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

Laura W. Black
Ohio University, USA

Jennifer J. Bute
Ohio University, USA

Laura D. Russell
Ohio University, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides a case study of how social support is communicated through online discussion 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 concerns issues related to diet, exercise, lifestyle changes, and other issues in their lives. Through analysis of 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 discussion help people communicate support. This study has 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

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

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 provided Internet users with a new tool for coping with their health concerns (Rains & Young, 2009; White & Dorman, 2001; Wright & Bell, 2003). Such groups have provided individuals with a network that can supplement or replace traditional sources of support (e.g., health care providers, family members, friends) by offering online anonymity, access to diverse sources of information, contact with similar others, and a sense of community (Wright & Bell, 2003). These benefits, though, have not come without challenges, such as a lack of visual and aural cues (White & Dorman, 2001).

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

Online groups can be particularly appealing to those dealing with a potentially stigmatizing condition (Goldsmith & Brashers, 2008; Wright & Bell, 2003), including people who are obese or overweight. "It has been said that obese persons are the last acceptable targets of discrimination" (Puhl & Brownell, 2001, p. 788). Indeed, people who are overweight have reported mistreatment and discrimination in employment, education, and health care (Falkner et al., 1999; Puhl & Brownell, 2001).

Online forums can provide a lower risk means of seeking support for those who want to lose weight but are concerned about the ongoing discrimination and social stigma they might face. Rather than presenting an overtly visible and discrediting stigma to others (King, Hebl, & Heatherton, 2005) by discussing their weight struggles in face-to-face settings, individuals with Internet access can elicit and provide social support in relative privacy while maintaining their anonymity. In fact, the anonymity offered by online interactions has been cited as a major advantage by users of Internet support groups who struggle with stigmatized conditions. Such anonymity is linked to what Walther (1996, 2008, 2009) calls "hyperpersonal" communication, which is a type of interaction that involves a high level of emotion and affection and is more personal than we might expect to encounter in similar face-to-face settings. As reviews of online support groups demonstrate, computer-mediated support can mitigate social stigma and enhance levels of comfort in disclosing intimate details and exchanging social support (Wright & Bell, 2003; Rains & Young, 2009).

Social support, including access to and participation in online support groups and interventions, has been identified as an important and often effective element in successful weight loss (Elfhag & Rossner, 2005; Krukowski, Harvey-Berino, Ashikaga, Thomas, & Micco, 2008; Tate, Wing, & Winett, 2001; Verheijdden, Bakx, van Weel, Koelen, & van Staveren, 2005). For example, Elfhad and Rossner's (2005) examination of factors associated with weight loss maintenance revealed that social support assisted people who were working to maintain a healthy weight. Internet- based support via a weight control website can be especially effective in promoting weight loss and maintenance, particularly if the site includes features like progress charts, journals, and community bulletin boards (Krukowski et al., 2008). In one study, participants' use of progress charts and journals was found to predict weight loss, and participation in social support through online chats was the best predictor of weight maintenance (Krukowski et al., 2008). Thus, particular features of online groups can provide members with opportunities to communicate with one another and exchange the social support that is an essential part of members' weight loss efforts. Although both scholars and practitioners have recognized that social support is important in promoting weight loss and is a vital function of online communities, very little research has investigated the ways in which the varied formats for online interaction assist or inhibit members as they provide social support for one another.

Social support can be defined in a number of ways (Goldsmith, 2004); it is not a single, unified construct but rather "an umbrella term for providing a sense of reassurance, validation, and acceptance, the sharing of needed resources and assistance, and connecting or integrating structurally within a web of ties in a supportive network (Albrecht & Goldsmith, 2003, p. 265). As communication scholars, we follow Goldsmith's (2004) lead in conceptualizing social support as *enacted support*, otherwise understood as "what individuals say and do to help one another" (p. 13). Supportive interactions can include a wide array of topics and supportive resources, including expressions of encouragement or validation, advice or feedback about behaviors, sharing of information, and offers of tangible assistance (Albrecht & Goldsmith 2003; Goldsmith, 2004). We wish to emphasize that social support is a communicative phenomenon. This conceptualization assumes that "support occurs through the process of conversations in which meanings are inferred and conclusions are drawn by both parties" (Goldsmith & Brashers, 2008, p. 321). Understanding social support as enacted support, rather than perceived support, draws attention to

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

how support happens in everyday interactions and commands a focus on the form, style, content, and sequence of talk (Goldsmith, 2004). In other words, we are interested not in whether individuals perceive that they can access support when they need it, but rather, in how they communicate and co-construct supportive interactions. Thus, communication processes take center stage as the phenomenon of interest. Although both online and face-to-face support groups provide opportunities for supportive exchanges, online groups offer scholars the ability to capture how such interactions unfold (White & Dorman, 2001).

We also recognize that providing and receiving social support can pose dilemmas for involved parties (Goldsmith, 2004; Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006). Interactants might seek ways of offering and receiving information and advice, for instance, without infringing on or compromising autonomy. Both seekers and providers of support might feel that incessant talk about an issue, particularly a health-related concern, means dwelling on that issue in an unproductive way (Goldsmith, Lindholm, & Bute, 2006). Though we acknowledge that social support is a complex process that is not always positive in nature, our goal in this chapter is not to explore such dilemmas per se but to understand how technological features of online groups facilitate or deter the communication of social support. We observe that one of the characteristics that makes FatSecret successful as an online community is the social support that members give to one another. The focus of our case study is to *better understand how people communicate social support in their online interactions about weight loss in this community*. In particular, we examine the FatSecret community to compare the social support given in two kinds of online interaction: discussion forums and responses to members' journal entries. In so doing, we discuss how features of these formats foster or constrain members' expressions of social support for one another.

CASE DESCRIPTION

In this section we provide information about site design, particularly by emphasizing the features of the FatSecret site that promote group interaction. The features described below enable members to present information about themselves and interact with other members. Although the site includes several components designed to help members track and visualize their progress toward their weight loss goals, the mainstay of the site are the features that enable interaction.

Features that Present Personal Information

The first set of technological features consists of the *personal profile* and related information that each member creates when he or she joins the FatSecret community. A member's personal profile, such as the one included in Figure 1, functions as the central location for all of the personal information a member enters into the website. The profile includes the person's FatSecret name, information about which diet he or she is following, the starting weight and goal, and a brief biographical statement. Some members choose to post a profile picture, either a photograph or other image that he or she selects. The profile page serves as a centralized location for all of the member's personal information and activity.

Insert Figure 1 about here

The member profile page includes several visual indicators of the member's experience with weight loss. One of the most prominent features is a weight history chart that indicates the member's progress toward his or her weight goal. The chart, which is displayed below the member's personal information and photo, is populated with data points that track the member's weight over the time period since the member's

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

involvement in the FatSecret community. The chart is a line graph that provides a horizontal line near the top, representing the member's starting weight, and another horizontal line near the bottom, which represents the member's goal weight. Members record their own weight when they choose, and these weigh-in values populate their weight history chart. Additionally, members can track their daily exercise and food intake by entering information into a personal log. A brief summary of this food and exercise log is evident on the right side of the member's profile page next to the weight history chart. Website users can click on this summary to access the member's complete food and exercise log.

The profile page also provides access to the member's journal entries. Each FatSecret member has the ability to journal about his or her experience, and a brief summary of these journal entries is evident on the upper right side of the member's profile page, above his or her food and exercise log. The member's full journal can be viewed publicly by clicking on the summary. A sample journal entry is displayed in Figure 2. From our initial observations of the FatSecret community we noticed that many members regularly document their experiences in their journals and, as such, the journals could be seen as a dominant feature of the site.

Insert Figure 2 about here

In addition to including a member's personal information (i.e., photo, bio, weight history chart, food/exercise log, and journal), the profile page is also a member's entry point into the community. Although profiles and other information are viewable by the public, only members who have joined the community and created a profile are able to participate in FatSecret's social networking features. For example, as Figure 1 demonstrates, the profile page includes a list of the member's "buddies," who are other FatSecret members with whom the person has connected. The site offers a request system for buddies, which is similar to other social networking sites. Once members are linked together as buddies they can send private messages to one another and easily keep track of each other's journal entries and other activity on the site.

Features that Foster Interaction

From our observations of the website, we notice that one of the primary ways that members engage in online interaction is through *commenting on each other's journal entries*. As Figure 2 illustrates, the comments are displayed below the journal entry. Any member can comment on another's journal entry, although we notice that members tend to form groups of buddies who consistently comment on each other's journal entries. In our initial experience with the community we noticed that there was a great deal of social support in the comments to journal entries.

Members also communicate with each other through participating in *discussion forums*, joining *groups or challenges*, or posting *recipes or diet tips*. These interactive features of the FatSecret community are accessible to members through their "My FatSecret" page, which is analogous to a member's "Home" page in Facebook or other social networking sites. An example of a My FatSecret page is shown in Figure 3.

Insert Figure 3 about here

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

This page provides an abbreviated version of the member's personal profile information and displays updates on other members' activities on the site. The prominent feature of the My FatSecret page is the personally-tailored compilation of other people's activities on the site. A FatSecret member can select whose recent activity (everyone, just buddies, people who follow a particular diet, etc.) and what kind of activity (either all activity or just journal entries) he or she wants to observe. In Figure 3, for example, the member "Herbie" has selected to see all recent activity, but only by her buddies. Viewing this activity feed gives the member an opportunity to engage in interaction with others by commenting on their journal entries, responding to a post in a discussion forum, or rating and commenting on a recipe or diet tip.

In our observations of the site, we noticed that a great deal of interaction occurred in the *Discussion Forums*. As the example presented in Figure 4 demonstrates, discussions typically begin with a member posting a question, comment, or request for advice on some topic. Any FatSecret member can respond, and some forums involve lengthy discussions of a wide range of topics related to nutrition, health, and weight. Like journal entries and comments, the discussions seem to be a very common way FatSecret members choose to interact with one another. Our initial observations lead us to believe that many discussion forums involve social support.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Participants who post to the discussion forum are identified by their FatSecret name, a thumbnail image of their profile picture, and a "ticker" at the bottom of their post, which indicates how much weight they have lost toward their goal. These tickers are colorful bars that look a bit like thermometers, and the color of the ticker depends on the percentage of weight a member has lost toward his or her target weight. Members who have made only minimal progress toward their goal have tickers that are red, and further levels of success lead to tickers that are orange, yellow, green, and finally blue. These tickers were not originally part of the FatSecret design, but were developed in response to members using tickers available from other organizations or creating other ways to visually display their progress.

Members also can join *Groups and Challenges*, which connect them with others who share some similar characteristics or goals. Groups tend to be organized around characteristics such as "30s with 25 to 50 pounds to lose" and serve as a gathering place for members with shared attributes to discuss aspects of their weight loss efforts. A specific kind of group is a "Challenge," in which members organize into teams and participate in a sort of competition with other teams to accomplish certain goals (such as exercise for 30 minutes every day, or try to lose ten pounds by a pre-set date). These groups and challenges were officially developed in 2007 after members started to informally organize themselves. Currently, any member can create a group or challenge and invite others to join. These groups and challenges are closed to outsiders so that only those FatSecret members who are participating in the group or challenge can see and respond to information posted there.

Finally, members can interact with one another through posting and commenting on *Diet Tips and Recipes*. Although there are many recipes and diet tips posted, only some have ratings and comments associated with them. As such, FatSecret members do not seem to treat the recipes and diet tips as an opportunity for interactive communication.

Summary

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

As is evident from the site design features, FatSecret members communicate information about themselves in their personal profile and interact through a variety of social networking features. Through all of these forms of interaction, members engage in various communication processes. Individuals chronicle the mundane choices they make related to food and diet, they confess straying from their plan, they vent about frustrations, they celebrate their progress, and they talk about other aspects of their lives. Members also participate in reciprocating supportive communication with their "buddies" and others on the site. Because social support is such an important factor in helping people achieve success in their weight loss efforts, we believe that it is important to uncover the features of the FatSecret site that enable supportive online interaction.

In our initial observations of the community, we find that most of the social support is evidenced in people's comments to one another's journal entries and in the discussion forums. Although there ostensibly could be social support enacted through the other information-sharing formats (such as posting recipes and diet tips), most of the supportive interaction is evident in the discussion forums and journals. For this reason, we turn our attention to analyzing examples of these two types of online interaction to discern how social support is communicated.

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH ONLINE INTERACTION

Our goals in this section are to describe how social support is communicated through online interaction and examine the similarities and differences in the communication of social support appearing in FatSecret's online journal and discussion forum formats. The online journals and discussion forums are available for use by all registered members of the site. Nonmembers can view the journals and forums, though they do not have access to post responses. To better understand the communication of social support and the ways that particular formats of the site enable and constrain support processes, we examined features of both the journals and the discussion forums by analyzing a sample of journal entries and discussion threads.

For our analysis, we concentrated our focus on four points of comparison between the journal and discussion forum formats: (a) the style and format of the original posting, (b) the nature of the social support communicated by other members in their responses to the original posting, (c) the extent to which the support process is characterized by dyadic or group dynamics, and (d) the advantages and disadvantages of the technological attributes of each format in terms of facilitating the communication of social support. Through this examination we explain how the journal and discussion forum features of FatSecret serve different functions in facilitating engagement in social support interactions.

Style and Format of the Original Posting

Attention to the ways in which social support is elicited by members is crucial for understanding how support processes unfold in online contexts. To understand how supportive exchanges are initiated, we explored the style and format of the original postings in members' journals and in discussion forum threads. We suggest that the ways in which FatSecret members solicit and offer social support are shaped by the particular formats they choose to use on the site.

In general, journal entries tend to follow a diary-like format in which the poster reflects on current events, articulates affirmations, or makes motivational statements directed toward him or herself. For example, in one journal entry a member mused about an appointment with her physician during which she found out that, despite her best efforts to maintain a healthy weight, she was pre-diabetic and had high cholesterol.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

Reflecting on the frustration of appearing to be physically fit while suffering from unseen health conditions, she stated:

> From now on when someone looks at me and wonders why I am in the sugar free aisle or someone thinks I'm nuts for telling them I can't indulge in even one ice cream cone because I "look fit," I'm going to pull out my lab results.[i]

Although journal postings typically resemble diary entries, it is clear that journal posters are aware that other members will read and respond to their postings (in contrast to diary entries, which are not usually intended for a public audience). Some members explicitly address the reading audience in their entries by asking questions or expressing supportive wishes to the group. Moreover, journal entries do not often include straightforward requests for social support, perhaps because members find value in simply reflecting on and expressing their experiences. Even so, members who read the entries infer the need for support and respond accordingly. Thus, online journals are similar to blogs in that they are personal diaries that have an intended audience other than the self.

In contrast, original postings in discussion forums tend to include more direct requests for support (e.g., validation, information, advice) than journal entries, though the request's level of explicitness can still vary. For instance, one member posted a request to a South Beach diet forum in which she asked for feedback on her diet: "I would really appreciate it if someone who has been through phase 1 would look at my food intake and tell me if I'm doing everything right." While not all posts are direct requests for advice, members might interpret them as such. Another posting to the South Beach diet forum featured a woman with a question regarding the link between oral contraceptives and weight gain:

> Has anyone noticed their weight loss slows, stops, or they actually gain from taking birth control pills? I tried to pinpoint exactly when I stopped losing weight and started gaining even with dieting and it was when I started the pills again... anyone heard of this???

Although this member's query could be interpreted as a call for advice (e.g., what should I do?), the posting could simply be a request for experience swapping or validation (e.g., is this just me, or does this happen to you, too). The implicit intentions and ambiguity behind support seeking, therefore, elicit a variety of different responses. For instance, some members reply by providing an account of similar personal experiences as a way to validate the questions d or concerns of the initial poster. In other cases, people offer advice for answering questions by providing expertise, references, or lay perspectives. These various responses exemplify how social support functions as a complex process shaped through the ways people express personal identity, recognition of others, and a variety of knowledge claims. Social support, therefore, is contextually defined in and through the communication in which it is embodied.

Nature of Support Communicated by Members

The diverse formats (journal or discussion forum) seem to elicit different forms of social support from members who respond to original postings. These differences appear to be related to the manner in which the original post is framed.

As previously noted, journals do not typically include direct requests for social support, but do entail highly personal reflections and self-affirmations. Subsequently, members who post responses to journal entries tend to focus their supportive messages on validating the journaler's emotions and experiences. In our analysis, we found that "validation" appeared to be the key function of every comment from other members. Validation appeared in a variety of forms including how members identified with others

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

through their personal experiences, expressed general understanding and encouragement, conveyed understanding through venting, provided information or instruction, and showed agreement and support for decision making. For example, in response to one member's bad news from her physician, another member shared her own personal experience:

> Come sit over here. I have the same three conditions and take meds for all. It drives me batty. I am glad you doctor has a diet for you. My doctor just pushes pills. I tried to get off the cholesterol med after I lost 20 lbs but it did not work.

Others responded to the same entry with more general words of encouragement, such as, "Hang in there chica...you're going to get through this with flying colors!! **hugs to you**" Such responses indicate members' attempts to validate and console the needs of the journaler. In addition, the content of the support expressed was frequently focused on encouraging others to maintain strength and control with their diets. As we observed, there were repeated times when people would compliment others' strength as a way of providing encouragement. Further, such encouragement would often be followed by a supporter sharing a personal experience of his or her own. Or, others simply posted encouraging words to convey that they were "thinking about" the journaler.

Based on the style and tone of journal entries and the content of members' responses, it seems that a primary goal of journalers is to receive validation and confirmation from others. Therefore, they post their journals publicly to receive confirmation that their experiences are meaningful, valid, and recognized.

The need for validation seems to be understood by others responding, given the supportive, encouraging, and relating comments provided in response to the journaler. In this way, social support in the context of online journals tends to focus largely on the person authoring the journal, particularly in how responders focus on validating the emotions or experiences of that individual. Discussion forums, however, feature divergent ways of communicating social support, and responses to discussion postings tend to focus less on personal aspects of the member who submitted the original post. In fact, the nature of support in responses to discussion forum posts varies widely. In particular, responses tend to be more focused on the post itself rather than aspects of the "poster."

Reponses to the discussion forum member who asked others to review her recent food intake generally focused on instrumental or informational support, such as "Nuts can be a downfall, if we're not careful. Be sure that they are raw, little to no salt and measured out to a nice small portion. Chewing then thoroughly will help soak up the satisfying taste, too." Others combine some instrumental advice with words of encouragement: "ITs just 12 more days if u look at it... so stick with it...Lots of water. U can do IT I know we all can."

In other cases, some members responded to forum threads without directly addressing the original posting. In the response to the request for an evaluation of food intake, one person simply wrote,

> This is what i am eating... Eggs(lots of eggs) Tuna (bought the chicken of the sea fro costco)Come nuts to munch on just 1 oz 2 times a day. lots of salade , chicken (grilled , curry) Extrra lean ham rolled in mozerella cheese sticks.) thisis what i have eatedn orthe last 2 days... I have bought Hummus to eat with celery sticks...

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

Though this response could be interpreted as experience swapping or indirect advice, at no point does the member personally address the original poster. In contrast, addressing the original poster directly seemed to be the norm in response to journal entries.

In comparison to journal threads, discussion threads are also more likely to feature responses that diverge from the topic of the original post. In the thread on oral contraceptives, for example, several members engaged in a debate about the pros and cons of natural family planning without addressing or involving the member who posted the original question. Such tangential discussions seem to be rare in journal-centered comments.

Although the nature of support expressed in discussion forums tends to differ from support offered in response to journals, using personal testimony as a form of evidence appears to be a common and widely accepted practice in both formats. Recall the member who shared her own health challenges in response to another member's reflection on disappointing news from her physician. Likewise, responses to the discussion post on oral contraception also resulted in experience swapping through testimony. One member wrote, "I gained initially, about 5 pounds when I first started the pill. I noticed an increase in appetite almost immediatly. It did even out over time, and i lost the weight after about six months without dieting." Thus, personal experience serves as a recurrent form of evidence used to legitimize support sought and offered throughout this online community in both the discussion and journal formats.

Dyadic and Group Oriented Interaction

Social support on the FatSecret website is communicatively shaped through *individual*, *dyadic* and *group* dynamics. In both the journals and forums, members share personal reflections as well as offer opinions and raise questions to others. The interactive opportunities of this online context allow participants to create a collective community with others. Binding the relationships among members is the reciprocal process of seeking and providing support. Whether sharing a personal story or explicitly requesting support, members are aware that their voice is shared with an audience. Further, this audience is unique in that members hold a common interest in losing weight. Therefore, FatSecret hosts a communicative context wherein common interests and social support promote a sense of interdependence. Such interdependence governs the structure of this online community as it is not the individual, but rather, the collective activity that constitutes the essence of this social support group.

Despite the collective image of this social community, the progression of group discussion is seemingly fragmented. Particularly in the forum threads, participants not only respond to initial posts, but also to subsequent responses. As evident in a discussion about a specific diet plan, members respond to the initial post while also referring to others in the discussion. This was demonstrated in a controversial discussion about the effects birth control has on weight loss:

> **Kelly**[ii]: I think as women..we can use hormones, PMS, the fact that our bodies don't have the metabolism that mens bodies do, child bearing, all as a reason to gain weight. We can all sit here and cry about how being a woman makes it soooo hard to lose weight. Is it true? Well sure. Is it doomed sentence? No.
>
> **JulieB**: Kelly, every woman is different and while you were able to lose the weight, a different woman could have been doing everything that you did and not lose an ounce.
>
> **Kelly**: Julie, you CAN see results in your situation. What I am saying is a simple fact though that a lot of people do use these as excuses.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

As these members explicitly call out one another in discussion, they draw attention to points of disagreement and explore the topic at hand in further depth. At the same time, however, other participants of the same thread either continue to comment on the initial post or implicitly direct their replies to others' responses. While members may be cognizant that all group participants see their posts, the intended audience for each response is frequently ambiguous. This ambiguity is reduced in the journal format where members tend to direct most of their responses to the journaler. Still, even appearing in the journals are responses with an unclear audience. Therefore, a sporadic flux between dyadic and group interactions occurs in both forums and journals.

With the given formats for communicating on FatSecret, *dialogic moments* (Cissna & Anderson, 1998) infrequently emerge throughout topic discussions. That is, we notice that many times the communication is one-way in that members are posting comments, but these comments are not directly responded to by the journaler or the person who began the forum topic. Yet, there are moments where FatSecret members seem to engage in a back-and-forth interaction where both people are fully engaged in and open to one another. At times, the initial poster will follow up with a comment to a particular respondent, thus demonstrating what Weick (1979) identified as a *double interact*. For a double interact to take place, a statement, response to a statement, and feedback to the response must be present. The interconnection between each of these steps constitutes an interactive process through which relationships are established and sense making occurs. In the current context, members reciprocating continual responses with one another demonstrate attempts to deepen discussion and create new ways of understanding weight loss experiences. Therefore, in discussions where double interacts emerge members take part in a process that may lead to a dialogical construction of meaning.

At the same time, however, double interacts between specific persons in a thread may function as exclusionary forces that disrupt the flow of whole group discussions. For instance, as two members in a thread begin to move into a deeper exchange of opinions with one another, others may become confused as to whether they should respond to the persisting interaction or to the initial post. The dispersed nature of responses and dyadic interactions complicates the progression of discussion, particularly because it creates difficulty in discerning to whom each comment is directed. The fluctuation between members commenting on initial posts and members engaging in dyadic interactions, therefore, creates a disunity that slows the progress of discussing topics in depth. While this disunity is present in the journal entires, fragmented interactions are most apparent in the discussion forums.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The distinctive features of the journal and forum discussion formats legitimize why both are necessary for the social support processes taking shape on FatSecret. The journals offer opportunity for individuals to reflect personally on their experiences while sharing their thoughts openly with others. This space provides members opportunities to share not simply issues concerning weight loss, but also other aspects of their lives that give meaning to who they are as individuals. The presence of a group audience provides journalers with a context conditioned for receiving validation, encouragement, and other supportive responses. While the nature of journal discussions tends to be dyadic, respondents participate collectively in an effort to create a supportive environment. The sense of interdependence is, therefore, evidenced in how members respond similarly by providing personal experiences and encouraging statements to ultimately validate the feelings and support needs of journalers. For instance, one journaler wrote about her nervousness about an upcoming surgery. Members, in turn, responded by expressing care and concern:

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

> **Jimmy**: Wow, I turn my head for one minute and look what happens. Surgery too? Take care Fruity and have yourself a really good Easter.
>
> **CookieNo**: Thinking of you and all good thoughts and prayers for surgery. Also I know how hard it was for you to type that weight in and I'm so proud of you for being brave. You WILL get it off and more to boot when you're feeling better-first things first!!

To show recognition of and appreciation for others' support, the journaler responded after returning to the site a few days after her surgery:

> **Fruity**: I'm back home and going back to sleep…thanks everyone for your prayers and wishes…things went great today and in two weeks we get the results from the lab…thanks again…

This example illustrates the dynamic unfolding of social support, a process through which a journaler writes about a particular personal experience, receives encouragement in response to that experience, and in turn, expresses a thanks for others' responses.

Whereas journals provide a space for more personal relationships to evolve, the forums offer participants opportunities to engage in more topical discussions related to weight-loss issues in general, typically with a larger group of members. While support is provided throughout forum discussions, responses tend to include more informational instructions than encouraging statements. In addition, because the focus of forum discussions tends to be on the topic rather than the person presenting the topic, members will challenge and disagree with one another about weight-loss concerns. Through disagreement, a number of different perspectives may surface with regard to a particular issue that allows for deeper meaning and/or more holistic understanding to take shape among the weight-loss community. This type of interaction was exemplified in the previously mentioned birth control discussion where members disagreed with and challenged one another's perspectives.

Both the journal and forum formats provide advantages to support-providing processes. First, these online features have lasting quality and serve as permanent records to which users can refer back at later points in time. A journaler, for instance, can turn back to previous entries and read the supportive comments of others at any given moment. Related to time, a second advantage is that the online availability of these features provides around-the-clock access to a social support context. Members can seek and/or provide support at the convenience of their personal schedules. Third, the combination of journal and discussion forum outlets fosters a broad spectrum of dyadic and group interactions. Participants on the website have opportunity to develop interpersonal relationships while also becoming involved in building a supportive community with many others. FatSecret, therefore, promotes the support of individuals while also encouraging broader support for a cause: weight loss.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

FatSecret combines iconic features of online support groups, such as discussion forums, with social networking features that allow members to connect with others who are undergoing similar challenges. The wide range of ways that members can participate in the FatSecret community seems to be one of the secrets of its success. In particular, we find that the journal entries and discussion forums are particularly rich sites of online discussion and social support.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

While the journals and forums offer promising advantages for providing support, there are also evident complications. In particular, because of the linear display of responses, it is sometimes difficult to determine who is responding to whom. Unless explicit names are mentioned in responses, it is often challenging to interpret if posts are intended for the initial poster, a particular respondent, or the group as a whole. This ambiguity complicates participants' abilities to build upon one another's contributions and slows the progression of discussion. Therefore, a considerable number of responses are needed to move a topic into greater depth. Consequently, numerous responses can further complicate the flow of discussion and inhibit deeper sense making from occurring. Such observations lead us to a key question: *How can communicative formats for online social support sites be structured in a way that promotes a clearer direction for in-depth discussion?*

The aforementioned question problematizes the organization of communication for online communities. A potential possibility for structuring FatSecret is exemplified in a current model developed by Microsoft for *Windows Live Q&A (http://home.live.com)*. This site has a comment feature for each initial post and each subsequent response. Therefore, if responders wish to address the initial post, they simply reply to the thread. However, if one would like to comment on a previous respondent, she or he can do so by selecting the comment option for a particular response. Comments remain hidden unless members intentionally select an expand key to make the comments present. This method of organizing responses and subsequent comments helps focus the discussion on the central topic presented in the initial post. The option to branch off into other discussions about particular responses enables members to engage in deeper interactions about particular ideas and better distinguishes who is addressing whom. Therefore, Microsoft's format may serve as a potential option for online social support sites.

In addition, the observations we offer in this case study may have a few implications for the design of online support groups as a whole. We found that journal entries and discussion forums facilitate the exchange of social support in different ways. Whereas online journaling allows members to get more personalized support through receiving others' validating responses, discussion forums allow members to engage in conversation about a wider range of topics that encourage social support in the form of information or advice (e.g., suggestions for specific foods to eat or modifications to particular diet plans). Because support on the FatSecret site is communicated in different ways through the journal and discussion forum formats, we would encourage organizers and site designers of FatSecret and other online support communities to continue offering multiple interactive features that facilitate communication among group members. Doing so allows users to connect with a network of similar others in a manner that suits their comfort level. For instance, users who do not wish to initiate discussion of a particular issue with a larger number of users might find the journal option a more suitable format. Other users seeking feedback about a specific issue, such as asking members following the same diet plan to review a recent food log, might find the discussion forum more useful. Or the same individual might utilize both the journal and the discussion forum options, depending of their interactional goals and their own experiences in using these formats. Whatever the case, offering multifaceted features provides group members with a wide range of options when it comes to communicating social support.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

REFERENCES

Albrecht, T. L., & Goldsmith, D. J. (2003). Social support, social networks, and health. In T. L. Thompson, A. M. Dorsey, K. I. Miller & R. Parrot (Eds.), *Handbook of health communication* (pp. 263-284). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Baym, N. K. (2000). *Tune in, log on: soaps, fandom, and online community*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Cissna, K. N., & Anderson, R. (1998). Theorizing about dialogic moments: The Buber-Rogers position and postmodern themes. *Communication Theory, 8*, 63-104.

Elfhag, K., & Rossner, S. (2005). Who succeeds in maintaining weight loss? A conceptual review of factors associated with weight loss maintenance and weight regain. *Obesity Reviews, 6*, 67-85.

Falkner, N. H., French, S. A., Jeffrey, R. W., Neumark-Sztainer, D., Sherwood, N. E., & Morton, N. (1999). Mistreatment due to weight: Prevalence and sources of perceived mistreatment in women and men. *Obesity Research, 7*, 572-576.

Goldsmith, D. J. (2004). *Communicating social support*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goldsmith, D. J., & Brashers, D. E. (2008). Communication matters: Developing and testing social support interventions. *Communication Monographs, 75*, 320-330.

Goldsmith, D. J., Lindholm, K. A., & Bute, J. J. (2006). Dilemmas of talking about lifestyle changes among couples coping with a cardiac event. *Social Science and Medicine, 63,* 2079-2090.

King, E. B., Hebl, M. R., & Heatherton, T. F. (2005). Theories of stigma: Limitations and need directions. In K. D. Brownell, R. M. Puhl, M. B. Schwartz & L. Rudd (Eds.), *Weight bias: Nature, consequences, and remedies* (pp. 109-120). New York: Guilford Press.

Krukowski, R. A., Harvey-Berino, J., Ashikaga, T., Thomas, C. S., & Micco, N. (2008). Internet-based weight control: The relationship between web features and weight loss. *Telemedicine and E-Health, 14*, 775-782.

Puhl, R., & Brownell, K. D. (2001). Bias, discrimination, and obesity. *Obesity Research, 9*, 788-805.

Rains, S. A., & Young, V. (2009). A meta-analysis of research on formal computer-mediated support groups: Examining group characteristics and health outcomes. *Human Communication Research, 35*, 309-336.

Rheingold, H. (2000). *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. London: MIT Press.

Smith, M. & Kollock, P. (Eds.) (1999). *Communities in cyberspace: Perspective on new forms of social organization*. London: Routledge.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

Strum, R., & Wells, K. B. (2001). Does obesity contribute as much to morbidity as poverty or smoking? *Public Health, 115*, 229-295.

Tate, D. F., Wing, R. R., & Winett, R. A. (2001). Using Internet technology to deliver a behavioral weight loss program. *Journal of the American Medical Association, 285*, 1172-1177.

Verheijdden, M. W., Bakx, J. C., van Weel, C., Koelen, M. A., & van Staveren, W. A. (2005). Role of social support in lifestyle-focused weight management interventions. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition, 59*, S179-S186.

Walther, J. B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research, 23*, 3-43.

Walther, J. B. (2008). Social information processing theory. In L. A. Baxter & D. O Braithwaite (Eds.), *Engaging theories in interpersonal communication: Multiple perspectives* (pp. 391-404). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Walther, J. B. (2009). Computer-mediated communication and virtual groups: Applications to interethnic conflict. *Journal of Applied Communication Research, 37*, 225-238.

Weick, K. (1979). *The social psychology of organizing (2nd ed.).* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

White, M., & Dorman, S. M. (2001). Receiving social support online: Implications for health education. *Health Education Research, 16*, 693-707.

Wright, K. B., & Bell, S. B. (2003). Health-related support groups on the Internet: Linking empirical findings to social support and computer-mediated communication theory. *Journal of Health Psychology, 8*, 1359-1053.

[i] All quoted material is presented as it appeared in the FatSecret member's original post. We did not alter the grammar or spelling in any of the quoted material.

[ii] The names presented in this paper are pseudonyms, used to protect the anonymity of FatSecret members.

This authors' submitted manuscript was retrieved from: http://media.usm.maine.edu/~lenny/. The final version was published as: Black, L. W., Bute, J. J., & Russell, L. D. (2010). "The secret is out!" Supporting weight loss through online interaction. In L. Shedletsky & J. E. Aitken (Eds.), *Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes*. IGI Global.

Figure 1

FatSecret Member Profile

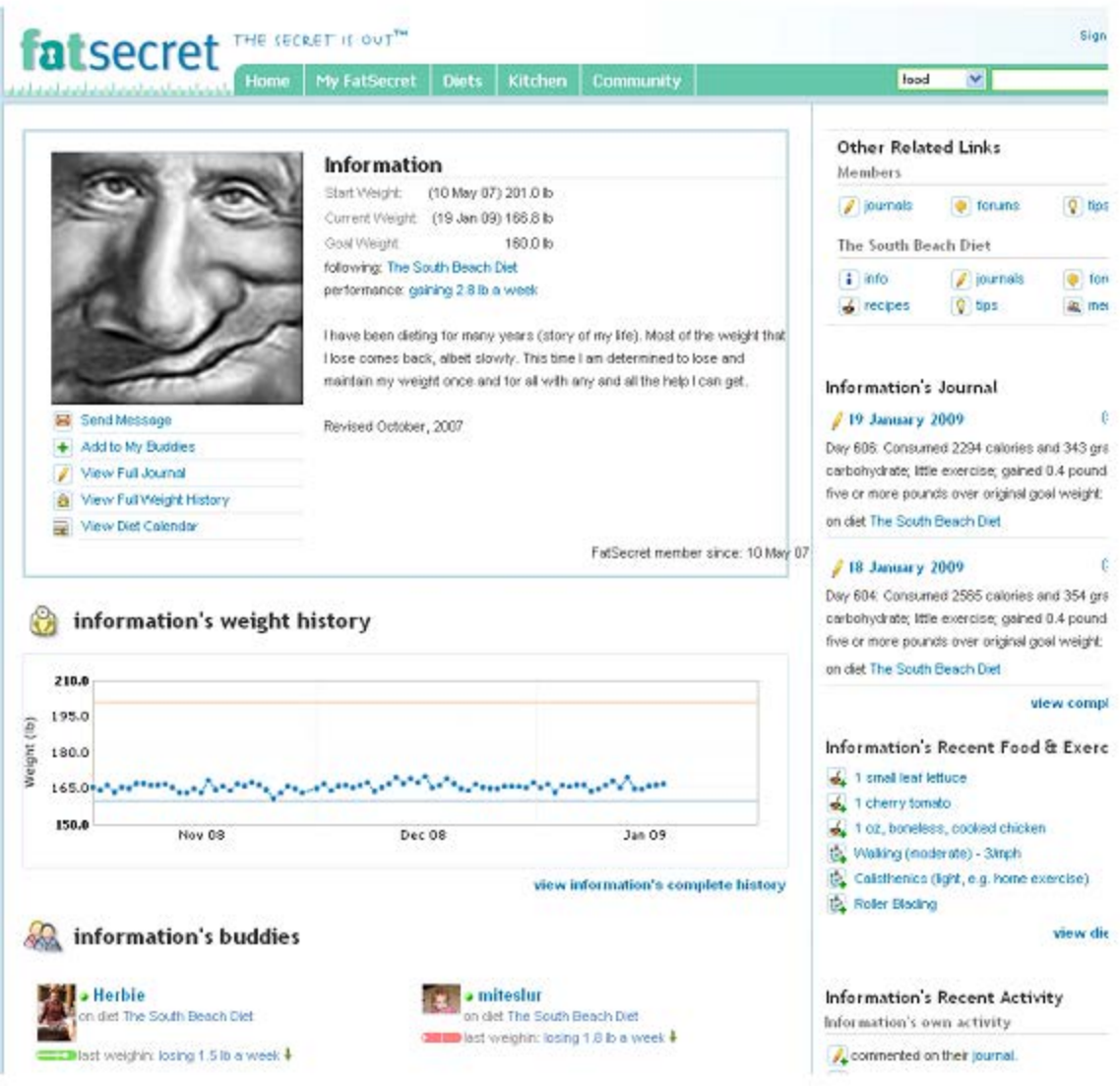


Figure 4

Example Discussion Forum

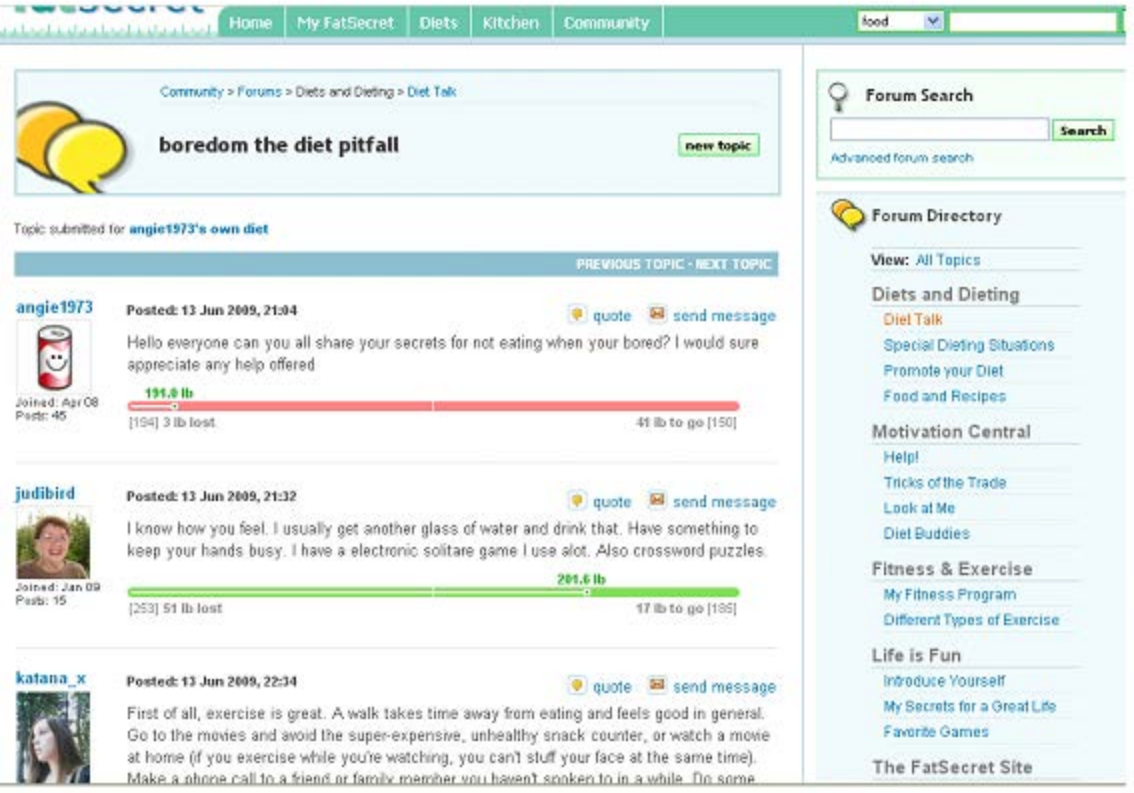


Figure 3

Example My FatSecret page

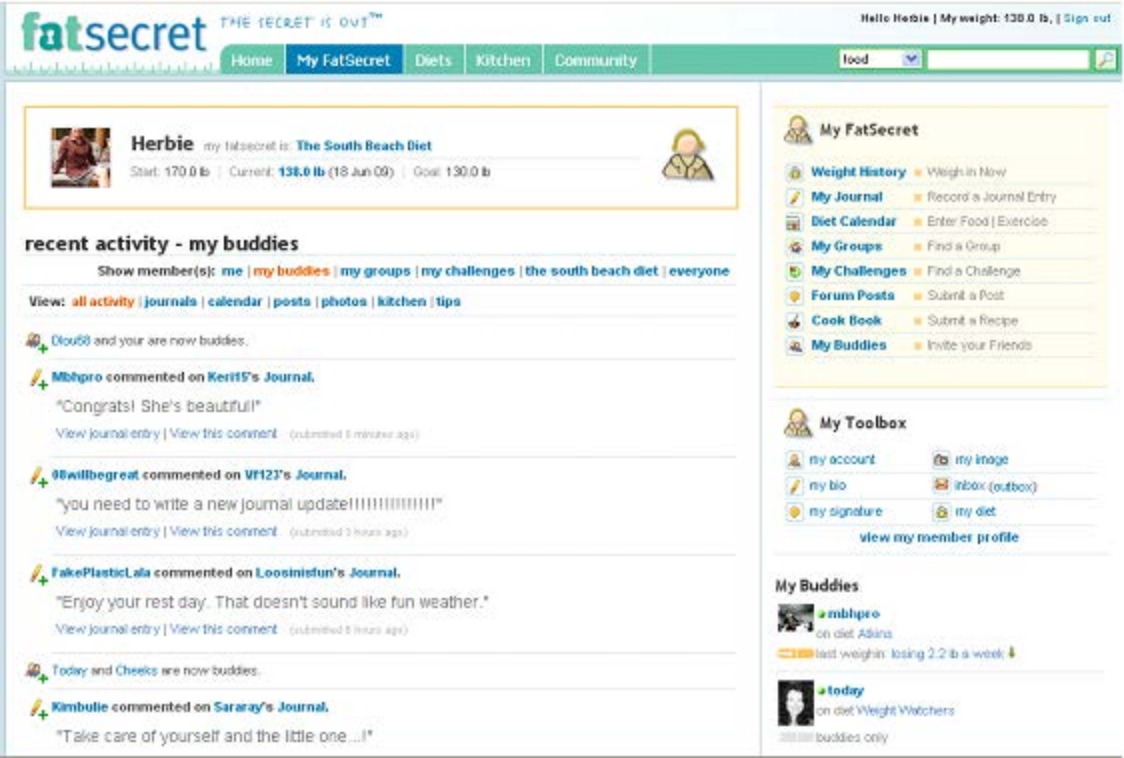
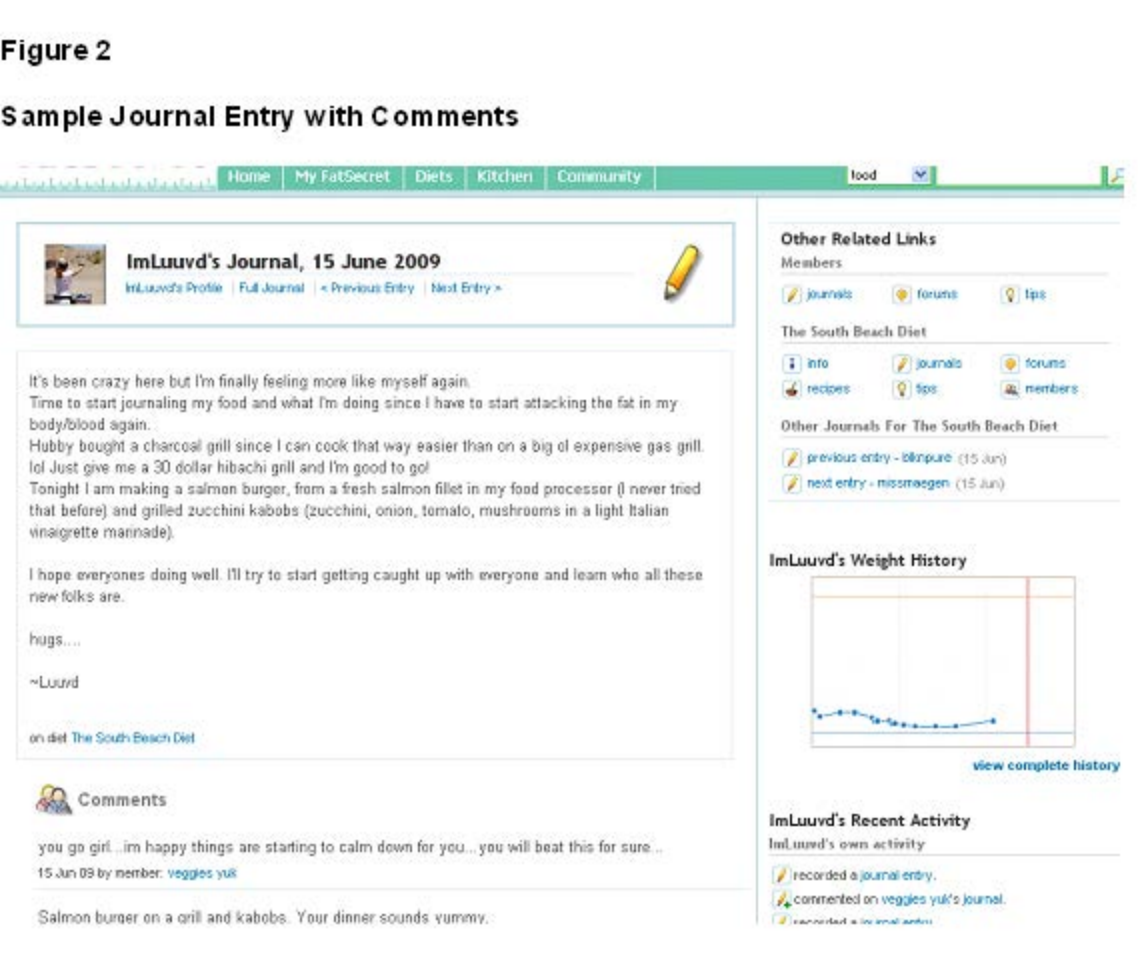


Figure 2

Sample Journal Entry with Comments