

Privacy and Weight Loss Apps:

A First Look at How Women with Eating Disorders Use Social Features



Elizabeth V. Eikey
The Pennsylvania State University

eveikey@psu.edu

Do users with eating disorders use community and social features of health apps, especially if those apps are not specifically intended for eating disorders?

Motivation

It is estimated that 20 million women in the U.S. have an eating disorder [2]. Women with eating disorders benefit from participating in online communities [3], and prior studies have found technologies that facilitate social support are helpful to users with eating disorders [1,5]. However, research on how women with eating disorders use community and social features within weight loss apps is lacking.

RQ: How do women with eating disorders use community and social features within weight loss apps?

Community & Social Feature Examples

Friends, Messaging, Forums

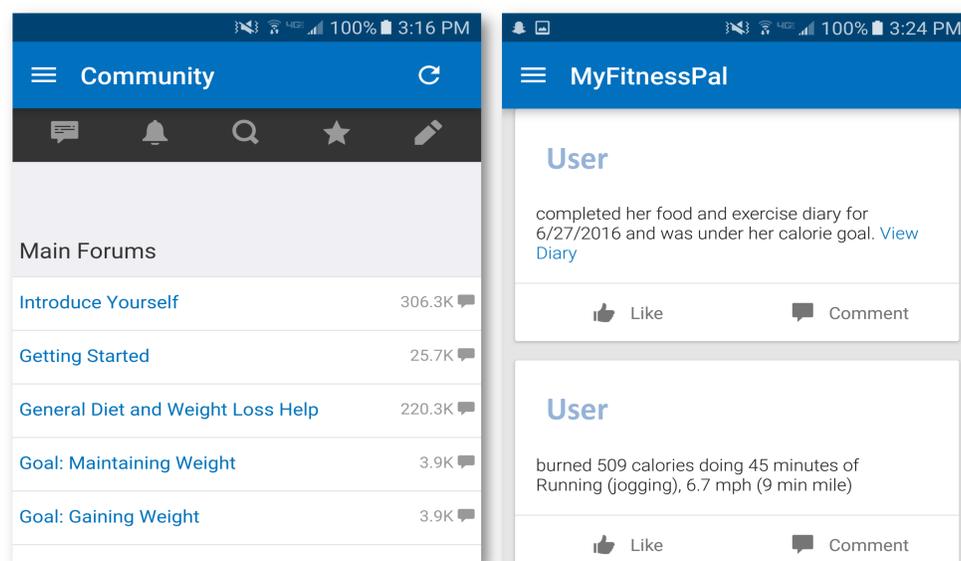
Methods & Recruiting

Think-aloud exercises and semi-structured interviews

1 hour each
So far, 14 complete

Participants

Women 18-25 years old
History of eating disorder
Use weight loss apps
Recruited using flyers
Compensated \$25



Screenshots from MyFitnessPal

Implications

Balancing maintaining privacy and promoting use of community and social features

Can we design weight loss apps to help women with eating disorders while maintaining their privacy?

"I never interact with people because I feel like my diet is like my, it's only my thing. Do you know what I mean? It's like individual stuff. I don't like to share with my friends. It's a little bit awkward, yeah. I just keep it private, I think. Because I really like, it's kind of... makes me uncomfortable because if you, like I don't know, like I use this pal because I think it's kind of give some privacy. I don't know. I just don't like to share." (U01)

Preliminary Findings

Women with eating disorders are reluctant to use the social and community features of weight loss apps.

Private issue

Embarrassed or uncomfortable

"I just didn't want other people to be involved. I guess that's just me personally, but I feel like a community where other people could have helped me probably would be better, but I was just like so embarrassed because I've been on this thing my whole life where I'm like, k, I'm strong, I'm mentally strong, I don't have anything to face, like I'm fine, but I was not fine at all in all reality, so I was like more embarrassed and didn't want friends and family to know and stuff, so I didn't even want to do the social part of it, so." (U05)

Discussion

Even though online communities have been shown to be beneficial to women with eating disorders, they still express privacy concerns with participating in online communities and sharing information. Perhaps this is due to the stigma associated with eating disorders [4] or fears related to consequences of revealing such information, especially on an app intended for weight loss not eating disorders.

More questions:

- Why are some users with eating disorders reluctant to use community and social features?
- Depending on where they are in terms of their eating disorder, do users feel differently about sharing information and using these features?
- How could using community and social features of weight loss apps be beneficial for these users?
- Would users feel better about sharing and using these features if they could share anonymously?
 - If so, what design changes could we employ to encourage users to share?
- Do users in other types of online communities have the same reluctance to share information? What about in face-to-face treatment programs?

Acknowledgements

This material is based upon work supported by the NSF under Grant No. DGE1255832. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the NSF.

References

[1] Bowler, L. et al. 2012. Eating disorder questions in Yahoo! Answers: Information, conversation, or reflection? *ASIST 2012* (Baltimore, Maryland, 2012). [2] Gulec, H. et al. 2011. Internet-based maintenance treatment for patients with eating disorders. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 42, 6 (2011), 479–486. [3] Keski-Rahkonen, A. and Tozzi, F. 2005. The process of recovery in eating disorder sufferers' own words: An internet-based study. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 37, (2005), 580–586. [4] Livingston, J.D. and Boyd, J.E. 2010. Correlates and consequences of internalized stigma for people living with mental illness: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Science and Medicine*. 71, 12 (2010), 2150–2161. [5] Whitlock, J.L. et al. 2006. The virtual cutting edge: The internet and adolescent self-injury. *Developmental Psychology*. 42, 3 (2006), 407–417.