stage is characterized by both physical maturation and identity formation. Grogan (2008) argues that body dissatisfaction is normative for women and girls in the Western world starting at the age of eight. Girls learn at young ages that happiness lies in the ideal body shape. With the pressure to conform to the ideal body image coming from so many angles (parents, peers, the media), many adolescents fear being teased or feeling alone, and so they resort to dangerous methods of weight loss in attempts to feel like they belong. This quest to fit in can be lengthy and dangerous and many girls suffer in silence as they try to figure out who they are what they want to be. Blogs have become a mean by which some girls can explore their feelings, speak their minds, and be honest without fear of rejection, resentment or judgment. In my view, blogs offer a good way to learn about the experiences of teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight. Studies that consist of yes or no questions or likert scales do not tell stories. A questionnaire can never completely ask anyone anything in any depth or give someone a chance to talk about what is important to them. The questions in interviews are written by researchers and may leave out areas that the interviewees think are important. Studies that ask specific questions risk missing key emotions and thoughts related to experience. How can questionnaires like the YRBS accurately describe the experiences of teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight when clearly, as demonstrated through my blog research, there are many factors and a range of emotions involved? No two experiences are alike and so I adopted blog research as a way not to silence the unforeseeable, the unexpected or the unheard of. I am interested in the raw and honest writings of these teenage girls. I am thrilled that I have the opportunity to write about the practice of blog research, which has permitted me to study the stories of teenage girls as presented in their own words and then share these stories with people who are interested in solving persistent
social problems related to body image and weight. I will now present the bloggers as well as their narratives.

Who are the Bloggers?

In my project, I look at five blogs written by teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight. All of the girls are between the ages of sixteen and nineteen and have written the blogs while attending high school or during summer vacation during or right after high school. I would like to point out that when I use the terms “teenage” and “girl,” I am basing them on the assumption that the authors of the blogs are in fact who they say they are. I am aware that the authors may not actually be who they say they are. As I discussed in Chapter Three, I decided to take the blogs at face value following previous studies on bloggers such as the one by Hookway (2008).

I found the blogs I studied on the website LiveJournal.com. The authors of these personal blogs also contributed to weight-related communities on the website. The criteria I used to choose the blogs were: they represented someone between the ages of sixteen and nineteen, who perceived themselves to be overweight; they discussed extreme methods of weight loss; they discussed weight goals; and, they discussed the girls’ experiences of feeling or being overweight. All of the girls lived at home with either one or both parents, and their siblings. Four of the girls experienced health-related side-effects as a result of their weight loss practices. All five girls talk about their reasons for blogging. The blogs are similar in that they all include weight loss goals, food journals, and stories about daily events that are affected by the girls’ weight-perceptions and/or efforts to lose weight.
In order to keep the confidentiality and privacy of my participants, I will refer to the girls by alternate usernames which I’ve created: wizardess17, teenie_queenie, heavenabove, odessia, and snowangelica:

**wizardess17**: Age seventeen, fourteen entries.

**teenie_queenie**: Age sixteen to seventeen, fifty-seven entries.

**heavenabove**: Age seventeen to nineteen, eighty-two entries.

**odessia**: Age eighteen, eight entries.

**snowangelica**: Age sixteen to seventeen, 164 entries.

(Blogs are quantified in numbers of entries as opposed to pages in length for several reasons. Since each entry was printed individually, page numbers could not be determined due to different font sizes, the use of pictures, and banner advertisements that would automatically show on some entries when printed. The total number of pages that I printed out from the five blogs is approximately 400 pages).

Wizardess17 is seventeen. She wrote fourteen blog entries on her personal blogging page and has also contributed to online discussions related to weight. She attends high school and admits to having an eating disorder with symptoms such as binging and purging. She wants to be thinner, smart, independent and fashionable, and wants to read more, do well in school, succeed, find real love, and define herself. At the start of her journal, wizardess17 weighed 140 pounds with an ultimate goal of weighing 115. She weighs herself once a day and restricts herself to 1200 calories a day. In effort to lose weight, she consumes two liters of water and works out for at least one and a half hours every day. She identifies herself as being depressed.
Teenie_queenie lives with her mother and stepfather, attends high school, and blogged fifty-seven entries between the ages sixteen and seventeen. She acknowledges that she suffers from anorexia and claims that she was born with the disease since it has always been a part of her life. She fears gaining weight and considers weight loss to be an addiction. At the age of sixteen, teenie_queenie weighed 123 pounds with the goal of weighing 90 pounds. She admits to being depressed and practicing self-harm (i.e. cutting).

In eighty-two entries, heavenabove chronicles her weight loss experience over the period of two years. She began her blog at the age of seventeen, and continued to write until she was nineteen and out of high school. Like teenie_queenie, heavenabove’s parents are divorced, and she lives with her mother and stepfather. Her weight loss is centered around dieting and restricting herself to 600 calories a day. She refuses to go a day without doing crunches, lunges, squats, push-ups and lifting weights. In addition to suffering from depression, heavenabove has been suicidal. She begins her blog at 129.8 pounds with the goal of reaching 99 pounds.

Odessia’s parents are also divorced. Her stepfather killed himself several months before she began keeping her blog. Odessia’s blog is the shortest, at eight entries, since it was basically used to chronicle a seven day fast. She is eighteen years old, attends high school and lives with her mother. She started her weight loss regime at 170 pounds with the hope of eventually reaching 125 pounds. Odessia says she is depressed.

Snowangelica chronicled thirteen months of trying to lose weight in 164 entries on LiveJournal. At the age of sixteen, snowangelica had already been diagnosed with anorexia and compulsive exercising. She is obsessed with all numbers relating to weight such as calories, pounds, body part measurements, the Body Mass Index (BMI), and body fat percentage. She
starts her journal in July at 110 pounds and aims to reach 90-95 pounds by December. She eventually hopes to weigh 88 pounds. She talks about having been obsessed with her body for some years, as she remembers her obsession starting at age ten. Snowangelica also says she suffers from depression and anxiety, and that she self-harms but she says she hides all her illnesses (including her eating disorder) from her parents under her large jacket, good grades, and her job.

The Content in the Blogs

The rest of this chapter will focus on the different weight-related themes that emerged in the blogs. The three main themes are: the influences on the girls’ attempts at weight loss, the consequences of the girls’ weight loss, and the methods the girls used to lose weight (including the resulting health-related consequences they endured). Since the majority of the blogs’ contents deal with weight loss, it is important to include the weight-related themes in my analysis. I am not just studying teenage girls and their blogging practices, but specifically how blogs are used by teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight and who are trying to lose weight. It is imperative that I demonstrate the weight-related themes in order to display what the blogs are about. I use the themes from the literature review to guide my findings as well as identify what I did not find in the blogs that was emphasized in the literature. The themes I addressed in the literature review in Chapter Two were not all present in the blogs. Throughout this chapter, I will mention what themes from the literature did not present themselves in the blogs. This discussion contributes to my final analysis where I answer my research question by relating the content of the blogs to the practice of blogging.
The Media as an Influence

Although the media has been found to be influential in the way teenage girls perceive their bodies (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006), not all the blogs I studied explicitly mentioned this association. Snowangelica is the only one to see the media as being at fault for eating disorders. She admits to wanting to look like a supermodel or an actress, saying that they inspire the way she wants to look. Wizardess17 enjoys looking at online images called “thinspirations” or “thinspos,” which are generally pictures of models or actresses with thin figures. Both teenie_queenie and snowangelica talk about weight loss methods they learnt through the media. Teenie_queenie learnt about Herbal Magic, a weight loss supplement, while watching a children’s channel, and snowangelica read in a magazine that apple cider vinegar can be used to boost her metabolism, suppress her appetite, and stop her body from absorbing fat. I do not believe that the shortage of comments about the media implies that the media is not a key player in the production of body image dissatisfaction. The girls themselves did not choose to write about it.

Peers as an Influence

For the most part, the girls suggest their friends are unaware that they are suffering from eating disorders or that they are trying to lose weight. Aside from teenie_queenie, who has a supportive relationship with an anorexic friend, the girls say they do not confide in their friends about their body image dissatisfaction and/or weight loss strategies. Wizardess17 wishes that her friends would notice her depressed mood. Heavenabove had a peer comment on her weight loss. The comment upset her because she disagreed that she had made any progress in her weight loss.
It seems like both wizardess17 and heavenabove need their friends to care about them so they can feel better about themselves. Heavenabove feels betrayed, hurt, and lost when her friends don’t notice her weight loss progress. As McSharry (2009) notes, adolescence is a time when youth depend on their peers for acceptance and support. In the case of a teenage girl with an eating disorder, a lack of support from peers may leave the impression that the girls’ body size is to blame. Heavenabove claims her readers are the only people she can trust because her friends do not congratulate her for her progress. The lack of concern by her friends does not seem to have any implications or influence on her weight loss.

Snowangelica does not talk about any friends. Each mention of school is used to demonstrate that being in school all day means she can get away without eating. She also mentions how her good grades distract her parents from her eating disorder and so she devotes much of her free time to studying. Aside from being in school and studying, snowangelica tries to work as much as she can because at work she has no time to eat and moving around a lot means burning more calories. She admits to constantly comparing herself to others and fears others looking at her as if she were a fat animal.

The literature on the influence of peers on weight-perception suggests that some of the main contributions to the development of body image dissatisfaction in teenage girls are stigmatization, bullying, teasing and criticisms by their peers. None of the girls mentions any sort of experiences pertaining to these practices. I do not believe that this implies that the girls have never been bullied or teased by their peers. I believe that it is unlikely that the girls recorded all daily occurrences and that it is possible that some experiences were omitted. It is also possible that experiences with stigmatization, bullying, teasing, or criticism could have occurred pre or post blog-keeping.
There was no evidence of Fat Talk (Nichter, 2000) having taken place in the girls’ social lives. The girls seem to genuinely view themselves as overweight and there is no evidence of the bloggers bringing attention to their weight in front of their friends for social reasons. In fact, the opposite seems to be true for some of the girls, especially in the case of teenie_queenie who works hard to keep her weight-loss efforts from her friends.

**Family as an Influence**

My discussion of the family in the literature review mainly focused on the influences of the family on weight preoccupation and body dissatisfaction. While I did not discover anything in the literature about how the family influences the shape of girls’ eating disorders or their actual weight loss practices, it seems that this may be an important issue. In the blogs I found very little discussion of the influence of family on body dissatisfaction and more about how the family got in the way of the girls’ weight loss. The following paragraphs display what the girls say about their family members throughout their blogs.

Four of the five girls write about their mothers and how they play a role in their eating disorders. Teenie_queenie and heavenabove’s mothers force them to eat and watch them to make sure they are actually consuming their food. Their mothers constantly monitor their food intake and notice when they skip meals or eat too few calories. Teenie_queenie constantly fears that her mother is going to weigh her and discover that she is losing weight. She drinks tons of water and stuffs her pockets with rolls of quarters before being weighed in order to fool her mother into thinking she weighs more.
The girls who talk about their mothers say that their mothers are aware of their eating disorders. Teenie_queenie, odessia, and snowangelica’s mothers send their daughters for professional help, whether it is with a psychologist, a counselor, or at the hospital with a doctor or nutritionist. All four mothers appear to be trying to control their daughter’s conditions, but it seems as though none are successful since none of the girls stop trying to lose weight.

Two of the girls mention spending time with their fathers, with whom they do not live. Snowangelica and heavenabove discuss their experiences eating at their father’s homes. Heavenabove noted that she gained one pound after eating a meal at her father’s home. She mentions not wanting to get in trouble with her parents and so she eats what her parents make for her. Snowangelica mentions a meal at her father’s house that consisted of more than 1000 calories. She eats what is cooked for her at her father’s house to give the illusion that she does not have an eating disorder and consequently her father believes that she is fine. With this belief he suggests to her mother that snowangelica stop seeing her counselor so they can avoid the “unnecessary” expense. Snowangelica’s parents argue about her condition and although her mother insists that snowangelica is still suffering from an eating disorder, her father continues to disagree. He believes his daughter when she insists that she has already eaten meals even if he has not actually seen her do so. Snowangelica wishes she could live with her father since she is constantly fighting with her mother about her eating habits and since her father doesn’t seem to think there is an issue.
Psychological and Social Implications of Weight Loss Practices

In the blogs, there were clear statements that implied that some of the girls were experiencing psychological distress. Unfortunately, it is unclear if the psychological distress (mainly depression) was a result of the girls’ eating disorders or if the eating disorders were influenced by the psychological distress. Regardless, it is important to show how depression, body dissatisfaction, and eating disorders go hand in hand since in one way or another they feed on each other.

In the literature review, I talked about the psychological implications of stigmatization and bullying. Stigma and discrimination may trigger feelings of depression, low levels of self-esteem or disturbed body images among those who identify their bodies as not conforming to societal ideals (Atlantis & Ball, 2008). In the blogs, I learn that there are numerous reasons related to weight for the girls’ psychological distress. In this section I will talk about these reasons as well as what types of psychological implications the girls deal with. I will also talk about how body dissatisfaction affects their social lives.

Psychological Implications

All five of the girls perceive themselves as overweight and all five of the girls say they are depressed. Sometimes the bloggers use the word depressed simply to describe how they feel about a situation, and other times they talk about behaviors that are commonly associated with clinical depression, such as not wanting to spend time with friends or relatives, isolating themselves in social settings and avoiding interactions with others. Wizardess17 makes a direct correlation between her depression and her weight and odessia talks about how she stays up late
thinking about stuff that depresses her, which causes her to break down and cry. Teenie_queenie and snowangelica talk about self-harm. Teenie_queenie describes cutting her thighs because it is a place she can hide her self-mutilation from her mother, her psychiatrist, her therapist and her friend. Snowangelica is proud of not having cut herself, in over a year, but she says she constantly feels the urge to begin again. She calls her counselor whenever she has the urge and is always successfully talked out it doing it. She also suffers from anxiety and talks to her counselor over the phone on a regular basis to help deal with her “mind overload.”

Heavenabove talks explicitly about her depression and how nothing seems to give her pleasure. She has a hard time eating and sleeping and is overwhelmed by suicidal thoughts and death. In one entry, she discusses her need to die, and depicts a suicide plan which involves driving out to the beach, getting drunk, overdosing, and slitting her wrists. She has a strong fear of failure and so she contemplates suicide as a way to avoid it.

The only scenarios in which the girls write about positive feelings or happiness are when they are successfully following their weight loss regimens, when they lose weight, when they successfully deny food offered to them, and when they fit into smaller sized clothing. When wizardess17 is successful at losing weight, she seems to feel in complete control. When she is on what she considers the “right track,” she describes feeling glad and super happy and she feels proud of herself and confident that she can accomplish anything. Teenie_queenie and snowangelica show excitement over fitting into smaller pants and heavenabove and odessia talk about how they successfully deny foods offered to them. Interestingly enough, they also seem to feel good when they are able to restrain themselves from binging, purging, or taking laxatives/diuretics. While they do not say so explicitly, some of the girls may be aware of the dangers associated with their weight loss practices and so they may find their restraint a sign that
they are getting healthier or can achieve their weight-goals in a healthy manner; however, none of the girls say anything about wanting to stop their severe weight loss habits completely. All of the happiness the girls portray seems to be temporary and occurs between bouts of depression and sadness. The girls suggest they will not feel completely happy until they are happy with the way they look.

**Social Implications**

Body image dissatisfaction may interfere with girls’ social lives, have devastating effects on their personal relationships, and push girls to use unhealthy means of weight loss in order to acquire the (thin) bodies they desire. The social events that the girls discuss in their blogs are nights out with friends, going shopping, volunteering, going on dates, going to balls/dances, and vacations. For the most part, when they discuss the events prior to attending them, they express their worries about how they will look and how they will manage to not eat too much or to skip meals entirely while there.

In Chapter Two, I discussed how the literature describes weight-perception as leading some girls to practice extreme methods of weight loss. Mooney and colleagues (2004) discovered a trend of teenage girls fasting or severely reducing their food intake for a short time before an event with the aim of looking good for that day. In the blogs, I was able to learn how the girls’ fears of how their bodies appear consume their thoughts and have a direct effect on their weight loss practices and on their social lives.

Snowangelica writes about the vacations she takes to visit her family. She obsesses over how she thinks she will look in a bathing suit. Before going to Florida to visit her grandmother,
she claimed to have looked at herself more than fifty times in one day in anticipation of having to wear a bathing suit. This made her feel nervous. She also talks about the anxiety that results from shopping. She calls the mirror her enemy and admits that shopping makes her scared.

Sometimes the girls mention that they worry about not being able to avoid eating food that is offered to them or to avoid eating altogether without raising suspicion; they worry at family meals, at work, while out with friends, and in school. For instance, to hide her eating disorder from her friends,teenie_queenie would buy food in front of her friends, and shove the items in her bag claiming she would save them for later. She also mentions having baked a cake and telling her friends about her experience baking in order to fool them into thinking she ate it. She also discovered that ordering zero calorie drinks at Starbucks while with her friends gave the illusion that she was consuming calories. Odessia was in the middle of her seven day fast when she found herself at McDonalds with her friends questioning her lack of eating. She told her friends she was on a diet, but drank a Diet Mountain Dew to appease them. Snowangelica talks a lot about family meals in which she has trouble saying no to food or avoiding eating. One night, her aunt sent her home with containers of food; however, snowangelica threw them away later. Other times, however, she wasn’t able to get out of eating. She mentions eating a lot of salad at her cousin’s birthday, and that while watching her family members eat, she was fascinated by the way they choose to eat whatever they want. She thinks about the repetitive motions of chewing and swallowing. She also talks about a birthday party she was planning on attending in which she was worried about being served dessert. She hates eating in front of people. Teenie_queenie talks about a school trip to New York where her meals would be included and served to her. Her heart dropped when she found out she would be forced to eat in front of other people. She
wondered how she would be able to avoid meals and she vowed never to go on another trip again.

The blogs provide evidence that the experiences that the girls have at the social events are greatly affected by their weight-perception and eating disorders. Rather than trying to have a good time, they seem to be pre-occupied with thoughts of food and fear of judgment. In order to prepare for these events and/or outings, many of the girls practice dangerous methods of weight loss in order to look their best. Some of the girls who were unable to get out of eating later purged or used laxatives in order to rid their bodies of the calories they had ingested.

In my review of the literature, I read little about the kind of social implications that were prominent in the blogs. Since Boutelle and colleagues (2002) discussed how purging is used as a quick solution to weight loss, I had previously understood some girls’ needs to use “quick” and extreme methods of weight loss like vomiting or using laxatives. I was, however, surprised to learn that being in unfamiliar environments affected the bloggers’ thoughts as much as they did. The next section will deal with the dangerous-methods of weight loss that the girls discuss in their blogs.

**Dangerous Weight Loss Practices**

While there are methods of weight loss that are relatively healthy, there are also methods that don’t work, are dangerous, unhealthy, and, on rare occasions, deadly. Examples of such dangerous weight loss methods include excessive exercising, dieting, fasting, taking diet pills, self-induced vomiting, and taking laxatives (Zullig, Ubbes, Pyle, & Valois, 2006). Studies, such as the ones conducted by Zullig and colleagues (2006) and Talamayan and colleagues (2006),
show that these dangerous weight loss methods are practiced by teenage girls of all weight categories. Researchers show that the methods of weight loss discussed in this section are dangerous and extreme due to the fact that they present unhealthy side-effects and that they are not recommended by doctors. The literature shows that the following dangerous weight loss practices are not only practiced by overweight girls, but also by girls of normal weight or by girls who are underweight (Talamayan, Springer, Kelder, Gorospe, & Joye, 2006). In the blogs, all of the girls say they practice at least one of the following methods of weight loss.

**Binging and Purging**

Three of the girls discuss their cycles of binging and purging. These practices typically describe an eating disorder called bulimia. Wizardess17 admits to binging and purging at least once a week. When she feels her weight is higher than it should be, she finds herself binging out of hunger and purging to make up for pounds potentially gained. She writes about how binging makes her feel depressed and how she is aware of the pattern that leads to purging: losing weight, feeling better, slipping control, binging, and becoming depressed. She wants to quit binging, but she feels her disorder won’t let her stop. Heavenabove also talks about binging. Every couple of days she has what she calls “a binge day” where she consumes more than 1500 calories in one day. To compensate for what she considers an overconsumption of calories, heavenabove experiments with diets that involve caloric restriction and/or fast days. Odessia, at her worst, has up to four binge/purge sessions in one day. She is obsessed with restricting calories and fasting, and so she finds herself compensating for a lack of nutrition by uncontrollably binging on everything and anything, and subsequently purging it out of guilt. On
day seven of a fast, odessia describes the different foods she ate and then purged. She was unable to allow herself to keep any food inside her body. She knew that whatever she ate would end up being purged and so at times, throughout her fast, she would allow herself to eat a meal.

Purging is generally associated with the binge/purge cycle that is characteristic of those suffering from bulimia; however, it is often practiced independently as a quick way for individuals to rid their bodies of the food they have consumed. While four of the five girls practice self-induced vomiting as a method of weight loss, only snowangelica used it independently of binging when she decided it was needed. Purging was not snowangelica’s most common method of weight loss; however, she mentions the urge to purge and the love she has for the feeling of emptiness inside her body.

Fasting

All five of the girls talk about fasting as a method to lose weight. Fasting leaves most of the girls feeling weak and tired, yet three of the bloggers force themselves to fast for several days at a time. Odessia’s blog was created and maintained for the purpose of chronicling a seven day fast. She was aiming to beat her record of losing ten pounds in her last seven-day fast by attempting to fast for longer. Not only was odessia restricting her body of essential nutrients and calories during the fast, she was also exercising in attempt to lose the fat that her body had already stored. Odessia says she tried to distract herself from the fact that she had no energy by exercising, taking five hour energy shots, taking caffeine pills, sleeping pills, and pain pills. By the seventh day, odessia was no longer able to control her hunger and found herself in a twenty-four hour binge/purge cycle. Her fast ended, and she decided to continue pursuing weight loss by
restricting her calories to 1000 a day, and burning 800 calories daily at the gym. Her journal ends with this announcement.

Snowangelica does not want anything in her mouth. She loves the feeling of pure emptiness and feels strong after a day of successfully not eating a lot. She does not practice week-long fasts like odessia; however, she goes through bouts of time without consuming any food throughout each day. Similarly, heavenabove describes fasting as a part of her dieting cycle of restricting calories. She enjoys testing herself in order to see how long she can go without eating. In her journal, she describes being able to go fifteen hours without consuming anything. Wizardess17 and teenie_queenie don’t implicitly mention that they fast; however, they both mention thinking about doing it in desperation to lose pounds.

**Dieting and Rules**

Caloric restriction is the standard type of dieting that all five of these girls practice. At one time or another, all the girls give themselves daily caloric intake goals in effort to avoid gaining weight. They also impose other dieting restrictions and/or rules as part of their weight loss regimens.

Wizardess17 will only allow herself to consume 1200 calories a day. She forces herself to consume two liters of water and, aside from that, she will not drink anything other than tea. Teenie_queenie does not like to count calories because she feels that it stresses her out. Instead, she avoids foods that are high in calories and consumes foods that she knows have very low caloric contents such as low calorie drinks, gum (three calories), diet iced tea (20 calories), four mushrooms at a time, celery, rockets candy (thirty calories), and drink flavor powder (four
calories). She drinks her coffee black unless she can find zero-calorie Splenda. She attempts to compensate for her lack of eating by taking calcium supplements, vitamin d, b12 and b6.

Heavenabove always aims to consume as few calories as possible. Several examples of her daily caloric intakes are 800 calories, 500 calories, 320 calories, 600 calories, 700 calories, and 480 calories. She obsessively calculates the calories in everything she makes and logs all the numbers in her entries. She also attempts to drink as much water as possible. Heavenabove talks about her obsessive compulsive tendencies that have developed around her food consumption. She will not eat bread unless it is multi-grain or gluten-free, she will not drink milk unless it is soy, she eats around her sandwiches and then eats the middle, she matches M&Ms into colorful pairs, eats oranges one segment at a time, eats the middle of the apple and then around, she will not eat with a spoon or certain types of cutlery, she uses no dressing on her salads, and she refuses to eat pork, red meat, sugar, dairy, gluten, soda, chocolate, candy or caffeine. She tries to keep a diet of only fruits, vegetables, fish, chicken, nuts, tea, and soy milk. She will only eat cereal or popcorn if she is feeling weak. Heavenabove’s eating regimen is very detailed as she pays close attention to the caloric content of foods and she avoids the consumption of certain types of foods entirely.

Odessia does not talk about dieting as much as the others since her journal is about her seven-day fast; however, she does mention the caloric values of certain foods when discussing her cravings and the foods she sees her friends eat. She consumes diet sodas to distract her friends from her fasting and tells them that she is dieting so that they aren’t as worried as they should be.
Snowangelica, who doesn’t like any food in her body, is very strict about what she consumes. She will generally consume between 300 and 500 calories a day, but will not consume more than 200 calories at any given meal. She drinks diet tea or lemon-lime water all day to feel as though she is eating. She thinks that all food will make her fat and she has a deep fear of gaining weight. Her favorite food is salad and she will not eat anything that has meat in it. She is also afraid of consuming carbohydrates and liquid drinks that contain calories. She plans each of her meals so that there are no surprises. She will not eat anything that she doesn’t know the exact caloric content of. She hates the idea of eating in front of others and is terrified of family meals where she is being watched and pressured to eat foods she doesn’t want to consume.

Dieting is a part of each of these girls’ days whether it is in the form of caloric restriction, or in the eating rules they make for themselves. Throughout their days, their thoughts are continuously revolving around what they do or do not eat. Their regimens are often complicated, difficult to follow, and sometimes unpractical due to their living arrangements and responsibilities. The girls try to shape their diets around what their families feed them as well as what they are able to consume, or not consume, while at home, in school, at work, or with friends.

Diuretics and Laxatives

Snowangelica is the only girl who uses diuretics and laxatives to rid her body of the food and liquids she ingests. Diuretics and laxatives are medications used to help the body get rid of its liquid and solid waste matter. There are certain individuals who are required to take these medications in order to remain healthy; however, when not specifically required for their
approved uses, diuretics and laxatives can be very harmful. Off-label use of laxatives can make the body dependent on the drugs.

There are many scenarios in which snowangelica mentions having used laxatives or diuretics. She writes that she only uses them a few times a week and that although she heard they don’t help with weight loss, she still takes them. She feels in total control when the pills start to kick in. She mentions taking them after having a tough week, and also when she feels bloated from her period. Although the laxatives hurt her stomach, she insists on taking two maximum strength laxatives at a time. She plans ahead when she intends on taking them, especially when she feels she has overeaten and may have gained some weight. In her 164 entries, snowangelica mentions having used laxatives thirteen times, and having used diuretics eleven times.

Diet Pills

In addition to taking laxatives and diuretics, snowangelica also ingests diet pills. She takes diet pills everyday and claims that the pills act as “fat burners.” Heavenabove writes that if she doesn’t take her diet pill, she has an anxiety attack. She discusses her search to find appetite/craving suppressants and how she would rather commit suicide than remain at the weight she currently was at.

Excessive Exercise

Exercise, when practiced in moderation, and at the intensity appropriate to one’s fitness level, can be a healthy weight loss practice alongside a healthy diet. However, some individuals,
such as these five girls, exceed healthy exercise recommendations when they learn how well exercise works with weight loss. During exercise, the body is burning up the energy (calories) that come from the food. When little or no food is ingested, the body starts to feed off the fat that is already stored in the body in order to produce energy. The fat that is stored in the body is not all “bad.” Fat protects organs and provides energy for vital functions such as breathing and keeping the heart pumping. If the body starts to eat away at the “good” fat, organs can begin to fail. In women, the menstrual cycle may stop as a response to over-exercise. This is known as amenorrhea. Amenorrhea is diagnosed when there is an absence of menstrual cycles in non-pregnant women; its causes include exercise, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Robert-McComb, 2008). Amenorrhea may damage a woman’s reproductive system.

Exercise is considered excessive when the body burns more calories than ingested during the period of a day. Exercising is also considered excessive when it presents a risk of physical injury (Davis & Fox, 2003, Davis, Fox, Cowles, Hastings, & Schwass, 1990, as cited by Adkins & Keel, 2005). Since, on many days, some of these girls consume few or no calories, and burn off more calories during exercise than they have consumed, exercise becomes a dangerous method of weight loss. Excessive exercise is also characterized by the maintenance of a rigid exercise schedule, when exercise becomes a priority over other activities, and when feelings of guilt and anxiety are present over missed exercise sessions (Wyatt, 1997 as cited by Adkins & Keel, 2005). All five of these girls practice excessive exercising as each one exhibits at least one of these habits or behaviors.

Wizardess17 claims that her life revolves around her workout schedule. She doesn’t fit exercising into her life; she fits her life into her exercising routine. She works out every day of the week. Teenie_queenie is forced to hide her exercising habits because she fears her mother
will find out how hard she is working to lose weight. In order to hide it from her mother, teenie_queenie tries to move her body as much as she possibly can each day. To pass time while waiting for a train, she walks the opposite way up an escalator in order to keep moving. She does twenty minutes of exercises for her abs and legs whenever she has the opportunity and sneaks off to the gym to run on the treadmill. Heavenabove enjoys dancing and so she uses it as a form of exercise. She uses dance workout DVDs for an hour whenever she has the chance. Odessia will often work out for three hours at a time. In one workout, she burned 1100 calories, and in two other workouts she burned more than 300 calories on an exercise bike each time. Since odessia was not consuming any foods during her seven day fast, the exercise she did would have been depleting her fat stores. Snowangelica, the girl who is obsessed with numbers, quantifies her exercise. After working out for three hours, she proceeds to do 400-600 sit ups and 200 squats. She says she works out for at least 2-3 hours a day on top of her at home regimen of sit ups and squats. On one day, she was able to do 800 sit ups.

Since all five of these girls are rarely consuming enough calories each day to sustain normal bodily functions, burning calories through exercise, ridding their bodies of calories through self-induced vomiting, diuretics, and laxatives, are practices that are likely harming their bodies. There are many side-effects associated with having poor nutrition as well as taking non-prescribed medications and excessively exercising. One would assume that all of the girls are physically affected by their weight loss regimens since the literature review shows that all the dangerous weight loss practices can negatively affect health. The stories that the girls tell of the health-related consequences show that they are real and often, and unfortunately, ignored.
Health-Related Symptoms

All five of the girls say they have experienced health-related side effects from their attempts to lose weight. Three of them experience amenorrhea. During extended times of reduced energy availability, the body prioritizes energy expenditure for activities that are necessary for survival. Reproductive function is not prioritized and is therefore compromised (Robert-McComb, 2008). Teenie_queenie, for example, at the time of her journal, had not had a menstrual cycle in more than a year and a half. Wizardess17 misses the days of not having her period while snowangelica is relieved to finally have one. As I previously mentioned, the causes of amenorrhea are excessive exercising, anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa (Robert-McComb, 2008). All three girls over-exercise and have at least one of these conditions. Wizardess17 sees her lack of menstruating as a sign that she is successful at her eating disorder, while snowangelica is relieved that she no longer needs to be followed by her OBGYN when her menstrual cycles resumed. Having her period makes her feel better about her sudden weight-gain since bloating is a common premenstrual symptom.

Snowangelica and heavenabove both experience weakness as a result of a lack of energy. Heavenabove mentions having fainted or feeling weak six times. One time, she was at school when she fainted and fell to the floor during class. She woke up to a friend holding her up. She was told that her blood pressure was 90/60 by the school nurse. Snowangelica talks about blacking out, feeling dizzy, almost passing out, having blurry vision, looking sick and pale, having tingly sensations in her head, almost collapsing, losing balance and hitting her head, and zoning out. She mentions many of these symptoms on more than one occasion and is aware that they are all a result of not consuming enough food. She does not appear to want to eat more in order to stop these side-effects.
There are several other health-related side-effects that the girls mention resulting from their weight loss strategies: blue lips/nails, stomach pain, bloating, lack of bowel movements, not being able to sleep, hernias, heart murmurs, coldness, weakness, irregular heartbeats, no energy, body pain, rib pain, and dehydration. Some of the girls make the association between a lack of nutrition and these side-effects. Snowangelica understands what she is doing to herself and recognizes that she could feel better with food. Odessia, who is fasting, is also aware that her lack of energy, lack of bowel movements, and difficulty falling asleep are direct results of her food restriction. Teenie_queenie, who says she has insomnia, does not clearly demonstrate an understanding of the effects of her eating disorder on her health. When discovering that she has a hernia, she learns that she must stay in her bed all day in order to heal. Her thoughts are consumed by the notion that lying in bed all day means she is not actively burning calories. It bothered her that the state of her physical health was in the way of her losing weight. Throughout her recorded weight loss journey, heavenabove suffered from chest pain, an irregular heartbeat, appendicitis, a chest infection, and a sinus infection.

While some of the symptoms, infections, and conditions mentioned in the previous paragraph may not all result from the dangerous weight loss practices, many of them may be correlated. In Chapter Two, I mention how some methods of weight loss can lead to inadequate energy levels for bodily functions and how some dangerous weight loss practices come with dangerous and unhealthy side-effects. Tayalaman and colleagues (2006), for example, discuss how diet pills can cause ill effects. Long and colleagues (1993) reported that girls reported having continued exercising while sick or injured. This suggests that perhaps some of the girls pushed themselves too hard and may have suffered health-consequences as a result of abusing weight loss practices.
Weight Perception

Not all of the girls are actually overweight. As discussed in Chapter Two, research has found that actual weight isn’t the only predictor of body dissatisfaction and the weight loss practices in teenagers; it is often weight perception that influences teenage girls to try to lose weight. Snowangelica, for example, begins her blog weighing 110 pounds. At the height of 5’3-5’4, she is within normal weight on the BMI scale. She claims to have started obsessing over her weight seven years earlier at the age of ten. She posts pictures of her bony body saying she wishes her stomach were flatter and that her hip bones would stick out more. She aims to fit into size zero pants and size extra small everything else, to weigh 90-95 pounds, to lose inches from her hips, waist, and thighs and to lower her BMI by two points. Snowangelica is not clinically overweight nor does she appear to be overweight visually. It is her perception of her weight and body image that is driving her to practice extreme methods of weight loss.

Wizardess17 starts her blog at 137 pounds. She aims to weigh no lower than 115 pounds. She finds herself confused when she notices her weight climb up and down continuously over the period of a year. She does not acknowledge the failure in her weight loss methods and continues to practice excessive exercise and dieting. She finds herself binging uncontrollably after restricting her body of food. She has a dream of being fit, thinner, smarter, independent and fashionable. She demonstrates unhappiness and suggests that losing weight is her key to success. She was not advised by a health-care professional to lose weight, rather it seems that the development of an association between her weight and happiness is what caused her to want to lose weight. She perceives her weight as a barrier to reaching a happy place and so she is engrossed by her physical appearance hoping that weighing less would mean accepting herself and others showing her love.
Teenie_queenie remembers being in the second grade and thinking she had fat thighs. At the start of her blog she weighed in at 127 pounds and felt disgusted with herself. At 106 pounds, with a BMI of 16, she claims she doesn’t want to lose more weight. It isn’t until she reaches 99 pounds, with a BMI of 15.1, that she claims she is finally happy with how she looks. Teenie_queenie did not begin her weight loss journey as clinically overweight. She decided for herself that she needed to lose weight in order to look and feel good. Body image played a key role in teenie_queenie’s decision to lose weight.

Heavenabove starts her blog at 129.8 pounds. According to the BMI scale, at 5’5, she is considered to be at a healthy weight. Her first ultimate goal weight was 115 pounds. After reaching 116.6 pounds, she changes her ultimate goal weight to 99 pounds. It appears as though regardless of how much she weighs, she will always want to weigh less. She writes that nothing tastes as good as thin feels, and so she continues to “keep strong” and “think thin.” Had a doctor hypothetically advised heavenabove to lose a couple of pounds, it is unlikely that she would have been advised to weigh as little as 99 pounds. Heavenabove acknowledges that there is no way to be happy with the way she looks.

Odessa is the only girl to begin her weight loss journey at a high weight. Because she does not disclose her height or her BMI, it is impossible to know if her start weight of 170 pounds indicates that she is “overweight.” Should that be the case, however, no doctor would advise odessa to fast for seven days. It is odessa who chooses to try to lose significant weight through fasting and excessive exercising. Like the others, it is her weight perception that causes her to try to lose weight in the way she does.
Conclusion

The literature review helped me look for the types of themes to pull out of the blogs. The literature taught me about the concept of weight perception and how it is not only overweight girls who perceive themselves as overweight. Standley and colleagues (2009), for example, show how many normal-weight adolescents see themselves as fat. After having read the blogs, I understand how weight perception not only affects the girls’ weight loss practices but also affects almost every aspect of their lives. Most of the experiences and thoughts in the blogs are related to weight. The literature I read did not prepare me for the extent of weight loss preoccupation that I found in the blogs.

All five girls talk about behaviors related to eating disorders and they appear to be open and honest about their weight loss practices. At a first glance, it seems as though they are simply using their blogs to chronicle their weight loss journeys; however, if taking into consideration the features of blogs such as having an audience, allowing comments, as well as the diary-like qualities they possess, it looks as though the blogs play a larger role in their weight loss journeys than just a place to record what they eat and how much they weigh each day. The following chapter will discuss the qualities of the blogs and suggest how teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight use blogs in their attempts to lose weight.
Chapter Five

Results

I open this chapter with my observations and findings that relate specifically to the practice of blogging such as the reasons the girls offer for blogging and the ways they talked about posting to an audience. I also discuss some of the non-textual features that appeared in the blogs. I will then try to answer my main research question with a discussion of the role of the blogs for teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight and who are trying to lose weight and then my secondary research question regarding the value of using blogs in research.

Blog Structure

All five of the blogs are publically posted and open to comments from readers. None of the girls opted to have their diaries hidden and/or accessible only by a password. I could access all five journals from any computer without having to sign in to the website as an official user. The girls whose blogs I looked at were also contributing to LiveJournal’s online weight-related communities, but I had no way of including such posts in my analysis as there is no record of how many comments a user posts or where they post them. For this project, I included only the material that was written in their actual journal/blog entries. The posts by other users that appear in the comment sections of each journal/blog entry, and the bloggers’ responses to those posts were used here only for the purpose of determining the role of comments in the girls’ journal keeping. Since the responses to the comments are provoked by cues from other users, I deemed this type of information irrelevant to my discussion of the themes. The information offered may
not have been mentioned had it not been solicited and therefore I feel it lacks the more organic feel of the blog entries.

Each blog had its own template and design. The bloggers on LiveJournal are able to choose the colors, fonts, patterns, and images that are to be used in each entry. They choose exactly how they want their blogs to appear to others and what features they’d like each of their blogs to have. Each of the blogs that I studied had a different font and different patterns or colors for the background. Each blog also had a display picture associated with the bloggers’ username. This picture appeared on each entry in the blogs.

Why Blog?

All five of the bloggers give some suggestion as to why they started their blogs or why they have kept at them. Although not all the blogs contain an explicit reason for having been written, the reasons do become apparent through the writing and the structure of the blogs. In certain cases, for example, the bloggers imply that they have not been able to divulge what they are writing to acquaintances or family members. It is clear that the possibility of anonymity offered by LiveJournal plays a major role in their reasons for blogging. This is confirmed by the fact that all of the bloggers conceal their true identities; however, confidentiality does not seem to be the only motivation for blogging.
**Blogs as a Place to be Honest**

As I discussed, two of the girls, Snowangelica and teenie_queenie, kept their efforts to lose weight hidden from their parents and friends. They practiced their weight loss in secret, and lied to their parents about how much they were eating. Sometimes snowangelica would avoid spending time with her friends altogether to avoid the need to hide. Teenie_queenie mentions that she posts about things that she can’t share with people in real life. Since all of her posts deal with weight-related experiences, it is clear that she uses her blog as a place where she can freely discuss her eating disorder. Snowangelica mentions that her blog is a place where she can vent. She says that she hides her eating disorder from her parents and avoids contact with peers, so it seems as though her blog is a place where she can admit what she is doing and feeling.

All of the girls, except for wizardess17, write a lot about their parents. Teenie_queenie vents about her parent’s divorce and discloses the ways in which she hides her eating disorder from her parents. She says she lies to her parents on a constant basis, telling them that she is going out to eat with friends when in reality she is spending time at the gym, a place where her parents have forbidden her to go. Heavenabove talks about how she fears her parents will discover her dieting behavior which would land her in “trouble.” In Odessia’s short blog, she spends some time ranting about her mother. She talks about her mother’s concerns for her health and how she continues to promise her that she is able to control her eating disorder all the while knowing that she can’t. Snowangelica’s blog is full of stories about how her mother hounds her about eating. She writes that she gets high grades in school to distract her parents from her poor eating habits. Day after day she lies to them about what she eats and how much weight she has lost.
When the girls are not at home or at the gym, they are likely to be in school, at work, or with their friends. After their parents, the girls’ friends are the people with whom they interact the most. Wizardess17 writes about how she doesn’t feel like pouring her guts out to her friends. She wants people to care, but she feels that none of her friends would. It seems snowangelica is too focused on her weight loss to have time for friends. She talks about spending her free time studying or exercising and how she chooses not to confide in anyone. Heavenabove wishes her friends cared or at least congratulated her on her success. She claims that her friends don’t care about her weight loss and that she can only trust “you guys,” the blog readers, and “ANA,” the name she gives her eating disorder. It is common for the contributors on LiveJournal to refer to their disorders by names such as Mia (bulimia), Ana (anorexia), and Ed (eating disorder). I suspect this is because their eating disorders are such big part of their lives that it is almost as if they spend more time with their disorders than with anyone else.

The girls use different methods to keep people from getting too close. For instance, in addition to lying to her parents and friends, teenie_queenie says she also lies to the staff at the eating disorder clinic. She tells everyone that she is recovered and that she is fine even though she knows that they should be worried. Heavenabove understands that she has pushed everyone away from her, due to her decision to practice her eating disorder in quiet. And, as I mentioned earlier, snowangelica refuses to have any social interaction whatsoever due to her strict weight loss regimen, which eats up all of her time.

All five of these girls live in environments where they are forced or choose to hide a part of themselves. Since most of the girls do not work, and only attend school during the day, they are at home for a large part of their time. Ultimately, these five girls spend much of their time putting on acts, pretending to be healthy when they are not, pretending to eat when they don’t,
and lying to their parents about where they spend their time. When they are at home, it is clear that much of their time is spent exercising in their bedrooms or writing in their online journals. When they are out of the house, they continue to keep their disorders from their peers, and for teenie_queenie, from the doctors at her clinic. None of the girls talk about any sort of relationship with anyone in their everyday lives with whom they feel comfortable expressing their weight-related concerns and experiences. Teenie_queenie and heavenabove say that they successfully made online friends through LiveJournal and that it is only with these friends that they feel comfortable talking about their weight.

The girls’ suggest that the blogs have become the only place where they can be open and say whatever they’d like to say. Wizardess17 talks about the purpose of her journal being a “place to write about whatever.” She can say whatever she wants without needing to filter her thoughts in any way. She talks about how she uses the blog to purge guilt, share with others, and write down thoughts and emotions. She does not say that she can share her thoughts and emotions with anyone other than her readers.

Teenie_queenie mentions at the start of her journal that she will mostly be posting about things anorexic-related and that she is upset that she can’t share what she writes with anyone outside of the blog. She likes to post when she can’t sleep. She wants to talk about her issues with others as well as share her experiences. Snowangelica has a slightly different intent. She uses the blog as a place to vent. Since she hides her weight loss from her parents, and never talks about spending time with any friends, it seems that the blog is the only place she has to vent. Each of the girls suggested in some way that the blogs let them express their thoughts, experiences, and emotions without the need to censor anything.
The fact that the girls only seem to feel comfortable speaking honestly with their online friends gives us a sense of the importance of the blogs as a place where they can be themselves. The blogs are a place where they can share their experiences, thoughts and emotions without feeling ashamed, embarrassed, or judged, and without fearing reactions or repercussions from others.

**Blogs as a Place to Document Life**

All five of the girls use the blogs to chronicle their efforts to lose weight. They write about their daily regimes, including what they eat, how much they exercise, and the type and frequency of their weight loss methods. They document their weight loss through their scheduled weigh-ins and they state their weight goals and hopes for the future. They also offer stories about events in their day-to-day lives, such as outings with friends and get-togethers with family members. They talk about cultural topics like entertainment, fashion, art, and travel. The vast majority of topics, however, are related to weight. Almost all of the topics that seem to deviate from weight eventually end up relating to weight-related emotions or stories. Wizardess17, for example, tells stories about spending time with her friends and experimenting with drugs. Each story concludes with comments about her eating or not having time to exercise. Heavenabove talks a lot about a school ball she is looking forward to, but at each mention she is distracted by how much weight she thinks she needs to lose in order to look good for that day. Similarly, snowangelica talks about spending time with her grandmother in another state, something she enjoys doing as they hardly gets to see each other. Each mention results in a discussion of her fear of being in a bathing suit or having to eat in front of others.
These stories of outings and school parties, which I originally deemed to be “unrelated” to the main topic of weight, would always turn back to the issue of weight. It was rare for any of the girls to mention a story or anecdote about something unrelated to weight. I think it is fair to say that the girls are using the blogs as a place to document their lives; the eating disorders that they are documenting are their lives. Along with their goals to be smarter, more independent, more fashionable, or to know themselves better, it seems that the bloggers mostly want to be thinner.

Blogs as a Place to Document a Fresh Start

In certain cases, both weight gain and weight loss gave the girls the opportunity to re-assess goals and to start afresh. Although gaining weight may seem to signify failure, some of the girls used weight-gain as an excuse to re-evaluate their techniques and goals and to try again to get thinner. Odessia, for example, was not starting her first journal. She had deleted her old one when her previous attempt to lose weight turned out to be unsuccessful. She wanted a “new” and “fresh” start, and felt that documenting her fresh start with a new blog would be a way of feeling motivated. Heavenabove often re-assessed her goals and changed her goal weight five times throughout her blog. When she reached her goal weight, she would give herself an even lower goal. If she gained weight, she would essentially start her whole weight loss process over again. Teenie_queenie similarly went through bouts of weight loss and weight gain. Each time, she would re-assess her goals and her weight loss plan. Snowangelica, however, continuously loses weight during the time she is writing her blog without having bouts of weight increase.
Every time she neared or reached her goal weight, she would change her goal weight to be even lower. The lowest she said she wanted to weigh was ninety pounds.

**Blogs as a Place to Make Friends**

Teenie_queenie, heavenabove, and snowangelica all start their journals saying that they hope to make new friends. Teenie_queenie writes that she hopes to find a friend with whom she can talk about her issues and with whom she can share experiences. Heavenabove says she hopes to find online “ana buddies”. From my understanding, through heavenabove’s and other blogs, an ana buddy is somebody with whom a girl might share her weight loss experiences. This buddy is someone with whom a girl might talk to everyday who might also be going through a similar experience. This person is someone who would be supportive, encouraging, a good listener and who would offer inspiration and motivation. Heavenabove, for example, is looking for a buddy with whom she can keep in touch throughout the day through text messaging. She mentions having once had a friend in whom she was able to confide; however, it seems as though she is looking to replace him or her with someone new.

**Blogs as a Place to Post and Share Weight-related Media (other modes of expression)**

Some of the bloggers posted pictures, songs, videos, lyrics, and poems in their daily entries. These posts were all related to their weight loss experiences. Heavenabove, for example, posted the song lyrics to a song called “Anorexic Beauty.” Teenie_queenie posted pictures of daily events that related to her eating disorder. One image, for example, is of a soda bottle.
shattered on the ground. Although upset by the fact that she had just purchased it and had yet to drink it, she wrote that she felt the accident was a sign that she should not be consuming the calories. She also posted a picture of herself walking up a downwards escalator, burning calories while killing time waiting for the bus. After baking a cake to distract her family from her eating disorder, she posts a picture of it describing it as “ana’s ultimate nightmare.” All of these pictures received comments from readers.

Some of the girls’ non-textual postings were designed to get feedback from their readers. Teenie_queenie, for instance, posts a picture of a bottle of Melatonin asking her readers if they had ever used it to help with insomnia. She also posts a picture of the mask she plans to wear to her school ball asking her audience what they think of it. Snowangelica posts several pictures of her body to show her weight loss progress to her readers. In the posts, she requests that her readers write comments in which they tell her what they think of her body.

The examples above reflect what Bowcher (2007) was explaining about when talking about the way in which different modes of expression may contribute to the production of meaning. While these photographs were not necessary to the explanations of events or to the understandings of the questions asked, they contribute to the experience of the reader. The reader may, for example, become stimulated by the photograph or may feel a different connection to the blogger by seeing what they look like or by getting visual insight into their daily lives.

The Role of the Audience

Although all of the bloggers enabled the commenting feature on their blogs, not all of them said explicitly that they were reaching out to their audiences. Only heavenabove and snowangelica
asked their audiences regular questions and solicited advice, while they also provided inspirational advice to their weight-losing peers. Heavenabove made remarks such as “stay strong” and “think thin,” and referred to her readers as “beautiful” and “lovely.” She writes her blog almost as if she knows it is being read by others. She asks her readers if they experience situations that are similar to the ones she describes and she asks them to inspire her, cheer her up or motivate her to do more exercise.

Snowangelica frequently asks her audience for advice. She asks them for their opinions/experiences with diet pills, cooking, eating certain foods, and following certain diets. She also asks them to share their health-related experiences pertaining to weight loss practices and vitamins. She tends to ask her readers if they’ve had success with certain techniques and if they experience the same problems she does with her health and with her parents. She asks her audience to recommend books to read and she recommends books about anorexia to her readers. She asks her audience to comment on her weight loss progress pictures and several times asks if anyone is willing to be her friend. She also tries to get her readers to join her own weight-related community on LiveJournal.

Comments

All five of the blogs are open to comments from other users. In one of own her comments, wizardess17 said she is not fond of people commenting on her weight loss and subsequently she stopped responding to her readers’ comments. The other girls, however, almost always respond to comments when they are posted on their entries. Snowangelica’s comments are mainly from other users who are responding to her request for “ana buddies.” They share
their telephone numbers as well as e-mail addresses and instant messenger usernames. Sometimes the users post their weight statistics to show snowangelica that they are in a situation similar to hers and that they would be well-suited to be her friend. Some of her readers expressed their concerns for her health condition. Teenie_queenie received a lot of comments with advice that she solicited. The type of advice she received mainly related to food and exercise. She received several messages congratulating her for losing her weight and some from others wishing her good luck in her weight loss journey. For the most part, the comments supported her decision to lose weight as well as the methods she was using. Wizardess17 only had eight comments throughout on her blogging page, most of them from users urging her to stay positive, and keep motivated. One comment conveys concern for her complaint about her esophagus hurting and potentially being damaged. She thanks her readers for the comments but does not spend any time directly responding to what they say. Comments on Odessa’s page do not follow any particular theme. She receives eighteen comments in her short blog (eight entries over thirty eight days). They mostly involve advice around various subjects as well as some congratulations and “feel betters.” Some of heavenabove’s comments are similar to those received by wizardess17. A few of the responses she received were from other users wanting to be her friend.

The comments that the bloggers receive convey both support and worry. For the most part, the readers provide advice to the bloggers about how they can lose more weight. They offer dieting tips and exercise regimens that they’ve successfully used in their own weight loss attempts. Some users offer motivation and inspiration to their weight-losing peers. They congratulate them for their weight loss and urge them to keep going when the bloggers express failure. Few of the comments express any sort of negativity. Aside from the health concern that wizardess17 receives about her esophagus and the one that snowangelica receives about her
stomach acid, no other readers say they are shocked by the health-related consequences or that they are worried by the damage that the eating disorders are causing the girls. For the most part, the readers relate to, envy, and/or support the bloggers.

How Do the Bloggers Respond to their Audience?

Aside from wizardess17 who did not enjoy receiving feedback in her comments, all of the bloggers responded to the comments that they received. Most of their responses included gratitude. The bloggers thank their readers for caring and for offering them the advice they sought. There were several instances where the comments included questions for the bloggers to answer. The answers to the questions were often paragraphs in length. These answers often discussed the girls’ attempts to follow the advice of other users or they contained solicited stories about specific health-related issues such as stories about menstrual cycles, exercise routines, and bowel movements.

Some of the bloggers received and responded to friend requests from readers. Snowangelica, for example, received dozens of messages from other users wanting to be her friend. She would respond by offering them her phone number or an e-mail address in which they could reach her privately. Wizardess17 does not respond to the one friendship request she receives. Heavenabove responded to all her friend requests since she solicited them throughout her blog.

After looking at the different reasons the girls gave for blogging, the way the girls used the blogs to post to an audience and how non-textual modes of expression were used in the blogs, I will now discuss the weight-related content. The content of the blogs mainly consists of weight-
related experiences and discussion. While I now have a better understanding of why they blog and how they utilize the functions of the blogs, I now want to target a sense of how these blogs might differ from other kids of blogs. One of my aims was to learn what these five blogs teach us specifically about the role of blogs for teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight. The girls mainly use their blogs to document their efforts to lose weight; therefore, my answer will focus predominantly on this role.

What is the role of blogs for teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight in their attempts to lose weight?

To answer this research question, I will consider the themes in the blogs in light of my literature review on weight and blogging, and in light of the theories on blog use that I presented in Chapter Four.

Weight-Related Role

Generally, the blogs are places for the bloggers to talk about/share their efforts to lose weight. They use their entries as a way to keep motivated and to document how many calories they consume and expend. They use the commenting section to receive feedback from their readers and to reach out to their audiences for weight loss related advice. In a way, the website LiveJournal provides the bloggers with a community in which they can share their weight-related experiences.
Teenage girls are among many of the groups that use blogs to document weight loss on LiveJournal. Other groups include women in their thirties and forties, women trying to lose weight after childbirth, and men trying to lose fat and gain muscle. All of these groups use the blogs to document their weight loss; therefore, the practice is not unique to teenage girls. Since these five bloggers differ from their online peers in their sex and age, I will suggest what the role of blogs might be specifically (but not uniquely) for teenage girls who perceive themselves as overweight.

Self-Discovery

Teenagers, in the midst of discovering who they are, may need a place to reflect on their thoughts in order to develop, discover and understand their identities. In a judgmental society where it seems to matter what one wears, says, feels and acts, the body becomes integral to both self-definition and definition by others. In many societies, thinness represents normalcy (Bordo, 1993). The body has become a visual and obvious mean by which people can judge each other and formulate opinions and assumptions. To adolescents who are trying to be happy and to fit in with their peers, the body is an important mean by which they can demonstrate their qualities and characteristics in social settings. Physical appearance can play an important role in personality judgment (Naumann, Vazire, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2009). The body is therefore often key to first impressions.

The five blogs that I studied reflected the bloggers’ personal thoughts and feelings about themselves and their eating disorders. The girls say they do not choose to share their struggles with their parents or peers, and instead choose to divulge information to their anonymous
audiences hoping for acceptance and support. With stigmas attached to their conditions, these girls have found a context in which they can develop their identities and be understood by others. These others are the users who read their blogs and contribute to the same communities. These others may have experienced similar upbringings and social situations and may also feel they have no one to talk to. These readers may also feel that they are being judged on a daily basis for what they look like and ultimately for who they are. One might speculate that girls feel less alone by immersing themselves in a community filled with others going through similar experiences.

While they identify the blogs as being a place to make friends, be themselves, vent, to start fresh, and to chronicle their weight loss, the openness to comments and to feedback from others demonstrates the girls’ need to be cared about and accepted for who they are. They ask other users for advice because they feel that can’t ask anyone in their “real” lives. They contribute to online weight loss communities to share their experiences while learning about others’ at the same time. They leave their blogs open to the public so that others can come across them and either learn from them, or comment on them and contribute to their journeys.

**Online Communities**

LiveJournal is not just a website for online diarists to log their lives. It is a place filled with communities based on mutual interests. It is a place where people can find others like themselves and learn that they are not alone. Just like I discovered when I was a teenager that I was not alone in my sufferings via the LiveJournal depression communities, these girls may learn that there are others whom they can relate to and that they too are not alone. Plant (2004)
identifies two reasons why users may use online communities: to reach out and connect to other human beings and to obtain knowledge.

Teenage girls who are suffering from eating disorders and are not ready or willing to be treated may turn to online communities that are free of the stigmas, pressures and judgments that are associated with suffering from the diseases. Karen Dias (2003) explored cyberspace as a site for women who are struggling with anorexia to find sanctuary from the surveillance of the public sphere. Dias (2003) looked at narratives written by women who use and visit pro-anorexia websites (such as the weight loss communities on LiveJournal) and discovered that cyberspace can potentially provide a space for women to meet safely as opposed to traditional spaces. Online communities allow for teenage girls with eating disorders to escape the scrutiny of others and to have the opportunity to interact with others struggling with eating disorders. Dias (2003) suggests that this may be helpful for users since the early stages of anorexia are typically marked by extreme isolation, secrecy and disconnection. The five bloggers in this project practice their eating disorders in secret. Since their “real” lives may cause them to encounter scrutiny, stigmatization, judgments and pressures to conform, the online communities on LiveJournal may have served as a place for the girls to both escape reality and build their identities independent of reality.

Unfortunately, the weight loss communities can result in negative implications for their readers. Since the communities are often used by members to share weight loss practices, readers might actually find themselves being pulled further into their eating disorders. Readers may be exposed to new ideas and practices that will teach them how to lose more weight. The communities can therefore be responsible for contributing to the girls’ conditions and potentially prolonging suffering and opportunities for recovery.
Pro-Anorexia Websites and Online Communities

Some of the communities I used to find the five bloggers on LiveJournal could be considered pro-anorexia (pro-ana). Pro-ana is a term used to describe pro-eating disorder online content (Casilli, Tubaro, & Araya, 2012). There is a plethora of blogs, communities and forums online where anyone can contribute to and share their experiences with weight loss and/or eating disorders. Many pro-ana websites glorify eating disorders and offer fellow sufferers online support (Casilli, Tubaro, & Araya, 2012). Much like some of the bloggers I studied, users use pro-ana websites to communicate with others or to find online friends going through similar experiences. Contó-Milà and Seebach (2011) analyzed pro-ana posts in forums and determined that there is “… a very special bond of friendship, love, admiration or gratefulness that ties members of pro-ana online communities together” (Contó-Milà & Seebach, 2011). I would suspect that most users visiting and/or contributing to pro-ana websites are either suffering from an eating disorder or are seeking the kind of advice needed to begin practicing dangerous weight loss practices. Contó-Milà and Seebach (2011) discovered that in pro-ana communities, it is common for users to look for a “twin” or intimate friend so that they could help each other lose weight (Contó-Milà & Seebach, 2011). This can be seen in the case of heavenabove who, for example, sought an “ana-buddy” to confide in about her weight loss. Contó-Milà and Seebach (2011) state that those who have difficulty coping with their illnesses, moments of weakness, or who have to hide their disease from their friends or family, use pro-ana communities to substitute the relationships they do not have with their family or friends.

The five blogs I studied could technically be considered pro-ana websites. Pro-ana sites are designed to “…help anorexics and aspiring anorexics learn techniques for weight loss, hide their disorder from parents and doctors, and support those on deprivation diets.” (Boero and
Pascoe, 2012, p. 28). The bloggers I studied supply this type of content to their readers. Anyone who reads the five blogs I studied will learn about dangerous weight loss practices and what it is like to live with an eating disorder. Riley and colleagues (2009) conducted a study on two different types of weight-related communities: pro-ana and recovery. It was discovered that the health-related symptoms of eating disorders were more lightly, and often jokingly, discussed in pro-ana communities as opposed to in recovery communities where symptoms were expressed as challenges aimed to be overcome (Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). In the blogs I read, negative health-related side effects of dangerous weight loss practices were not always taken seriously. As mentioned, wizardess17 mentions missing the days of not having her period. In pro-ana websites, bodily experiences can be used to support an anorexic identity (Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). Those seeking to belong in the pro-ana community may purposefully aim to have unhealthy side-effects. These health symptoms, to pro-anorexics, may be considered a sign of success or belonging. The five blogs that I studied, however, were not explicitly pro-ana sites. While they display pro-ana qualities, the contents of the blog do not overwhelmingly support anorexia for others and are not directly designed to offer weight loss guidance to others.

**LiveJournal as a Valuable Source for Researchers to Learn about Eating Disorders in Girls’ Own Words**

The blogs that I studied offered first-hand perspectives on eating disorders, experiences with weight loss and weight perception. I think that social science researchers can learn a lot from the blogs on LiveJournal since the information contained in the blogs comes from the writers’ own words. As displayed through the girls’ efforts to hide their weight loss from their family and
friends, blogs may contain information that may otherwise not be shared, especially with a researcher. There may be other taboo-like topics that are discussed anonymously through personal blogging websites. LiveJournal may be an important tool for determining the existence of unknown groups or for discovering information difficult to extract through any other research method. As discussed, certain research methods, such as questionnaires, have limitations that affect the nature of the data collected. Blog research can help researchers overcome these limitations.

While hiding the thoughts and emotions that result from their eating disorders from their parents, adolescents may grow tired of living a lie. It can be exhausting telling your parents you are at one place while you’re really at the gym, or telling your friends that you already ate while silently starving and wishing you were elsewhere. These girls completely hide their disorders from the “real world” and have no real place to just be themselves. Most extreme weight-related regimens are personal and private practices. Binging and purging, for example, are almost always conducted in private. Blogs serve as an outlet for honesty and a place where the girls have nothing to hide. From the time they wake up to the time they go to bed, they spend their days hiding a key part of who they are from their parents and friends: the Internet allows them to be able to be themselves within a community of others just like them. It is thanks to the blogs that these girls are able to have a bit of honest social interaction in their day-to-day lives as well as have an opportunity to feel like they belong in the world, have friends, and ultimately, learn that they are not alone.
Chapter Six

Conclusion

When I started this project, I knew that I wanted to study body image from a source that provoked honesty and rawness. I was interested in the fact that some people harm their bodies in order to achieve body ideals and expectations set out by society and I set out to find a way to learn more about this. When I discovered LiveJournal’s communities of teenage girls blogging about losing weight, I knew that I had found an interesting focus for this study. It was clear that these girls were attempting to lose weight in non-conventional ways. Not only did they seem to be mentally and physically suffering from eating disorders, their weight perceptions also seemed to be having significant effects on their everyday experiences and interactions. Upon deciding to study the blogs, it also became clear that the type of research I would be conducting would be a great contribution to Internet-based social research methods. After reading about how blog research is a new and still little explored method, I hoped that my project would be helpful to other researchers hoping to use blog research as well.

I originally suspected that the girls’ journals would mostly reflect their eating patterns and weight loss progress. From what I read in the weight loss communities, it initially seemed as though the website was a place for girls to compare their weight loss practices and to learn new practices from each other. I remembered that the website had contained personal and private-like journals more than ten years ago when I first discovered it; however, I expected that the site would have evolved to reflect the changes in modern social media. After reading through dozens of blogs and learning about dozens of experiences associated with weight loss, it was clear that this site was not just a forum for users to connect with each other based on common interests, but
rather it was a safe-haven for girls who felt silenced and marginalized due to their lifestyles and diseases. LiveJournal seems to give users the chance to belong to and be accepted in a virtual community.

Although I’ve never suffered from an eating disorder, I feel as though I can relate to the way the girls’ insecurities affect their daily lives. I can think of several inner-struggles that have affected my own social interactions. It didn’t surprise me that girls would turn to the Internet when they didn’t feel comfortable talking to anyone they knew. Just as I used my hand-written journals to chronicle my experiences and release my emotions, these girls used online journals as their outlet for speaking. I can’t help but imagine the endless ways in which the website might have affected people’s lives.

I think that choosing to study unsolicited writings on LiveJournal made my project unique. Other researchers have studied eating disorders by interviewing girls or providing them with questionnaires. I think that I avoided some of the limitations of these types of projects, such as dishonesty and censoring and the limitations inherent in short-answer questions. I may also have been able to collect unexpected data that could not have been triggered by a questionnaire. Answers to formal questionnaires and interviews lack the unguarded quality of the blogs on LiveJournal. Questionnaires, for example, are limited in that they do not leave much room for the unexpected. The data collected is solicited through specific questions. The researcher is looking for answers to particular questions that fit the criteria of their study. Important information, in my opinion, may be missed if the right question isn’t asked. Interviews may hold the same limitation. While interviewees have more of an opportunity to go off topic in their responses, they are still guided by the questions they are asked. This leaves little room for interviewers to offer information they feel is important. I understand that there are obviously benefits of
soliciting information for the purpose of finding specific data for a research project; however, due to the “taboo” nature of my subject, I decided that more formal interviews or questionnaires would not get at the kind of material that I hoped to find. I hoped to find writings about first-person experiences, and fortunately, I was successful.

While reading the five blogs, I felt as though I was getting some access to what the girls were going through. As a reader, I feel I can understand how the girls would want to have readers like myself contributing to their journals. I do not know what the girls look like and therefore, I, unlike their peers, cannot judge them for their appearance. I only know what I read, and what I read was representations of their feelings and experiences. I imagine the excitement the girls may feel when getting a message or comment from someone who is not relating to them through their appearance. I imagine it must be a great relief for the girls not to have to worry what they look like while sitting in front of their computers.

I hope that LiveJournal will continue to thrive as a place for users to find communities based on their interests, to keep anonymous journals, and to find friends. I worry that with the rise of bullying through social media, Internet users may begin to withdraw from using the Internet as a safe-haven for honest expression. I hope that LiveJournal can remain the open site it is today and I look forward to continue reading about people’s lives through their journals.

Limitations of the Analysis

As with all research, a potential limitation of my project is that it may contain biased information or analysis. My interpretations of the text may have been shaped by my previous education and experience. Although I have never suffered from an eating disorder myself, I have had friends
who have, and I have had an interest in learning about them prior to having begun my project. As a result, I suspect that the content of my literature review, my choice of blogs and my reading of them, may have been based on my own expectations and views.

A likely limitation to all Masters-level theses is sample size. The time frame and page length assigned to my project did not allow me to study more than five blogs. Due to the amount of time it takes to find, read, code and analyze blogs, including more than five blogs in my project would have been difficult. If I had had more time to work on this project, I would have liked to include more blogs for the purpose of being able to learn about how teenage girls of different ages differ in their uses of the LiveJournal website for blogging. Ideally, I would have liked to learn about and include girls as young as thirteen. I imagine relationships between thirteen year olds and their parents or friends would differ from the relationships between seventeen year old girls and their parents or friends, and such differences would likely impact the content of the blogs. Similarly, because of my limited page length and time frame for the project, I was forced to choose only a few blogs that fit specific criteria. The process of choosing the final five blogs forced me to eliminate blogs that I had found interesting. I would have loved to study all the stories I found and included more girls’ experiences.

A limitation associated with all qualitative research involving participants is the possibility of collecting data that is misleading or untruthful. It is easy for participants to lie in any research project. Just as someone can provide a made-up answer in a questionnaire or interview, the bloggers could be using their imaginations to write their entries. Regardless of the research method, there is no way to determine whether or not participants are providing the truth.
As discussed in Chapter Three, research on blog writing has identified the Internet as a place that promotes honest and truthful writing. Research on the motivations for keeping blogs provides two important points regarding honesty and truth. Firstly, reasons for fabricating stories about sensitive issues online are unclear. Since many bloggers blog anonymously, there appears to be no clear reasons as to why they would need to lie. Secondly, the motivations behind the users’ decisions to blog combined with the illusion of privacy on the Internet may also provoke bloggers to disclose personal information. Following Bar Ilan (2005), I took the blogs at face value.

**Implications for Future Research**

While researching articles on the practice of blog research, I had a hard time finding information that was relevant to my project. The term “blog research” is hardly an official term. Some authors refer to the practice simply as online research or as conducting research on the Internet. I only came across two studies that had actually used personal blogs to collect their data. These two studies were difficult to find and not entirely applicable to the type of research I was planning on doing. I was forced to take bits of information from different places and put them together myself to figure out what it was that I needed to do.

I hope to make my project accessible to anyone who is thinking of conducting blog research so that they can see one approach to doing this type of study and why it might be an appealing method for collecting data. I also hope that my project shows the value of using anonymous participants for research projects. There appears to be no reason for bloggers to lie;
therefore, it seems as though blogs are a good place to learn about how bloggers understand their experiences.

I believe that in time, blog research will become a more popular research method. As researchers and students discover the type of data that can be found within the blogs, I think that there will be an increase in studies using blog research as well as an increase in literature regarding how to conduct blog research. I discovered that there is a significant difference between my data and data extracted from questionnaires and/or interviews on similar topics. Most studies were interested in numbers and statistics and hardly any asked participants to speak generally about their experiences with weight loss or about perceiving themselves as overweight. It is important to mention once again that I looked at the blogs not just to learn about the girls, but to learn about how the girls used the blogs in their experiences. The blogs therefore had several purposes in my study. It was not only important to study the contents of the blogs, but also to look at how the blogs were used by the bloggers throughout their experiences losing weight.

I hope that future literature will focus on how blogs give researchers access to people’s own words. Today, blogs are used a tool for expression and cannot be ignored as a source of valuable information. While losing weight, the girls I studied blogged. Blogging was a part of their experiences with weight loss. Analyzing their blogging practices offered a new angle to the study of girls who perceive themselves as overweight and who engage in intense efforts to get thinner. I hope that other researchers can benefit from looking at blogs and that they will find that blog research is an excellent way to enhance their projects, find valuable information and learn about marginalized groups in society.
Implications for Eating Disorder Prevention

The teenage girls I studied all practiced their eating disorders and weight loss practices in secret. The girls find ways to hide their weight loss from their family and their friends, and they seem to spend much of their days dealing with their disorders. It is clear that their thoughts are overwhelmed by plots to practice their weight loss habits in secret and to lose more weight. These girls were highly invested in their eating disorders and determined to reach their weight loss goals. The type of information I gathered may be helpful for family members or friends to learn how to identify the kinds of red flags that signify that a loved one may be suffering from an eating disorder. It may help them understand what their loved one is going through and how they could approach them in a safe way. I believe that the information contained in the blogs could also be useful for health-care practitioners seeking to find ways to deter girls from developing eating disorders and to stop girls who are already suffering. There is no quick fix to eating disorders, especially if psychological conditions play a role. Due to the physical and mental health risks involved, I think that it is critical that people with eating disorders be approached lightly. I hope that my research project provides insight to other researchers studying teenage girls, body image, weight perception, eating disorders, and weight loss practices and provokes researchers of different disciplines to consider the benefits of blog research for their studies.
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