THESIS

SHARING RECIPES FOR "BLENDSHIPS" AND OPTIMAL WELL-BEING:

COMMUNICATING COMMUNITY ON HEALTHY LIVING BLOGS

Submitted by

Aleksandra Fedunchak

Department of Communication Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Summer 2012

Master's Committee:

    Advisor: Leah Sprain

    Andy Merolla
    Lynn Kwiatkowski

ABSTRACT

SHARING RECIPES FOR "BLENDSHIPS" AND OPTIMAL WELL-BEING:

COMMUNICATING COMMUNITY ON HEALTHY LIVING BLOGS

This thesis seeks to understand how the discourse on healthy living blogs can function socially, create and maintain an online community, foster a network of social support, and establish meanings of health for blog participants through performing Cultural Discourse Analysis. The four research questions that guide my analysis are: first, what is being accomplished through participation (authoring and commenting) on the sample of Healthy Living Blogs (HLBs)? What, if any, are the social functions of blogging about and commenting on healthy living for the participants? Second, does this network of healthy living blogs exemplify characteristics of a virtual community? Third, what, if any, are the key symbols used to communicate social support? And lastly, what does being "healthy" and "unhealthy" mean to the bloggers and blog participants (what are the discourses used to communicate these meanings)?

In my analysis, I find that blog participants engaged in communicative action through the process of "confessing," they communicated sense of being to cultivate online personalities, and they portrayed senses of relating by referring to one another as friends, "blends," and by discussing important "blendships" (i.e., combination of the word blogger and friendship). Additionally, blog participants frequently and willingly exchanged information, provided social support, and offered advice and solutions to one another to foster connectedness, which symbolizes a sense of virtual community. Ultimately, two paradoxes became clear in that

bloggers were rewarded with greater amounts of supportive comments ascribing them as strong when they shared weaknesses, and that the overt definition of health as a balance of multi-

faceted features was challenged by a strong content focus on nutrition and fitness as primary tools for being "healthy." On the premise that blogging, a discursive practice, is a form of everyday communication, and thus has the ability to build trust and senses of community between individuals, this thesis analyzes how three healthy living bloggers and the blog participants that comment on the blogs, respectively, potentially function to reconceptualize what it means to be healthy.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I

Introduction

Within the last fourteen years, weblogs, or blogs, have grown as free, public outlets for

people to express their interests, learn something new, and contribute to the vast amount of

information on the internet. Writing or reading a blog has become a popular option for

individuals who want to share some aspect of their lives or explore others' perspectives on some

topic. Anyone with access to the internet can write or read a blog about almost *anything;* topics

range from technological to cultural, political, and personal blogs. Finding blogs to read only

requires typing a few key words signifying some interest(s) into an online search engine and

exploring the depths of the web. According to Blog Pulse, an online search engine, which is

programmed for trend discovery of blogs, as of 2011, over 175 million of them have been

identified (this number grows by approximately 87,000 blogs daily)[1]. Creating and managing

blogs is becoming the fastest increasing medium of individual web publishing and mode of

personal expression on the internet. Additionally, authoring, commenting on, and reading blogs

may allow individuals to share viewpoints, seek information, gain knowledge, and create online

connections (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Savolainen, 2010).

Researchers have called for analysis of relationships among bloggers and blogger

behavior in relation to intention and actual blog performance (Miller & Pole, 2010; Liao, Liu, &

Pi, 2011). According to Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robinson, and Weigel (2006), a

participatory culture emerges when members of a community become participants in each

other's realities, feel that their contributions matter, and socially connect with one another.

Ultimately, my thesis will add to the scholarship of how blog participants communicate in a

---

[1] Statistics found from http://blogpulse.com/, October 30, 2011.

online participatory culture.

In this study, I have analyzed a sample of a self-ascribed "online community" of healthy living blogs (also commonly referred to as fit blogs). Through collection, description, and interpretation of the cultural information in the discourses occurring on healthy living blogs within a blog network, my goals were to discover how notions of healthy living are expressed and reveal how the discursive practices ultimately inform meaning to participants. By utilizing a cultural perspective to study the language and social interaction of blog participants, I hoped to figure out if and how social support is enacted and/or negotiated between bloggers and commenters. My analysis includes description and interpretation of communicative content from bloggers and active blog readers. Although lurkers, blog readers who choose not to comment on posts or other readers' comments, may be part of a blog community, it is not in the scope of this project to understand their motivations or communication practices. Using an ethnographic approach and Cultural Discourse Analysis assists in theorizing community creation, maintenance, and real life value of online communities in my sample (Witteborn & Sprain, 2009). Next, I will briefly discuss why I decided to study blogging as a communication practice and I will present the research questions in this thesis.

Blogging as Everyday Communication

Since 2004 scholars have shown evidence of the "development of weblog communication practices and community-forming effects of blogging" (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005, p. 2). There is also growing evidence that because blogs are both a genre of communication and a social technology, social structures are cultivating around them (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008; Efimova & Hendrick, 2005). In this sense, blogging is a way for people to connect to one another and they are able to reach and maintain these connections efficiently and at almost any time through web-

capable communication technologies such as smart phones, pads, and portable laptops. Thus, greater numbers of people can congregate in these online spaces and form social networks or structures (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005). As a part of a communicative practice, blogs support self-expression and computer-mediated interactions through features such as links and comments (Herring, Scheidt, Wright & Bonus, 2005). By linking to other blogs or websites within an individual's personal blog and by commenting on blogs, people achieve connection with others by sharing similar interests, ideas, and feelings in a particular online space. Additionally, blogs are a social technology that allows users to make and maintain group membership (Chin & Chignell, 2006). Efimova and Hendrick's (2005) analysis of shared links (indicating mutual interests) between blogs established that actual bloggers (in their sample) expressed feelings of group identity and affirmatively recognized their blog community. Also, Hallahan (2003) suggested that consistent interactivity with others using communication technologies is a communicative and relational process that is essential to establishing online relationships.

With these principles in mind, I contend that blogging is a new way to accomplish everyday communication with others by engaging in frequent and consistent dialogue. Expressing the self, maintaining connections, sharing information with others, recognizing a group identity, and having consistent interactions are prominent components in many face-to-face relations. These components are occasionally also part of everyday interactions (even with strangers). Still, the degree to which the components above are realized in any interaction vary; the same is true for interaction on blogs (i.e., some individuals may only read the blog without commenting (lurking), while other readers decide to frequently comment on blogs and interact with bloggers in some way). Since these communicative acts occur in natural face-to-face communicative settings and also online on blogs, I suggest that blogs are another way of

3

participating in everyday two-way communication.

According to Chang (2009) and Savolainen (2010), blogs represent empathic communities which enable individuals to solicit and provide social support and informational support; yet, they differ from online forums and chat rooms because they emphasize sharing experience and opinions, not only seeking health-related information (Savolainen, 2010). Blogging not only provides an opportunity for an exchange of information, but the setting of a blog and the practice of commenting on a blog also enables participants to tap into the health benefits of having social support from others by reinforcing existing connections or creating new ones (Cocciolo, Mineo, & Meier, 2010). Since thousands of new blogs are created every day, continued exploration of their appeal, understanding the significance of participating (reading or creating) on a blog, identifying characteristics of a virtual community on a blog, and examining its functional elements are important steps to enhance knowledge of this communicative phenomenon.

My research questions for this thesis are as follows:

RQ1: What is being accomplished through participation (authoring and commenting) on the sample of Healthy Living Blogs (HLBs)? What, if any, are the social functions of blogging about and commenting on healthy living for the participants?

RQ2: Does this network of healthy living blogs exemplify characteristics of a virtual community?

RQ3: What, if any, are the key symbols used to communicate social support?

RQ4: What does being "healthy" and "unhealthy" mean to the bloggers and blog participants? What are the discourses used to communicate these meanings?

By asking these questions, I wanted to identify the cultural structures, or specific vocabularies,

4

which are commonly understood by and available to participants in my sample of HLBs (Carbaugh, 1988). Knowing these vocabularies can help future researchers who are interested in healthy living bloggers and health communication more broadly to recognize how these individuals connect to and influence one another. This information is useful to other researchers because it reveals the cultural logic of people in this group, which can help health professionals and health-related organizations better understand the needs of these individuals and market health-related information or products to them. With these research questions, I focus on interactional sequences that position the practice's cultural nature and significance to the community of healthy living bloggers,; this suggests how participants are drawn to and support one another. Moreover, evaluating these communicative patterns reveals which behaviors are rewarded or looked down upon for an online community of individuals who are interested in healthy living practices. My general research questions are based on the assumption that communication constitutes social realities. Furthermore, everyday communicative acts are laden with symbolic meanings and cultural commentary. In this sense, when people communicate, they express, in some fashion, significant meanings of identity, emotions, relationships, and ways of living (Carbaugh, 2007).

The second chapter of this thesis will represent a comprehensive history of blogs, discuss the urgency for studying the communicative practices on blogs, introduce some connections between health communication and social support, explain how individuals experience a sense of community, present characteristics of a virtual community, and review Cultural Discourse Theory. In the chapter following, I will establish the method used in the analysis, describe the sample, and explain how I collected data. In the fourth chapter, I will present my complete analysis of the discourse within the three healthy living blogs in my study. Lastly, my discussion

chapter will include my interpretations of the findings and review implications and limitations of this study.

Chapter II

Literature Review

The What, How, and Why of Blogging

Blogs come in all shapes and sizes; they vary in design, content, consistency, audience, and media features. This type of website features dated entries that express one's feelings, thoughts, experiences, or activities. Blog text includes personal elements such as emoticons, personal images, individually stylized blog design, and particular personality or tone of the content by the blogger; also, blogging is a form of web publishing that exists within a public space and connects text fragments within the blog to other web text (Jacobs, 2008). According to Chin and Chignell (2006), a blog fuses "document and person," as blogs "link hypertext networks with social networks" (p. 1). Blogs typically have an author-driven personality behind them and share a basic format, but they may differ in goals, uses, or writing styles (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005). The narration of an author's feelings or contemplations constitutes a blog personality and, at least part of, an online identity (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005). Through the act of blogging, an author may both be "writing oneself" through the consistent diary-like recording of life events and "rewriting oneself" by linking to other bloggers, interacting with blog readers, and/or creating or maintaining an online community (Harris, 1995).

Blogs are generally classified into one of two styles, largely based on content: (1) the original filter-style, where bloggers curate and share links to other websites and (2) the more personal-style (Blood, 2000). The focus of the former type, which first appeared online in 1988, is on the assembly of links with access to information to serve a specific interest (Blood, 2000). By 1989, the second type, now immensely more common than the first, emerged with a greater emphasis on journal-like writing (Blood, 2000). Increased use of the personal-style has been

attributed to development of free software that allowed individuals to construct, design and publish personal blogs with ease. In addition, software such as Blogger has enabled (and continues to enable) people to design a website without many technological restraints and publish anything about anything (Blood, 2000).

Although these two blog types (with possible smaller subgroups within each type) are relevant to the history of blogs (Herring et al., 2004; Lovheim, 2011), a more recent development combines features of both types. Presently, a type of blog that is increasingly prominent includes both diary-like posts and link to a larger blog network, allowing participants to connect to one another and foster a network of like-minded individuals who share common cultural discourses. Furthermore, in this type, there is the capability for, and perhaps appeal of, two-way communication for users. This two-way communication occurs both by bloggers linking to bloggers and through bloggers and commenters interaction; thus for the purposes of this thesis, I will describe this third type as "two-way communication blogging." To illustrate a possible scenario of how individuals participate in two-way communication blogging, I will provide the following example. At any point, one blogger (A) decides to start a blog that focuses on theme "X," and (A) writes in a style that focuses on some feature(s) of "X." Blogger (A) does a web search and finds Blogger (B), who writes similarly about theme "X." Blogger (A) continues to narrate feelings, thoughts, and experiences related to theme "X," and may now embed links to Blogger (B)'s blog (since the discovery of its comparable content) or include Blogger (B) on (A)'s blogroll (a list of blogs read by Blogger A). Since both of the bloggers are linked to one another and share common interests (theme "X"), they may interact with each other in the public domain of either blog's comment sections.

Bloggers and blog participants of this third combination type have access to and

manipulate various media features (e.g., inclusion of images, search widgets, archive folders), but the format (having posts with date and time stamps presented in reverse chronological order, which establish the expectation of updating) of all blogs in this type remains consistent, (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Additionally, a combination of links (i.e., to other blogs, websites, or for other internet navigational purposes) are generally dispersed throughout content text and in blogroll lists (i.e., separate pages for lists of and active links to a blogger's other favored blogs or useful online information resources). The comment section on specific posts enables conversations with blog participants and embeds the blogger as a participant in a social network (Miller & Shepherd, 2004).

Bloggers are not simply categorized by the types of technological features (e.g., images, types of pages in addition to the homepage, plug-ins) or by the subject content of their blogs, but by how they communicate. Jacobs (2008) suggests that what constitutes a blog is "the space for blogger-reader interaction through the comments, the act of blogging itself, and the social context in which the blogging occurs" (p. 2).It is in this space that blogging, as a social practice, achieves social functions of everyday two-way communication. In essence, analyzing two-way communication on blogs is possible because information is posted in a public sphere and bloggers' opinions, perspectives, and discussions are constructed naturally (i.e. without a researcher and a controlled study). This type of interaction, I claim, is similar to everyday communication between interacts seeking to share or gain knowledge (in the form of opinions, perspectives, discussions).

Researchers have found that "much of the interesting interaction occurs in comments left by bloggers directly on a post of another blog," which indicates that readers have read a blog post and want to offer feedback to or engage with the blogger (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007).

Jacobs (2008) suggest that "blogging transcends space and time in that bloggers and blog readers from around the world are able to share texts, comment on those texts and together build new texts" (p. 3). As previously suggested, these practices are illustrative of conversations and interactivity on blogs. The dialogue that occurs within an interlinked network of blogs may enable the formation of relationships and extend communication to offline situations, and it can rouse the possibility of influencing members and maintaining a community (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007). Members may become influenced to have a particular attitude, belief, or act on something based on the responses of the majority on some issue, or based on rewards or penalties communicated, through the comment sections or on the blog posts. Therefore, by understanding how bloggers interact with commenters and others bloggers, researchers may gain insight into how meaning (specific to a topic, subject, or concept) is made in larger blogger network or community.

Various reasons for an individual's formation of or participation on a blog have been researched by communication scholars (Blachard & Markus, 2004; Miller & Shepherd; 2004), and in my study, I note the action of self-expression and community development as two salient themes (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). Self-expression on a blog functions as an intrinsic motivation and is served in narrative form through self-disclosure, self clarification, and self validation of bloggers' own perspectives and experiences. The extrinsic functions of a blog include self-disclosure for community building, relationship development, and social control (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). By incorporating a comment feature, linking to other blogs, and managing relationships through commentary, blog authors are able to increase audience participation and create connections (Miller & Shepherd, 2004).

According to Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht (2004), blogs take form as object-oriented

communicative activity. Using activity theory in their study, the researchers found that blogs are virtual manifestations of people's efforts to enact diverse social motives; features such as comment sections and content of the blog communicate specific social purposes (interaction and self-expression, respectively) to blog readers (Nardi, schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004). The objects that may motivate bloggers are numerous, and they include documenting one's life, expressing emotions, cultivating and validating the self, accessing information, conveying ideas, expressing or seeking opinions, and forming and contributing to a social environment (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004). As I have found and will discuss in my final chapter, understanding how blog participants in a particular social network achieve self-validation points to the associated meanings about health for that network..

In addition to understanding the discursive and social functions of blogs, it is important to consider them as "a communicative act situated in a technological as well as social context" (Lovheim, 2011, 5). Lovheim (2011) characterizes personal-style blogging as disclosure of certain types of experiences through social conventions (i.e. if you are a woman, you will most likely blog about feminine topics such as fashion, beauty, children, etc.). However, studies show also that as the communicative channel of blogging transforms (e.g., following technological advances, broadening of scope, and increasing international use), so do the pragmatic accomplishments of bloggers. For instance, bloggers may have started a blog purely for self-expression and later progressed to full-time blogging for income in response alternative needs (Lovheim, 2011). Moreover, blogs are "not a closed world, but part of a larger communication space in which diverse media, and face to face communication, may be brought to bear. . . .[they] are completely social in nature" (Nardi, Schiano, & Gumbrecht, 2004, p. 4). In the next section, I will present literature from a communication perspective, which proposes an exigency for

studying both blogging as a discursive practice and the actual discourse that occurs on blogs.

The Exigency for Studying Blogs

The discursive practice of blogging combines multiple elements of human needs: to express identity, to obtain community membership, and to temporally structure life experiences. "Blogs can serve as a lens to observe the way in which people currently use digital technologies and, in return, transform some of the traditional cultural norms—such as those between the public and the private" (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008, p. 67). Some scholars argue that the power of an online community is the blurring of public and private spheres (Gurak & Antonijevic, 2008) because even blogs that are created for smaller audiences as private disclosures are available to the entire public.

Blogging has been described as a "public sphere phenomenon" which positively impacts the ways in which the American public engages multiple communication and democratic processes (Gunter, 2009). Opportunities for contribution of information or voice to blogs are almost endless; upwards of 26 million Americans blog, and over 90 million read blogs (Miller & Pole, 2010). Many blogs are updated multiple times throughout the day in order to keep readers engaged. Additionally, bloggers use hyperlinks to increase site traffic to their own blog, provide access to relevant information for readers, or browse similar blogs (Kenix, 2009). Hence, a collective of voices blogging on a particular topic offers a channel for public dialogue on some relevant issue to the collective.

Blogs support a public two-way conversation in a number of ways (Ali-Hasan & Adamic, 2007); the conversational exchange between communicators is public because it occurs through a free and accessible channel. Evidence of public dialogue occurring within the blogosphere is evident because bloggers typically read and participate on other blogs, bloggers use blogrolls to

12

highlight the blog network of which they are part, they embed links to other blogs and websites (called citations) within posts, and, many bloggers occasionally feature guest bloggers (Ali-Hasan and Adamic, 2007). These discursive practices may allow individuals to reflect, construct or modify ideas, and perhaps have access to new world views (Jacobs, 2008). As a result, these allowances can be entry points into a participatory culture that moves individuals from being "passive consumers to being content creators and thus participants in wide ranging public discourse on a variety of topics" (Jacobs, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, Moretensen (2004) suggests that blogs are "a new narrative," and within them cultural conflicts have the capacity to become personal, subjective, and understandable as worlds become interconnected and "a new public sphere, the digital public" emerges (heading 3, paragraph 7).

Since blogs enable participation in a public dialogue about innumerous topics, it is important to consider the possibility of shifts in understanding or value of public issues as a result of blogging. The social role that blogs play connects not only people but also connects ideas. Changes in social issues, such as political views and human rights, or changes in trends, such as popular fashion and communication technologies, can also be studied by understanding the perspectives of a group of people who actively publish or participate on these issue or trend related blogs. Gunter (2009) suggests that marginalized voices with social issue or trend concerns have the ability to become more "public" and less "private" as less mainstream practices (i.e. alternative health care, alternative diets, single parenthood, etc.) are popularized through blogs (Gunter, 2009). The consistent attention to formerly "private" practices is a key contributor to social change because as more information is exchanged between people, more people become informed and involved with a trending, but previously more private, issue (Gunter, 2009). This shift in blogging intention by an author may be indicative of a shift in what

13

a collective (or perhaps an online community) considers important to talk about.

One example of this might be seen on blogs about healthy lifestyles. How the bloggers talk about health through posts and interactions with other blog participants can reveal their perspectives on what it means to follow a healthy lifestyle, which may be alternative to mainstream media's messaging (e.g., "Living a life fueled by healthy food and fitness"[2] versus "Look better naked!"[3]). By assessing the organization of information and cultural structures from the bloggers' perspectives, researchers can better understand if and how collective definitions and goals on blogs eventually translate into or influence public values. Although this project does not seek to completely understand to the complexities of the dominant public narratives on health of the mainstream public sphere, I believe there is significance in what occurs within a small sample of blogs because they become sites for articulating new discourses or understandings about health. To advance the sections of this project, it is important to link this project to the discipline of health communication and review common meanings of health.

Health and Social Support

According to the World Health Organization (2006), the most enduring definition of being "healthy" (for humans) means being in a general condition of physical, mental, and social wellbeing and being free from illness, injury or pain. Numerous factors such as a person's physical environment, lifestyle, gender, social support system, family history, culture, and socio-economic status may contribute to general wellbeing. Achieving and sustaining good health requires continuous attention throughout all life stages. For many individuals in the United States, meanings and practices of staying healthy are shaped both by professional healthcare

---

[2]A tagline from this one healthy living blog, http://www.pbfingers.com.

[3] A tagline on Women's Health magazine's homepage, http://www.womenshealthmag.com.

practices and through personal strategies.

Public health communication scholarship is a field that continuously grows and provides insight into social and communicative processes focused on human health. Communication scholars study how messages are developed, exchanged, and how they influence or create meaning for societies. Studying health through this lens allows researchers to identify influences of human and mediated communication on health issues (e.g., health care delivery, health promotion) (Kreps & Maibach, 2008). For example, in terms of issues of health and wellness, Cocciolo, Mineo, and Meier (2010) suggest that social networks are capable of persuading people to embrace a way of life based on healthy eating and exercise. These scholars indicate that online social networks and virtual communities provide areas for mutual appreciation and an exchange of ideas, which motivates individuals within the networks to communicate or behave in culturally specific ways.

Kreps and Maibach (2008) suggest that interactive health communication technologies (such as blogs) have the power to identify health information needs of a network, disseminate relevant information, and influence information seekers to "take control of their health and healthcare" (p. 741). Healthy living blogs, and other similar social media, have enabled a shift in the public sphere from a "monologue to a dialogue" because anyone can generate content and communicate about health or wellness issues (McNab, 2009, p. 566). Instead of visiting a doctor's office or talking about health in face-to-face settings with others, blog authors and participants generate conversations about health news, foster social interaction, and offer one another a different space to discuss health issues or concerns.

Rains and Keating (2011) suggested that blogging about health is one way that individuals can "marshal social support" and even reap some health benefits (p. 512).

Social support is verbal and nonverbal communication that conveys some emotion or information to reduce uncertainty or stress about a situation, the self, the other, or a relationship (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Walther & Boyd, 2002). Cutrona and Suhr (1992) identified five types of social support: (1) informational, (2) emotional, (3) esteem, (4) social network support, and (5) tangible support; however, Ko, Wang, and Xu (2011) believe that the most prominent types of social support in the blogosphere are esteem support and emotional support. Ko, Wang, and Xu found that validation, encouragement, and compliments were the primary types of social support given by readers and commenters to the bloggers in their analysis. The researchers suggest that these types of supportive responses may help bloggers to have or to boost confidence in their abilities and confirm their self-esteem (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2011). In studying the audience responses to bloggers' content in their study, the researchers also found that compliments, supportive responses, and encouragement boosted the bloggers' health statuses and confidence by confirming their self-esteem (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2011).

Moreover, as Laurenceau, Barrett, and Pietromonaco (1998) suggest, when an individual perceives feedback from a recipient, the rate and extent of his/her self-disclosure may increase and the development of a close relationship may be enhanced. Savolainen (2010) also suggested that in the context of dietary blogs, participants (bloggers and readers/commenters) both give and seek informational and social support. Savolainen (2010) found that journal-type bloggers who shared their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings with an audience gain the positive health benefits of self-clarification, expression, and social support for the self. Therefore, health-focused blogging allows individuals to obtain and give social support by connecting with others (with whom strong or weak relational ties exist); I find the opportunity to study how social support communicated in this context is particularly useful and worthwhile because the two-way

communication occurs naturally on blogs in that it is between blog participants who have "no obligation to enact or feign social support," (Rains & Keating, 2011, p. 515). Literature on connecting with others is highlighted in the next two sections on how meaning is communicated when experiencing a sense of community and when participating in virtual communities.

Sense of Community

In order to better understand what is meant by sense of community, I will first define the term, community, and then I will reference McMillan and Chavis's (1986) four-factor definition. A community[4] is described as a group of individuals with common social, political, or economic interests or characteristics living together in a particular area. However, in the present historical and social context, the concept of community has less geographical limitations since the dawn of the internet. Now, individuals can gather together in a virtual community and share common interests or characteristics without having to be physically close to one another. A sense of community is "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

McMillan and Chavis (1986) suggested that the elements that comprise a sense of community are membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and having a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Membership refers to the feeling of being invested in and belonging to something. Having membership means recognizing boundaries and in-/out-groups. In this sense, boundaries can be used to create cohesion within the in-group and establish protective barriers against those in the out-group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Security, emotional safety, personal investment, and a common symbol system are additional components

---

4   See online dictionary definition from: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/community

relevant to membership (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Influence within a community is conceptualized through four propositions: (1) attraction to a community increases as influential power of a member rises; (2) conformity of members within a community is telling of the intensity of their connections; (3) conformity of members enables an internal closeness and cohesiveness; (4) influence may be simultaneously bidirectional where it is exerted both on the member by the community and on the community by the member (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Consensual validation is a construct that provides some stability to these various pulls of influence. It assumes "that people possess an inherent need to know that the things they see, feel, and understand are experienced in the same way by others" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 11). In essence, a group with conforming behavior is indicative of consensual validation and active creation of group norms by members.

The third element is integration and fulfillment of needs. This component refers to reinforcement membership status, community success, and members' capabilities and attributes (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A strong community, according to McMillan and Chavis's (1986) definition, "is able to fit people together so that [they] meet [each] others' needs while they meet their own" (p. 13). The final element involved in facilitation or deterioration of the strength of a community is having a shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Seven features are significant to this principle: having consistent and frequent contact with one another for closeness; engaging in positive experiences to increase successive cohesion; having closure of interactions and community tasks; sharing valuable events; investing disclosure, time, and energy to community life; recognizing reward or humiliation opportunities; and connecting spiritually (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Since McMillian and Chavis' (1986) original conceptualization of SOC, other researchers have suggested additional important components,

including the community's art, history, and environmental factors (Blanchard & Markus, 2004).

Blanchard and Markus (2004) proposed that place-based (physical) neighborhoods and communities are not synonymous, but neighborhoods may become communities when "an experienced sense of community and community behavior occurs" (p. 66). However, these features, among others, are not limited to existence only within place-based neighborhoods. A sense of community and community behaviors (e.g., giving and receiving emotional, familial, or economic assistance) can be present in virtual settlements with affective bonds (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). A virtual settlement exists when computer-mediated communication becomes consistent and patterned between participants, and a virtual settlement may become a virtual community when emotional connections are made between them (Jones, 1997). However, it has not been completely shown or proven if members of virtual community experience the exact same feelings as members of place-based communities. Some virtual community researchers contend that a sense of virtual community (SOVC) is experienced when participants of a virtual setting have feelings of membership, support and challenge social rules, provide support to others, and experience shared affective bonds (Blanchard & Markus, 2004).

Virtual Communities

Virtual communities have been discussed in communication-based research for the last twenty-five years; and, in this time, millions of people have actively participated in some online community (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). A comprehensive definition of virtual community refers to groups of people who have mutual interests and systematically communicate on a regular basis for some period of time over the internet through a common site (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Reasons for joining a virtual community include the ability to exchange knowledge and information, for social support (i.e., express views and share feelings), and to suggest solutions

19

to community-plaguing problems (i.e. the ability to ask "strangers" online about services and product reviews) (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). According to Stavrositu and Sundar (2008), blogs accommodate a sense of virtual community by fostering dialogue and connectedness with others.

In their analysis of an online community, Blanchard and Markus (2004) found that a feeling of community in a virtual space, or a sense of virtual community (SOVC), is similar to SOC in physical communities; however, divergences from the original understanding of SOC were also reported. Primarily, the researchers did not find prominent "feelings of influence" within their virtual community of study, and they found that "feelings of membership" have a slightly different meaning for virtual participants (i.e. member identity was created within the group, rather than feeling integration to the group) (Blanchard & Markus, 2004, p. 75). I believe the term "virtual community" is important for social reasons because it locates spaces that foster the creation and maintenance of relationships with like-minded others; additionally, participation in online communities may lead to increased offline face-to-face involvement with virtual community members and even offline community activism (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Moreover, the term "community" implies "emotionally positive effect" which can lead to increased participation and sustainability of a virtual group (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Virtual (or computer-mediated communication) groups are similar to Jones's (1997) virtual settlement, or the virtual place in which people interact in a public domain but are not necessarily interacting to fulfill social needs (e.g. creating and maintaining relationships). A virtual settlement might be an online chat space or forum where the purpose is to allow users to interact, gain and exchange information, and share thoughts or opinions, rather than create social connections. Although virtual settlements are key components of virtual communities, in that information sharing and commentary occurs, the social relationships and feelings that develop within the virtual

20

community distinguish it from a virtual settlement. According to Blanchard and Markus (2004), these feelings are psychologically equivalent to place-based senses of community (SOC).

As evinced through this review of literature, there are many interactive features on a blog (engaged both by bloggers and participants) that support notions of a virtual settlement, and thus may support the presence of virtual community. These features include the consistent updating of information by the blogger, comment section for blogger-readers interaction, references to other blog authors in active posts, and creating and sharing blogroll lists. Since bloggers and blog participants interact in a public domain and have the capability to participate in dialogue with one another, it is important to consider the emotional and social effects of this social practice. Ultimately, this thesis was designed to understand if and how my sample of a healthy living blog network shows characteristics of an online community. If healthy living bloggers and blog participants are found to have shared perspectives, are able to meet individual and group needs, construct notions of membership, value knowledge-sharing and influence, and have shared emotional connections, then they may serve as adequate examples of virtual communities for future study. The benefits of knowing that these blogs are virtual communities are gained in being able to then understand how these individuals, who have common interests and characteristics, communicatively negotiate facets of their personal health statuses and what it means to be living healthfully.

Cultural Discourse Theory

Since this project analyzed and considered the communication practices on healthy living blogs as potentially indicative of community with a culture (a common system of symbols and meanings), it is important to understand the framework to be used in this study, Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) (Scollo, 2011). According to Communication scholar Donal

Carbaugh (2008), the idea behind this approach is that "people, in agencies or local communities, are involved in cultural forms of communication" which precede and construct their learned "concepts about and conduct of social life" (p. 56). Using CuDA to answer my research questions illuminated how communication is shaped and practiced by healthy living bloggers and blog participants in my sample by their own guidelines, for their own purposes, and through their own understandings. Cultural discourse analysis comes out of work by linguistic anthropologist Dell Hymes (1972) and Gerry Philpsen's (1997) framework for speech codes theory. Philipsen (1975, 1976) trained Donal Carbaugh after bringing Hymes' original tradition of Ethnography of Speaking (later called Ethnography of Communication) into the Communication discipline. Between the mid 1970's and late 1990's, from the combined efforts of over a dozen scholars trained by Philipsen developed the conceptual framework now known as Cultural Discourse Theory (CDT) (Scollo, 2011). The underlying assumption of this framework is that "speaking and communication [are] cultural systems worthy of study in their own right," and thus fields such as anthropology, communication, and sociology began studying speaking from a cultural perspective through ethnography.

Though I will not cover the history of CDT in great detail (see Scolllo 2011), it is important to note that a major component of CDT came from some of Philipsen's (1975, 1976) and Carbaugh's (1987) earliest works. The conceptualization that continues to remain significant to CDT is that "personhood and ways of speaking intimately interrelated" (Scollo, 2011, p. 9). The grounding work of these scholars explored the metacultural commentary of people while communicating, suggesting that cultural discourses are present in "spoken systems of symbols" (Scollo, 2011, p. 8). Although there are numerous ways to study cultural discourse, CuDA is useful for understanding a specific set of research problems. As people use discourse, they can

22

be doing a various things, even at one time. For instance, communicators may be self-disclosing, engaging in humor, or arguing against something. Cultural discourse analysis illuminates a range of communication accomplishments between people, and connects those to "issues of identity, action, emotion, relationships, and dwelling in nature" (Carbaugh, 2007, p.169). CuDA recognizes the existence of cultural structures and expressions specific to a particular group or community of people in communication. Furthermore, CuDA seeks to first realize the deep meanings of specific terms for communicators in order to understand the communicators' social interactions and realities. It is a goal of CuDA to also identify the communicative sequential forms that occur during social interfaces. In exploring the sequences and acts of everyday talk, cultural discourse analysts can shed light on the cultural characteristics of common interactions.

People often accomplish multiple things while communicating (e.g., discussing the actual subject, notions of who they are, how they feel, etc.), and multiple points of cultural meanings may be present simultaneously. Carbaugh (2007) proposed five "radiants of cultural meaning" to help researchers creatively analyze and interpret participants' values, meanings, and perspectives using a CuDA framework. All five of the radiants are interrelated because they implicate one another and the process of deciphering the meaning of a discursive practice. Who are we and how will we frame our messages to illustrate the positions or qualities we hold? During communication practices, we may be establishing our personal ways of being, identity, membership, and personhood. How are we being associated to those with who we are in communication? Through communication we create and maintain ways of relating to others. Meanings may be embedded explicitly or implicitly in messages about relating. What do we want to do when we are communicating? Oftentimes, we are doing multiple things during a singular communicative practice. Implicit and explicit messages about acting typically identify

the relevance of particular discursive practices to people. While communicating about being, relating, and acting, we also communicate about feeling. We may express those feelings explicitly through affective terms or implicitly through body language. How do we identify places, environment, and meanings about dwelling? By positioning a cultural discourse somewhere during communication, people situate themselves in a distinct social norms or routines.

Various scholars have completed ethnographic studies of communication in order to identify problems and provide knowledge or solutions to "bridge the gaps between different human communities" (Carbaugh, 2008, p. 57). The tradition of ethnography of communication has given people new ways of understanding and being productive in diverse speech communities and agencies (Carbaugh, 2008). Communication scholar Milburn (2009) employed CuDA in her study of two non-profit organizations in urban areas of the United States. Milburn (2009) found that although the definition of the organizations was similar, there were differences in the discourse used by the organizational members. The discourse was closely connected to the community contexts of the organization and had historical meaning; additionally, members used various terms and related membership to local purposes of the organization in order to tie themselves to the local communities (Milburn, 2009). By describing and interpreting the discourse members used in each organization, Milburn (2009) was able to understand the world views of the members and understand the meaning of membership in both organizational communities.

Two examples of ways CuDA has been used to study medical discourses follow. An ethnography of communication by Mackenzie (2005) studied the medical discourses of "Williams Syndrome" (WS) and the discourses of people who live with the diagnosis.

Mackenzie (2005) found that people with WS used a "richly textured and detailed discourse" to describe their senses of being and express feeling "gifted" (Carbaugh, 2008, p. 58). These two radiants of meaning (Carbaugh, 2007) diverged from the medical discourses which described WS as a "disease" and "rare congenital disorder;" the participants in Mackenzie's (2005) study lived together at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy and felt positively about their social realities. A comparable study by Suopis (2002) focused on medical discourse and researched ways women communicate about their experiences and struggles during menopause. Suopis (2002) found that the medical discourses on menopause framed it as flawed, unnatural, and in need of medical treatment. As women navigated through the definitions of this life stage, some of their discourse grappled with the various treatment options and the decision-making process. Others adopted an alternative discourse that rejected the dominant medical discourse's definitions and treatment options and instead communicatively framed menopause as a different, but natural, stage of life (Suopis, 2002). Both of these examples illustrate the influence of a medical community and the power of medical discourse to frame individuals' understandings of medical situations, identity, ways of being, and ways of feeling. Ethnography of communication continues to be a valuable research tool for bridging gaps between the medical community and diverse communities of people (Carbaugh, 2008).

Another analysis that focused on public health discourse was conducted by Carbaugh and Khatskevich (2008). The researchers examined public health campaigns that were created by and designed for North Americans communities but were applied in Eastern European and Asian communities. The researchers found that the definitions of "health" and sub-optimal health in the campaigns and their focus on changing knowledge, attitudes, and practices of the populations were generally effective in North America, but less so in the culturally diverse communities

25

(Carbaugh & Khatskevich, 2008). The specificity of the discourse of "heath" did not translate well into communities where "health was conceived and conducted differently" (Carbaugh, 2008, 59). This study illustrates the importance of understanding "health" in local terms before specialists can identify problems, implement solutions, or suggest best practices when working with specific communities.

I have reviewed the relevant literature on the ever-rising growth of blogs in U.S. American society as a communicative practice that is capable of meeting multiple human needs and substantiating a public dialogue. I have also described some communication research on blogging as it relates to health and social support. Then, I discussed elements of a sense of community and characteristics of a virtual community. Lastly, I explained the conceptual framework that will be used in this project, Cultural Discourse Theory, and provided some examples of scholarship based on ethnographies of communication in diverse cultural settings. Drawing on CuDA, this literature frames the concerns in my study because it has provided me with a preliminary understanding of the cultural logic that underlies the social practice of blogging for the participants in my study. In order to speak back to this literature, I illuminate CuDA concepts from the healthy living blogger discourse to make arguments about the significance of specific key symbols, phrases, and interactions between the participants.

Chapter III

Methods

This project employs cultural discourse analysis (CuDA) to study communication

practices, symbols, and meanings on healthy living blogs. Conducting ethnography of

communication helped me to realize the deep meanings of the social interactions on healthy

livings blogs and make interpretations about different cultural characteristics. Through analysis

of the discourse(s) by bloggers and between bloggers and blog participants, I began to

understand the social functions of participation in this HLB network.

According to Efimova and Hendrick (2005), it is difficult to find a single shared design or

format in blog communities, but analysis can begin once clues have been gathered that "indicate

likelihood of a community presence and assumptions about norms and practices in it" (p. 7). The

website with such clues used for my study is, healthylivingblogs.com (HLB.com), which

promotes the healthy living blogosphere and organizes links to a large network of bloggers who

write about living healthfully. According to the website's homepage, "Healthy Living Blogs is a

website designed to enhance the positive community of the healthy living blog world. Bloggers

and readers can explore the site and find more blogs to love, fellow bloggers in their area, and

forums to deepen healthy discussion and support" (healthylivingblogs.com, 2011). As an aside,

because this site describes its network of users as a community, I will also refer to the HLB.com

community through much of this thesis when discussing this group of bloggers specifically.

HLB.com's homepage suggests that any blog with a focus on health can be part of the HLB.com

community; frequency of posts, content, audience size, and technological features are not

determinants of membership. Alternatively, this community is made up of "everyone, bloggers

and readers alike, who *care* about health [emphasis added]" (healthylivingblogs.com, 2011);

27

hence, a shared understanding of values and attitudes about health sets the precedent for

HLB.com community membership. Blog participants who seek group membership, then, are

expected to illustrate a shared understanding that they do, in fact, "care about health"; however,

the term "health" is undefined on this website.

The three foundational notions of Cultural Discourse Theory, outlined by Carbaugh,

Gibson, and Milburn (1997), are evident when analyzing communication practices within

particular scenes that are constructed by and become a product of cultural discourses. These

concepts are interrelated; signifying each one during CuDA helps analysts to make

interpretations of meaning from the native perspective. A communication practice is "a pattern of

situated, message endowed action that is used in a scene(s)" (Carbaugh et al., 1997, p. 22). I am

primarily interested in the communication practice of participating on a blog, both through

authoring and commenting. The communicative scene refers both the physical settings and the

greater symbolic culturescapes (meanings presumed by communicators) in which

communication practices take place. In this case, the communicative scenes of interest are the

three blogs, Sound Eats, Savvy Eats, and Then Heather Said, and their respective comment

sections. Additionally, HealthyLivingBlogs.com is referenced as a fourth communicative scene.

Cultural discourses stand for the "bigger idea, with symbols nested within codes, and codes

nested within discourses," thus they are thematic and interconnected (Scollo, 2011, p. 14). Codes

are subgroups of symbols and meanings, and meanings are comprised of the beliefs and values

that are expressed during communication. Carbaugh et al. (1997) explain cultural discourses as

"consist[ing] in basic premises about being (identity), doing (action), relating (social relations),

feeling (emoting), and dwelling (living in place)" (p. 22). Essentially, this suggests that deep

meanings of communication practices may be indicative of a people's belief system, personhood,

how they relate to others, how they should feel, and in what place they should live (Scollo, 2011).

In order to say something of substance about the radiants of meaning, Carbaugh (2007) suggested a set of concepts to classify distinct and diverse communication practices during "interpretive analyses of cultural discourses" (p. 178). A word or phrase is a cultural symbol or key term. After locating various symbolic terms within a cultural discourse, analysis of the five radiants can begin. In the fourth chapter, these key symbols will be seen in text as direct quotes with quotations (i.e., "confessions" and being "healthy"). Take for example the phrase "strong connections" found on the "About" page for healthylivingblogs.com, the site highlighted earlier which promotes and organizes a blog network devoted to bloggers and participants interested in healthy living. This phrase is deeply symbolic within this blog network, as evidenced by its prominent placement on the "About" page; however, locating the meaning of the phrase requires understanding the common cultural resources or ways of talking about the social practices norms of blogging in this network. .

When cultural terms are combined into statements, Carbaugh (2007) calls them cultural propositions or premises. The arrangement of the key terms is illustrative of the common, cultural ground on which people interpret meanings. Cultural premises are reflected on during interpretation to "capture and explicate taken-for-granted knowledge…believed to be part of common sense [of the participants]" (Carbaugh, 2007, p. 178). An example from healthylivingblogs.com illustrates a cultural proposition: "Healthy Living Blogs was designed to enhance the already tight-knit, supportive community of the healthy living blog world." This statement has a number of key terms that signify the common cultural resources used by bloggers and participants in order to maintain and participate within this network. The terms

"already tight-knit" and "supportive" signify that bloggers inherently understand that a "community" exists and membership is valuable.

Another concept is called semantic dimensions, it refers to meanings falling on a continuum or having two-values. Identification of semantic dimensions is important to gauge where people communicate themselves to be in relationships, feeling, acting, dwelling, and being (Carbaugh, 2007). A example from the same website illustrates semantic dimensions on the "About" page: "Find new blogs that blow you away. Find new inspiration. Find people in your geographic area to meet and encourage and support you in real life." The semantic dimension, "online/offline," suggests that although connections are first made online through this blog network, they can also be transferred to "real life" or offline places. Some connections may solely remain online, but the capacity exists to move relationships on the continuum and experience connections in face-to-face settings.

The final concept Carbaugh (2007) described is the norm, an established meaning of proper conduct between communicators (e.g., what action is permitted or prohibited). Some discursive norms found in most blog networks include recognizing that the blog authors have the authority to control content of the blog, show or remove commenter feedback, and steer personal conflict through private messaging which keeps it off the blog (Boicu, 2011). Additionally, having netiquette, or e-politeness, is part of adhering to the norms within a blog network (Boicu, 2011). Netiquette refers to both bloggers' responsibilities to post relevant and expected information and to the audience's evasion of "blatting" (publically posting private correspondences with the blog author) (Boicu, 2011).

The general design of this project adheres to Carbaugh's framework for generating and evaluating cultural discourse analyses. In regards to the above said tenants, modes of inquiry,

30

and concepts, I used this project to theorize about the communication practices of healthy living bloggers, describe them in detail, and interpret their significance and value to the chosen of bloggers and blog participants. Using CuDA as an investigative lens provided me with a particular process to follow for my study. In order to understand deep cultural meaning of a communication practice, I contemplated what has to be believed or valued in the context of a conversation in order for a contribution to have meaning for participants. Since the prevalence of blogging in U.S. American contemporary society has been discussed, I revere it as a communicative practice that is recurring and meaningful for the purposes of this project. Although other discursive practices may be simultaneously taking place within the blogs I analyzed, I feel that understanding blogging as a central communication practice was the first step in this process.

Sample

In order to obtain a sample for this study, I wanted to begin from a perspective based on a possible point of view of a person from within the culture; my goal was to imitate a potential online search for an individual interested in healthy living blogs. I chose three blogs from the website, Healthylivingblogs.com because it showed up as the first website (and was often followed by two to three related domain links) after typing "healthy living blogs" into three popular internet search engines, Google, Bing, and Yahoo. The HLB website provides a plethora of blogs from which to choose and they all meet one criterion: "any blog which focuses on health" (healthylivingblogs.com).

Although the list of blogs who are affiliated with this network is lengthy, I selected the blogs of the three administrators of the website. These bloggers are listed on the right-hand side of the site as "Team HLB." Three images and short bio-blurbs of the founder of HLB and two

other administrators appear under ten available tabs on the website (i.e. Home, About, Advertising, Blogs A-Z, etc.) of the site. These three women are bloggers themselves and each bio-blurb includes a link that redirects users to their individual sites. I selected these bloggers because as administrators of HLB, they are partaking in a unified effort[5] and more likely share an understanding of its meaningfulness. Thus, the discursive practices that occur on each blog are hypothesized to share some interest, purpose, and significance grounded in their joint endeavor of managing HLB.

I began with the blog authored by Lindsey, the founder and main administrator of HLB. Her blog, created in October of 2009, is titled Sound Eats. The tagline for Sound Eats, found directly under the title, reads, "Practicing the art of being in tune with one's health." On her "About" page, Lindsey writes, "Sound Eats is a place where I focus on various health topics and recipes." I analyzed all of Lindsey's blog posts from November 1, 2009 to January 31, 2010. On average, Lindsey published posts one to three times per day. The second blog I studied is authored by Julie and is titled Savvy Eats. Julie started blogging in September 2009, and her tagline states, "All about smart food and fitness." Julie's "About" page imitates this tagline, "My philosophy in life is "Smart Food, Smart Fitness, & Smart Life" (she goes on to explain her values and routines to achieve optimal health in these three categories). Content analyzed on Savvy Eats was posted from April 1, 2010 to June 30, 2010. Julie did not publish as many posts as did Lindsey; I have recorded an average of fourteen posts per month. The last blogger in my sample, named Heather, created Then Heather Said in September 2009. Heather's tagline suggests readers should "Make one healthy decision (now make another)." In her "About" page,

---

[5] See healthylivingblogs.com "About" web page: "Healthy Living Blogs was designed to enhance the already tight-knit, supportive community of the healthy living blog world."

she wrote, "Then Heather Said developed as Heather Shugarman ran her way to the bright side after her broken engagement, finding a healthier lifestyle along the way. Through her dedication to make one healthy decision, then make another, she has lost 40 50 pounds (and counting)." Although Heather also does not publish as frequently as Lindsey, she surpasses Julie and provided one post per day over three months.

It is interesting to note some distinctions in the way each blogger addresses their own identities and motivations on their respective "About" pages. Lindsey explicitly recognizes Sound Eats as a social medium in which she will focus on particular topics. Julie makes an effort to establish her blog as a place to share her philosophy. Conversely, Heather has two active links on her "About" page; one offers "The Short Story" and the other is "The Long[er] Story." In the shorter version, she writes in the third person on her to perhaps signify the chronicling of her private life in a public space. The longer version provides greater detail into her "healing process," where she recounts her broken engagement, weight loss journey, and her challenges with cooking for herself. Even though each blogger has some part in management of HLB and meet the one criterion of the HLB network, idiosyncrasies in blogging style are definitely observable.

Data Collection

Although two bloggers started their blogs in September 2009 and one started in October 2009, I purposefully chose three different periods of time (three chronological months of content) per each blogger. I selected November through January 2009 for Sound Eats, April through June 2010 for Savvy Eats, and February through April 2011 for Then Heather Said in order to find and use data from each year since conception of all three blogs. The three months and years are different for each blog to avoid limiting my claims to an isolated period in time. In

this sense, I wanted to find out if and how interactions between the three bloggers were occurring at different times in the last three years. To collect data, I closely read each of these blogs and took note of relevant blog posts and comment sections. The criteria that I used included evidence of frequent patterns of interaction between blogger(s) and commenters (i.e., on which posts do bloggers receive the most amount of comments, and what happens in these comments?), facets within any of Carbaugh's five radiants of meaning, references to "community," discourse surrounding meanings of "healthy" and "unhealthy," and signs of other distinct key symbols (i.e., the terms and phrases that were recurrent and meaningful to the blog participants). In my observation notes, I chronicled numerous blog attributes, from each title, to each blogger's name, conception year of the blog, months studied, publishing frequency, and taglines. I organized my notes on separate Excel spreadsheets for each blogger and in order to make "descriptive and interpretive claim[s] of a practice that actually occurred and features of it that are culturally significant" (Scollo, 2011, p. 16).

Next, I reviewed each "About" page; this was an important step to evaluate each blogger's personal motivations for blogging (if openly stated) and establish some sense of the blogger's identity. Then, I observed and described the integral features and structure of discursive codes on the blogs by noting discursive patterns, blogging norms, recurrent terminology, narrative themes, and any striking commentary on the blogs. For example, on one of the blogs I consistently read about focusing on "health in terms of balance and general wellness;" this caused me to remark on the significance of these cultural symbols and evaluate its possible prevalence on the other two blogs. My goal in this process was to gather enough data to make warranted interpretations of the discourse, conversations, and social interactions on the blogs to the bloggers and blog participants. I accomplished this through careful evaluation of the

important symbols, cultural premises and propositions, semantic dimensions and norms from the perspectives of the bloggers and blog participants.

In order to understand the implications of discourse on my sample of healthy living blogs, I organized data fitting dimensions of Carbaugh's (2007) five corollaries: being/identity; acting/doing; feeling/emotion; relating; dwelling/living in place. Then, I looked for patterns and recurrent language used by the participants; in contemplation of the discourse, I was able to form interpretations of what the social functions of blogging are to these individuals and why they are important. According to Scollo (2011), positioning data into the appropriate premise provides researchers with an understanding of "cultural discourses that invoke, and are invoked by, particular communication practices" (p. 17). By understanding the patterns and frequencies of certain key symbols, I gained insight into how the communication practice of participation on a blog results in the formation of a particular cultural discourse with its own norms, rewards, cultural logic, and implications for participants. Although I was not necessarily seeking to critique this blog network, my final chapter discusses implications of and paradoxes found within the content, or discourse used, on these healthy living blogs.

Chapter IV

Analysis

As posited in first chapter of this thesis, I believe Cultural Discourse Analysis (CuDA) is the appropriate methodology to answer my research questions. The first thing I will show that I discovered regarding my sample of the healthy living blog (HLB) network was what is being accomplished through participation (authoring and commenting) on these blogs. Additionally, I will discuss the social functions of blogging about and commenting on healthy living for the participants. CuDA was useful in answering my first two-part research question because it helped me identify patterns and cultural characteristics within the discourse(s) on all three blogs. Extracting key words, cultural premises, and semantic dimensions from the blog posts and comment sections allowed me to answer my first research question about what is being accomplished on the blogs. By focusing on Carbaugh's (2007) categorical radiants of meaning, I found that discursive practices of bloggers and blog participants on Sound Eats, Savvy Eats, and Then Heather Said most clearly illustrated the key meanings within the dimensions of acting, being, and relating.

The Social Functions of Blogging about Healthy Living

Acting

The first dimension I will discuss is communication as action. This radiant of meaning seeks to understand what people, or in this case, the bloggers and commenters, are doing when they communicate with one another. Meanings of communicative action can be interpreted from the implicit and explicit messages about actions, accomplishments, conflicts, and engagements. I found that communicative action was prominently displayed through the recurrent cultural symbol of "confessing" or publishing "confession posts." Each of the bloggers published

36

numerous "confessions" and "I bet you didn't know" style posts. The types of content within the context of this symbolic style of posting were personal self-disclosures by the blogger. As generally defined and understood, a confession is an admittance of some wrongdoing, often done in religious practices. This definition matches the bloggers' use of the term because by posting their confessions, the bloggers (and even the commenters who shared their confessions) admitted some lapse in healthy living; for instance, one "confession" regarded overeating and not minding balance and bodily cues of satiation (Then Heather Said). Since the blog participants gather in these online spaces to share common interests and characteristics surrounding the topic of healthy living, when they feel they are at fault for being "unhealthy" or if they have committed an "unhealthy" offense, they use "confessions" to alleviate some stress, negativity, or uncertainty about themselves or the situation in which they find themselves. This concept is exemplified in confessing feelings of negative body and pessimistic self-talk , which is contrary to the promotion of self (and other) support and encouragement of the healthy living blog community[6]. Generally, the commenters responded with praise (for the blogger) for revealing the private thoughts, feelings, and experiences; on multiple "confession" posts, commenters also shared their own "confessions."

On Lindsey's blog confession is explicitly labeled as a key communicative action; she purposefully titles numerous posts (over the course of the three months read for my analysis), "Confession of SE." This post title became a weekly theme for her because she published posts in this style consistently for more than a month. On two different "confession" post days, she wrote, "I have two random confessions for you this morning. …I was extremely nervous putting that post out there, because it's obviously immensely personal and personal is one thing the

---

[6] http://healthylivingblogs.com/about/

internet is usually not," and, "I very much struggle with self-image as of late. I also wonder if my body's appearance will ever mimic how I feel." In scanning the comment sections her readers responded with affirmations for her "confession" and praised Lindsey for sharing her personal feelings, writing, for instance, "I am so glad you made that confession!" Following Lindsey's "confession" of gaining weight, a reader commented, "Oh Linds…I'm so proud of you for posting about this, because I think honesty is the best thing for the blog." The pattern of understanding and sympathetic responses from audiences to the primary blogger continues in the examples below.

The key symbol, "confession," is used by Julie in numerous posts as well: "I have a confession to make. I have been cheating on my beloved Breakfast Quinoa," and,

> In what is perhaps my most vulnerable post yet, I'm going to confess something to you all today. Though I strongly support Caitlin's Operation Beautiful movement, I haven't been applying it to myself. In fact, I've had some serious body image issues for the past few months… Worrying about what I just ate or how I veered from my training plan isn't going to help me feel strong or healthy. Nor is worrying about my weight or how I look. So I won't. I'm just not going to let myself be upset about it.

This post received thirty-nine comments, which were sympathetic to Julie's "confession." Comments included, "I love this post, obviously! I think it's so wonderful when people realize that there are more important things in life than forcing/struggling/fighting w/ yourself to be something," and, "You are amazing for figuring this mentality out so early in life. It took me well into my 20′s but truly I find myself in better health and shape just by taking it easy on myself and not obsessing." In her confession, the blogger challenges her own feelings of insecurity about having poor body image, and the comments function to empathize with the blogger and support the notion that worrying about body image is not worth the tribulation. A similar arrangement is found on Then Heather Said.

38

Although Heather does not offer "confessions," she has at least two posts that share details about her life offline, which she called, "I bet you didn't know" posts. Though in them she does share personal memories, thoughts, and experience, she does not focus on poor body image or self-doubt, as do the other two bloggers' in their "confessions." Instead, Heather offers insight into her various avowed features and also asks readers to share what she might not know about them. Heather does, however, give her readers a "Peek Inside" three different times where she   posted images of excerpts from the insides of various handwritten offline diaries. This is conceptually similar to a confession post because Heather communicates to her readers that she has a need to come clean, and by sharing the text inside of her offline diaries she is able to share her most personal of thoughts and feelings about herself. She does not usually focus her posts on nutrition, food, or recipes, but does share some of her struggles with body image on other posts throughout the three months I had reviewed.

After Heather admitted that she spends a great deal of time watching television, and she wants to eliminate her hobby as a form of entertainment for an entire week, she received eight comments from readers who also admitted that they engage in this behavior. The commenters disclosed that they appreciated Heather's challenge to herself, and many of them agreed to take the same challenge (watch little to no T.V. for a week), writing responses such as: "Thanks for another entertaining and inspiring post" and "I will do this too! I feel like less of a failure now." These comments speak to the strategy for improvement that Heather offered; the second comment is especially interesting because it suggests that although the reader relates to Heather, the common ground is established on the basis of feeling negatively about oneself (i.e., "a failure"). In both examples, through the admittance of what is suggested to be a negative quality (watching too much T.V.), the blogger receives rewards from the readers because they show her

gratitude for entertainment and information and acknowledge mutuality. The discourse evident in the interactions between bloggers and commenters seen in this section will be revisited in a later chapter to discuss the relationship between communicated social support and health benefits.

Through reading these confessional posts and subsequent comments, I began to infer the significance of the act of confessing for the participants. For many people, experiencing low self-esteem is natural in the flux of everyday feelings; however, the bloggers may experience this disclosure as a lapse in their general motivations as healthy living bloggers to optimistically focus on health. Perspectives on "being healthy" and "being unhealthy" will be the focus of the fourth section of this analysis chapter. Nonetheless, what became apparent to me is that none of the bloggers received negative feedback from the readers for their confessions. In other words, after someone confesses a wrongdoing, a reprimanding response or some form of punishment might be expected. Instead, as I have illustrated in examples above, the comments were appreciative, sensitive, and showed gratitude for the bloggers' communicative action of "confessing" or admitting personal reflective feelings (i.e., on body issues or insecurities). As this analysis section has demonstrated, the bloggers and commenters engage in communication as action through the process of "confessing." The potential motivations confessional style posts are that they helped to relieve personal anxieties of the bloggers, and in some cases, even the readers, while allowing positive and encouraging feedback from others.

Being

The second dimension that became important for analyzing the participants' values, meanings, and perspectives of blogging about healthy living is how they communicate senses of being (Carbaugh, 2007). Identifying this radiant of meaning increased my understanding of how the bloggers and blog participants framed their messages to illustrate their own identity, ways of

being, and personal attributes. Illustrating an actual personality behind the online blog posts cultivates a connection between the blog authors and their audiences, which may ultimately influence these blog participants to construct and maintain a specific association with healthy living practices. Thus, unpacking the qualities the bloggers and commenters communicate about most has the potential to point to some traits for consideration by health professionals when communicating with similar demographics.

To understand the social action of blogging, I believe I had to understand the discourse beyond the posts by the three bloggers Lindsey, Julie, and Heather and also look at the comments offered by readers. In my analysis, not only did I read the posts published by each blogger, but I also thoroughly read each response of commenters. Certain words and phrases were recurrent throughout the comments and patterns were coming to light. There were four key symbols that consistently showed up, including: "being real/realness," being open/openness," "being honest/honesty," and "being strong/strength." Habitually, commenters would either thank the bloggers for "being real/open/honest/strong" or would complement the bloggers on their realness/openness/honesty/strength. In the next section, I will present the key excerpts from all three healthy living blogs that exemplify the discourse used to communicate senses of being "real/open/honest/strong." Also, I will offer some interpretation of the significance of the commenters' responses to the bloggers' high self-disclosure posts (i.e., "confessional" style posts discussed above). Finally, I will discuss how communicating senses of being functioned to form emotional connections between bloggers and their audiences.

Lindsey and Heather shared more of their everyday struggles than did Julie. Throughout the span of time chosen for review of Lindsey's blog, she was struggling with body image issues following weight gain for an unknown reason. In the time frame I chose for Heather's blog, she

was in the process of healing from a broken engagement. On the other hand, Julie was preparing for her wedding and generally shared less of her personal struggles than did Lindsey and Heather. For that reason, there is seemingly less data to use to pull from Julie's blog to illustrate the key symbols, although some of them do appear in the comment sections.

In Lindsey's case, the key symbols, "real/open/honest/strong," were most apparent in the readers' comments to her posts. Being "real" was the one of the recurrent cultural symbols in this discourse. Many commenters expressed that when Lindsey disclosed a higher than average amount of information, she was being real. For instance: "Being real is hard; I applaud your honesty," and, "The blog world is an amazing place. And people like you make it that way. It is so great to read a blog with somebody who is so real." Similarly, Lindsey was applauded for her openness: "I love how open you are being," and, "Thanks for being so open and honest about your weight loss efforts. I'm currently working hard to get back to my goal weight after having a baby and it's nice to follow what others are doing; sharing personal information in the online community. On honesty, commenters wrote the following: "You are awesome and it's wonderful that you are being honest with how you feel," another wrote, "I am so glad you made that confession. I love reading blogs that have that honesty factor because 9 times out of 10, I can relate. And this is definitely one of those cases," and also, "Oh Linds…I'm so proud of you for posting about this, because I think honesty is the best thing for the blog. And no, you're not a hypocrite, you're being you and being honest. It's not a bad thing." In concordance with the above section on the communicative action of "confessing," these comments praise confessions of the bloggers, even when they (the bloggers) feel as if they have done wrong or misrepresented themselves (e.g., "no, you're not a hypocrite"). Again, this is contradictory to the response we typically expect of a confession of wrongdoing, because in these examples, the bloggers receive

affirmations and rewards instead of chastisement. Additionally, the notion of being honest and real on blogs by sharing flaws and mistakes is seemingly valued more than publishing posts on faultlessness and flawlessness.

Lindsey was often described as strong or as having strength by her commenters in reactions to the higher self-disclosure posts. I interpreted the significance of this type of response as explicit ways for the audience to show support and empathy for Lindsey's feelings. For example, one commenter wrote, "What's making my life beautiful? The knowledge that I am strong and capable (like you [Lindsey]) and slowly finding my way after a really tough breakup." Even from the small sample of responses shared above, it is apparent that from the perspectives of the bloggers and their audiences, being "real, open, honest, and strong" are important qualities to affirm for one another. Moreover, the affirmations serve to establish and maintain emotional connections for blog participants. In other words, these key symbols are significant because as the participants engage one another, they share experiences of distress (i.e., surviving an emotional break-up with a significant other), which can strengthen emotional ties and increase feelings of social support within their blog network.

Bloggers Julie and Heather received similar empathic and supportive responses from readers following high self-disclosure and "confessional" style posts. After Julie shared her anxiety over following an exercise regiment, one commenter said, "Honestly, I LOVE this post. Thank you for being so honest with us." Another commented on Julie's strength in her decision to lessen the stress she often would put on herself to follow a strict diet, "You are so strong, and I totally agree with your philosophy. Enjoy your new freedom." In two ways, these excerpts suggest a unified group of people, or community, exists within this context. First, one commenter suggests communicates a sense of relating by using the word "us." Secondly, the

43

acknowledgement of agreement by a commenter (which happens frequently on both ordinary and HSD posts) communicates a sense of being similar to the blogger. Thus, in affirming the blogger, communicating a relationship between participants, and admitting similarities, the commenters' communication may functions to create their own senses of being "real, open, honest, and strong."

Since Heather frequently posted her feelings and thoughts surrounding her break up (a topic to which many people can relate), her commenters took pleasure in her ability to sincerely share her experience. Once, Heather even posted that she "[just wants to] be real, and be encouraging." To this, one commenter wrote, "But I just have to show my appreciation for you. Your blog is so inspiring and REAL. Your no holds barred approach is refreshing in the world of the internet, which has the tendency to be rife with delusion and dishonesty." Another wrote, "Thank you for opening up like this." Commenters responded very positively to Heather's honesty time and time again, writing, "What a beautiful, honest, touching post. This brought tears to my eyes! I wish you the best," and, "Great post, love your honesty!" When Heather shared pictures of her weight loss transformation, commenters said, "Congrats! You look amazing and STRONG," and "You are beautiful and strong, my friend!" Other compliments on her personal posts include, "Thank you for sharing your strength," and, "I absolutely LOVE reading your blog. I think it's partially because I know you're a great person inside and out, but also because you are such an inspiration to me. Thank you for being a strong example to people all around the US. You're wonderful." The frequency of communicating sense of being illustrates the import of participating on these blogs for both the authors and commenters. The significance of the key symbols, "real/open/honest/strong," is represented in the overt and consistent willingness of commenters to verify these characteristics within the bloggers.

Furthermore, this may simultaneously enable the readers to avow the same characteristics within themselves.

As I have discussed, an interesting paradox is that when the bloggers would post their most intimate information, insecurities, or struggles (i.e., showing some weakness) the commenters would fervently respond with compliments of how real, open, honest, and strong the bloggers were. These senses of being of a particular identity and relating to one another communicated throughout the discourse illuminated three things during my analysis. First, the commenters showed support to the bloggers in order to grow emotional connections. Secondly, I interpreted the swelling of amount of comments following disclosure of "confessions" or admitting personal weaknesses as a reward for the bloggers. Huffaker and Calvert (2005) suggest that, on average, personal-style blogs (e.g., Sound Eats, Savvy Eats, and Then Heather Said) are real and valid accounts of people's lives; and in the blogosphere, large readership and quantity of comments are generally measurements of popularity and are valued by most bloggers. Thus, posting about weaknesses (though it may have social support benefits through interacting with like-minded individuals and health benefits as a form of emotional cleansing) gives the bloggers more rewards through receiving encouragement about real accounts of their lives, a greater number of comments, and potentially more exposure. The implication is that if bloggers recognize that sharing more weaknesses results in greater popularity, they may provide more self-critical high self-disclosure (HSD) posts in order to receive affirmations (e.g., "Thank you for being so honest") from the readers. Thus, this community not only responds with social support, but interprets these self-disclosures as signs of strength.

Relating

The third dimension that surfaced from my analysis was relating, which exposed how the bloggers and the commenters communicate associations to and relationships with one another (Carbaugh, 2007). The recurrent discourse used to portray the communicative dimension of relating set up a semantic dimension of online/offline relationships. Cultural symbols such as "blends" and "blendships" (i.e., combinations of blogger and friend and blogger and friendship) were used to describe some of the bloggers' close relationships. The term "friend(s)" was also employed frequently by the three bloggers when addressing or talking about blog readers. Another symbol, "blogger meet ups," was used to illustrate instances where relationships formed online could be transferred to offline spaces. The term "blogosphere" could be interpreted as the online space where bloggers publish and interact. The phrase, "real life internet friends," was used by one of the bloggers as well. These key symbols communicate different ways to talk about relating to one another both on and off the blog sites. The various symbols may hold different approximations of the value or worth the bloggers attribute to their readers and commenters.

In addition to revealing private information about her daily feelings, thoughts, and activities, Lindsey communicatively works to create and maintain a relationship with her readers. She references some of her offline (or "real") friends and relations (e.g., her husband, mother, grandmother, and college friends) on her blog, but she purposefully writes her posts to an imagined audience of others, many of which she most likely does not know offline. She directly addresses the audience in these examples: "Sleep tight, friends," "Good night bloggies," "I probably won't post again until Sunday evening, so I will see you all then," and, "Hope you ladies have a great evening!" The titles given to the readers (e.g., bloggies or friends) signify that

Lindsey denotes her relationships with her readers as friendships. Additionally significant is Lindsey's gender framing of her audience; in the example above, and on multiple posts, she specifically addresses "ladies" or "girls" as her predominant audience. Not once during the three months of blog posts employed for this thesis did Lindsey address or reference an audience of any other gender identity. Besides Lindsey's assumption about the biological sex or gender of her audience, she consistently announces when she is coming and going (e.g., good night, see you all then).Here, Lindsey follows normative expectations in the context of an offline relationship (Burgoon & Jones, 1976).

According to the Expectancy Violations Theory (EVT), expectancies influence people's interaction patterns and assumptions of one another, and they have an effect on whether discursive practices are seen as positive or negative during interactions (Burgoon & Jones, 1976). Afifi and Metts (1998) categorized nine types of expectancy violations typical in close relationships; Lindsey's practice of greeting her "friends" and announcing her exit while reminding her audience she will return corresponds with two types: relationship escalation and acts of devotion. The former EVT type intensifies the commitment of the communicator (i.e., Lindsey communicates her commitment to maintain her online relationships by continuing to post blog posts) (Afifi & Metts, 1998). However, since her consistent greetings and signing off are not required in order to her to maintain her relationships with her audience, Lindsey partakes in an act of devotion, or an unexpected approach to symbolize specialness in the relationships (Afifi & Metts, 1998). The EVT framework is helpful in understanding that communicating about relating is a deeply symbolic and meaningful practice for the bloggers and blog participants. Applying this sociological construct to the communicative practices of these blog participants illuminates that many of their interactions follow expectations, proven by research,

of people in face-to-face relationships and during everyday interactions. This is a useful application because it speaks to the exigency of understanding how these relationships are communicatively negotiated in an online blog context, an online space that is used more and more frequently by individuals worldwide.

Not only is value of relationships communicated through verbally minding coming and going expectation, but it is also explicitly stated by Lindsey in the following two examples: "Because I'm here [blogging] and not in bed, that should speak volumes for how much y'all mean to me," and, "I feel like there are so many wonderful changes and opportunities on my horizon [following her New Year's celebration], and I can't wait to share [them] with you!" Lindsey communicates to her audience that she desires close senses of relating to one another in this instance: "Keep those comments on my giveaway coming! I am LOVING getting to know more about y'all! It's so cheesy – it almost seems like I'm running a bit of an online dating service, but I think it's great to know more about each other!" Lindsey uses the metaphor of "an online dating service" to imply that intimate relationships are possible between the blog participants; this idea also echoes the import of emotional connections between blog participants which are cultivated through being commenting on blog posts, being "real/open/honest/strong," and ultimately "know[ing] more about each other."

Commenters become important in this part of the analysis as well because they regularly communicate to Lindsey that they cherish relationships with her and her blog, Sound Eats. For instance, some commenters wrote: "I swear the optimism you have has rubbed off on me as I've followed your blog! You are just one amazing person!" Additionally, much of significance of communicating relating can be interpreted from the numerous supportive and complimentary comments shared in the above section on the dimension of communicating being. Beyond

publicizing that Lindsey cares about her audience and blog network, she routinely conveys her desires to relate to her cohorts from the blogosphere by meeting more of them offline. For instance, "I secretly wonder what some of my 'online friends' are like in real life." Responses to this post from her readers express agreement with the blogger, as in these comments: "BTW [by the way], I still wish we lived closer so we could go for coffee and a jog. Love you friend!" and, "Me too… but do we REALLY want to know?" After meeting face-to-face with other bloggers, Lindsey shared her experiences, which she identified as exciting and joyous experiences. Prior to a first time face-to-face meeting with one of her readers who is also a healthy living blogger, Lindsey dedicated an entire post to her enthusiastic anticipation, "I get to meet Melissa [name is hyperlinked to another healthy living blog]!" On the post following the meeting, Lindsey recounted her positive experience: "Melissa and I have been blog/ email/ Facebook/ text buddies for quite a little while now, and I was SO excited when I learned she'd be in Gainesville to get going on her new job. I gladly offered up my couch for a couple nights for her."

Even more zeal was expressed by Lindsey after receiving a package from a different healthy living blogger (who also comments regularly on Sound Eats): "I can't wait to meet you in a couple months, Julie [another blogger]!" To this, Julie reacted in the comment section, "Woot, we get to meet in two months!" The interaction between bloggers Lindsey and Julie uncovers that they met through the healthy living blogosphere where they participated in an online relationship, and later, the bloggers met offline and continued their friendship in "real" settings, as well as online. Since Lindsey and Julie started their blogs in 2009 (October and September, respectively) and the exchange above occurred sometime in early winter of 2009, I can assume that their relationship transferred to offline within a few months of online communication and relationship building. As evidenced both through discourse between these

bloggers and within Julie's posts on Savvy Eats, Julie is highly attentive to her audience of readers.

Although much of Julie's content on Savvy Eats during my time-delimited analysis is focused on her wedding planning, she often directs questions at her reader to obtain feedback, advice on wedding planning, and stimulate conversations in her comment sections. She wrote, "Do you want to see more about the wedding planning in the next 6-ish weeks leading up to the big day?," "Anyone have any recipe/snack/meal suggestions for my new dietary challenge?," "I can't decide if it is a good idea for me to start running short distances again, though… thoughts?", and, "How was your weekend?" In the next example, Julie, like Lindsey, denotes her potential readers as her friends: "Have a great weekend, and I'll see you Monday," "Happy Tuesday, friends," and, "Happy Monday, friends! It is a gorgeous day here…hope it is where you are, too!" By greeting her audience consistently at the forefront of each post and by ascribing them to be her "friends," Julie follows expectancies of a close relationship, just as does Lindsey. Julie expresses her admiration for her readers and regularly says she is grateful for information that they share with her. For instance, "Thank you all for your fantastic support and responses to my first truly negative comment. I love my readers, [following an anonymous negative comment on Julie's decision to use store-bought, not homemade, pancake mix]," "I want to take a moment to congratulate everyone who completed the 25 Days of Push-Ups Challenge… way to go! I love the support we were able to provide each other in the comments section of the challenge page," and, "Thank you for your input on my running dilemma. I think I'm going to start out easy and see how it goes, but I'm always open to more of your opinions!" These excerpts signify one of the components of Expectancy Violations Theory I have already

suggested, in that Julie communicates an act of devotion to symbolize fondness of her relationships with her readers (Afifi & Metts, 1998).

Savvy Eats readers are equally as enthusiastic with communicative relating with the Julie, offering devotional messages such as, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY BABYGIRL!!!!! You are an amazing, kind, beautiful person, and I'm so happy/proud to call you my friend" and "THANK YOU for posting about the bake sale and donating. You are awesome. Love you!" Meeting other bloggers offline is enjoyable and productive for Julie; evidence of this interpretation is seen in these excerpts: "We have a Madison blogger meet-up tonight, and I am so excited. It has been far too long since I last met up with all these wonderful ladies," "I met up with Maleah of Cha Cha tea [embedded links to this other blogger's site] at Brasserie V the other day for a late lunch. I was buying a teapot from her, and since she lives in Madison, she offered to bring it to me in person," and, "Also, I'll be visiting my parents this weekend, so if any Minnesotans [bloggers] want to meet up sometime between Saturday and Wednesday, let me know!" Here, Julie suggests that it is possible for bloggers who usually begin a friendship or relationship online to "meet up" and transfer that relationship offline. Therefore, an intentional journey is necessary to move on the continuum from offline to online relationships for bloggers and blog participants; this journey begins communicatively, and I assume that the blog interacts first establish trust, emotional connections, and a sense of relating to one another prior to an offline meeting. This tells us that blogging and online relationships are still valuable and pursued by many individuals.

Heather's blog has similar elements to signify the dimension of relating (Carbaugh, 2007). Heather's communicative relating is evident in her explicit interests in getting to know more about her audience: "I love when THS readers have something to say. I love to read of your opinions. I love to learn more about you. I love to take advice from you. I love your comments!

And I especially love when I can put a face to your name!" Akin to the other two bloggers, Heather also frankly asks readers for advice, "What do you say- can you help me build an awesome playlist?" This type of discursive practice represents Heather's desires in establishing a common ground with her readers and building their relationships. In response to Heather's keen interest in establishing connections, the commenters affirm their value for Heather: "It doesn't take much to change someone's day. YOU, Heather, have changed my day. Thank you so much!" Heather often showed appreciation for her readers' comments, advice, and readership: "I get a lot of feedback from readers telling me that I'm encouraging, and welcoming, and friendly. I want to say THANK YOU!" These kinds of exchanges give insight into the significance of communicating as relating; through regular requests for personal opinions or information and in proclamations of gratitude between this blogger and her audience, there is evidence of different ways to talk about and sustain their intimate relationships with one another.

One of the most distinctive ways in which Heather communicated about her relationships with her readers is through using the cultural symbols "blends" and "blendships." In her blog, Heather habitually embraces the ability to move relationships on the semantic dimension continuum from online to offline; she optimistically talks about "blogger meet ups" and "blendships" on a regular basis because, according to her, these relationships are a large part of Heather's social life. Heather shares with her audience that she felt gratification after meeting new bloggers offline during a planned night out: "I would say the #CDNYEatDrinkBlog New World Bistro Bar meet-up was a great success. I was beyond pleased with every detail of our experience, and am very thankful that I was able to visit such a special location with such wonderful women." In the next excerpt, she clearly attributes meaningfulness to friendships she has made online and maintained offline:

On the drive to New World with Kelly and Julie [names are hyperlinked to these women's healthy living blogs], I started to get a bit sentimental about the blogging community. Through starting Then Heather Said, and becoming active in the "healthy living blogging" community, I have met some of my very best friends; friends who are willing to travel several hours—by plane, train, and automobile—to come and visit me for weekend. I've also gained a strong group of supportive, encouraging, like-minded local friends who I adore so much.

In post after post, Heather communicates her regard of her "blends" to her readers: "Luckily, my blend, Bekah has shared with me a fabulously fun baby gift that is a blast to put together and give! I asked her to share with you guys, too!," "My #CDNYEatDrinkBlog Blends have left quite an impression on my heart in the past six months since the group first formed," "Despite having only run three times since the great fall of 2010, I found myself gathered with some of my favorite local healthy living blends preparing to race," "Just blogged next to two of my very best blends," and, "Just a couple of week left until I conquer a new distance! I'm running the Albany Spring-off 10K (sponsored by It All Changes!!) with a slew of blends on April 30th!" The repetitive and positive framing of the symbol "blends" indicates that Heather holds reverence for her online-turned-offline friends. Furthermore, there seems to consistent evidence that becoming offline friends is advancement from being merely online friends. Being a good "blend" is represented through offering online and offline support to one another, spending time together in offline spaces, sharing information, and making emotional connections. The difference between an online friend and "blend" might be the achievement of an offline meeting and continuing to maintain the relationship both on- and offline.

Commenters on Then Heather Said also communicated about their relationships with the blogger; one commenter wrote, "I follow you on Twitter and I added you on Facebook, but I wanted to say that I just love your blog and perspective. Posts like this make you one of the

people I really wish were my friends." Heather responded empathetically, "Dear Kaley -Let's be "real life internet friends" – okay? :) xo." By explicitly repeating these key symbols throughout her discourse, Heather may be implicitly reaching out to many readers of her blog by suggesting that although it is more complicated to meet offline, the complications can be dismissed in order to perhaps they can meet one day and become offline friends, or blends, too.

By asking for advice from, showing gratitude for, and responding to comments of their readers, each blogger communicated ways of relating to their audiences. A semantic dimension, online/offline is also apparent in these passages. According to Cutler (1996), relationships that are formed online don't always stay in cyberspace. As intimacy and trust grow from communal and reciprocated admissions, the need to meet "online" friends or relationships face-to-face intensifies (Cutler, 1996). The cultural symbol of "blogger meet up" is meaningful for these bloggers as it explicitly signifies an opportunity to develop their online friendships. Although connections are forged between bloggers (i.e., the three bloggers in my sample and their readers, who may or may also be bloggers) through a public medium on the internet, these connections do have the capacity to advance to offline spaces. The examples shared in this section illustrate how the bloggers and blog participants communicate about their relationships with one another. Ultimately, through evaluating how these individuals express their shared interests, signify meaningfulness of online and offline friendships, and describe gratification for one another, I have found that relationships that start online and continue offline are valuable to this blog network.

A Virtual Community

Carefully studying and interpreting discursive content from nine total months of blog posts and their respective comment sections provided me with insight into how blog participants

in my sample communicate dimensions of meaning such as acting, being, and relating. By recognizing the recurrent cultural symbols, semantic dimensions, and key phrases used both by the bloggers and between the commenters, I was able to discern what is particularly meaningful and how it is communicated and understood within this blog network. Specifically, I have a better understanding of the communicative practices used by blog participants to present significant daily activities, identities, and relationships from their perspectives. Through evaluation and interpretation of the computer-mediated communication on each healthy living blog, I found that the discourse was consistent and patterned between participants; thus, each blog can be considered a virtual settlement (Jones, 1997). Moreover, I found that emotional connections were evident in the way bloggers and commenters communicated about one another. Therefore, I suggest not only that the virtual settlement of each blog may also be regarded as a virtual community, but also that the discourse on each blog represents participants' senses of virtual communities in similar ways.

As defined earlier, a virtual community is a group of individuals with similar interests who regularly communicate over a common internet website through some period of time (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Throughout this section, I will offer evidence of how discourse by the bloggers and commenters in my sample functions to exchange knowledge and information, provide social support, and offer advice or solutions for problems afflicting the community or its members (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Additionally, the dialogue in the comment sections illustrates connectedness with one another (i.e., between bloggers and commenters) that may symbolize a sense of virtual community (SOVC). Blanchard and Markus (2004) suggest that SOVC is similar to experiencing place-based sense of community (SOC), in that members experience and communicate a sense of belonging and importance to one another and the group and that they

55

believe their needs will be met through their cooperation as a group. In the following sections, I will show how the discursive practices of the bloggers and commenters collectively illustrate illustrated the four elements of a virtual community—membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and having a shared emotional connection (McMillian & Chavis, 1986)—by presenting excerpts from content on Lindsey's, Julie's, and Heather's blogs and comment sections.

On Being a "Community"

A culturally significant phrase, "community of bloggers," was prevalent in the discourse on all three blogs and most explicitly speaks to the meaningfulness of the online gathering place to the bloggers. In addition, the website that directed me to the specific blogs used in my analysis, Healthylivingblogs.com (HLB.com), is evidence of the connection between what I understand as virtual communities on Sound Eats, Savvy Eats, and Then Heather Said. HLB.com explicitly communicates the nature of its objective on both its "Home" and "Members" pages, respectively: "Healthy Living Blogs is a website designed to *enhance the positive community of the healthy living blog world* (emphasis in original)" and, "The beauty of the healthy living blog community is that it is diverse and there's something for everyone." References to membership, boundaries, and a common symbol system were frequently communicated on the healthy living blogs. For instance, HLB.com provides a specific webpage for members or bloggers who aspire to be members, declaring, "So whether you have a fitness blog, weight loss blog, "here's-what-I-ate" blog, vegan blog, yoga blog, spiritual health blog, wellness blog, or any kind of health blog, you are welcome here." Additionally, this page gives instructions to become a member of HLB.com: **"Once we receive your email request for membership, we will send you a PayPal invoice for ten dollars." These statements are clear examples of membership and boundaries in this virtual community. The cultural symbols "member" and "membership"**

communicate that a sense of belonging is available to anyone seeking SOVC. The process of becoming a member (i.e., sending a request to the administrators and paying a fee) and the presence of the "Member" page represent boundaries between members and non-members.

As stated earlier, Lindsey, of Sound Eats, is the founder of HLB.com, while Julie and Heather, of Savvy Eats and of Then Heather Said, are administrators of the site. Lindsey's discourse during her first musings on a communal gathering place for healthy living bloggers describe her ultimate goal for the website, "It'd also be a great place for everyone to find more blogs with similar interests that they could enjoy. Additionally it could be a good resource for readers and bloggers of other niches to find further inspiration and more information." With this declaration, Lindsey suggests that a single forum with meaningful and consistent interaction (i.e., an online community) can help participants locate other blog users with similar interests and may result in informational and emotional rewards for those participants (i.e., a shared connection, the fourth element in a sense of community) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A few posts later, she wrote, "I'm really excited about this [the creation of Healthylivingblogs.com site], and think it could be a great way to unite our whole blogging community together." In these statements, Lindsey communicates her willingness to exchange knowledge and information with others who have similar interests. More importantly, she states that she believes a "whole blogging community" exists; the frequent use of this symbols suggests that this is one way that the participants communicate a sense of relating to one another by reaffirming that membership to a particular entity is important to them in order to be vulnerable with each other.

Lindsey's readers and commenters responded positively to her aspirations, writing, for instance: "I think this sounds like a great idea, and it gives us new bloggers a chance to really get

our names/faces, etc out there." The commenters exhibit a desire to have some needs fulfilled through consensual validation and positive recognition of their attributes. Besides posting content in the context of HLB.com, Lindsey references community in other posts, such as this one which follows a request to her readers to share their physical heights, "If you didn't share yesterday, please keep sharing your height! It's so fun and makes this little online community a little more personal." Here, she points to the importance of connectedness between blog participants and suggests there is emotional safety in membership to the community.

Julie uses the key term "community" in numerous posts, and many of her statements are indicative of the four elements of feeling a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) and establishing an entity with or in which she feels comfortable being vulnerable. She wrote, "Thank you for all your positive feedback on my decision regarding running. I love how supportive the blogging community is!" Her overt gratitude and her use of the term "supportive" illustrate the shared emotional connection she feels with her readers and fellow bloggers. Julie's statement, "I love that our community finds it fun to go grocery shopping together" demonstrates membership and influence, because she validates the uniformity of the virtual community members (i.e., healthy living bloggers and blog participants) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) who find joy in the activity of grocery shopping in pairs or groups. In another instance, Julie displayed the third element of a sense of community, a fulfillment of needs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) by reinforcing members' capabilities and attributes, "My workouts will be posted here, but I really want this page to be a place for us to all motivate each other. Feel free to leave comments here with your progress, struggles, and successes, as well as encouragement for others in our community!" Taken together, this sample of discourse from Julie's blog establish her sense of community because she directly referenced her blog and the larger healthy living blog network

as a "community," expressed that emotional safety would be present with membership to the community, validated behavior and interests of members, reinforced members' potential to achieve health-related goals, and consistently shared valuable events and acknowledged a shared emotional connection with her readers. As such, Julie's readers also reaffirm her behavior and choices by consistently and frequently posting constructive comments such as, "Nice dress!" "That looks yummy!" and, "Great job on your [bicycling] time!"

Following suit with her fellow bloggers, Heather too employs the symbol of "community" in the next excerpt:

> I'm so happy you commented and I want to assure you that we bloggers really LOVE receiving feedback from our readers – even/especially when a lot of readers are reply with *the same information/opinions* (emphasis added)! I always have said that the community of bloggers/readers has a lot to do with feeling like we relate with one another. Don't ever feel like you can't/shouldn't comment! I'd love to hear more from you.

In the example directly above, Heather suggests that having "the same information/opinions" and feeling like they relate is a positive effect of being part of the healthy living blog community, which is demonstrated by receiving consistent feedback. She also recognizes that one reward of sharing personal information about oneself on Then Heather Said is "feeling like [the blog participants] relate with one another." Essentially, investing disclosure means that the blog participants are reliant on each other for affirmations and support within this community by confiding in one another, despite the fact that the internet is a public medium and the information is open to all web users. Therefore, having feelings of relating to one another and sharing emotional connections are designated as rewards and something to be desired.

Being open about her struggles and success with exercise regimen is considerable part of Heather's blog and her journey to a healthy body. She shares her enthusiasm for running in more races during the sample of posts I read, but she also states her apprehension in paying for race

registrations. Eventually, she reveals that a few other bloggers have contacted her to pay her registration for various races. In response to some seemingly negative feedback (which is not visible on comment section, so it is assumed that this feedback was privately messaged to Heather), Heather writes, "While I'm at it, although some people may believe it's ridiculous that I am not paying my entries myself, I think it's pretty damn awesome that this community of bloggers is FILLED with people with such generous hearts to support one another as we do." Heather uses the symbol "community" to label the group of her supporters; these supporters make up "this community of bloggers," who are in opposition to "some people" who may counter the financial support Heather receives. Thus, by acknowledging a group of people who support other bloggers' monetary sponsorship of Heather's race registrations and people who oppose it, membership (as an element of experiencing a SOC) is implied here. However, this example does not suggest that the people who are challenging her are not part of the overall Then Heather Said blog virtual community; instead, it serves as one example of how unity of participants is negotiated on the blog itself.

Heather also recognizes that others in the healthy living blogger community contribute to fulfillment of her needs, which are both financial and emotional in this case (i.e., identifying "generous hearts to support one another as we do"). Commenters also demonstrate feelings of a sense of virtual community. For instance, one commenter wrote, "Looks like such a fun time! I love that being a member of HLB lets me see bloggers who are in my area. I'm thinking about creating a blogger meet up sometime in the near future." This comment communicates an understanding of a key symbol (i.e., blogger meet-up, as discussed in the section on Carbaugh's dimension of relating) and feelings of safety, in that this commenter can feel secure in the presence of other participants in the healthy living blogger community.

60

On Linking Together

Another way that I believe the bloggers demonstrate components of experiencing a sense of community is through discursively linking to other bloggers' websites. By including active hyperlinks to other blogs on their blogroll pages, bloggers are able to convey to their audience different blogs that they share some connection with or enjoy reading. The "Blogs A-Z" webpage on HLB.com accomplishes this most precisely. This particular webpage offers a seemingly endless list of bloggers who are paid members of this particular Healthy Living Blog community. Heather's blog also provides a list of other bloggers under her page entitled, "Then Heather Read"; on this page, Heather wrote, "I read a lot of blogs. These are just a few of my most favorites." She organized the blogs into the following categories: "Favorite Foodie Blogs," "Latest & Greatest Blogs I've Found," "Friends Who Became Bloggers," and "Blends: Bloggers Who Became Friends." The titles of the categories are most likely topically focused, and in this next excerpt, Heather shares her reasoning for the categorization: "I have FINALLY updated the "Posts" page of Then Heather Read. Here you will find a list of some of my favorite posts written by other bloggers. I truly believe that each and every post I've linked to on this page is valuable in one way or another, and I've tried to organize the list in a way that it can be most helpful to you [the readers]." Thus, even though all members of this community may be valued by Heather, her discursive categorization suggests some level of meaningfulness of the links to fulfill her own needs and the needs of her readers.

Heather also frequently embeds links to other bloggers' sites in the content of her daily posts. In the following excerpts, all of the names of other women are hyperlinked by Heather; the text appears blue and is underlined, which differs from the standard black text in the posts, and

directs those who click on it to another website. For instance, "Why don't you check out A+M's great post and take a moment to vote for *Julie's* recipe. If she wins, her fabulous Clementine Pound Cake recipe will appear in the next Food52 book," "My friend *Tina* is a firm believer in Cookie Fridays. *Tina* celebrates each Friday with a special treat," and, "One of my favorite healthy happy living bloggers, *Heather*, once blogged that 'running is supposed to be hard work and hard work is good for you'" (emphasis added in all examples). By clearly linking to other blogs within the content of her own daily posts, Heather communicates a shared connection and reinforces these members' attributes and contributions to the blog community. Discursive practices such as these are an integral component of establishing a sense of community and expose the feelings of SOVC for this blogger.

Similar to Heather's practices, Julie also embeds hyperlinks (blue underlined text) to other blogs in her content. She wrote, "And apparently, I'm not the only one who feels this way. Both *Ashley* and *Lindsey* have written about similar ideas recently. I think Lindsey said it best in her post today" (emphasis added). However, she does not have a specific blogroll page of bloggers or bloggers which are her personal favorite or may be potentially valuable to her audience, as does Heather. Instead, she offers a page entitled "Press + Elsewhere" where she features links to different social media of which she is part and websites where she has published blog posts or articles. She does include the names of specific blogs on which she has guest posted, which may be interpreted as accomplishing either one or simultaneously both of the following: (1) this practice may work to establish some connection with members in the same community of bloggers interested in health, and (2) this practice may be a sign of self-promotion. Although I do not have precise evidence to provide a definite explanation of this practice, my interpretation is that Julie's decision forgo a blogroll page reflects her motivations to promote her

own contributions as a blogger. However, through careful evaluation of her blog over three months and as many examples of content from her blog and comment sections have illustrated, I believe I have provided adequate evidence to suggest that being part of an online community (i.e., experiencing and fostering opportunities for a SOVC) is one of the social functions of participating on healthy living blogs. It is interesting to note that Lindsey does not have a blogroll page, nor did she mention or hyperlink to other bloggers in the entire three months of content which I used for this study. In her comment section, I did take note of a particular interaction, however, in which in-group/out-group membership is communicated between Lindsey and a reader. Hallie, the reader in this example, prefaced her first-ever comment with "De-lurking!" in response to a question about the nutritional value of lentils. Lindsey responded with, "Hey Hallie, thanks for de-lurking!" Lurking refers to reading blogs without commenting on posts or openly interacting with other readers. Although lurkers may consider themselves invisible parts of a blog community, their choices to exclude themselves from the comment sections may make it more difficult for blog participants to include them in their senses of community. The above interaction is significant because it implies that one reader has crossed a boundary to become a visible participant of Lindsey's blog community.

In this section, I have discussed the different ways in which the three bloggers and their commenters communicated a sense of [virtual] community. After establishing that the blog networks were, in fact, virtual settlements because the communication was patterned and consistent, I was able to recognize that the discourse was also indicative of meaningful connections. The connections communicated explicitly and implicitly between bloggers and commenters pointed to the presence of interrelated communities; reviewing content from the website healthylivingblog.com also directed me to this conclusion. Thus, the answer to my

second research question, "Does this network of healthy living blogs exemplify characteristics of a virtual community?" is affirmative. I was able to make interpretations of excerpts from blog posts and comment sections to support the manifestation of senses of virtual community by recognizing discourse about membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Social Support

In this section, I will relate my findings to the ways social support was communicated on the healthy living blogs by the bloggers and the commenters. I found that the quantity of comments doubled or tripled when the bloggers published confessional style posts; I refer to this content as having high amounts of self-disclosure (HSD). Generally, these posts are atypical from the bloggers' usual styles of describing daily activities, meals, or exercise routines and are indicative of some personal apprehension or vulnerability. The discourse used by the bloggers displays dimensions of feeling or emoting (Carbaugh, 2007), and the feedback from the commenters exemplifies various forms of social support, or messages conveying information and emotion to reduce the bloggers' uncertainty or stress about something (Walther & Boyd, 2002). According to Petronio (1991), there are five reasons for people's self-disclosure: (1) to express feelings or thoughts to others, (2) to self-clarify personal positions and have them acknowledged by others, (3) to have the self validated and receive esteem confirmation, (4) to develop a relationship and in expectation of receiving reciprocal information, and (5) to control a social situation and have others comply with personal opinions. Additionally, Cutrona and Suhr (1992) identified five categories of social support: emotional, informational, esteem-based, tangible support, and social network support. Principles from both category systems (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992; Petronio, 1991) will be used in the section below to decipher how social support is

communicated and how meaning of high self-disclosure posts is understood and responded to by blog commenters. Since I have established that the blog networks function communicatively as virtual communities, I will now discuss how key symbols were used to represent the blogs as "empathic communities" (Savolainen, 2010) that encourage seeking and giving social support through reviewing interactions on HSD posts by each of the three bloggers.

Akin to the findings from Ko, Wang, and Xu's (2011) study on social support between journal-type bloggers and their audiences, I found that self-disclosure behaviors (i.e., sharing their lives, feelings, and thoughts) of the bloggers to their audiences resulted in social support gains such as self-expression, relationship development, and social validation. This becomes important when evaluating the responses communicated by the readers of the healthy living blogs in my study, as they may potentially encourage the bloggers to feel that many people care about their lives, thereby motivating them to extend the social network, bond with the readers, and continue writing about their healthy living pursuits.

Communicating Vulnerability

For many women, talking about troubles is the "essence of connection," and this communication practice may also build consensus in a group (Tannen, 1990). The bloggers in my study, Lindsey, Julie, and Heather, communicated about their troubles numerous times; as aforesaid, the posts that included a higher level of self-disclosure (HSD) received more comments in response. The content of the comments was almost always related to the HSD and functioned to communicate some level of understanding, sympathy, advice, or encouragement. In reviewing various HSD posts and responses by readers, I found that the most prominent types of social support communicated are emotional, esteem, and social network support. Next, I will

provide examples of HSD content by each blogger followed by examples of key symbols the commenters used to give social support.

One of Lindsey's most personal HSD posts came after she achieved one of her running goals:

> The pride I had felt in myself taking another step in a positive direction immediately shattered and I became irritated and frustrated at myself again.. . .There have also been more issues with numbers that I have been keeping more "behind the scenes" from the blog: my weight. I ballooned. Despite all my healthy habits (balanced, vegan eats with greatly reduced snacking/sweets and working out with cardio and strength around 5 days a week) my weight has not budged. If anything it kept going up.

In this example, Lindsey communicates her vulnerable feelings and personal thoughts on her weight to her readers; she also clarifies that even despite her healthy habits, she is struggling to get her weight under control. To this post, she received twenty-six comments (over double the average amount of ten to twelve), many of which looked similar to this one:

> Girl you are NOT alone- it is sooo easy to get worked up about numbers like that. i've been there many times! i agree with meghann about getting your thyroid checked. i would also get checked for pcos as well. i had unexplained weight gain (lots of it) a few years back and it turned out to be pcos. they have lots of treatments for both thyroid problems and pcos, so the docs should take good care of you :) just remember you are absolutely gorgeous the way you are!!

This comment communicates agreement ("I agree with Meghann…") and provides Lindsey with informational support through suggestions and advice, emotional support through expressing sympathy, and esteem support through relief of blame (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2011). Following the topic from the first HSD post above, on another day Lindsey wrote:

> I wasn't intentionally hiding my weight gain from the blog, but I never made an open announcement "HEY I'VE GAINED WEIGHT". I felt so hypocritical. How could someone who puts all her meals out there on the Internet, someone interested in pursuing a career in nutrition, someone who does enjoy exercising and working out, and someone

66

who's a vegan be overweight? Be gaining weight? If I told my "healthy lifestyle blog" readers that I was gaining weight, no one would read! Of course I'd look like a hypocrite.

Lindsey communicates her motivations for blogging about healthy living but also shares her insecurities with her weight struggle. In a response from a reader, the key symbols "community" and "honest" are used to provide social network support by indicating companionship and esteem support through a compliment (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2011).

> Oh Linds…I'm so proud of you for posting about this, because I think honesty is the best thing for the blog. And no, you're not a hypocrite, you're being you and being honest. It's not a bad thing. I know I have felt like that sometimes when I post about my struggle eating and recovering from an eating disorder, but all you will garner is support and kind words from the blogging community!

Here are additional instances of Lindsey self-disclosing on her body image struggles: "I'm going to the doctor to get checked out....Anyway, all that to say, here is me being open and honest with you. No more black cloud/ secret in SE (Sound Eats) land. I'm not sharing this to garner sympathy and advice, I just want to be open with you all," "I was incredibly nervous putting that post out there, because it's obviously immensely personal and personal is one thing the internet is usually not," and, "I very much struggle with self-image as of late. I also wonder if my body's appearance will ever mimic how I feel."

All of these HSD posts represent Lindsey's reactions to what seems to be an uncontrollable stressful event, and they indicate how Lindsey communicates her feelings to others, clarifies her opinion of herself, opens herself up to be validated and to receive confirmation, develops relationships with her readers through her personal disclosures, and/or controls the situation affecting her life on her blog (Petronio, 1991). Readers' feedback to her HSD includes comments such as these: "I am so proud of you," "I'll pray for you," "I wish I could be there with you," "Hang in there! I don't even know you, and I'm frustrated for you," "I

67

think it is great that you have worked out even though you've been feeling crummy. That is a great accomplishment!" and, "We all know you are trying hard to be healthy." According to Cutrona and Suhr (1992), when stressful events are controllable, they warrant action-facilitating and informational support such as providing referrals or advice. In order to gain control of her weight gain, Lindsey states she is going to a doctor for medical attention (she is seeking informational support). However, in the context of uncontrollable events, such as with Lindsey's feelings of uncertainty of her health state and negative body image due to unexplained weight gain, communicatively diminishing pessimistic emotions and providing expressions of caring, belong, and shared concerns are most beneficial to self-disclosers (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992). Lindsey's commenters are able to provide her with this kind of support, as shown above. These principles are evident in analysis of Lindsey's HSD posts and readers' comments, and they are also evident on Julie's and Heather's blogs.

On one post, Julie disclosed some apprehension about "going back to eating meat after over a month of vegetarianism"; however, she felt that in order to function better in her everyday life, she needed vital meat-based nutrients. Though it was her free choice to share this information, according to Petronio (1991), one reason that she may have openly provided this information is to gain self-validation and acknowledgement of her position, which she did receive from this comment, "You're a smart cookie Julie! Once again I think you're making the right choice! Our bodies know what's best for us!" Later, Julie writes, "In what is perhaps my most vulnerable post yet, I'm going to confess something to you all today. Though I strongly support Caitlin's Operation Beautiful movement, I haven't been applying it to myself. In fact, I've had some serious body image issues for the past few months." This excerpt is a clear example of HSD, and Julie both expresses her personal feelings and leaves room for others to

68

reciprocate understanding of or experiences with similar feelings. Supportive comments from readers include: "As I said on Saturday, I so support you here," "I really liked your entire post–I even linked it in my 'essay,'" and, "What I wanted to say was I cannot agree more. You are so spot on. I feel like we're in a really similar situation and I could use a mindset change similar to this." These comments illustrate emotional and esteem support because they express similarity of emotionally challenging experiences, intimacy through explicitly sharing those experiences with one another on the blog, and compliment Julie's disclosures.

The key symbol "support" was used in one of the above examples and is also used in comments following Julie's post on her decision to stop running for exercise after becoming injured: "As a non-runner, I fully support your decision =) I felt the same pressure to run, especially since I started blogging." Following a HSD post on Julie's dissatisfaction with the look of her arms and her call for a 25-day push up challenge to get into better shape, commenters demonstrate social network support by indicating available access to other companions: "I'm really proud of you for this decision! The healthy living blog world is full of runners, but there is so much more to physical fitness, and so many other ways you can be fit!" and, "This is so cool! I'm a new blogger looking to connect with others about fitness and healthy eating, this is such a great way to get started!"

Heather's self-disclosure is similar to Lindsey's in that she shares her personal insecurities with her body, but differs from Julie's in that the extent to which Heather grapples with these insecurities is more frequently voiced. Heather demonstrates control over the topic of her blog and the comments generally relate to what she writes; in this sense, the blogger may perceive her blog as her personal quarters which readers are invited to enjoy (Ko, Wang, & Xu, 2011). Boyd (2006) suggests that readers of blogs are regarded as guests and are expected to

show respect by behaving in a friendly manner in the comment sections. Though this proposition holds mostly true in all comment sections of all three bloggers (Julie did have one negative comment by "Anonymous" following a non-HSD post), Heather's guests (i.e., readers and commenters) seemed to me most friendly because of the high quantity of comments and the supportive language the commenters used. However, Heather did not only solicit social support through her HSD posts, but also frequently provides social support for readers. She communicates general constructive and positive messages without explicit requests from readers, and her posts often include uplifting suggestions for both herself and any readers who may desire social support.

Some of Heather's HSD content looks like this: "I feel like I deserve to be beautiful, which is something I didn't always give myself permission to believe for myself. . . .The truth is, of course, that I was always beautiful, at every size, no matter if I adorned myself with jewels, gloss and glimmer or not; even if I didn't realize this until now." She gives her readers an opportunity to validate her feelings, but she also confirms her own opinion of herself and communicates a positive outlook at the end of the post. Heather follows this pattern of disclosing insecurity followed by a constructive statement on two different occasions: "And while I'm confident in myself, my personality, who I AM, I'm not at all confident in how I LOOK...I wish I had a magic pill to offer others [and myself!] when these feelings of "unbeautiful" sneak up on us. I am confident that we all feel this way from time to time," and,

> Sometimes, my "trying to do my best" turns into "hanging on by a thread." I lose all ambition in kindness, and find myself not quite able to even TRY to be nice. I get a lot of feedback from readers telling me that I'm encouraging, and welcoming, and friendly. I want to say THANK YOU! I also want to tell you that although I try to make kindness a priority each and every day, it's not always as easy as it may seem.

In all of these excerpts, Heather discloses personal standpoints on body image, confidence, and kindness which foster intimate relationships with others; this is evidenced by commenters' willingness to share that they think similarly and are willing to disclose reciprocal information. The reciprocal nature of investing disclosure also functions to establish and maintain trust between the blogger(s) and readers or commenters. On a foundation of trust, blog participants can build intimate meaningful relationships that have the capacity to transfer offline and continue developing face-to-face.

Heather often communicates her weight loss and exercise goals to her readers. One day, frustrated with her running time, Heather ranted on her discontent. On the next day, Heather responded to a reader who tweeted (i.e., posted on the social networking site, Twitter) some encouragement to the blogger. Heather wrote, "Alex is right. I do have the power. Here comes happiness," which received eighteen supportive comments. Within this context, one commenter said, "With the weather lately (and your injury-related setbacks) it's so understandable that your running hasn't been where you'd like it to be. Yes, you totally have the power to change it, and that's awesome!! Can't wait to hear how it goes." Another wrote, "Heather, I am so proud of you!! I can't wait to run another race with you! <3 <3 <3." Both of these comments illustrate emotional support by expressing understanding, encouragement, and esteem support by relieving Heather of blame for a slower-than-desired running time. As a result of this particular outcry of support from her readers, Heather provides them with social support by encouraging them to "chase and find their wishes" and confirms that, "I [she] believe[s] in you." Heather's readers validate her abilities and efforts, and she reciprocates by communicating her value for them ("I believe in you") and cheers them on in her posts. Again, these comments may be evidence of the reciprocal nature of an intimate relationship or friendship between blogger and blog participants.

Additionally, the comments may represent the negotiation of the semantic dimension of online/offline relationships. Since the commenters receive encouragement, emotional support, and esteem support by the blogger, these primarily online relationships may be understood by both parties as similar in meaning to or expectations for close relationships that are primarily offline.

In order to prepare and train for various races, Heather creates and shares her running, on which she receives these supportive comments: "Love you and your running and your race schedule, you can do it," "We've all been there. Kudos for realizing the power is in your hands," "GOOD LUCK! You're so close and going to do amazing :) you know where to look if you need some help getting pumped up <3" and, "That is so awesome! Such a good idea to leave yourself notes. Way to go, girl!" Heather again reciprocates by telling her audience, "Make a wish, make it a dream, go get it," and, "What are you waiting for? GET CHASING! I'll be right here, your Wish Cheerleader, toe touch, pom-poms, glitter and all. I believe in you." Here, Heather is notably reinforcing her readers' capabilities and attributes by sharing valuable events with them and recognizing opportunities for reward (i.e., greater quantity and quality of interaction when support is given by and provided for readers).

These discursive practices also represent some of the elements found in a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Engaging in discussions with her audience by going back and forth between soliciting social support and providing it shows that dialogue is occurring between this blogger and her readers. Furthermore, Heather seems to be gaining positive effects of expression and self-clarification by disclosing her inner feelings and thoughts. Additionally, the content of her HSD posts gives readers a prospect to develop a relationship with her by sharing their experiences and offering informational support (i.e., advice, referrals, and suggestions).

Up to this point, I have provided descriptions and interpretations from analysis of discourse on Lindsey's, Julie's and Heather's blogs. Answers to my first three research questions include the following: the frequently occurring discursive practices by bloggers and commenters on these blogs fit into Carbaugh's dimensions of acting, being, and relating; the discourses illustrate that participants avow themselves as members of a virtual community, both within the context of each blog and within the context of the larger blog network, Healthylivingblogs.com; social support is communicated reciprocally by bloggers and commenters, which may foster close relationships between participants. Finally, I have discussed possible reasons for high self-disclosure posts and provided examples of instances where the bloggers and the commenters communicate social support to one another. My final research question asks, what does being "healthy" and "unhealthy" mean to the bloggers and blog participants? In the following section, I will provide examples and interpretations of the discourses found on the blogs used to communicate these meanings.

Understanding Healthy and Unhealthy Living

First, it is important to note a semantic dimension (Carbaugh, 1987) of being healthy/unhealthy is prevalent on all of the blogs. Although each blogger strives to live healthfully, unhealthy behaviors or practices are often acknowledged and discussed. It seems that the healthy/unhealthy positions on the continuum are polar opposites, but these points may be conjointly experienced on any given day by all blog participants. Another semantic dimension is having one's body feel on balance/off balance depending on how much one has exercised, the amount and kinds of food one has eaten, the types of thoughts or feelings one has experienced, etc. In the significant posts to be shared below, the bloggers reveal some understanding of being healthy/unhealthy or feeling that their bodies are on balance/off balance and commenters respond

73

to each of their concerns. Next, I will share examples from the perspectives of the bloggers and their commenters on what it means to be "healthy." I will unpack the recurrent cultural symbols and premises used to negotiate meanings of balanced bodies and healthy living; this will include analyzing each blog's tagline, each blogger's explicit definition of being healthy, and references to healthy living in posts and comment sections. Then, I will discuss the most frequently referenced behaviors and practices that lead to "being unhealthy" according to the three bloggers and their commenters. Lastly, though I will largely develop the significance and implications of the discourse in the next chapter, this section will also include some interpretations of the meaningfulness of the subject most important to this virtual community: health.

On Being Healthy

A blog's tagline refers to a phrase or sentence that corresponds with (and is usually visually positioned close to) the blog's title and its theme, standpoint, purpose, or perspective on something. Studying the tagline of a blog can also give readers insight, however minimal, to the blogger's identity and motivations for blogging. All three of the bloggers in my study have taglines that focus on some aspect of health or pursuit of health. Lindsey's tagline reads, "Practicing the art of being in tune with one's health." With this tagline, she may be suggesting that although she is not an expert in healthy living, she is a practitioner of "the art" and may be using the blog as a tool to hone her skills. The word "tune" is perhaps used as a pun to simultaneously reference an art form (i.e., musical tuning) and her attempts at finding balance. The key symbol of finding and/or losing "balance" shows up in the discourses of the blogs repeatedly, including in the taglines. Julie's tagline claims she is "All about smart food and fitness." In her case, nutrition and exercise must be "smart," but there is no reference to how much food or fitness makes a "smart" healthy living blogger. Heather's tagline reads, "Make one

healthy decision (now make another)." After examining Heather's blog in detail and especially after gaining a better understanding of ways she communicates and receives social support, the structure of this tagline fits with her blog's purpose and her ascribed blog identity. In other words, through analysis of her discourse through the lens of social support scholarship, I am able to discern that Heather reminds herself to be positive and supportive of her own body, goals, decisions, etc. while simultaneously offering encouragement and social support to her readers. Her tagline exemplifies this same notion because she both reminds herself and suggests to readers that it is not difficult to make a single healthy choice and then make another.

On each blogger's "About" page provides a clear definition of finding and maintaining a healthy lifestyle from their respective perspectives. Lindsey again uses the cultural symbol "balance" and suggests there are multiple significant factors in her in her definition: "Health is so much more than how we exercise and what we eat. Health is part of those things, but I think being truly healthy also includes spirituality, relationships, happiness, balance and general wellness." For Lindsey, communicating about being healthy is not limited to topics of food and exercise; instead, she previews that she will publish posts on "spirituality, relationships, happiness, balance and general wellness" in order to focus her blog on health, which connects her to a healthy living blog community (i.e., HLB.com). Julie acknowledges a struggle with her health on her "About" page and writes, "I have tried both gluten-free and vegetarian diets in the quest to improve my health and lessen my hypothyroidism symptoms. However, I have found that I feel my best when I eat a little of everything in the world of natural foods." Not only does Julie advocate "smart food and fitness," but she also discloses that eating "natural foods" makes her feel her best. She may be making the argument that processed and unnatural foods are not smart and eating them contributes to overall "unhealthy" feelings and threatening medical

conditions. Additionally, she suggests that gluten-free and vegetarian diets may fit into the

"smart food" category, since she tried both eating styles to enhance her healthiness. Heather's

definition states, "To me, healthy living is not only about nutrition and fitness; it is more than

what you are eating and what kind of exercise you are doing each week." Heather, like Lindsey,

argues that being healthy is more than Julie's idea of "smart food and fitness," although she does

not imply what other factors play a role in achieving or maintaining optimal wellbeing. From

these definitions, another cultural symbol emerges; I am reluctant to call this a semantic

dimension as the terms are not opposite of one another on a continuum, but the two-part

combination of food and fitness is a consistent and significant fixation for these bloggers.

Key Symbols for Healthy Living

Although Lindsey's blog includes some references to her relationships, spirituality, and

happy experiences, the main focus of most of her content is on her diet and exercise regimen as

key ingredients for a healthy lifestyle. The cultural symbols "listening to your body," "balance,"

and "eating clean" (i.e., natural foods versus processed foods) are integral parts of her discourse.

On listening to her body for cues on her wellbeing, Lindsey wrote: "A big part of a healthy

lifestyle is listening to your body and knowing yourself, so I honored what my body was telling

me today," "Listen to your body – it's the only guide you need, and it's your body so it will tell

you what you specifically need," and, "One such amazing thing? The fact that our bodies will

guide us in healthy choices if we listen! After my carb-centered lunch/snacks yesterday, my body

felt off balance and I could really feel my body desiring the wholesome energy that I get from

whole foods." In the last example, Lindsey suggests that eating many carbohydrates resulted in

being "off balance" and her body actually told her that she needed more natural whole foods in

order to retain balance. On a different day, she wrote, "Thank goodness I had that clean lunch to

balance out my less-than-green breakfast and dinner today!" Again, she positions one category of foods against another (i.e., clean foods are green and are better for the body than non-green foods) and in doing so, communicates to her readers this is her personal perspective on having good health and being a healthy individual.

Lindsey also references eating a vegan diet, as "going vegan would assist [her] in an ever-evolving quest for a healthy lifestyle," and she discloses to her audience that she "need[s] to plan better meals and snacks on days that [she] won't be home often." So, although her former discourse demonstrates her consistent and seemingly strong opinion on which foods to eat or avoid, she later acknowledges that she continues to strive for a healthy lifestyle and often questions her diet choices. Ultimately, the take-away from analyzing Lindsey's blog is that to be healthy, one must "just do it [workout], and do it longer" in order to "keep myself on a path to optimal health" and recognize that "the most important things you can do when in a pursuit of healthy lifestyle are to be flexible and prepared." While these phrases were posted on different days, they represent what being healthy means to Lindsey and likely to her audience: health is achieved through balanced diet and a regular exercise schedule. These findings are interesting because they seem to contradict her initial assertions in her tagline and on her "About" page; though an all-encompassing life balance is the principle promoted by this blog on the surface, the content reveals that "clean," "green," and "natural" nutrition and fitness are most important for "being healthy."

Akin to Lindsey, Julie wants to get into fitter physical shape and she is concerned with her diet; in addition, when Julie publishes posts about battles with her diet (i.e. craving foods she does not normally allow herself, which may or may not mean she is listening to her body by giving into cravings), she receives many comments from readers encouraging her to "listen to

77

your body" to be happy and healthy. Few of Julie's posts are purely devoted to her food intake or recipes, but after sharing a decadent recipe for risotto cakes, she wrote: "These [risotto cakes] aren't an everyday dish by any means, but they are a fantastic treat. Why is it labeled "Smart Food," then? Because everyone has room for a fun dish like this in their life every once in awhile!" This excerpt implicitly suggests that being smart about nutrition includes enjoying "fun" foods that may not be exceptionally healthy. Thus, she implies the cultural symbol of "balance" exists in her daily life and gives agency to her readers to not follow "smart food" rules all of the time. She revisits this principle when she discloses her dissatisfaction with her weight loss efforts and suggests that following "rules all of the time" does not work for her. Instead, she states that the better method for her will be: "No 'rules,' no pressure. Just let it happen," but also that, "Consistency is important!" The quality of comments always increased on Savvy Eats following any post featuring diet and fitness related concerns, questions, and doubts. Examples of the most common responses to Julie's posts of the aforementioned types are encouragement and affirmation; commenters encourage Julie to listen to her body as "our bodies know what's best" when it comes to food craving and exercise stamina.

Also seen in Savvy Eats' comment section: "It's so nice to see that you're happy and listening to your body," "I am glad you decided to do what was best for you! Eat what your body wants and it will do amazing things for you," and, "I've gotten really good about listening to my body, and my mind is better because of it." Sometimes, Julie asks her readers for their opinions on a subject; in the next example, we see reader responses to Julie's concerns on whether or not she should start running for exercise: "I completely agree with listening to your body. Do you feel up to it? If you do, go for it!," "I am all for listening to your body, people push so hard and feel this need to be wonder woman all the time," and, "I agree with the others, listen to your

body." The consistency and frequency of the cultural symbol of "listening to one's body" seems more meaningful to this blog network than a specified exercise regimen or particular diet plan.

However, the symbol or phrase is not defined specifically on any of the blogs. I have interpreted "listening to one's body" as meaning a number of different things; it can mean that an individual should be aware of and respond to bodily cues (i.e., eating when hungry, resting from exercise when injured or feeling sore, etc), it can represent how the blog participants account for what they did or did not do (i.e., I did not work out today because I listened to my body and I could not handle it), or it can serve as a communicative defense to absolve oneself from some kind of blame (i.e., I ate a cupcake which was not healthy but I was listening to my body and it wanted to the cupcake). Although the examples I have provided above are not verbatim from the blogs in my analysis, thematically similar statements have been published at some point by all three bloggers, and so my interpretation is based on my experience reading the content. Further depth and understanding of this key symbol will be developed in the discussion section.

Heather's approach on healthy living can be summed up in this statement (which she published): "The best part of the 'make one healthy decision at a time' goal I try to adhere to is that when I make an unhealthy decision, there is no need to do anything drastic; simply make the next decision a healthy one." Her interpretation of health does not include drastic measures, strict rules, or a focus on balance, per say. Instead, Heather understands health as "self-encouragement," "more than nutrition and fitness," and "being reflective." In addition, Heather's discourse reveals a celebratory approach to being healthy: "I want to live the month as most wholly myself as possible. I want to listen to my body, and mind, and heart, and soul every day. I want to celebrate without condition. I want to do not only what I want to do, but what I truly need to do to reach this unrestrictive whole happiness." She employs this same celebratory-style

communication in another post where she describes a new approach to measuring weight loss with her friends: "Instead of calorie counting, or seeing who could lose the most weight in a 6 week period we are focused on certain health goals. We have a spreadsheet where we track our points, which are rewarded for things such as getting 7-9 hours of sleep and consuming 5 or more servings of [fruits or veggies]." Heather is consistent with her motivational posts and encourages her own pursuit of healthiness as well as the efforts of her audience: "Seeing the weight loss progress I have made in the past two years, I felt inspired; motivated to keep working hard to shed the pounds and find my healthy, happy weight." This statement is interesting because Heather suggests that having a specific weight will enable her to have happiness, which seems a bit conflicting with her general cheering mantras.

Although Heather's comment sections do not reveal a prominent use of the cultural symbol "listening to one's body," Heather's discourse includes it in two instances: "I need to learn how to listen to my body, heart and mind more than the "shoulds" in my life" and, "My run/walk interval plan (it's important to note that while this is my plan for the race, I do intend to listen to my body and forgo these intervals if necessary)." In both of these examples, Heather suggests that her body will provide her the cues to do what is necessary and good for her health. The "body, heart, and mind" seem to be telling her the same thing, which is in opposition to the "should," but it is not made clear if the entities she specifies speak in different ways (it would seem that the mind supports the "shoulds" (i.e., I should work out to be fit), but Heather does not offer a clearer explanation of this, nor does she explain how one actually listens to his or her body. Thus, I interpret this statement to be referring to bodily cues such as pain or hunger, emotions such as sadness or happiness, and mental states such as clarity or haziness.

"Food for Fuel"

Since I have established the esteem and importance attributed to "listening to one's body" for optimal wellbeing, it is now important to discuss what the bodies of these bloggers and their readers are asking for: fuel. The cultural symbol "food as fuel" is used over and over again by the bloggers and blog participants; this symbol implies that bodies are machines that require proper sustenance to keep them running. Lindsey uses the symbol most frequently, and she often uses it when she writes about physical performance and exercise. On one occasion, she posted a photo of her breakfast, which was a bagel and captioned it with, "Perfect fuel for a great gym workout soon!" On another morning post, she detailed how she baked a pumpkin pie in the evening prior, and she jokingly wrote to her audience, "pumpkin pie before the gym – good workout fuel, right? ;)" Being "fueled" by "clean" foods provides ample energy and better performance, as seen in these excerpts from Lindsey's content: "I was certainly fueled by green today!" "Eating "clean" for energy/green smoothies and fresh juices as equally energizing as caffeinated coffee," and, "It's official. I am definitely powered by plants." When Lindsey does not fuel her body in the way that her body needs (or tells her), her performance suffers: "However, I can't let the desire for less [food] and the desire to lose [weight] outweigh my knowledge of the fuel I need to perform at work (and other daily functions) well." Many of her readers agree, writing comments such as: "I struggle with extremely low blood sugar issues if I don't properly fuel myself so now I know that I need to suck it up sometimes and eat MORE food despite how badly I want to lose (30-40 lbs!)." In both of these examples, Lindsey and her commenter reveal that they struggle with wanting to lose weight while simultaneously wanting to reduce their food intakes; however, doing so results in improperly fueling their bodies (i.e., not "listening to their bodies" which goes against the purpose of this symbolic message)..

Ultimately, Lindsey communicates her ideology on this subject by stating, "But at its core, food is simply fuel."

Julie and Heather also use the "food as fuel" symbol in their content. Although excerpts from their content are less prolific, they are still significant and contribute to the significance of this symbol to this blogging community. Within the context of a post where Julie disclosed her emotional battles with her body image, she also wrote: "The less you think about making your body look good, and the more you concentrate on 'fueling' your body the better you will look AND feel." This post received a high amount of comments (following suit with my previous note: when these bloggers disclosed more personal information, emotions, or thoughts they received greater quantity of comments) from her audience who communicated agreement with this sentiment. Heather also used the symbol occasionally; in the following instance, she writes about another blogger who wants to share nutritional food items with Heather's readers: "Andrea from Run Eat Date Sleep wants to pass on the supplies to get your run on, with a package of awesome, tasty running fuel!" These statements play into an interesting relationship to food for this network or community of healthy living bloggers.

Despite the bloggers praise a balanced approach to health, which includes multiple features, listening to one's body, and celebrating efforts to live healthily, they post their personal disappointments in their occasional food choices and invite readers to provide emotional social support for 'poor body image days.' Although a healthy diet is a large part of healthful living, the emotional ties to food evinced from the discourses on these blogs indicates that food is more than fuel for these blog participants. In sum, food is something to be celebrated, occasionally indulgent of, and even sometimes a catalyst to negative body image or insecure feelings.

82

On Being Unhealthy

References to "being unhealthy" are somewhat implicitly positioned throughout the discourses on the blogs. In other words, though the bloggers do not explicitly state that eating a particular food or performing/not performing an act is "unhealthy," the meanings are embedded within posts about gaining weight, over eating, not exercising enough, not "listening to one's body," and counting calories as a diet management tool. As I've shown, Lindsey discusses her weight in multiple posts on her blog, Sound Eats. She tells her audience that she does not understand why she is gaining weight despite her honest efforts to eat healthily and exercise regularly. In Lindsey's discourse, gaining weight is equated to being unhealthy, and this is something about which she feels badly. I have shared this excerpt previously in the section on social support and high self-disclosure posts, but it also reveals how Lindsey communicates "being unhealthy:"

> How could someone who puts all her meals out there on the Internet, someone interested in pursuing a career in nutrition, someone who does enjoy exercising and working out, and someone who's a vegan be overweight? Be gaining weight? If I told my "healthy lifestyle blog" readers that I was gaining weight, no one would read! Of course I'd look like a hypocrite!

Not only does Lindsey share her insecurities with her body in this example, but she also positions what "healthy lifestyle blog readers" expect from her (supposedly embodying "health" through a fit looking body) as conflicting with her body type and the fact that she is "gaining weight." Lindsey also discloses instances of overeating and skipping exercise as other "unhealthy" behaviors: "Too much convenience and too many carbs, and not enough greens and sweat," "After my carb-centered lunch/snacks yesterday, my body felt off balance," and, "Today I did one of those things I don't like to do. I ditched a work out. I have no excuse." These food choices, though voluntarily shared by the blogger, are conveyed as having emotional and

physical negative effects on Lindsey's health. Additionally, she also announces her view on other people eating unhealthily: "If you're morbidly obese and your shopping cart is filled with soda, Twinkies, fried chicken and potato chips, I wish you knew more about health and your body." So, having a higher weight from eating processed and carbohydrate-dense foods is equated with being unhealthy; this interpretation seems to contradict the explicit definition of healthy Lindsey offers on her "About" page, "Health is so much more than how we exercise and what we eat. Health is part of those things, but I think being truly healthy also includes spirituality, relationships, happiness, balance and general wellness." The implications of this contradiction will be discussed in more details within a following section.

In analysis of Julie's content, similar types of messages were communicated to her readers. On numerous posts, Julie stressed the principle of "letting go of the rules" for optimal health. Only rarely did Julie state that she was putting pressure on herself to exercise more often or eat a more restrictive diet, at which point she would share these revelations on her blog and simultaneously proclaim that moderation, listening to her body, and being honest with herself and others is how she ought to maintain her health. I found that her readers were of the same opinion, from examples such as this comment: "i agree! all those "plans" that are so widely advertised annoy the crap out of me. we all gotta find our way and make things work for ourselves." When she would not focus on balance and attending to her body needs, her discourse reflected her self-image in a state of poor health.

Heather's blog, like Lindsey's, included some disclosure about her habits of overeating. After sharing with her audience an instance where Heather ordered a large portion of fried, carbohydrate-heavy food for lunch that she consumed in whole, she admitted feelings of guilt and disappointment. These unhealthy behaviors, according to Heather, were old habits. She

84

wrote, "I would ALWAYS order extra. I would ALWAYS stuff myself. I would ALWAYS do it without thinking. I would ALWAYS only do these things when I was alone. It was just something I did." However, she also stated that she has the power to control her unhealthy habits in this next excerpt: "Rereading this honest look into my hidden food habits was a reminder that I can be, and am, in control. It refreshed my acknowledgement that Healthy Living is about making ONE HEALTHY DECISION AT A TIME (then making another)." Here, Heather suggests that balance and being honest with oneself (akin to Julie's proposal) are essential to being healthy; when one loses control and withholds food consumption behavior they are "being unhealthy." The notion of "balance" is reiterated in the reminder of "making one healthy decision at a time," not striving to be perfect in healthy choices constantly. Heather's messages signify that poor health is a result of poor management of dietary choices.

Calorie Counting as a Gateway to Being Unhealthy

Messages on calorie counting are perhaps most pervasive in discussions about "being unhealthy"; two of the bloggers and many commenters disclose that counting their calories resulted in obsession, restriction, and general feelings of "being unhealthy." In one post on this subject, Lindsey provides testimony on seeing someone she knows become obsessive calorie counters, but then she states that she wants to practice counting her caloric intake in order to lose extra weight. She also writes, "Most importantly, while calorie counting you still need to remember proper nutrition and to listen to your hunger cues," and later, "Calorie counting does NOT have to become obsessive and controlling of your life. You are the only one in control." Although Lindsey advocates for this practice, she maintains that having control is essential for good health (as does Heather in the paragraph above). Therefore, to become obsessive and lose control redefines what can be a healthy behavior into an unhealthy one.

An interesting aside about this particular post is that it received an extremely high amount of comments (40), second only to a post where Lindsey was giving away items to a random reader based on responses in the comment section. In the comment section on this calorie counting post, Lindsey responded to ten different comments by her readers who engage in discussion about the controversial topic. I was able to discern the contentious nature of this topic from comments such as this one: "I know a lot of people in the blog world seem to freak about counting calories, but if you need to legitimately lose weight, counting calories is a very effective way to track calories and fat, protein, carbs. Not everyone gets obsessive about it…some people can just use counting calories as the tool that it is." On the following day, Lindsey published a post to affirm her standpoint: "The general consensus is that calorie counting is a personal choice (of course!) but it is good to remember that food is fuel." The cultural symbol of "food is fuel," which represents a "healthy" way of thinking and using food, reappears in conjunction with calorie counting, which is a tool used for good health, but according to the discourse on the blogs, it is notorious for becoming unhealthy. Examples that draw the reasons for this follow in discourse on Julie's blog below.

Julie is the second blogger who publishes on this subject. She discloses to her readers that she did attempt calorie counting in her past, however she also writes, "While it worked and I did lose weight, I didn't feel particularly strong, I was eating a lot of processed "lite" foods, and I was constantly stressed about how many calories I had eaten and how much more I could eat that day." So, although Julie achieved weight loss and possibly looked healthier, her body did not feel healthy. Feeling worrisome and being "constantly stressed" strongly implies "being unhealthy"; consequently, Julie does not seem to advocate for calorie counting on Savvy Eats, nor do her readers. In response to the quote above, a commenter showed support to Julie in offering this

response: "Calorie counting can do so much more harm than good for people if done incorrectly (ahem, waving my hand in the air), so much better to learn the basics of nutrition, exercise and do what makes you feel the best and stick to that." From analysis of Julie's posts on her experiences with this practice and her readers' comments (which share similar experiences and beliefs), I found that the Savvy Eats blog community concurs that calorie counting is usually a delicate subject to discuss and viewed as "unhealthy."

Chapter V Discussion &

Conclusion

From a communication perspective, dialogue is "inherent to the human condition… [it is] a multivocal co-construction of meaning and truth" (Keaton & Soukup, 2009, p. 183); throughout this thesis, I use dialogue to refer to the back and forth communicative exchanges between bloggers and commenters, and between commenters in the comment sections of three healthy living blogs. Since dialogue is important in the process of building trust and a sense of community between individuals (Keaton & Soukup, 2009), and online communities are increasingly relevant in contemporary society (Blanchard & Markus, 2004), it is imperative to understand the how everyday talk occurs and its meanings within online communities. By analyzing the discourse on three healthy living blogs, I was able to explore the significance of participating on these blogs and sufficiently answer my four research questions.

First, I found that the bloggers' and blog commenters' discourse connected to three of Carbaugh's (2007) dimensions of meaning: acting, being, and relating. The blog participants engaged in communicative action through the process of "confessing," they communicated sense of being to cultivate online personalities, and they portrayed senses of relating by referring to one another as friends, "blends," and by discussing important "blendships" (i.e., combination of the word blogger and friendship). Particularly, the participants reinforced characteristics of being honest, open, and real in order to cultivate intimate relationships in which personal information was reciprocally shared between bloggers and their commenters; additionally, paradoxically, admissions of weaknesses were responded to as interpretations of personal strength and were rewarded with positive affirmations and greater quantities of feedback. Elucidating these admissions of weaknesses were responded to as interpretations of personal strength and were

88

admissions of weaknesses were responded to as interpretations of personal strength and were rewarded with positive affirmations and greater quantities of feedback. Elucidating these dimensions of meaning from the discourse suggested that the bloggers and their commenters were communicatively creating and maintaining online intimacy to grow relationships, make connections, and sustain an online community.

My second research question sought to examine the characteristics of the healthy living blog network to identify it as a potential virtual community. Through careful analysis of the dialogue in each bloggers' comment sections, I found that blog participants frequently and willingly exchanged information, provided social support, and offered advice and solutions to one another to foster connectedness, which symbolizes a sense of virtual community (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Being a virtual community is significant because it is a space where "individuals identity with anonymous commenters… [and] attitudes [of users] are influenced" (Walther, DeAndrea, Kim, & Anthony, 2010, p. 471). In this sense, acknowledging the existence of a virtual community increases the likelihood that members of the community will be simultaneously influenced by and exert influence over the cultural logic and cultural codes of that particular community; the strength of influence may be realized in everyday talk or practices in offline spaces as well. To figure out the cultural logic of the blog participants in my sample, I reviewed the discourse for key symbols that communicated social support between them. I found that high self-disclosure posts and comments from readers (i.e., sharing more personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences than simply sharing everyday activities or tasks) resulted in social support gains such as self-expression, relationship development, and social validation.

Moreover, bloggers make discursive moves similar to those that they might make with people face-to-face and in intimate relationships (e.g., providing daily greetings, leave-taking,

89

and apologizing for lapses in posting), consistent references to readers as "friends" and "blends" within posts, and frequent designation of a "community" of healthy living bloggers all speak to the foundation of an "empathetic community" (Salvolainen, 2010). The empathetic online space enables the blog participants to seek and give social support; also, it is through high self-disclosure posts that blog participants communicate personal limitations and struggles in weight, diet, and special relationships, which fosters online intimacy and results in the aforementioned rewards.

Lastly, I wanted to decipher what being "healthy" and being "unhealthy" meant to the bloggers and their readers. When avowing themselves as or aspiring to become "healthy," participants communicated the importance of a balanced perspective and "listening to one's body." Although this phrase was never specifically defined in the discourse (i.e., guidelines were not discussed or offered by any blog participant on how to listen to one's body), the nature of this phrase was recurrent in contexts of paying attention to bodily cues (such as hunger, satiety, fatigue, bodily aches, or cravings for unprocessed, healthy foods) and was used to account for doing or not doing something related to wellbeing (such as going for a run or cutting a run short depending on what the body said to the participants to do or not do). When discussing being "unhealthy," participants referenced calorie counting, obsession, and pushing oneself too hard. That is, altering the body's natural state of balance through physical overexertion, obsessive attention towards caloric intake, expressing a poor self-image, and cognitive avoidance of body cues (i.e., not listening to one's body and not responding to body cues of hunger, satiety, fatigue, etc.) signifies a state of being "unhealthy" for the blog participants. These discursive and actual practices stand on the opposite end of the semantic dimension of being "healthy," where balance and honest attentiveness to the body are key principals.

Although my research inquiries and findings are valuable for enhancing knowledge of the communicative practice of blogging about healthy living, there are additional implications of my analysis that I will now discuss. On the premise that blogging, a discursive practice, is a form of everyday communication, and thus has the ability to build trust and senses of community between individuals, I believe it is important to further unpack the significance of publishing posts about personal insecurities and weaknesses through "confessions" and simultaneously garnering rewards. As active participants of the healthy living blog community, one way that bloggers and readers offer rewards is by affirming or ascribing positive qualities in each other (bloggers to readers and vice versa) following a submission of some weakness, vulnerability, or misstep in everyday healthy living. I claim that rewards in this context include self-validation, connection with others, receiving compliments, and receiving social support—all of which may result in health benefits for the confessor (blog author or commenters who can also confess in the comment section). Weaknesses and vulnerability were generally represented as experiencing poor body image, regret after an unhealthy diet choice, emotional distress (e.g., heart break following the end of a relationship), and personal frustrations with physical limitations (such as with an exercise). Outpours of positive and supportive responses were offered between commenters and bloggers at points when that type of vulnerability was shared; most affirmations featured an ascription of the confessor being "real/open/honest," suggesting that these characteristics are highly valued to these participants, perhaps more so than being perfect or striving for flawlessness (in health, body image, exercise regime, etc.).

Furthermore, the communicative act of confessing weaknesses results in the confessor being told that they are "strong." Although being strong by sharing fragility is paradoxical, this pattern represents one way that bloggers and commenters on these blogs give and receive social

support, which promotes some online intimacy and relationship building between participants who may rely on the community for this type of encouragement. The consequence of confessing to one another is that participants are rewarded for acknowledging that they encountered a misstep in their everyday goal of being "healthy." Divulging this kind of information seems to have a therapeutic effect on participants; the practice of high self-disclosure results both in affirmative responses from some audience (either the commenters if it was the blogger disclosing information, the blogger responding to the commenters in the comment sections, or the commenters responding to each others' comments in the comment sections) and in the cultivation of a cultural logic that reinforces and accepts admittances of weaknesses and credits the confessor to be "strong," which fortifies this behavior as cultural norm. Thus, "confessing" is an integral part of the dimension of relating to one another by collectively and consistently participating in a cultural norm.

The fact that bloggers can acquire income from blogging (such as from accumulating a high number of page views and hosting advertisements), however, makes it possible that there may be other rewards for this behavior. In other words, there is the potential that bloggers may "confess" in order to maintain or increase traffic to their site and make monetary gains. Millions of blogs currently exist and there are many different dynamics of bloggers who may experience rewards in different ways. Still, in regards to the participants in this analysis, I believe the communicative action of confessing supports the claim that the rewards for them are more closely related to experiencing a therapeutic effect from ascribing others and being ascribed to be "real/open/honest/strong" in light of sharing weaknesses and vulnerability related to achieving and maintaining a healthy lifestyle. Although Heather of Then Heather Said did, on one post, discuss the fact that a few of her races were sponsored by other bloggers because she did not

have the funds to single-handedly pay for all of the registrations, no other specific reference to making money came to light during the three months of posts studied. Overall, there was little to no mention of monetary rewards as a direct result of blogging by the bloggers, and instead the discourse is arranged in a way that demonstrates social support and online intimacy as the primary felt rewards by the blog participants.

Additionally, it is important to delve deeper into meanings of being "healthy" both by interpreting implications of the way health is communicatively framed and making sense of the phrase "listening to your body." This key symbol showed up consistently and frequently in both posts by the blog authors and in comment sections by the readers. According to the analysis, listening to one's body is "all we need," it will "guide us if we listen," and doing so will result in happiness. Also, one's mind will benefit from not "pushing so hard…be[ing] Wonder Woman all the time." These examples are a bit obscure in that they do not suggest a specific approach that one should follow in order to listen to his or her body. Consequently, I have determined four prospective meanings of this significant phrase as it applies to particular blog participants in my analysis: (1) listening to bodily cues such as hunger, fatigue, pain, etc., (2) accounting to for how one feels (e.g., happy, exhausted, balanced, or unbalanced), (3) slowing down and accepting limitations (e.g., I did not work out today because I listened to my body), and/or (4) employing a self-help tool to relieve guilt or anxieties about health-related decisions (e.g., I listened to my body and it said that eating a cupcake would not kill me so I ate it). Engaging in any of the four above practices enables blog participants to assess their own well-being at any given time or offer encouragement to others (e.g., I did or did not do this because I listened to my body; It is a good thing you listened to your body and did or did not do this thing).

"Listening to your body" for hunger cues is a dominant message promoted by the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) (2005); the NEDA released a public handout in 2005 that endorsed being aware of what one eats, while still eating whatever and whenever one wants. By giving agency to one's body cues and feeding oneself with proper nutrition when true hunger strikes, the NEDA (2005) suggested that diets and eating disorders could be eradicated. Although explicit references to eating disorders are not found in the discourse of the blogs in my analysis, a connection is present in the data to the NEDA's campaign. The blog participants openly support a healthy lifestyle and to be without an eating disorder is most likely part of the bloggers' overall goals. This is not to say that there is no underlying disordered eating in the healthy living blogosphere; certainly, writing and reading about nutrition and fitness can be triggering to many individuals who strive to live a particular lifestyle or look a certain way. Conversely, my interpretation of the discourse on the blogs is that it is similar to the NEDA's campaign because the participants use the cultural symbol "listening to your body" to represent that a decision has been made to achieve optimal health. Due to the range of meanings of this key symbol, there may be no real guidelines to its exact definition for this community, but it remains an important symbol to continue studying in order to understand how these, and similar, blog participants negotiate understandings of health-related decisions and actions.

Though listening to one's body is communicated as a norm in this community, it does suggest that health is more than assuming a state of balance for these participants. In this sense, even people who are oriented towards talking about healthy living are found to be focused on issues of weight and body image, are highly concerned with diet and nutrition, and frequently discuss exercise as a method to look or feel better about themselves. By consistently responding to diet and fitness related decisions with the indefinite phrase, "listening to your body," the

94

participants suggest that healthfulness is nuanced and dependent on the context of a person's situation (i.e., being "healthy" varies between individuals and it is achieved in people's own ways). Therefore, although all participants share a common interest in healthy living, they also share a common understanding of the challenges in attaining optimal wellness and do not ignore feelings of weaknesses and self-criticism that occasionally occurs in the process. Again, the paradox is that it is through the admission of some violation of what it means to be healthy the participants are ascribed to be strong and receive social support. We see here that admitting unhealthy behavior or having negative thoughts about oneself does not translate to being unhealthy. Instead, through confessions and high self-disclosure the blog participants communicatively enact what is generally considered a healthy behavior, similar to going to counseling, meeting with a therapist, or getting rehabilitation to deal with high stress or life changing events.

An additional key symbol that necessitates attention in this discussion section is that of "food as fuel" or "fueling your body." This phrase seems to contradict the natural process of listening to your body, as fueling something is generally purposive, in that a certain amount of fuel enables some sort of functioning for certain durations. According to Lindsey of Sound Eats, "Food is simply fuel." To combine the meaning of the two key symbols, then, is it possible for the body to call out for fuel? Since natural foods and products are typically spotlighted as healthy and beneficial for the body, I interpret the relationship between "listening to one's body" and "food as fuel" to refer to the need of being aware of whatever one's body may need, such as increased protein intake, more rest, more activity, or even an indulgence of some sort, and proving a natural solution (or fuel) for that need. Natural in this case may represent following an

innate response, consuming an unprocessed food item, or completing a normal feat; by providing one's body with what it needs, the idea may be that the body will thrive or restore itself to health.

Another paradox within the findings illuminated the discrepancy between what the bloggers classified as being healthy on their blogs and what their posts actually focused on. This was problematic because the bloggers specifically identify themselves as "healthy living bloggers" with a focus on health as a holistic, comprehensive condition, yet their discourse reflected mainstream conversations on health (i.e., primarily in shape and losing weight). In review of all of the blogs' taglines, proposals of being in tune with one's health, seeking balance, being smart, and being positive describe each blogger's conception of being healthy. By reading each blogger's "About" biographical pages, readers are left with a sense that the blogs will address healthy living as multi-faceted endeavor, being "natural" (i.e., avoiding processed junk foods and products), and as more than simply nutrition and fitness.

On the contrary, the array of all three bloggers' numerous high self-disclosure posts (or the "confessions") demonstrated fixations on diet, amount or type of exercise, and body shape. Therefore, there is some inconsistency in how being healthy is described (balance, natural fuel, and positivity) and how the journey for healthfulness is communicated on these blogs, since much of the high self-disclosure content depicts bloggers feeling unbalanced in some fashion, having guilt after consumption of an unhealthy food item, and expressing poor body image. The violations that occur here are twofold, and yet, they seem to be the norm in that they are to expected within the discourse of these healthy living blogs. First, the blog participants are violating their own approaches to healthy living. Although healthy living is defined as a multi-faceted, complex state of being, the focus of the blogs is more on responses to nutrition and fitness than any other health factor. The violations are represented in the confession of the

discloser of the action or thought that challenges the particular healthy living definition on each blogger's "About" page.

Secondly, admitting these violations generally contributes to the reaping of health benefits by allowing participants to obtain and give social support, which is a key, recurrent communicative practice of this online community. Thus, the confession becomes expected and is a way to create an online space for participants to build emotional connections, share similarities, offer advice and social support, and validate the self (i.e., by knowing there are other individuals with similar thoughts, feelings, and behaviors).This is important to attend to in future research endeavors because, as the literature on social networks and health suggests, social networks are capable of influencing members to adopt a particular way of life (Cocciolo, Mineo, & Meier, 2010). The above described communicative and behavior patterns do not suggest that the members in this community necessarily influence one another to be "unhealthy," but understanding these practices can help health professionals to more effectively assess the needs (therapeutic, nutritional, and physical) of other individuals with similar characteristics or interests in order to provide best care and help people achieve optimal wellbeing.

Lastly, it is important to consider the consequence of obsessively counting calories and not listening to one's body as being "unhealthy" for these individuals. Feelings or experiences of being unhealthy are insinuated when participants do not listen to their bodies. Also, several posts focused on calorie-counting as being unhealthy because, according to the blog participants, this practice has the tendency to result in food obsession and restriction. The heavy-handed orientation on numbers of calories and not on natural hunger cues was a major turn off for the bloggers and many of their commenters. Although some commenters did state that counting calories provided them with a better understanding of how their bodies respond to different

97

amounts and types of foods, most participants regarded the progression of calorie counting into an unhealthy behavior as inevitable. Another interesting point here is although counting calories could be a weakness to be confessed in this online community, it seems to be coded as taboo because participants communicate a general agreement that it is a practice where one can lose control.

As seen in the discourse of two different Sound Eats posts on this subject, Lindsey suggests that calorie counting is a "personal choice" and more important than counting the calories is the fact that "you still need to remember proper nutrition and to listen to your hunger cues." She also suggests that the practice does not "have to become obsessive," and the comments on a calorie-counting post suggest that "general consensus is that calorie counting is a personal choice (of course!) but it is good to remember that food is fuel." In these excerpts, calorie counting is approaching warily and there were fewer supportive, positive responses evident in the comment sections of these posts; instead, the comments focused more on the opponent viewpoint of this practice. Julie from Savvy Eats described calorie counting as a stressful practice which may have left her feeling less healthy: "I was constantly stressed about how many calories I had eaten and how much more I could eat that day." Julie's commenters responded similarly to those on Lindsey's blog, saying that calorie counting is a difficult practice and even that "those "plans" [calorie counting] that are so widely advertised annoy the crap out of me."

Thus, based on the evidence above, discussing calorie counting as a form of weight and diet control is less likely to result in the normative rewards offered by bloggers and commenters. This topic is taboo and different from the confessions of violations discussed above because it represents a lack of "listening to one's body" and a loss of control. The ability to be in tune with

98

one's body is very significant for the members in this community, and although confessing violations from consumption of a guilt-inducing food or engaging self-criticism are temporary losses of control, choosing to count calories and sticking to "those 'plans'" indicates a loss of responding to what the body asks for or needs because practitioners are focused on numerical caloric intake only.

Conclusively, though there is no direct connection communicated between having a specific body shape and being healthy, for individuals blogging about healthy living their content does include a prevailing concentration on body image, diet, and nutrition. However, it is through blogging and commenting about these issues that the participants form "cultural knowledge" (Bahktin, 1993). Healthy living blog participants emphasize honesty, responsibility, and variances in feelings about their personal health in their health-related high self-disclosure posts and comments, and by responding to the posts and comments in the affirming and positive way that they do, participants embrace their own and others' vulnerability. This process of everyday talk between blog participants creates mutuality within the healthy living blog community (Bakhtin, 1993), which has the ability to influence the participants to understand and employ the concept of health in a certain way.

This implication is important for health professionals, researchers, marketers, and the like who are interested in working with individuals who are have similar concerns, interests in healthy living, and use blogging as a community-building or information-seeking tool. For instance, instead of connecting being healthy to being a particular size or shape, health promoters can use the information and interpretations from my analysis to engage a community by encouraging members to gather together and share (confess) both positive and complex (violations) experiences within their personal journeys toward healthfulness. Additionally,

through embracing personal vulnerabilities, seeking and giving social support, and becoming in touch with one's own reactions to being "healthy" or "unhealthy," individuals and health promoters can better establish what it means to really "listen to one's body" and create more defined guidelines on how to practice this cultural symbol to maintain overall wellbeing.

Limitations & Future Research

There are various limitations to my study. Since I performed a textual analysis and did not conduct interviews with the bloggers or commenters, I was not able to perform perception checking. Hence, my suggestions and answers to my research questions are my personal interpretations as an ethnographer of discourse found on the blogs themselves, not from conversations with the participants. Additionally, although my sample of bloggers represents important figures related to the Healthy Living Blogs website, which assembles and provides access to masses of national and international healthy living blogs, it is small in size (only three blogs were reviewed) and I acknowledge that the findings may have been dissimilar had I chosen different blogs to study.

Areas for future study may include deciphering what "listening to one's body" specifically looks like to healthy living bloggers. This can be done with an ethnographic approach; by interviewing blog participants and perhaps even participating on the blogs, researchers can obtain an insider perspective to this key cultural symbol. Understanding the potential demographic variances of this symbol can also provide insight to what is important when trying to be "healthy" for people of different characteristics, in different locations, and of different socioeconomic statuses. Again, this kind of information can be helpful to health promoters who are trying to connect with or impact individuals already interested in health, but

continue to encounter challenges in their personal everyday journeys or during everyday talk about the issue of health.

Concluding Thoughts

In summary, I have used the theoretical framework of Cultural Discourse Analysis (Carbaugh, 1987, 1999, 2007) in review of the discourse on three healthy living blogs. The blogs were chosen based on the statuses of the authors, all of whom are administrators of a website dedicated to the conversation about healthy living and the organization of healthy living blogs (Healthylivingblogs.com). To collect data I read three months of blog posts and comment section feedback per blogger. I analyzed the data and found various patterns that elucidated the social functions of participating on the blog, how blog participants created and maintained an online community, exchanges of social support, and how blog participants communicated about healthy and unhealthy behaviors. Through my analysis, two paradoxes became clear in that bloggers were rewarded with greater amounts of supportive comments ascribing them as strong when they shared weaknesses, and that the overt definition of health as a balance of multi-faceted features was challenged by a strong content focus on nutrition and fitness as primary tools for being "healthy." These paradoxes beg for more attention by researchers and health promoters alike to better understand the meanings of health and health needs to members in this and similar online communities.

References

Afifi, W. A., & Metts, S. (1998). Characteristics and consequences of expectation violations in close relationships. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 15*, 365-392.

Ali-Hasan, N., & Adamic, L.A. (2007). Expressing social relationships on the blog through links and comments. Paper presented at the International Conference on Weblogs and Social Media, Boulder, CO.

Aoki, E. (2000). Mexican American ethnicity in Biola, CA: An ethnographic account of hard work, family, and religion. *The Howard Journal of Communication, 11,* 207-227.

Ardito, S.C. (2009). The medical blogosphere. *Searcher*, *17*(5), 22-51.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1993). *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Berger, C. R. (1986). Uncertain outcome values in predicted relationships: Uncertainty reduction theory then and now. *Human Communication Research, 13*(1), 34–38.

Blanchard, A.L. (2004). Blogs as virtual communities: Identifying a sense of community in the Julie/Julia project. *Into the Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs.* Retrieved from http://blog.lib.umn.blogosphere/blogs_as_virtual.html

Blanchard, A.L., & Markus, M.L. (2004). The experienced "sense" of a virtual community: Characteristics and processes. *The DATA BASE for Advances in Information Systems*, *35*(1), 65-79.

Blood, R. (2000). *Weblogs: A history and perspective.* Retrieved from http://www.rebeccablood.net/essays/weblog_history.html

Boicu, R. (2011). Discursive norms in blogging. *Romanian Journal of Communication*, *6*(1), 54-62.

Burgoon, J. K. & Jones, S. B. (1976). Toward a theory of personal space expectations and their violations. *Human Communication Research, 2,* 131-146.

Carbaugh, D. (1987). Communication rules in Donahue discourse. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 21*, 31–62.

Carbagh, D. (1988). Comments on "culture" in communication inquiry. *Communication Reports, 1*, 38-41.

Carbaugh, D. (1995). The ethnographic approach of Gerry Philipsen and associates. In D. Cushman & B. Kovacic (Eds.), *Watershed research traditions in human communication theory* (pp. 269–97). Albany, New York: State University of New York Press.

Carbaugh, D. (2007). Cultural discourse analysis: Communication practices and intercultural encounters. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, *36*(3), 167-182. doi: 10.1080/174750701737090.

Carbaugh, D. (2009) Putting policy in its place through cultural discourse analysis. Paper presented at the International Colloquium on Communication, Schoodic Peninsula, Maine.

Carbaugh, D., Gibson, T., & Milburn, T.A. (1997). A view of communication and culture: Scenes in an ethnic cultural center and private college. In B. Kovacic (Ed.), *Emerging theories of human communication* (pp. 1-24). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Carbaugh, D. & Khatskevich, E. (2008). Putting cultural research at the service of operational effectiveness. Presentation the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research's Security Needs Assessment Protocol Seminar, Geneva, Switzerland.

Chin, A., & Chignell, M. (2006). A social hypertext model for finding community in blogs. In U.K. Wiil, P.J. Nürnberg & J. Rubart (Eds.), *Proceedings of the Seventeenth ACM Conference on Hypertext and Hypermedia*, (pp.11-22). Odense, Denmark: ACM Press.

Chin, A. & Chignell, M. (2006). Finding evidence of community from co-citations: A social network analytic approach. In *Proceedings of 3rd IADIS International Conference Web Based Communities*, (pp. 191-200). San Sebastian, Spain.

Cocciolo, A., Mineo, C., & Meier, E. (2010). Using online social networks to build healthy communities: A design-based research investigation. In *Proceedings of World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia and Telecommunications 2010,* (pp. 3107-3116). Chesapeake, VA: AACE. Retrieved from http://www.editlib.org/p/35086

Cutler, R.H. (1996). Technologies, relations, and selves. In L.Strate, R. Jacobson, & S.B. Gibson (Eds.), *Communication and Cyberspace* (pp. 317-334). Cresskill, New Jersey: Hampton Press.

Efimova, L., & Hendrick, S. (2005). *In search for a virtual settlement: An exploration of weblog community boundaries.* Retrieved from https://doc.telin.nl/dscgi/ds.py/Get/File-46041

Fitch, K.L. (1998). Text and context: A problematic distinction for ethnography. *Research on Language and Social Interaction, 31*(1), 91-107.

Fox, S., & Jones, S. (2009). The social life of health information. *Pew Internet, 8.* Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/reports/2009/8-the-social-life-of-health-information.aspx

Gunter, B. (2009). Blogging—private becomes public and public becomes personalized. *Aslib Proceedings, New Information Perspectives*, *61*(2), 120-126. doi: 10.1108/00012530910946875

Gurak, L.J,. & Antonijevic, S. (2008). The psychology of blogging: You, me, and everyone in between. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *52*, 60-68.

Hallahan, K. (2003). Teaching with and about the Internet. In Lynne M. Sallot (Ed.), *Learning to teach: What you need to know to develop a successful career as a public relations educator* (3rd ed.) (pp. 369-374). New York: Public Relations Society of America.

Herring, S.C., Scheidt, L.A., Bonus, S., & Wright, E. (2004). Bridging the gap: A genre analysis of weblogs. *Proceedings of the 37th Hawai'I International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS-37).* Los Alamitos: IEEE Computer Society Press. Retrieved from http://www.blogninja.com/DDGDD04.doc

Hourihan, M. (2002). What we're doing when we blog. *O'Reilly Network*. Retrieved from http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/javascript/2002/06/13/megnut.html

Hymes, D. (1972). Models of the interaction of language and social life. In J. Gumperz & D. Hymes (Eds.), *Directions in sociolinguistics: The ethnography of communication* (pp. 35-71). New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Jacobs, G.E. (2008). Saying something or having something to say: Attention seeking, the breakdown of privacy, and the promise of discourse in the blogosphere. *Fast Capitalism, 4*(1). Retrieved from http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/4_1/jacobs.html

Jenkins, H., Clinton, K., Purushotma, R., Robison, A. J., & Weigel, M. (2006). *Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media education for the 21st century*. Chicago: The MacArthur Foundation. Retrieved from http://www.newmedialiteracies.org/files/working/NMLWhitePaper.pdf

Jones, Q. (1997). Virtual-communities, virtual settlements & cyber-archaeology: A theorethical outline. *Journal of Computer Supported Cooperative Work, 3*(3). Retrieved from http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol3/issue3/jones.html

Keaton, J.A., & Soukup, C. (2009). Dialogue and religious otherness: Toward a model of pluralistic interfaith dialogue. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 2*(2), 168-187.

Kenix, L.J. (2009). Blogs as alternative. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 14*, 790-822. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01471.x

Kreps, G.L., & Maibach, E.W. (2008). Transdisciplinary Science: The nexus between communication and public health. *Journal of Communication, 58*, 732-748.

Langshur, S. (2008). Online healthcare gets personal: Health 2.0 and **the** healing power of supportive communities. *Care Pages.* Retrieved from http://cms.carepages.com/ export/sites/derault/CarePages/en/Press/white_papers/online_health_care_gets_ personal.pdf

Liao, H.L., Liu, S.H., & Pi, S.M. (2011). Modeling motivations for blogging: An expectancy theory analysis. *Social Behavior and Personality*, *39*(2), 251-264.

Liu, X. (2010). Online posting anxiety: Impacts on blogging. *Chinese Journal of Communication, 3*(2) 202-222. doi: 10.1080/1744751003740391

Lorence, D.P., & Park, H. (2007). Gender and online health information: A partitioned technology assessment. *Health Information and Libraries Journal, 24*, 204-209.

Lovheim, M. (2011). Personal and popular: The case of young Swedish female top-bloggers. *Nordicom Review*, *32*(1), 3-16.

Lynch, M. (2010). From food to fuel: Perceptions of exercise and food in a community of food bloggers. *Health Education Journal*, 1-8. doi: 10.1177/0017896910386284

Mackenzie, L.B. (2005). *When words fail, music speaks: How communication transforms identity through performance at the Berkshire Hills Music Academy.* Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

McMillan, D.W., & Chavis, D.M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *Journal of Community Psychology*, *14*, 6-23.

McNab, C. (2009). What social media offers to health professionals and citizens. *Bull World Health Organization, 87*, 566. doi: 10.2471/BLT.09.066712

Milborn, T. (2009). *Nonprofit organizations: Creating membership through communication.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Miller, E.A., & Pole, A. (2010). Diagnosis blog: Checking up on health blogs in the blogosphere. *American Journal of Public Health*, *100*(8), 1514-1519.

Miller, C.R. & Shepherd, D. (2004). Blogging as social action: A genre analysis of the weblog. *Into The Blogosphere: Rhetoric, Community, and Culture of Weblogs.* Retrieved from http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/blogging_as_social_action_a_genre_analysis_of_the _weblog.html

Mortensen, T. (2004). *Dialogue in slow motion: The pleasure or reading and writing across the web*. Keynote at BlogTalk 2.0, Vienna, Austria.

Nardi, B.A., Schiano, D.J., Gumbrecht, M., Swartz, L. (2004). Why we blog. *Communication of the ACM, 47*(12), 41-46.

Nardi, B.A., Schiano, D.J., & Gumbrecht, M. (2004). Blogging as social activity, or, would you let 900 million people read your diary? *Proceedings CSCW, 6*(3), 222-231.

National Eating Disorders Association. (2005). Listen to Your Body. Retrieved from http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org/nedaDir/files/documents/handouts/ListenTYB.pdf

Pandey, S.K., Hart, J.J., & Tiwary, S. (2003). Women's health and the internet: Understanding emerging trends and implications. *Social Science & Medicine, 56*(1), 179-191.

Philipsen, G. (1975). Speaking "like a man" in Teamsterville: Culture patterns of role enactment in an urban neighborhood. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *61,* 13–22.

Philipsen, G. (1976.) Places for speaking in Teamsterville. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *62*, 15–25.

Phillipsen , G. (1987) The prospect of cultural communication. In L. Kincaid (Ed.), *Communication theory: Eastern and western* perspectives (pp. 245-254). New York: Academic Press.

Phillipsen, G. (1997). A theory of speech codes. In G. Phillipsen & T. Albrecht (Eds.), *Developing communication theories* (pp. 119-156). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Ridings, C.M, & Gefen, D. (2004). Virtual community attraction: Why people hang out online. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 10,* 00. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.tb00229.x

Schiano, D.J., Nardi, B.A., Gumbrecht, M., & Swartz, L. (2004). Blogging by the rest of us. *Proceedings CHI 2004*, 1143-1146.

Scollo, M. (2011). Cultural approaches to discourse analysis: A theoretical and methodological conversation with special focus on Donal Carbaugh's cultural discourse theory. *Journal of Multicultural Discourses, 6*(1), 1-32. doi: 10.1080/174471.2010.536550

Stavrositu, C., & Sundar, S.S. (2008). *Psychological empowerment derived from blogging: Is it agency or community?* Paper presented at the International Communication Association Conference, Montreal, Canada.

Suopis, C. (2002). Women's ways of speaking about menopause and hormone replacement therapy: An American disclosure on personhood. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Turnbull, G. (2002). The state of the blog part 2: Blogger present. In J. Rodzvilla (Ed.), *We've Got Blog: How Weblogs Are Changing Our Culture,* (pp. 81-85). Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Walther, J. DeAndrea, D., Kim, J., & Anthony, J.C. (2010). The influence of online comments on antimarijuana public service announcements on YouTube. *Human Communication Research, 36*(4), 469-492.

Warner, D., & Procaccaino, J.D. (2007) Women seeking health information: Distinguishing the web user. *Journal of Health Communication, 12*, 787-814. doi: 10.1080/10810730701672090

Wei, C. (2004). Formation of Norms in a Blog Community. In L.Gurak, S. Antonijevic, L. Johnson, C. Ratliff, & J. Reyman (Eds.), *Into the Blogosphere; Rhetoric, Community and Culture of Weblogs.* Retrieved from http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/formation_of_norms.html

Witteborn, S., & Sprain, L. (2009). Grouping Processes in a public meeting from an ethnography of communication and cultural discourse analysis perspective. *The International Journal of Public Participation, 3*(2), 14-35.

World Health Organization. (2006). Constitution of the World Health Organization. *Basic Documents*, 45, 1-18. Retrieved from http://www.who.int/governance/eb/who_constitution_en.pdf