Chapter 19
"The Secret is Out!"
Supporting Weight Loss through Online Interaction

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides a case study of how social support is communicated through online interaction on a weight loss community website. The site has many features including member profiles, journals, discussion boards, exercise and food trackers, and charts to help members keep track of their weight loss efforts. Members set goals, write journal entries, comment on one another's journals, upload photos, join groups and challenges, and discuss concerns issues related to diet, exercise, lifestyle changes, and other issues in their lives. Through analyzing journal entries and discussion forum comments, we discern how members demonstrate and respond to social support with one another. We also investigate the ways in which features of the online interaction and social networking help people communicate support. This study offers implications for facilitators or web designers who want to create online spaces that foster supportive communication, particularly related to health concerns.

BACKGROUND OF THE CASE

"I was laid up due to my heart issues and was afraid to eat anything. I literally felt that one more bite of something with fat in it and I could die. My doctor suggested the South Beach diet to me because of my heart issues. While researching online I saw the Today *show say that FatSecret was one of 5 websites that could change your life! Like a sign from above I logged on immediately. Right away I saw recipes and ideas and tips for my specific plan. I met other people following the same plan. It was incredible. I met people who have lost weight, some who were well along their way and others just like me...just starting out along the journey! I could gripe, cry, whine, vent and ask away. There was a lot of asking*

when I started here and I always found answers. FatSecret people were my comfort, my hope and my confidants." --FatSecret member who lost 45 pounds

Obesity is a major health concern in contemporary U.S. society as the number of people who are obese has increased substantially over the past twenty years. Recent health research has found that three out of every five Americans is considered overweight or obese (Strum & Wells, 2001). Moreover, obesity has been linked to many chronic health concerns such as heart problems, joint pain, diabetes, limited mobility, cancer, and a host of other ailments. Health researchers have warned that obesity should be considered an "epidemic" in the U.S., and that it has a greater impact on Americans' chronic health concerns and medical expenditures than regular smoking, problem drinking, or poverty (Strum & Wells, 2001).

As the problem of obesity has become more widely recognized and accepted, many people have sought social support from others to help them manage their weight. Some of these people have turned to online communities where they can ask questions, discuss their concerns, and connect with other people engaging in weight loss efforts similar to their own. Online communities exist when groups of people gather around some common purpose or activity and use computer-mediated communication as one of their primary means of social interaction (cf. Baym, 2000; Rheingold, 2000; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Rheingold notes that the mediated interaction in online communities occurs over time and involves "sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (1999, p. xx). In the case of online communities devoted to health issues, people build relationships through computer-mediated interaction related to their health and well being. In this way, these interactions become the social fabric of the online community.

One of these online communities can be found on the website FatSecret, which is the focus of this

case study. FatSecret is a relatively new online community, beginning in 2006. The site combines attributes of a general online support group, such as discussion boards and journals, with features of more popular social networking sites such as Facebook. FatSecret's goal, as described on their website, is to be:

a new online diet, nutrition and weight loss community that harnesses the collective contributions of our members to generate practical and motivating information so that you can make better decisions to achieve your goals.... FatSecret evolved from the idea that the most abundant and highly valuable source of information on diet, nutrition and weight management is the sum of the views, performances, achievements and recommendations of individuals that make up the broader community. We've tried to create an easy to use system that gathers, stores and sorts the input of members of the FatSecret community to provide quality information and useful recommendations so that we can all benefit. (FatSecret website, "About Us")

Since its inception in 2006 FatSecret has undergone substantial growth with thousands of active members participating on the site. As the title of this chapter implies, one of their mottos is "The Secret is Out!" The website's innovative combination of user-generated content, visual presentation of personal information, social networking, and online interaction may be the secret of its success. The site has been highlighted by both online and traditional news media, including a feature on the Today Show and inclusion in *Time Magazine's* top 50 websites of 2007.

SETTING THE STAGE

In recent years, the substantial increase of online support groups and communities focusing on health-related issues has offered Internet users

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