Privacy and Weight Loss Apps: A First Look at How Women with Eating Disorders Use Social Features

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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.

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?

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

Community & Social Feature Examples

Friends, Messaging, Forums

Preliminary Findings

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

Private issue

Embarrassed or uncomfortable

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?

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References


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