The Body as Information: An Emergent Theory of Social Positioning and Information

Behaviours in a Virtual Diet Community

by

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ABSTRACT

The intersection of diet culture with the rise of online communities has led to the rapid growth of virtual diet communities, including the LoseIt community on Reddit. Using a conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities and social positioning theory, this project studied LoseIt with three primary objectives: 1) examine the types of information being shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well these behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities; 2) explore how forum participants use information to discursively position themselves within community interactions, and; 3) discuss the implications of these results for LIS and healthcare workers.

These questions were approached using constructivist grounded theory to qualitatively code and analyze a set of posts and responses shared on LoseIt, resulting in twenty-two codes. Through these codes, three distinct ways in which forum members positioned themselves in the LoseIt community were identified: explicitly, expertly, and experientially. Additionally, my findings have suggested that Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework does not adequately address the role of information on LoseIt, and a new, substantive theory has emerged as a result.

This study has set a precedent to conduct more qualitative research on virtual dieters in order to better understand and address their health-related information needs and their feelings toward the healthcare system. My results emphasize the importance of researching the information behaviours and practices of virtual dieters; ultimately, examining the ways in which health information is shared and consumed online has highlighted aspects of virtual interactions that have been previously left unexplored.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH OVERVIEW

1.1 Introduction

In 2013, I was placed on medical leave from university as the result of a long-endured eating disorder. My grades were at an all-time low, I was no longer allowed to continue in my degree program, and I was struggling to see a way out of the darkness I had become accustomed to. I say this not to garner sympathy, but to situate myself and my experiences before delving into topics as sensitive as diet culture and weight loss. It is also to let readers know that my story is not unique. Diet culture is a pervasive, seemingly unavoidable part of the modern human experience, with a power that transcends cultural and geographical boundaries. This is especially true in regard to its rapid growth in online spaces and is most apparent on social media, where celebrities and influencers alike are paid to promote diet supplements and flat tummy teas, pro-anorexia communities are thriving on platforms like Twitter, and Reddit has diet communities boasting millions of members.

While my experiences were not solely the result of diet culture in online spaces, I cannot say that these communities had no role in my initial decline. My life, and the lives of many others who are close to me, has been negatively impacted by diet culture. I am aware going into this study that I have biases and opinions regarding dieting and that my overall opinion of virtual diet communities, especially ones that enforce accountability and shame in their members, is negative; however, my issues are with the predatory nature of diet culture and the imposition of such narrow standards of health and beauty on such naturally diverse and vibrant populations. My qualms are with the ideologies and pressures that underlie modern dieting, and not with the individuals who become involved in it. My hope is that this study can help others to understand and provide helpful information to online dieters, not to shame them.

In the United States, approximately 45 million Americans attempt a diet each year

(Boston Medical Center, n.d.). Of these, 50% of diets attempted are fad diets, which rely on

health misinformation to promote rapid weight loss and physical health benefits without

adequate scientific grounding (Boston Medical Center, n. d.; Fitzgerald, 2014). In a comparable

2017 Canadian survey, approximately two-in-five participants had dieted in the past year with

the sole purpose of losing weight (Insights West, 2017). Many of these dieters turn to online

communities for peer support, diet and exercise tips, and accountability measures that are absent

from their non-virtual lives, for example publicly posting daily calorie counts, body progress

pictures, and weekly weigh-ins as a means to hold the dieter accountable to themselves and the

online community (Garrity, 2011). The purpose of this thesis is to examine the information

behaviours and discursive constructions of identity of virtual diet community members.

Society's relationship with dieting and body image is incredibly complex, and the divide

between 'average' and 'ideal' bodies fuels an ever-growing diet industry that uses social media

to prey on the insecurities of vulnerable people who are overwhelmed with information

(American Dietetic Association, 2006). But how do users of internet diet forums interact with

this information in order to construct and convey their identities in an increasingly online world?

And how do these users both interact with and produce diet information within the context of

online communities and diet culture?

1.2 Research Questions

In order to begin understanding the unique intersections of identity, discourse, diet, and

virtual communities in the information practices of forum users, it is critical to first identify my

research questions. These questions were determined through the identification of gaps in library

and information studies (LIS) literature, and it is my goal to explore them using the data gathered during this study. The questions that have been identified are as follows:

- What are the types of information shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well do these communities' information behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities?

- How do forum participants use information to discursively position themselves in a virtual diet community?

- What are the implications of these findings for LIS and health information workers?

Framed by Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities, this study examines the information behaviours of dieters in virtual communities and the ways they position themselves through discourse.

1.3 Study Overview

In this study, constructivist grounded theory, as described by Charmaz (2014) and Thornberg (2012), is used to analyze and code the information behaviours and positions of members of the LoseIt community on the social media platform Reddit. LoseIt is the largest virtual diet community on Reddit with 2.3 million members as of July 8, 2020. There are two main frameworks underpinning this thesis: Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities. Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory serves as a theoretical framework which posits that both individuals and collectives use discourse to locate their place within society. Positioning theory illustrates the construction of identity through discourse, demonstrating the ways in which virtual community members both present

themselves and understand others through the choices they make when interacting with and exchanging information.

This research is further grounded in Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities, an emergent model in information studies composed of four tiers: foundational building blocks, social networks as information networks, information exchange, and information sharing. Information behaviours focus on the ways in which people seek and utilize information, and they serve an important role in the development of virtual communities that this study hopes to elucidate (Bates, 2010; Burnett, 2000). Combining these theoretical and conceptual frameworks allows for a clearer understanding of the role of discourse in identity formation, and the role of positioning in how users interact with information in a virtual community.

1.3.1 Methodology

This study employs a constructivist grounded theory approach to data analysis, conducting a process of open, qualitative coding to uncover the non-obvious meaning that underlies discursive practices in the online LoseIt community. Constructivist grounded theory is an extension of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) classic grounded theory approach, a methodology in which data collection and analysis informs the direction of the work and ends in theory development, as opposed to a traditional hypothesis-testing method. This is an underutilized approach in information studies research about online communities, which tends to prioritize a quantitative, content analysis approach (Togia & Malliari, 2017); however, a qualitative and inductive approach informed by grounded theory allows for a more thorough and flexible examination of the deeper meanings of these discursive choices. This method is well-suited for my study in that it allows for the exploration of a large dataset, followed by qualitative coding

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and close reading in order to identify overarching patterns in communication as well as specific

discursive choices regarding information and positioning. Data collection is followed by analysis

through an open coding process, using NVivo as a qualitative data analysis software tool to

examine relationships, recurring themes, linked concepts, and other aspects of textual

information that relate to underlying discursive themes. As a result of this analysis, a new theory

that integrates information behaviours, virtual communities, positioning, and identity emerges.

1.4 Research Value

This study is part of the general area of research problems about information behaviours

and identity formation in virtual communities. Discourse analysis of web corpora is an

important interpretive method that can be used to assess the relationship between discourse,

identity, and information behaviours, which in turn allows for greater understanding and

resource allocation in the health information sphere (Given et al., 2014; Mautner, 2005;

Thornbury, 2010). Information professionals have studied virtual health and diet communities

in the past (Braga Enes et al., 2019; Hirvonen et al., 2019; Manikonda et al., 2014; Park et al.,

2018; Wang et al., 2017), yet there has been minimal discursive analysis of identity

construction, positioning, and information behaviours in these communities. This work has the

potential to test and expand upon Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework in a novel and

previously unexplored research area.

1.5 Summary

This introductory chapter has provided personal background context for my thesis. After

situating myself, an outline of the goals and objectives of my current research was provided

through three research questions: What are the types of information shared and exchanged in

virtual diet communities? How do forum participants use information to discursively position

themselves in a virtual diet community? What are the implications of these findings for LIS and

health information workers? An overview of the study design and the theoretical frameworks

underpinning this research was also provided. Finally, the value of grounded theory in

information science research was discussed, as well as the gap in LIS literature surrounding

discourse and identity in online communities and the opportunity this study has to test

Hersberger et al.'s (2007) virtual information behaviour framework.

The rest of this thesis is arranged into six additional chapters. Chapter Two contains a

literature review, providing an overview of relevant concepts to my research such as feminism

and diet culture as a feminist issue, community, discourse and identity, and information

behaviours in virtual communities. Understanding these concepts and the relationships between

them is an important part of framing this research and interpreting the study results. Chapter

Three describes the research design from the broader methodological perspective to the specific

methods used in data collection and analysis. This includes the approach taken, population used,

data sampled, ways in which the data was collected and analyzed, and ethical considerations

taken during the research design process. As an important extension to data analysis, the latter

half of Chapter Three focuses specifically on the coding process, explaining the coding method

undertaken for this research as well as the themes identified. Chapters Four and Five discuss the

results of the data analysis of the diet forum by exploring the data in relation to the qualitative

codes and categories identified. Chapter Six uses these themes to shape a discussion about the

construction of online identity through discourse and positioning, before delving into the ways in

which these themes underpin information exchange and information sharing practices in online

spaces. This chapter serves to address the study's main research questions by exploring the

relationship between virtual identity construction and positioning, and information behaviours in

virtual communities. Along with addressing these topics and questions in relation to one another, I discuss this study's emergent theory of discursive positioning as it relates to information behaviours in online diet communities. Finally, Chapter Seven concludes with a summary of the research findings, limitations, practical and theoretical implications, and potential avenues for future research.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This thesis is interdisciplinary in nature and relies on literature and theories from five main fields of study in order to fully frame my research and its relevance: the body, diet culture, positioning theory, community, and information behaviours in virtual communities. Beginning with the body, I review the Foucauldian concepts of surveillance and biopower before moving on to shame and feminist conceptions of the body. Continuing in a similar vein, I discuss diet culture and provide a brief background on how it is currently defined and understood, as well as its relationship to Fat Studies. Following this I cover positioning theory, a central theme of this study that is examined broadly and then more specifically from an LIS context in the third section of this chapter. The final two topics of this chapter are closely interrelated, with the first one informing the latter. Starting with community, I explore communities of practice, virtual communities, and information worlds before continuing to information behaviours in virtual communities, which includes this study's conceptual framework. Finally, I provide an overview of past research that has examined information behaviours in virtual communities, with a particular emphasis on studies from an LIS perspective that have focused on diet communities.

The topics discussed in this chapter ultimately fall within three overarching research areas: the body, identity, and information behaviours, and it is where these areas intersect that a gap in the literature was identified. As this research is primarily informed by Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities, these are covered extensively and supplemented by relevant background literature that adds important context and scope to this review and the subsequent discussion of my research results and emergent theory.

2.2 The Body

  The body is a corporeal representation of the self that is directly observable to others, however, what makes it a particularly fruitful area of study is that the body is also "the seat of personhood, that which makes meaningful subjective experience possible" (Dolezal, 2015, p. 6; Dudrick, 2005). This duality makes the physical body a representation of embodied consciousness, in which the body is something that we are, but also something that we have (Jansen & Wehrle, 2018). Thus, it can be argued that the body is socially shaped, and understandings of the body lie not only within the individual but in our perceptions of others. To further contextualize the role of the body in online diet culture, the ideas of surveillance, biopower, shame, and feminism in relation to the body are explored below.

2.2.1 Surveillance & Biopower

  The work of social theorist Michel Foucault lends itself to the idea of the socially constructed body, particularly as it relates to the concepts of surveillance and biopower. Foucault's work centres on a social constructionist understanding of the body in which external forces play a critical role in the constitution of embodied subjects, in turn questioning the "effect of objectification on the subject" (Dolezal, 2015, p. 55; Franco, 2017). With this understanding, the body cannot be understood separately from the historical context within which it is interwoven. Personhood is inextricably linked to the ways in which bodies intersect with the world, and embodied experience is shaped by the cultural and social landscape (Dolezal, 2015; Jansen & Wehrle, 2018). Foucault supports his claims with an examination of bodily surveillance, centering on the institutional gaze. What are the consequences of being seen in a certain type of body? What actions are permissible in each body? Foucault argues that an ever-present institutional gaze "pervades daily life and ultimately leads to the subjugation and

domination of bodies" (Dolezal, 2015, p. 58), and that this dynamic is representative of an unequal distribution of power.

Although Foucault's early ideas fail to fully realize the nuance of modern power structures which are not always rigid and unidirectional, his later works note that in modern society power is exerted in new ways (Dolezal, 2015; Franco, 2017). Institutions are no longer explicitly regulating behaviour on an individual level; instead, norms and rules are propagated through power networks found in all levels of society, in a phenomenon Foucault (1998) calls "biopower" (p. 140). Biopower refers to the "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (Foucault, 1998, p. 140). Essentially, the goal of biopower is normalization and the promulgation of universal categories that bodies and behaviours easily fit into. Within this configuration, the universal standard becomes the white, able-bodied male. While the way that power is enacted has changed throughout time, the subjugation of bodies by way of powerful institutions is a societal constant.

While power is difficult to define or describe, it can best be understood as control-based relationships which are socially produced and institutionally recognized, with Foucault (1980) noting that, "Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain...Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation" (p. 98). This is best exemplified by his 1995 work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, which uses the panopticon example to explore the relationship between power and the constantly surveilled body within the penal system. The panopticon was an institutional building first conceptualized by Jeremy Bentham in 1785 and intended to make all subjects visible for constant surveillance under an omnipresent gaze (Figure 2.1). In describing the panopticon's hypothetical prisoners, Foucault stated:

Each individual, in his place, is securely confined to a cell from which he is seen from the front by the supervisor; but the side walls prevent him from coming into contact with his companions. He is seen, but he does not see; he is the object of information, never a subject in communication. (1995, p. 200)

As a result of this constant observation, "[t]here is no need for…material constraints. Just a gaze…which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising his surveillance over and against himself" (Foucault, 1980, p. 155). The prisoner is manipulated into self-discipline through control, and through fear of punishment.
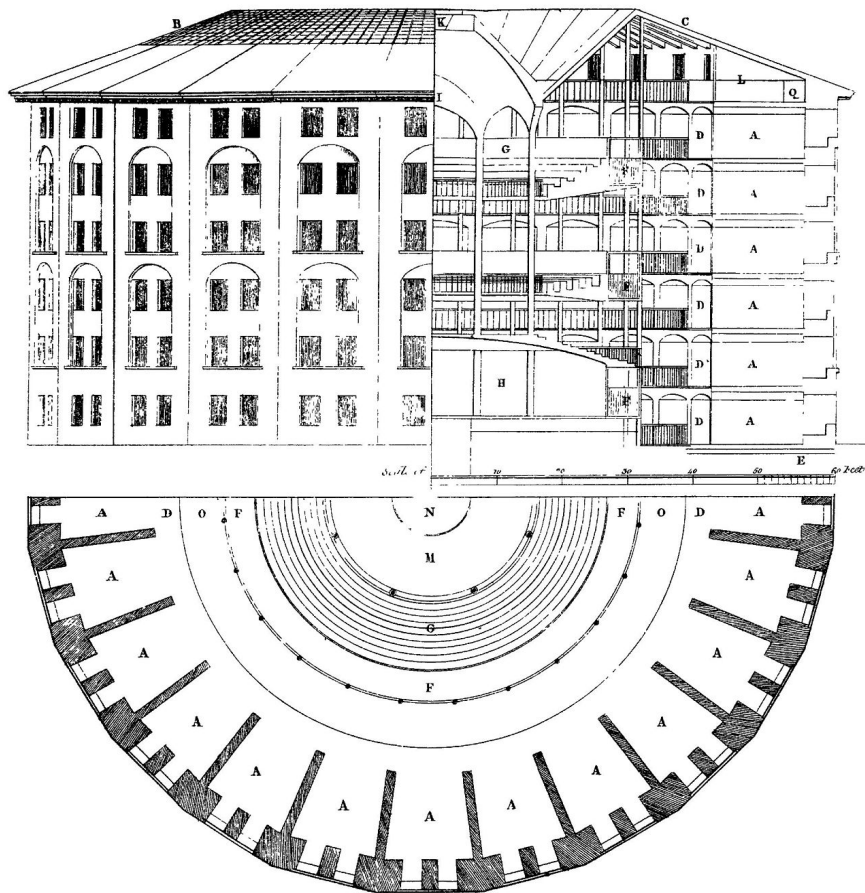
Figure 2.1 *Bentham's panopticon design (The works of Jeremy Bentham vol. IV, p. 594)*

This transformation requires internalization, in which the subject takes on and accepts the external power's set of rules and norms. These norms are then fully integrated into the subject's worldview, and are thus given power. While the penal system illustrates Foucault's argument well, that is not to say that his theories are inapplicable elsewhere. In fact, it can be argued that societal views on bodily norms represent those of the people in power who promote specific types of bodies over others based on supposed profitability. This in turn creates a situation where 'society' is dictating what bodies should look like, and what should be thought of those who fail to meet the standard. This situation can be connected back to the example of the panopticon's institutional gaze, which is nowhere and everywhere, forcing the subject through an unending cycle of objectification and alienation, encouraging them to exhibit self-control through its constant presence (Dolezal, 2015). In many ways, this is the insidious approach used by diet culture to control us. Ultimately, as in Foucault's panopticon, those who are unable or unwilling to change in order to appease external authorities are often subject to punishment, whether it be bullying, ostracization, or the degradation of self-esteem.

Foucault's final discussion point lends itself to this concept well; this is the process of normalization, in which the binary of 'normal' and 'abnormal' is constantly enforced for the subject. Relying on this Manichean binary paints 'normal' as good, and anything else as bad, leading to an incredibly narrow set of acceptable appearances or behaviours. This is how diet culture and virtual diet communities have thrived in the Digital Age, through constant enforcement of an undeniably limited range of features as attractive. In doing so, it becomes inevitable that many will seek to adhere to these standards and go to desperate lengths to do so, behaviour which is exemplified in many online diet communities. In an institutional setting, this process of normalization is referred to as discipline, meaning that the body is complying with the

rules through control. The body is "manipulated, shaped, trained;... [it] obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its forces" in order to keep up with institutional demands (Foucault, 1995, p. 136). According to Foucault (1995), these productive and disciplined bodies are also docile bodies, lacking the freedom and possibility to move beyond the constraints of the institution. Docile bodies lack autonomy, and the ideas that are internalized and normalized within them are externally motivated (Franco, 2017). Without autonomy, power structures cannot be resisted or transformed, as they are too enmeshed with the ideas of the disciplined and docile body.

2.2.2 Shame and the Body

Linked to Foucault's constantly surveilled body, shame is a central component of bodily experience. It exposes our deepest personal insecurities, but it also reveals the norms that make up our general social world and exert control over us. Etymologically, the English word 'shame' is derived from a pre-Teutonic word that means "to cover," in which covering oneself is seen as an innate expression of shame (Klein, 1967, p. 1430). In this sense, shame has been linked to the naked body since its etymological conception (Dolezal, 2015). At its most basic, shame can be conceived of as an emotion resulting from a self-assessment which provokes anxiety in an individual based on how they think they have been seen or judged by their peers (Velleman, 2001). This definition further reinforces the idea that being visible to others is central to an act provoking shame in most cases. The body itself is not the problem, it is the external judgment of the body that causes shame. Shame as an internalized self-judgment is not an impossibility, however, the internal thoughts that cause shame are undoubtedly shaped by external societal sources that prescribe norms and rules that become embedded into individual worldviews.

Shame not only occurs because of bodies, it happens within bodies. The feeling of shame triggers a psychological and physiological response in the body, but the root of the shame can

also be the body itself, with Stephen Pattison (2013) noting that "its appearance and functions are an important locus for shame" (p. 62). Shame is able to alienate someone's sense of self from their physical form by creating discomfort within their own body, illustrating that people both are and have bodies. Luna Dolezal has identified two main types of body shame in her 2015 book, *The Body and Shame: Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*:

1. Acute body shame, which is related to the body's behavioural components (ie. comportment, bodily management).

2. Chronic body shame, which is related to more permanent or continuous aspects of one's bodily appearance, like skin colour, height, or weight. (Dolezal, 2015, p. 104)

Chronic shame is particularly relevant for the context of this thesis, as bodies existing outside of societal ideals are devalued and shamed in both public and private forums. In these cases, many people feel shame not as a short-term disruption, but as a constant undercurrent of self-consciousness and anxiety (Dolezal, 2015). Preoccupation with the body to this extent negatively impacts self-worth and self-esteem and in extreme cases can be pathological, as is the case for those with Body Dysmorphic Disorder. In virtual diet communities, users deal with this shame through acts of information exchange, particularly through asking comparative questions like, "is what I am going through normal?," or "do you think I have made progress?"

2.2.3 Feminism and the Body

It would be remiss to discuss body shame without mentioning the role of shame in female embodiment. The social pressures placed on women and female-identified bodies is undeniable when looking at statistics for dieting, eating disorders, and plastic surgery (Bordo, 2003). Societally, women are placed in an incongruous situation in which they may feel both socially invisible and hyper-visible (ie. hyper-sexualized). Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949)

was one of the first works to discuss this relationship between shame and femininity, and explored the process of becoming a woman as "an extended lesson in shame" (Guenther, 2011, p. 33). Her work demonstrated that the female body is shamed both for what it looks like and what it can do, and this shame is culturally inherited each generation by young women living within patriarchal systems.

Appearance management is one of the many ways that women try to navigate through their shame, however, these attempts at normalization are complicated by the absence of a single feminine ideal (Franco, 2017). The ideal female body is not a static entity; it morphs across time and culture. This ultimately makes it an even more powerful tool of disciplinarity, holding women "captive by a web of feminine ideals" (Franco, 2017, p. 21). Because it is impossible to satisfy every requirement of femininity, women are destined to fail by design, meaning that for all intents and purposes, "the feminine body is constituted and experienced as the enemy of the woman" (Cahill, 2000, p. 52; Franco, 2017).

The female body has become central to global industries of fashion, diet, cosmetics, and grooming (Dolezal, 2015). Cosmetic surgery, a more extreme method of appearance management, can be particularly problematic in dealing with the female body. While cosmetic surgery can lead to positive outcomes for the individual, the effects of its normalization for women may "contribute to social, cultural and discursive norms that contribute to their own oppression and that of others" (Gillespie, as cited in Parker, 213); Dolezal (2015) refers to this phenomenon as the body "shaped by shame" (p. 119). The 'perfect body,' representative of an unattainable physical form and lifestyle, sits atop the body hierarchy, casting minor differences as defects. Any variances in appearance then become linked to negative perceptions of the individual. Physical defects become moral defects, the fault of the individual.

Shame is such a normal part of female embodiment that it often goes undetected. As the male body is positioned as the norm, the female body is always considered 'other' by default, creating circumstances in which shame is only avoidable through processes of internalization and normativity. The internalization of normative values shapes women's understandings of themselves and their bodies, and the desire to be seen as 'normal' leads many women to lean into these harmful beauty standards to avoid shame. Women seeking support and validation in virtual diet communities like LoseIt is common, and it is possible that supportive responses and shared experiences may lessen their shame through gained feelings of companionship and understanding.

Moving towards Western conceptions of the feminine body, Susan Bordo is one of the foremost researchers in the areas of feminism and the body in Western society. Her work focuses on the materiality of the body and its physical conceptions, claiming that women are "associated with the body, and largely confined to a life centred on the body, [as] culture's grip on the body is a constant, intimate fact of everyday life" (Bordo, as cited in Carter, 231). Thus, the female body is a limitation, positioned as 'other' to the dominant male bodies in a patriarchal system where femininity is viewed as passive (Bordo, 2003). This division is further echoed in Bordo's (2003) discussion on gendered food practices, noting that "men eat and women prepare" (p. 119). How this division lends itself to dieting and disordered eating habits is fascinating; gender norms exist even within disordered eating habits among bulimics, with women's binging primarily being a secretive, shameful act and men's binging occurring mainly in public places or with other people (Bordo, 2003).

One of the most interesting aspects of Bordo's (2003) work is the exploration of the role of agency in women with eating disorders, which places the body as the location of self-

determination and links eating disorders to individual agency. More specifically, Bordo (2003) notes that eating disorders are a form of protest, stemming from a lack of agency. Through control and denial, particularly in restrictive eating disorders, individuals are able to gain a sense of power and agency. This lines up with Susie Orbach's belief that "anorexia represents one extreme on a continuum on which all women today find themselves, insofar as they are vulnerable, to one degree or another, to the requirements of the cultural construction of femininity" (Orbach, as cited in Bordo, p. 47). This statement is not intended to downplay the severity of the suffering that people with anorexia nervosa endure, but rather to contextualize the cultural components of the disorder.

In Western society, the pressures on women's bodies are insurmountable; however, in recent years the body positive, fat acceptance, and body neutrality movements have been gaining unprecedented ground, functioning as spaces of resistance and reclamation against toxic diet culture (Cwynar-Horta, 2016). These movements present self-acceptance as the goal, claiming that "there is nothing to be ashamed of if your body is gay, black, disabled, fat or old" (Probyn, 2000, p. 125). Encapsulated within this goal of self-acceptance is the banishment of disgust and shame from the conception of the body and its functions, however, there is one critical error with this formulation (Probyn, 2000); negative feelings and poor self-image do not necessarily improve that easily (Meagher, 2003). Instead, the newfound mainstream acceptance of body positive movements has made it increasingly difficult for individuals to admit to feelings of disdain or disgust toward certain bodies, as this disgust represents their own continued fatphobia, marking them as a 'bad person.' Essentially, "disgust itself has been rendered disgusting and shameful" (Meagher, 2003, p. 29). Regardless of whether an individual has an eating disorder or

not, all women are part of the same system that prescribes perfect femininity, meaning that they are all vulnerable to the same pressures that society has placed upon them.

One of the most damaging ways that society enacts these pressures is the moral coding of the body. In a modern Western context, slender bodies are associated with positive attributes like status and wealth, whereas larger bodies are negatively coded as poor and greedy (Bordo, 2003). These dualisms have existed prior to the modern context, however, since the 1970s an interesting transformation has occurred (Bordo, 2003). While there are still traditional class associations coded into body size, the body is increasingly seen as a sign of personal morality. As Bordo (2003) states, "the size and shape of the body have come to operate as a market of personal, internal order (or disorder)—as a symbol for the emotional, moral, or spiritual state of the individual" (p. 193). If body size is no longer solely indicative of class, but also of social mobility and individual morality, it is natural that those outside of these desired categories feel pressured to conform, whether that be through diet, exercise, or more extreme measures. This dissonance between who online dieters want to be and who they currently are is what leads many of them to virtual diet communities. The insatiable need for desirability and social acceptance further positions the self and the body in opposition to one another, especially in regard to unwanted weight (Cahill, 2000). Hearkening back to Foucault, this scenario sees the body as in need of constant surveillance, guarding against one's own appetites and desires in order to avoid potential weight gain (Cahill, 2000). Cahill (2000) presents a dangerous configuration here, in which the body is reconstituted as something that women must inherently fight against and work to control, "despite its inherent tendencies to lapse into unattractive appearance" (p. 52).

Society's confusing relationship with the body is further complicated by capitalism. There is a contradiction between the consumer as indulgent and impulsive, and the producer as

repressive and hardworking. Individuals are instructed to both give in to desire and to exhibit control, a duality that is echoed in food and diet culture (Bordo, 2003). Quick fix diet programs promise instant gratification and results, while the surrounding media promotes decadent food at every turn. We are conditioned to succumb to our desires to propel the capitalist economic system, yet on a personal level succumbing to these desires is a moral failure (Bordo, 2003). As a result, Marcia Millman says that "the obese elicit blinding rage and disgust in our culture and are often viewed in terms that suggest an infant sucking hungrily, unconsciously at its mother's breast: greedy, self-absorbed, lazy, without self-control or willpower" (as cited in Bordo, 2003, p. 202). Yet anorexics are also seen as moral failures, as both the obese and anorexic body are failing to normalize, and "embody resistance to cultural norms" like perfect femininity (Bordo, 2003, p. 203).

So how does the slender body relate to gender? In Western society, women face more pressures to conform to bodily norms than men, however, the desire for slenderness is not solely about being physically thin. In fact, Bordo (2003) points out that there is gender-coded significance to the image of the thin body, which carries other meanings with it. Thinness, in the modern sense, serves as a "metaphor for the correct management of desire," while the spontaneities of the body, like hunger and emotion, are seen as "needful of containment and control" and are coded female (Bordo, 2003, pp. 205-6). In a cultural arena where gender issues and desire management intersect, it becomes clear that the slender body "has been overdetermined as a contemporary ideal of specifically female attractiveness" (Bordo, 2003, p. 211). Bordo (2003) makes the compelling claim that "the axis of consumption/production is gender-overlaid...by the hierarchical dualism that constructs a dangerous, appetitive, bodily 'female principle' in opposition to a masterful 'male' will" (pp. 211-12), and that this

inordinately affects the relationship between women and their bodies. While traditional Victorian ideals of feminine beauty, such as corseting, evoke the external constraints of Foucault's surveilled society, modern conceptions of female slenderness are tied to the idea of self-management as a means to successfully enter the public arena. This single-minded focus on self-management as the key to successful normalization is what has facilitated diet culture's unprecedented growth in the Digital Age.

2.3 Diet Culture

Diet culture is at the core of many of the concepts discussed in this study, but what exactly *is* diet culture? It is difficult to put a definition on a concept so vast and uncontainable, but it has been described as such:

The marriage of the multibillion-dollar diet industry (including fitness apps, over-the-counter diet pills, prescription drugs to suppress appetite, bariatric surgery, gyms, and gym clothiers) and the social and cultural atmosphere (beliefs and norms) that normalizes weight control and fatphobic bigotry. (Tovar, 2018, p. 8)

Interestingly, in its most basic sense, Albala (2005) noted that the word 'diet' originally referred to "a general program of health maintenance" (p. 169), but over time as the medical and societal understanding of weight and body fat shifted, 'diet' began to be understood as "a regimen specifically designed to cure excess weight, which was increasingly defined as a pathological state" (p. 169). How diet as health maintenance transformed into diet culture as shame and the pathologization of the human body is a long and convoluted process, but one thing is clear: the focus on weight has created extra barriers and life stressors for people with weight concerns, and in most cases this additional stress leads to detrimental changes in food choice that cause weight gain, not loss. Western society and medicine have continually failed those in larger bodies

through degradation and a lack of empathy, and this resistance towards an understanding and acceptance of fat bodies predicated the growth of Fat Studies as an academic field of research.

2.3.1 Fat Studies

Situating this study within related fields of critical theory like fat studies, feminism, and the body is central to understanding how virtual dieting communities became so prevalent in the Digital Age, and how the power structures underlying them can be challenged. As defined by Esther D. Rothblum, editor of the journal *Fat Studies*, "fat studies is a field of scholarship that critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance, and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size" (2012, p. 3). This statement becomes clearer when examined alongside Marilyn Wann's (2009) description of fat studies: "unlike traditional approaches to weight, a fat studies approach offers no opposition to the simple fact of human weight diversity, but instead looks at what people and societies make of this reality" (p. x). Essentially, the aim of fat studies is to shift the discussion away from a medical view of health and size diversity, and to instead focus on how fat bodies are understood and treated in society.

The pathologization of larger bodies is inextricably linked to the pathologization of women's bodies, as well as racialized bodies, with Solovay and Rothblum claiming that weight stigma "has a synergistic effect with oppression based on other areas of difference such as gender, race, social class, and sexual identity" (as cited in Watkins et al., 2012). In this way, body size becomes linked to cultural anxieties about gender, race, and class (Tovar, 2018). Being fat becomes a person's defining trait, in which their fatness is the only important aspect of their existence. As a result, much like disabled people, trans people, and racialized people, fat people are not given meaningful representation and the full spectrum of human experience (Tovar, 2018). While race was not able to be accounted for in this study due to the data's anonymity, it

sets a precedent for future research into the prevalence of dissociative feelings in minority groups that take part in online diet communities.

Diet culture is pervasive throughout all facets of Western society regardless of gender identity, but there is an undeniable focus on women's bodies that can be seen through targeted advertisements, media representation, and popular discourse. The constant messaging that the body is a problem that needs fixing leads people to not only search for solutions online, but to search for community that can help and support them. The conditions and messaging surrounding women's body image creates a state of internalized inferiority, and the diet industry takes advantage of this, knowing that women often internalize and blame themselves for how they are treated (Tovar, 2018). These feelings of inferiority lead to an environment where the diet industry can easily manipulate dieters by claiming that diets are easy, and that unsuccessful dieters are simply using the diet programs incorrectly (Tovar, 2018).

But where did this anxiety about weight come from? While it seems to become increasingly prevalent throughout the later half of the twentieth century and start of the twenty-first century, the topic was first introduced to medical discourse in the seventeenth century (Albala, 2005). Although at the time body fat was viewed in a more positive light, medical professionals began to call attention to the potential dangers of excess body fat and the importance of weight loss in these instances (Albala, 2005). It was under these conditions that the societal understanding of fat shifted and became something to be feared, which led to weight loss becoming a normal, and even fashionable, recommendation for many health concerns (Albala, 2005). This means that the association between body fat and gluttony is a relatively recent development.

Albala (2005) points out that historically, overconsumption was considered the cause of much disease and was also a sign of greed and a lack of charity, however, overconsumption was not directly linked with obesity. While it is difficult to understand the mid-seventeenth century ideological shift on obesity, it is possible that the increasing numbers of obese people in need of medical attention became a concern, as this was the first time that masses of people in a single area had enough expendable income to bring their concerns to a medical professional (Albala, 2005). Of course, another possible reason is an increasing understanding of how and why excess fat accumulates in the body from the medical field (Albala, 2005).

While much of the early theory about fat originated in Western Europe, modern discourse on weight and fat is inextricably tied to America. The culture of excess that characterizes the United States extends to all realms, including food and body size (Stearns, 2005). As stated by Stearns (2005), American fat is "unusually voluminous and evident. It serves as a national symptom and symbol" (p. 239). It is no coincidence that most of the well-known diet programs originate in America, like the Atkins diet, Weight Watchers, and the South Beach diet. Although American weight concerns began near the end of the nineteenth century, much later than in Europe, the causation was similar, resulting from new medical discoveries combined with increasing abundances of food and a newly sedentary lifestyle (Stearns, 2005). Yet the troubling American discourse around food and weight persists until today, in a way that is not reflected in most of Europe. Stearns (2005) identifies three distinctive circumstances that make the American story unique:

1. The more efforts to denigrate fat increased, the average weight of Americans increased, especially since the 1980s (Stearns, 2005). This put the issue of American obesity on the

world stage, and conceptually linked the concepts of fat and American culture to the rest of the modern world.

2. American approaches to weight maintenance and fat control were not only different from those used elsewhere, they were seemingly counterproductive (Stearns, 2005). Stearns (2005) cites two of these differences as a reliance on group accountability (ie. Overeaters Anonymous, Weight Watchers, etc.) as opposed to personal responsibility, and a reluctance to impose thinness on children.

3. National responses to American obesity have been complicated by internal debates on the real problem at the core of the obesity debate—whether the main issue is fat itself, or attacks on fat (Stearns, 2005).

Looking more closely at the United States, the obsession with weight and fat did not begin until the 1890s, when thinness became the new goal in middle-class America. This idea rapidly spread throughout the nation, being seen through fashion trends, celebrity body types, and diet advertisements, which primarily targeted women (Stearns, 2005). Interestingly, as this obsession with dieting and weight loss increased, Stearns (2005) identified three elements specific to early American diet culture:

1. By the 1950's, diet promoters and advertisements made use of extreme cases of weight loss in both men and women to promote their programs.

2. Americans also seemed to uniquely latch onto the idea of dieting as a group activity, employing tactics of shame and accountability towards weight loss or food goals. Stearns (2005) notes that this shaming tactic became particularly popular among women.

3. The final element is "an early and deep-seated tendency to equate overeating and a fat appearance with moral deficiency" (Stearns, 2005, p. 245). Weight-related self-help

groups played a large role in this phenomenon, as American culture has a tendency to "turn health issues into moral crusades" (Stearns, 2005, p. 245).

This final element of moralism and the moral crusade against fat did not accomplish its intended goal of lessening American obesity rates, but instead led to increased prejudices against those in larger bodies. It also counterproductively linked the fight against fat to the white middle-class, leading to two outcomes: the dissociation of minority groups from these goals and inner turmoil among the white middle-class who were expected to adhere to these constraints. As stated by a commentator in Stearns (2005), "Dieting while growing fatter is an inverted spiritual exercise: every time you break your resolution you eat even more, for [consolation] and in defiance" (p. 247).

2.4 Positioning Theory

Now that conceptions of the body and its relationship to feminism and diet culture have been explored, I can introduce one of this study's main frameworks: positioning theory. Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory (Figure 2.2) informs the theoretical basis of this study, as well as its methodological approach of constructivist grounded theory. Positioning theory is a social constructionist theory which posits that both individuals and collectives use discourse to situate themselves, and that this positioning occurs as a cyclical and interactive process in three acts: communication acts, positions, and storylines (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; McKenzie, 2003; Moghaddam & Harré, 2010; Sabat & Harré, 1999; Tan & Moghaddam, 1999).

Communication acts are representative of any initial form of communication, including both text and speech. This stage also accounts for the social significance ascribed to the act, depending on who said it, and under what circumstances (Austin, 1959). The second act,

positions, represents how an individual's identity is constructed through interaction, whether that

identity is constructed by themselves or others. Positioning includes the distribution of rights and

duties to an individual, and the role that they have taken or been given (Davies & Harré, 1990).

Storylines are representative of narratives within a given community or context, and serve as the

underlying values or messages associated with a given communication act. The same

communication act can be construed in different ways according to different storylines (Davies

& Harré, 1990). There is no greater instrument for communicative action than language, and in

the context of positioning theory, culture and context serve a key role (Harré & van Langenhove,

1999). Cultural differences in language and linguistic structure impact the interpretation of any

given message. Additionally, Harré & van Langenhove (1999) note that context can largely alter

the meaning of a communication act depending on the time period, location, and age of the

speaker.
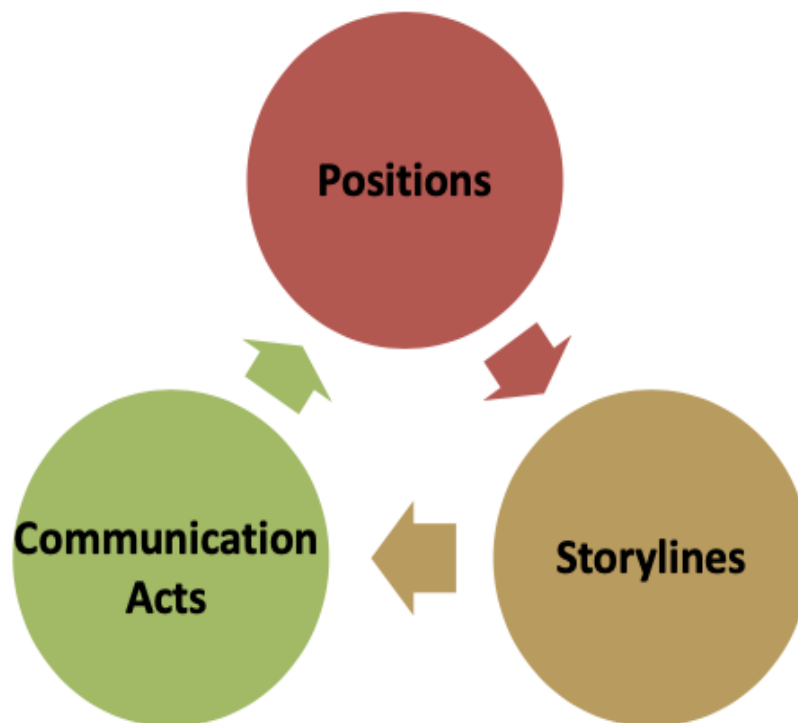
Figure 2.2 *Harré & van Langenhove's (1999) three acts of positioning theory*

To understand how individuals navigate their own identities, Harré (2008) has examined a number of ways in which identity is understood, both socially and psychologically. This includes Vygotsky's Principle, which proposes that higher order mental processes exist on two levels at once: first, in the wider cultural context, and then in the individual's mind (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, human existence and development is just as reliant on interpersonal relations and communication as it is on individual and internal maturation. Vygotsky (1978) puts forth the idea of a psychological symbiosis, in which successful sociocultural development is dependent upon a combination of interpsychological and intrapsychological circumstances.

Temporality is another aspect central to self-identification. Thoughts, actions, rights, and duties are temporally bound among and between people, and changes over time alter the ways in which people understand the concept of 'self.' Harré (2008) notes four primary components of personhood that are temporally bound: the embodied self, the autobiographical self, the social self, and self-concept. The embodied self is the first component, and accounts for an individual's lived and current experience in a linear trajectory through space and time (Harré, 2008). The second component is the autobiographical self, which accounts for the ways in which individuals represent themselves through stories (Harré, 2008). Autobiographical selves are often unstable, and change from story to story, exposing the self as an unreliable narrator. The third component is the social self, another unstable self that is shaped and molded by encounters with others (Harré, 2008). The fourth and final component is self-concept, a term that refers to the beliefs that individuals have about themselves and their lives (Harré, 2008). While the embodied self is invariant, self-concept, the autobiographical self, and the social self are malleable to change. These are the areas in which positioning theory becomes critical to

understanding the nuances of identity construction through discourse, and are of particular relevance to the virtual diet community I have explored.

Within the larger context of positioning theory, Harré and van Langenhove (1999) outline five main modes of positioning:

1. First and second order positioning: First order positioning refers to people's use of storylines and categories in order to locate themselves and others. Following this, second order positioning refers to a situation where a person questions or renegotiates their position.

2. Performative and accountive positioning: Performative positioning is also second order positioning and occurs in response to first order positioning. Accountive positioning, or third order positioning, occurs when a third party becomes involved with second order positioning.

3. Moral and personal positioning: Moral and personal positioning are the result of one's perceived role within a social hierarchy. For example, one can be assigned a role that may not fit them based on how they are perceived within the hierarchy.

4. Self and other positioning: Self and other positioning happens on an individual level within conversations, in which positions shift as they are assigned and challenged throughout a conversation.

5. Tacit and intentional positioning: Tacit positioning refers to unconscious or unintentional first order positioning. Although first order positioning can be considered intentional in circumstances like teasing, second and third order positioning are necessarily intentional. (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, pp. 20-23)

While these five modes describe positioning in a more general sense, there are an additional four types of intentional positioning. In the context of this study, these intentional modes of positioning are of particular interest, as the means by which people position themselves in virtual discourse have a necessary element of intent. They are as follows:

1. Deliberate self-positioning: Deliberate self-positioning refers to how an individual's personal identity is defined.

2. Forced self-positioning: While similar to deliberate self-positioning, forced self-positioning refers to an instance where an external source is the reason for the positioning.

3. Deliberate positioning of others: Positioning others deliberately occurs in two main ways. Gossip is a form of this where the person being talked about is absent. If they are present, this can instead be reproach or moral judgment.

4. Forced positioning of others: The forced positioning of others happens when a third party has to position themselves against another positioned person, regardless of their presence or absence. (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999, pp. 23-28)

Ultimately, positioning theory is a micro-level approach that studies the formation and influence of shared local and cultural assumptions in an individual or group's understanding of themselves and others during small-scale interactions (Harré, 2008; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). It contrasts with the older and more established Role Theory, which posits that roles are relatively fixed and stable throughout an individual's lifetime, whereas positioning theory deals directly with communication acts that are both labile and ephemeral (Harré, 2008).

2.4.1 Positioning Theory in LIS

Unfortunately, social positioning theory as a theoretical framework has been greatly underutilized within LIS, with the exception of works by Pamela McKenzie and Lisa Given. While dissimilar to the focus of this study, McKenzie's work on positioning theory as it relates to pregnant women (McKenzie, 2003; McKenzie, 2004; McKenzie & Carey, 2000), and Given's examination of the information behaviours of mature students through the lens of positioning theory (Given, 2000a, 2000b, 2005) demonstrate some of the ways in which positioning can be applied and understood through an LIS context. Informed by these works, my study does not use any predetermined positions when coding the data, and instead the positions coded into the dataset are determined during the data analysis stage.

Although rarely used in LIS research, positioning theory can be found more commonly in social science fields like psychology and sociology, in which the focus is not on the specific uses of information, but on the larger social and psychological realities that shape the ways in which people position themselves and others. In many cases, these larger social realities include the community or communities that an individual positions themself within, which is where this literature review turns to next.

2.5 Community

The concept of 'community' is universal across all social and academic spheres of life, yet there is no one accepted definition of what constitutes a community. For the purposes of this study, a community is defined as a symbolic structure based on more than just social practices, instead focused on shared goals, interests, experiences, and other components of group membership centering on relationships between community members (Cohen, 1985; Hersberger et al., 2007). McMillan and Chavis (1986), two of the key figures in this research area, expanded on this idea by defining the four foundational building blocks of a community, which include

membership, influence, integration and need fulfillment, and shared emotional connection. This is a fitting definition for a modern context in that the growth of the internet has shifted community formation from solely geographically-bound to ideologically-bound, prioritizing emotional over physical bonding. Within the overarching idea of community, there are three types of community that warrant further attention: communities of practice, virtual communities, and information worlds.

2.5.1 Communities of Practice

According to Wenger (1998), a community of practice is "a living context that can give newcomers access to competence and also can invite a personal experience of engagement by which to incorporate that competence into an identity of participation" (p. 214). Wenger focuses on these communities as places for social learning, as communities learn through social interactions surrounding a shared community identity. This was first discussed in a 1991 community study by Lave and Wenger, in which they identified a process they called 'legitimate peripheral participation' and its role in the reproduction of communities through newcomer acclimatization. With shared group identities and sets of goals, many virtual communities can also be considered communities of practice.

2.5.2 Virtual Communities

Like physical communities, virtual communities are discussed across many fields of study and defined in many different ways. Media scholar Howard Rheingold defined them as "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (1993, para. 25). Virtual communities are centred on a common goal or interest held by its members, transcending the usual geographical or cultural boundaries, making them unique

arenas for emotional bonding, information exchange, and self-presentation. The novelty of digital space also allows for the simultaneous existence of a huge range of communities with varying relations to one another, which form a larger ecosystem of information worlds. This concept of information worlds can be applied to the LoseIt community, and the larger ecosystem of Reddit that it exists within.

2.5.3 Information Worlds

The theory of information worlds is primarily linked to two scholars: Jürgen Habermas and Elfreda Chatman. Their approaches varied greatly, with Habermas focusing on overarching social structures and Chatman narrowing in on small social units operating within, or outside of those larger structures (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). Stemming from their work, contemporary understandings of the theory of information worlds consider information behaviours in all levels of society, including small worlds, social institutions, political and economic forces, and other areas that are in constant conversation with one another. Ultimately, the theory of information worlds is focused on five elements that are encountered in every level of society:

1. Social norms: A world's shared sense of the appropriateness of social appearances and observable behaviours.

2. Social types: The roles that define actors and how they are perceived within a world.

3. Information value: A world's shared sense of a scale of the importance of information.

4. Information behaviour: The full range of behaviours and activities related to information available to members of a world.

5. Boundaries: The places at which information worlds come into contact with each other and across which communication and information exchange can—but may or may not— take place. (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010, p. 8)

These five elements are constantly in flux, being constituted and reconstituted through communicative interactions (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010). If a small world is thought of as a social group with a unique set of norms and rules regarding information behaviours, it can be understood that small information worlds exist across all of society and are far from static. As stated by Jaeger and Burnett (2010):

> Information moves through the boundaries between worlds via people who cross between the different worlds to which they belong and through interactions between members of multiple small worlds in physical and virtual social spaces where members of different worlds encounter each other. (p. 9)

Ultimately, "As information moves through the boundaries between worlds, the social norms of each world shape the ways in which that information is treated, understood, and used, creating different roles for the information within each world" (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010, p. 9), leading to the conclusion that our larger information world is merely a collective of numerous small information worlds in coexistence.

When taking the advances of the internet and social media into account, this idea of information lifeworlds becomes even more compelling. Contemporary social media can be uniquely defined by its focus on many-to-many communication, in which the entire process of reading, writing, and responding to posts occurs within the public forum, as it does on Reddit (Burnett, 2000). This leads to public acceptance or rejection, public praise or scrutiny, and public positioning by the self and others through information behaviours and practices. Personal connection to collective communities is no longer reliant on physical proximity because of the internet, and virtual community members are able to interact with one another and form bonds

through acts of information sharing and exchange, which leads to my final topic: information behaviours in virtual communities.

2.6 Information Behaviours in Virtual Communities

The internet and social media have drastically altered how individuals interact with and seek information (Burnett et al., 2001; Moore, 2016; Powell & Clarke, 2006). Virtual communities are guided by related passions and lifestyles, linking those who are not geographically close by ideological similarities (Burnett et al., 2001; Powell & Clarke, 2006). Virtual communities share many of the same characteristics as groups in physical life. These characteristics include: relationships between people within the community, shared interests, goals, objectives, and knowledge, interdependence, and the accumulation of shared experiences that define group membership (Hersberger et al., 2007; Nahl, 2001; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman et al., 1996).

There are relatively stable boundaries that exist between virtual communities that ensure their existence as information worlds, and while the information flow occurring in virtual communities sustains their position as a functional small world, individual users must fulfill specific roles within these groups to maintain them (Burnett et al., 2001). These roles are determined by the identity that an individual is assigned within a group through discursive positioning, which dictates their role in the community during a given interaction (Burnett et al., 2001; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

2.6.1 Hersberger, Murray, and Rioux's (2007) Conceptual Framework

To further explore information behaviours and identity building in the virtual space, Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities has been used to inform my own emergent theory. To understand this conceptual

framework, it is first important to define what is included in the definition of an 'information behaviour.' Information behaviours focus on the ways in which people seek and utilize information, and analyzing and coding user information behaviours sheds light on the underlying themes that make up virtual diet communities (Bates, 2010; Burnett, 2000). They "encompass information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviours (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviours that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (Case, 2008, p. 5). With this definition in mind, Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework is tiered and includes four levels (Figure 2.3):

1. Foundational building blocks.

2. Social networks as information networks.

3. Information exchange.

4. Information sharing. (Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 137)

The model forms a quasi-hierarchy of necessary community components for information-based virtual communities, in addition to an affective component in which individuals vacillate between gratification and discontentment based on their interactions within the community. Hersberger et al.'s (2007) work gathers and compiles established information theories regarding social networks and creates a more holistic model that incorporates and molds critical elements from various models into a single, coherent framework from which to build.
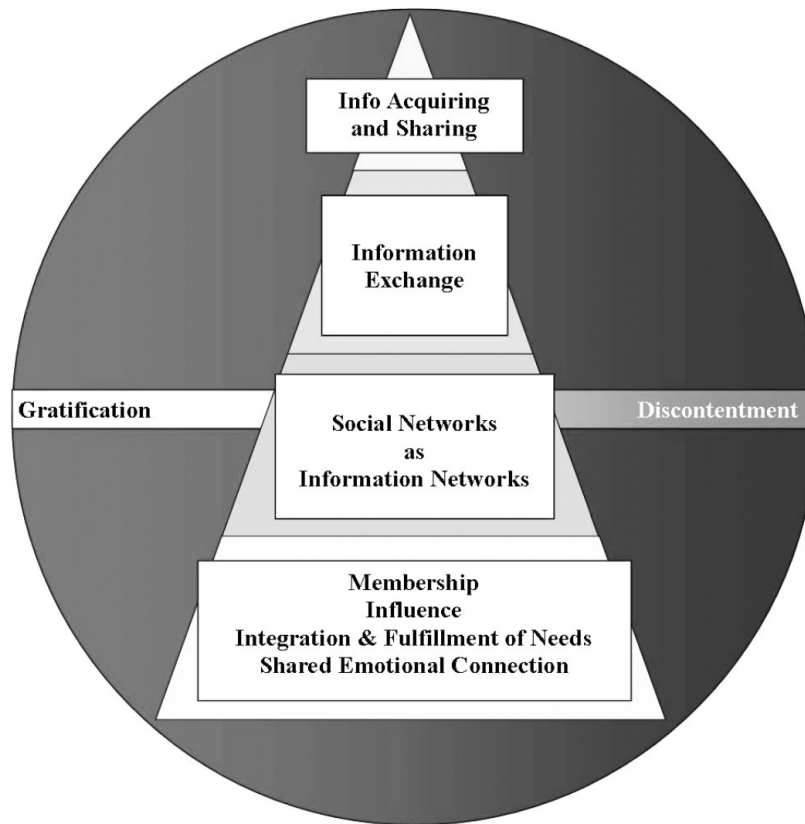
Figure 2.3 *Hersberger et al.'s (2007) emergent framework*

The first, and most basic component of information behaviours in virtual communities is foundational building blocks. This notion has been further divided into four types of building blocks by McMillan and Chavis (1986), which are: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Group membership carries with it a set of membership attributes, which include:

1. Safety: Includes feelings of emotional and physical security.

2. Sense of belonging and identification: Relates to the level that an individual feels accepted by a group, and how strongly they identify with the group.

3. Personal investment: This relates to how much an individual participates in a community, and the sense that they deserve to be in the community.

4. Common symbol system: Includes community lore, such as myths, ceremonies, rituals,

    and relevant symbols. (McMillan & Chavis, as cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 138)

Membership boundaries exist as a set of conditions that dictate who has the right to belong, and

rejection or isolation as a result of these boundaries can lead to negative affect in potential

community members.

Influence refers to the bidirectional relationship between members and community, in

that people both influence the community, and are influenced by the community as a whole

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986). McMillan and Chavis (1986) connect this to the next building

block, integration and fulfillment of needs, which refers to an individual's acceptance into the

group when their needs are integrated with the needs of the members. Need fulfillment also plays

a role in forfeiting community membership, as members are more likely to leave a community in

search of a new one if the community is no longer serving their needs (Hersberger et al., 2007).

This is especially true in virtual communities like LoseIt, where group membership is much

more dynamic than non-virtual communities, and there is a more transient element to entering

and leaving online communities.

The final building block is shared emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

These are based on the individual's identification with the community's history and shared

experience, and McMillan and Chavis (1986) outlined seven key facets of shared emotional

connections:

1. Contact hypothesis: Increased interaction will likely increase emotional connection.

2. Quality of interactions: The more positive the community experience, the greater the

    personal bonds and likelihood of a successful and cohesive community.

3. Closure to events: Ambiguity and unresolved tasks are inhibiting factors to group cohesion.

4. Shared valent event hypothesis: The perceived importance of a shared community event is linked to the increase in community bonds.

5. Investment: A community member's investment determines the importance they place on perceived individual status within the community and the history of the community.

6. Effect of honour and humiliation on community members: The extent to which a community member perceives honour or humiliation from others within the community affects the community's attractiveness.

7. Spiritual bond: A sense of community and cohesion, or the "community of spirit" is shared by successful communities. (As cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 139)

These facets of emotional connection are critical factors in understanding virtual communities, in that they allow one to examine the causal factors that create such a strong sense of emotional connection between group members through their information behaviours.

The second tier of the framework is social networks as information networks (Hersberger et al., 2007). Hersberger et al. (2007) explain this as an expansion of the first tier that explores how social networks can emerge from online communities and become information networks. One of the most important concepts associated with social networks is tie strength, which accounts for the closeness of people's relationships to one another (Garton et al., 1997; Scott, 2000). The stronger the tie, the closer the individuals, leading to an open relationship in which information is shared and exchanged often and easily (Granovetter, 1973). As such, it makes sense that "closeness," in the emotional sense, is "the best indicator of tie strength" (Marsden & Campbell, as cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 140). Another concept important to this tier is

that of social capital, which states that an investment in relationships is met with an anticipated relational return (Hersberger et al., 2007). For example, shared information and resources embedded in a social network are meant to be accessed and used by individuals belonging to those networks (Lin, 2001).

Information exchange is the third framework tier, which addresses how models of information behaviours, including needs, seeking, and exchange can be used to explain the evolution of online relationships and communities (Hersberger et al., 2007). While roles within an online community may remain relatively stable over time, relationships between community members are both fluid and dynamic. These relationships are formed on the basis of shared interests and common goals, and in the case of virtual communities like LoseIt they are built off of communication acts and information exchange (Hersberger et al., 2007). Quality information exchange in a community requires four psychological elements:

1. People need a reason for being present at a site in order to interact comfortably.

2. People need to feel that entry and exit are unrestricted.

3. People converse more readily when they have more time on their hands.

4. People communicate more readily if they perceive that the strangers around them are neighbours. (Crickman, as cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 141)

While Crickman's (1976) factors explain the conditions for communities of information exchange, they do not explain how people arrive at virtual communities for their information needs. Dervin (1992) and Savolainen (1995) approach this phenomenon from different directions, with Dervin's sense-making model proposing that individuals who have unfulfilled information needs experience a cognitive gap that stops them from making sense of certain life circumstances, and virtual communities are often turned to in order to fill these gaps (see Figure

39

2.4 for a similar information behaviour diagram). Savolainen (1995) instead suggests that

seeking information in a virtual community is dependent on the role of sociocultural factors in

an individual's information-seeking preferences.
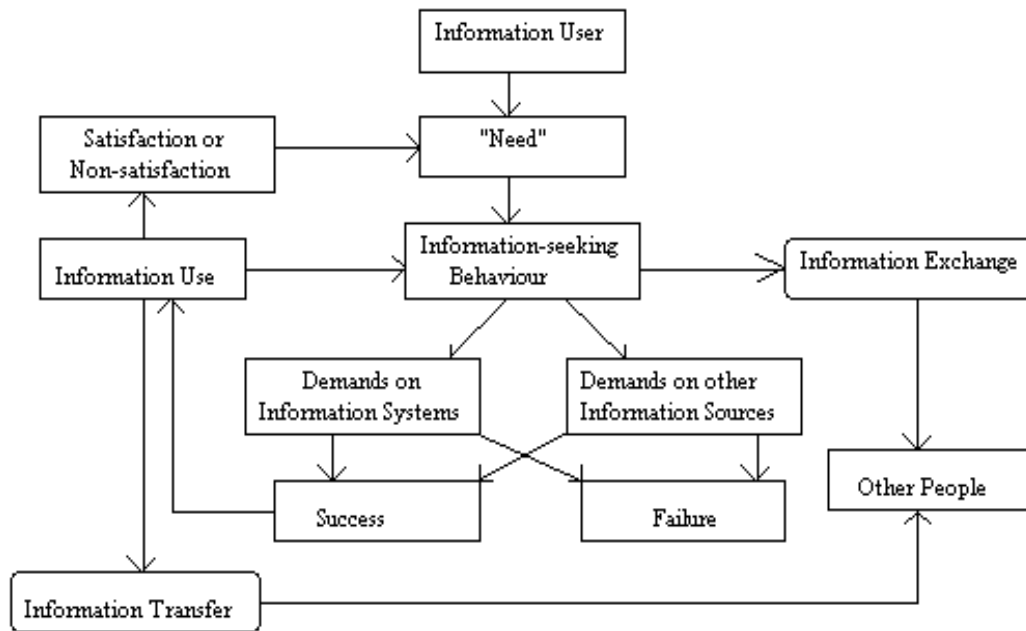
Figure 2.4 *Wilson's (1981) model of information behaviours*

Information sharing is the final tier of Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework

of information behaviours in virtual communities. This concept is primarily based on Rioux's

(2005) information acquiring-and-sharing concept, which refers to the ways in which an

individual understands the information needs of others, and shares their own information on the

basis of those needs. More specifically, information acquiring-and-sharing refers to sets of

behaviours and processes where an individual:

- Cognitively stores representations of other people's information needs.

- Recalls those needs when acquiring information of a particular type or quality.

- Makes associations between the information acquired and the person/s who they believe
  need or want this information.

- Shares this information in some way. (Rioux, as cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 142)

In a 2004 study, Rioux noted a combination of affective, cognitive, procedural, and motivational needs linked to the ways in which people acquire and share information. From this, four themes relating to information acquiring-and-sharing were identified:

1. Respondents perceive a relatively low awareness of the cognitive states they experience during the process of sharing acquired information

2. A quick cognitive evaluation state is evidenced

3. Respondents experience a varied mix of positive affective states during the process of sharing acquired information

4. Respondents do occasionally experience negative affective states during the process of sharing acquired information. (Rioux, as cited in Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 142)

Although similar, tiers three and four (information exchange and information sharing) differ in directionality. Information exchange is a reciprocal exchange, whereas information sharing is a unidirectional information-sharing event (Hersberger et al., 2007).

The final component of this model is the affective dimension, which refers to the emotional contexts in which each tier of the framework takes place (McMillan, 1996; Nahl, 2001, 2005). These affective states alternate between gratification and discontentment throughout each tier of the framework and for each individual community experience, and have large community implications due to the emotional dimensions of community cohesion. Depending on an individual's understanding of their place within the community, they may feel optimistic, confident, and accepted, or anxious, hesitant, and doubtful, which impacts information behaviours as well as virtual community participation (McMillan, 1996; Nahl, 2001, 2005). Building from the work of Nahl (2001, 2005) and McMillan (1996), Hersberger et al.

(2007) developed their framework's affective dimension to conceptualize the relationship between positive emotions, negative emotions, and participation. When affect is overlaid with the aforementioned pyramidal framework, the four tiers are slightly altered as follows:

1. The foundational basis of the community, including membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and the community's shared emotional connection.

2. The strength or weakness of ties in the social network.

3. Information exchange on a community level.

4. Information acquiring-and-sharing on an individual level. (Hersberger et al., 2007, p. 143)

2.6.2 Information Behaviours and Virtual Diet Communities

A particularly notable change in the rise of virtual communities has been the emergence of virtual health communities, an area not discussed within Hersberger et al.'s (2007) model. Health information-seeking has become a major component of modern online communities (American Dietetic Association, 2006); however, little research has been done into the unique information practices of users of virtual diet communities like the members of LoseIt. Content analyses of these communities have consistently found that informational and emotional support are the primary purpose of communication in virtual dieting environments (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011; Hwang et al., 2010; Trainer et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2017); however, not all studies have been in agreement regarding the type of information most commonly sought by users and few have taken a qualitative approach when exploring these complex topics. For example, Braga Enes et al. (2019) found that Reddit communities were content-centred, and not relationship centred. In contrast, a 2019 study by Hirvonen et al. took a more qualitative approach, finding that although Reddit may be a content-centred platform, online health

information is evaluated for credibility by users through the construction of cognitive authority and established relationships with other users, indicating the importance of strong community relationships. This lack of consensus demonstrates that the information behaviours of virtual dieters are not yet fully understood, especially as it relates to their information needs and identities. To situate my study and the novelty of its approach, I have included a brief overview of the past research that informed my initial research questions and prompted my use of constructivist grounded theory as a research methodology.

The majority of past research on information behaviours in virtual diet communities has employed a quantitative or mixed methods approach, which is common in content-focused LIS research. A 2011 study by Ballantine & Stephenson used quantitative data from 145 members of Facebook's Weight Watchers page in order to understand how social and emotional support were given and received within the community, and the communication styles used in these interactions. Their study found that users could be roughly divided into three groups (casual browsers, active supporters, and passive recipients), and that even though members had a shared interest in the community, the ways in which they interacted and participated differed, along with their perceived community benefits (Ballantine & Stephenson, 2011). Wang et al. (2017) continued this quantitative trend with a text-mining study of online health communities that explored the types of social support that were related to user participation, and created a predictive model to determine when a user would leave the community. While I believe this study suffered from the lack of qualitative considerations, its focus on user retention provided important context for my study.

Incorporating a blend of quantitative and qualitative methods, Hwang et al. (2010) conducted a mixed-methods study of an internet weight loss forum that used surveys,

interviews, and content analysis. This study focused on understanding and describing the role

of social support in online weight loss communities, and found that these communities played a

substantial role in weight loss efforts, meriting further evaluation as a potential clinical

resource (Hwang et al., 2010). As one of my research questions pertains to online health

information in relation to LIS professionals and healthcare workers, this article holds particular

importance. As previously mentioned, Braga Enes et al. (2019) conducted a study of three

Reddit diet and weight loss communities (r/LoseIt, r/Keto, and r/xxKeto) in which interactions

between users were evaluated through data modeling, as well as through an analysis of

community characteristics. The study determined that Reddit is a content-centred website, in

which what matters is not who is posting, but what is being posted. Surprisingly, Braga Enes et

al. (2019) also found that there were no substantial differences between community behaviours

and relationships, meaning that online weight-loss strategies and interventions may be more

broadly applicable than previously expected. Hirvonen et al. (2019), as noted before, took a

mixed-methods approach to examine the role of cognitive authority in online user-generated

health information. Through an analysis of data from a questionnaire survey, it was determined

that forums with online health information were a trusted source for experiential information as

opposed to accurate health information, and that author credibility was evaluated through

things like tone, veracity, and argumentation (Hirvonen et al., 2019). Therefore, while online

forum members may be trusted as cognitive authorities, it is widely understood that they are

not sources of legitimate medical information. Trainer et al.'s (2016) cross-sectional and

longitudinal study of American weight loss blogger narratives revealed a much less optimistic

outcome, demonstrating that although there are online spaces for resistance and empowerment

for larger bodies, the majority of user narratives documented weight-loss failure over time, and the reinforcement of antifat social values as a result of this continued failure.

The final diet community study by Manikonda et al. (2014) took a markedly different research approach from the ones before it, focusing on language and discourse analysis of the *Lose It!* weight loss application. This study took a particular interest in the differences in discourse between users who regularly fluctuate in weight and users who lose weight and do not regain it. Ultimately, Manikonda et al.'s (2014) study revealed that post type, sentiment, and semantic cohesion varied in accordance with users' patterns of weight loss. The insights from this study have helped to provide important context for my upcoming discussion and are as follows:

1. Users with frequent weight fluctuations are more active in virtual diet communities than other users.

2. Users with frequent weight fluctuations post more questions than other users.

3. Users with stabilized weights write more cohesive posts when contextualized within a given thread.

4. Negative sentiments are more prevalent in posts by users with frequent weight fluctuations compared to those with stabilized weights. This implies that constant weight fluctuations result in an increased need for emotional support from virtual diet community members. (Manikonda et al., 2014, pp. 31-32)

Veering away from weight loss, Park et al. (2018) incorporated a text-mining and visualization approach to analyze three mental health communities on Reddit (r/Anxiety, r/Depression, and r/PTSD). In this study, prevalent themes in the forums were identified using algorithms before being qualitatively examined to gain a better understanding of their

differences and similarities. Following this, visualization techniques were used to identify the relationships among and between the three communities included in the study. Park et al. (2018) identified four shared themes: gratitude towards supportive community members, sharing of positivity, sleep-related issues, and work-related issues. While this particular study does not address virtual diet communities in particular, there are significant overlaps between thematic content in weight-related and mental health-related online communities, particularly when they share the parent platform of Reddit.

Research like Braga Enes et al.'s (2019) and Park et al.'s (2018) has begun to look at the information behaviours of members of virtual communities, but minimal literature exists on how these intersect with identity and discourse. This gap in the literature is where my research topic began to take shape, as I searched for ways to bridge the gap between these two seemingly disparate areas. Information professionals and academics have studied various aspects of virtual health and diet communities in the past (Braga Enes et al., 2019; Hirvonen et al., 2019; Manikonda et al., 2014; Park et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2017), yet there has been no analysis of information behaviours and identity formation in these communities using a grounded theory approach. The aforementioned studies have primarily used content analysis but have not accounted for the discursive meaning of the content analyzed in order to identify the larger narratives and communicative patterns being formed. There has also been a lack of research into virtual diet communities that focuses on qualitative data from an LIS perspective. It is hoped that this study further explores the ways in which virtual dieters use information to position themselves and inform their online activities through a process of grounded theory coding and analysis in order to unravel the deeper meanings that underlie user discourse.

Primarily informed by Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and

Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual

communities, this study hopes to illustrate the information behaviours of dieters in virtual

communities and the ways they position themselves through discourse. Additionally, as stated

by Hwang et al. (2010), "understanding these communities could improve how health

professionals evaluate, build, harness, and manipulate social support for weight loss" (p. 5),

indicating that further explorations of this research area could have substantial clinical

implications that my thesis hopes to uncover.

2.7 Summary

This chapter has aimed to explore five main areas of research relevant to this study: the

body, diet culture, positioning theory, community, and information behaviours. By discussing

these concepts in relation to one another, a gap in LIS literature was identified regarding

positioning and information behaviours as they relate to the body and dieting in an online space.

While numerous frameworks and approaches could have been chosen to inform this work, it was

determined that Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and Hersberger et al.'s

(2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities had not been

employed in this context before and no identified prior research had used these approaches in

tandem. It is hoped that this study is able to test and expand upon Hersberger et al.'s (2007)

framework through an examination of the community members' posts, and that this exploration

of community discourse uncovers patterns of positioning through language. By providing

background information on community, perceptions of the body from Foucauldian and feminist

perspectives, the role of shame in body image, and the realities of diet culture and fatphobia in

Western society, the context within which online dieters use information to position themselves

and others within their communities can be better understood. Keeping this context in mind,

Chapter Three ("Research Design") discusses the methods being used to conduct the rest of this

study.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 Introduction

Throughout the planning of this thesis, my research design shifted many times. Ultimately, I decided that the overall approach and methods used needed to suit a more inductive and exploratory research approach, as my project was delving into previously unexplored territory in LIS. In addition to this, the world of online dieting is one that is often emotion-driven and community-based, establishing the need for a qualitative approach like qualitative data analysis.

Qualitative data analysis involves the categorization and interpretation of textual or oral data to generate theory or make statements about social phenomena and the construction of meaning through language (Flick, 2014). There are three main goals of qualitative data analysis, including: (1) to describe certain phenomena in detail, (2) to identify and explain commonalities and anomalies within the data, and (3) to develop a relevant theory using the study's data (Flick, 2014). Essentially, qualitative data analysis is a transformation of data into theoretical outputs, and while direction may be offered, "the final destination remains unique for each inquirer, known only when—and if—arrived at" (Patton, 2002, p. 432). This led me to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory, an approach to research in which theory emerges from the data and is developed throughout the study, instead of theory being tested as a predetermined hypothesis.

3.2 Approach

3.2.1 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a research methodology used to develop theories or generalizations regarding the causes and circumstances surrounding specific social phenomena; in essence, it is the "discovery of theory from data" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 1). Through a constructivist

grounded theory approach, this study aims to develop a theory for understanding the information behaviours of online dieters, as well as the ways in which they use this information to position themselves and others. To provide more context to the necessary steps involved in conducting this research methodology, the following is a list of the seven fundamental concepts associated with grounded theory:

1. Openness: Grounded theory studies take an open approach to the processes they study. This means that the topic or goal of the study may evolve throughout the analysis.

2. Ongoing analysis: In grounded theory studies, analysis begins as soon as possible and occurs alongside data collection.

3. Coding and comparison: Coding is central to data analysis, in which data is segmented, labelled, and compared with other data as a method of understanding and explaining commonalities and anomalies in the data. When codes are combined in related groups they become part of larger concepts or categories.

4. Memo-ing and annotating: Memos are written throughout the project, about general thoughts, observations, and relationships between categories. They not only record thought, they stimulate thought.

5. Theoretical sampling: Theoretical samples are informed through memo-writing, coding, and comparison. They are intended to serve the emerging theory by filling in potential gaps and working to explain part of the newly developed theory.

6. Theoretical saturation: Theoretical saturation allows researchers to know that all of the concepts of their developed theory have been adequately accounted for by the data. This means that there are no new concepts being introduced that are not already present in the study.

7. Production of a substantive theory: The ultimate goal of a grounded theory study is to develop a substantive theory, or set of related concepts that work together as one cohesive unit. This theory is context-dependent and fallible. (Sbaraini et al., 2011, p. 3)

For this study, grounded theory is used to qualitatively analyze and identify the recurring themes that appear in LoseIt community discussions. This is an inductive research process, in which theory is systematically developed through a continuous engagement with the study's data and thus the steps in grounded theory are cyclical, allowing the researcher to move back and forth between data collection, coding, and sampling as the project progresses towards the development of a substantive theory, as seen in Figure 3.1 (Flick, 2019). This level of flexibility aids in the creation of conceptual or thematic categories that the data falls within, as the categories can be altered based on the level of coherence between the codes and the data (Flick, 2019). Within the primary or cluster categories there are also a series of subcategories that share an overarching theme as identified by the researcher (Flick, 2019). Throughout this process, as the categories become clearer and the relationships between them become more apparent, theory develops. While this theory evolves another critical step should be occurring continuously throughout the study: self-reflection. During the coding and sampling process it is important to reflect on what the data has to say, and the role of the researcher in assigning these meanings (Flick, 2019; Holton & Walsh, 2017). This is also the stage where the researcher can try to address or acknowledge any bias and its potential effects on their analysis and argument.
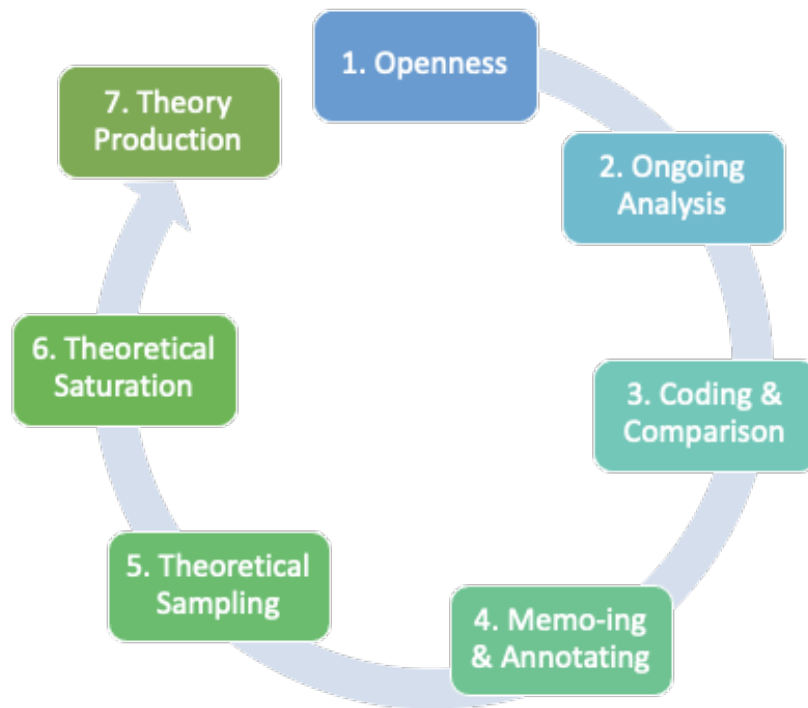
Figure 3.1 *The iterative process of grounded theory research*

Although the general steps involved are similar, it is important to reiterate that this study does not use classic grounded theory but instead the constructivist approach, an offshoot that employs a pragmatic and relativist approach within a constructivist epistemology (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). In this configuration, data and theories are not discovered, but are instead constructed as a result of the researcher's interactions with the data, participants, and field of research (Charmaz, 2014; Thornberg, 2012). The data is shaped by the researcher's worldview, privileges, positions, interactions, and geography, as well as those of the participants (Thornberg, 2012). Constructivist grounded theory allows the researcher a high degree of openness, but does not discount the role of context and worldview as classic grounded theory does. Importantly, within a constructivist approach there is a pre-data collection literature review which does not limit the study or force pre-hypothesized conclusions (Thornberg, 2012). Instead, this is a data-sensitive review that helps inform the researcher's understanding of the

knowledge areas involved in the project while remaining open and flexible to different theoretical processes and outcomes.

3.3 Addressing Common Misconceptions

While researching grounded theory, I discovered that there is a lack of consensus as to what grounded theory is, what it does, and how it is to be done (Holton & Walsh, 2017). As my research does not follow a traditional grounded theory approach, I have decided to discuss these issues in this chapter and provide my reasons for why I still believe that constructivist grounded theory is an appropriate methodology for this research. Most of these issues stem from three main areas of disagreement: emergence versus preconception, description versus conceptualization, and substantive versus theoretical coding (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Before these issues can be discussed I need to address what is likely the most common misconception regarding grounded theory. As a general research paradigm, grounded theory is not solely a qualitative research method; in fact, grounded theory can use any type of data and any appropriate epistemological or ontological perspective (Holton & Walsh, 2017). As a result of this misunderstanding, many guides to grounded theory promote the inclusion of a preconceived theoretical framework and frame it as a purely qualitative approach, illustrating the difficulties in truly defining grounded theory (Goulding, 2002; Partington, 2002; Suddaby, 2006).

3.3.1 Emergence vs. Preconception

The first area of major disagreement is emergence versus preconception. Grounded theory rejects the idea that scholarly studies must focus on preconceived notions and hypotheses, instead favouring open exploration of the data (Holton & Walsh, 2017). As stated by Glaser (2003), "GT listens to participants' own[...]concerns and then subsequently crafts questions from emergent concepts for subsequent theoretical sampling" (p. 118). I believe that this notion-free

approach is not truly possible and likely never was, which is why I have prioritized the constructivist methodology. Every researcher enters their field with a set of preconceived notions based on their own worldview, and although they may be aware of them and try to account for them, that does not negate their existence. Additionally, most research projects stem from an initial problem, theory, or framework to be studied, and therefore preconceptions cannot be avoided (Holton & Walsh, 2017). In response to this some scholars have dismissed the need to avoid preconceptions, noting that the premise is not only fundamentally naive and unrealistic, but that it is not the only way to be 'open' as a researcher (Dey, 1993, 1999; Kelle, 2007).

Grounded theory's openness to discovery is what makes it unique, and researchers must be theoretically sensitive to new ideas as opposed to solely focusing on predetermined research areas (Holton & Walsh, 2017). What this does not mean is that one must only participate in research areas where they hold no preconceived notions, as is the case in classic grounded theory. Instead, my research has embodied Charmaz' (2014) constructivist grounded theory, which has captured this reformulation by insisting that "guiding interests, sensitizing concepts, and disciplinary perspectives [can act as] points of departure for developing, rather than limiting, our ideas" (p. 31). Using the constructivist approach has allowed me to read relevant literature and conduct background research without stifling my openness as a researcher.

3.3.2 Description vs. Conceptualization

Following emergence and preconception, the second area that lacks consensus is description versus conceptualization. It can be difficult to transcend mere description and arrive at conceptual explanations when conducting grounded theory research, however, conceptual explanations are the most powerful example of grounded theory's potential impact (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This work is not focused on the accuracy of data description, but instead on

"tapping into the latent structures in social settings" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 51). By doing so, the researcher can make generalizations or theoretical propositions that extend beyond a specific case study, avoiding the trap that many qualitative and descriptive studies fall into (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Although conceptualization is hard to truly quantify, grounded theory's creative and iterative nature helps to facilitate this 'conceptual leap' from empirical data to conceptual theory (Klag & Langley, 2013). This is what helps differentiate grounded theory from other research methodologies, along with the ongoing use of comparative analysis, theoretical sampling, and theoretical coding (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

3.3.3 Substantive vs. Theoretical Coding

The final major area of disagreement in grounded theory centres on substantive versus theoretical coding. In grounded theory, coding "refers to both the substantive coding of empirical data and, later, to the theoretical integration of emergent concepts through theoretical coding" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 53). While theoretical coding follows an initial substantive coding stage, substantive coding conceptualizes the study's data by open coding all of the identified concepts (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Memo-ing occurs throughout both of these stages as a form of reflection and record keeping. Once a pattern emerges that tentatively indicates a core category, the researcher switches from open coding to selective coding. This is done by selectively collecting and analyzing data that is related to the core concepts identified (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Following this, the researcher focuses on theoretically saturating the relevant codes, before moving on to theoretical coding.

Theoretical coding "conceptualizes how the substantive codes may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated in the final theory" (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 53), emphasizing the importance of a conceptual integration between the theory and the data. The constant

comparison of codes and memos is crucial to theoretical coding, as memos are used as a tool to help the researcher understand the relationships between categories (Holton & Walsh, 2017). There are two main misconceptions regarding theoretical coding: that it refers to the fact that empirical data is coded with theoretical labels, and that during analysis specific theoretical codes are selected and applied throughout the entire data analysis process (Kelle, 2005). As a result of these misconceptions, there are a number of accounts of grounded theory coding and methodology that are in disagreement with one another (Dey, 1999; Gibson & Hartman, 2014; Locke, 2001).

3.4 Grounded Theory Justification

As a result of the misconceptions and lack of consensus surrounding grounded theory as a methodology, I think it is important that I justify my decision to use it for this study. Research in information studies tends to prioritize a quantitative or content analysis approach, however, a qualitative grounded theory approach allows for the examination of the deeper meanings of community discourse (Togia & Malliari, 2017). My reasons for using a grounded theory approach are as follows: (1) it allows me to develop my own theory, (2) it is flexible, and (3) it allows me to engage with data in an iterative way that necessitates reflexivity. Additionally, when used qualitatively, grounded theory's communication-based approach is well suited to social media research and information-sharing research, which are central components of this study. Qualitative analysis methods like those used in this grounded theory approach are well-suited not only to the goals of this study, but also to my own identity as a researcher.

Qualitative research encourages self-awareness and introspection as a practice, as well as an acknowledgement of biases, flexibility, and the inclusion of external feedback. Most importantly, it allows the researcher to celebrate anomalies and account for unexplained or

unexpected findings. While my study is informed by both a theoretical and conceptual framework, and a thorough literature review has been conducted on several relevant research areas, I do not think this precludes me from using a grounded theory approach. These frameworks serve to inform my work, but do not dictate the direction it takes. The ideas discussed in them (i.e., social positioning and information behaviours) were not predetermined codes included during coding, and I only added them as top-level codes following the emergence of relationships between lower-level codes that were connected to one another through these top-level relationships. Additionally, due to my history with dieting and eating disorders, the order that I went about this research was fairly non-traditional. I did not first look for promising theories and frameworks and then collect data that would suit my needs. The frameworks discussed in this study were decided upon after the community of study had already been decided, and they were chosen based on my own community observations. I did not find the LoseIt community for this research, but have instead been following it online for years, and my curiosity was piqued from years of browsing and reading as a bystander. Essentially, this project arose as a direct result of lived experience. While Holton & Walsh (2017) would likely argue that this is not in line with grounded theory, I would disagree. My experiences in these communities are an unavoidable part of my worldview that have shaped my research interests and my understanding of myself. My incorporation of relevant literature and frameworks reflective of parts of my own experience does not limit or dictate the directions that my study can take, but instead provides necessary context that can explain my worldview instead of ignoring it.

Although the nature of my research is not conducive to member checking, the iterative process of grounded theory provides its own form of validity. Member checking involves

sharing findings and collecting feedback on study results with the participants (Birt et al., 2016);

however, my study prioritizes the virtual nature of the LoseIt community and the power of

anonymity. As my study focuses primarily on general discursive practices and information

behaviours in the forum, the data collected is already extensive enough to inform my theoretical

conclusions. In addition, the iterative relationship between data collection, sampling, and theory

testing inherent in grounded theory increases validity in a similar manner to member checking

(Birt et al., 2016). While validity cannot be guaranteed without a member check, I believe that

my methodological approach is what this study required, especially due to its focus on the use of

language and information in a virtual, anonymous setting.

Finally, I believe that the lack of consensus surrounding the process of grounded theory

research makes it difficult to say whether a specific research application is correct or incorrect.

Much like my research has been shaped by my worldview, so have common understandings of

grounded theory as a methodology. While I have not followed the classic model as intended by

Glaser and Strauss (1967), I have found Charmaz' (2014) constructivist grounded theory to be

the right fit for this project's needs and a methodology that is well suited to explore and answer

my key research questions.

3.5 Research Questions

In order to better understand the unique intersections of identity, discourse, diet, and

virtual communities in the information practices of forum users, it is important to identify this

study's key research questions. The following three questions were determined through the

identification of gaps in the related literature, and it is my goal to explore them using the data

gathered from the LoseIt community:

- What are the types of information shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well do these communities' information behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities?

- How do forum participants use information to discursively position themselves in a virtual diet community?

- What are the implications of these findings for LIS and health information workers?

While gaps in LIS literature informed the questions chosen for this study, there were a number of other components taken into account when forming these questions. Most notably, the questions asked had to be answerable or at the very least, attemptable. It was also important that the study's results would add to the existing scholarly literature. Additionally, the questions needed to identify and explore the relationship between information behaviours and positioning theory and tie these relationships back to themes covered in the literature review. The next section of this chapter discusses my research parameters and the confines of this project.

3.6 Study Population

My research occurred exclusively in an online environment, with a focus on the collection of textual data. The community included was from the website Reddit (reddit.com), a popular social networking site with large subcommunities (called subreddits) and a focus on user interaction and information exchange. To be considered a virtual diet community, the community needed to fulfill at least one item from the following criteria that I decided upon based on my experiential knowledge as a dieter and member of numerous dieting communities:

1. Inclusion of progress updates (both progress pics and text posts).
2. Information regarding weight loss that can be used as a tool by other users.

Community selection was initially done by choosing communities that shared a similar end goal, but differed in their approaches. In this stage, the selection was narrowed down to two communities. These were the LoseIt subreddit (reddit.com/r/loseit/), which is a general weight loss community, and 1200isPlenty (reddit.com/r/1200isplenty/), which focuses on caloric restriction, with a recommended daily maximum of 1200 calories for its members. The LoseIt subreddit is the most general diet forum on the Reddit platform and has the largest member base, with approximately 2.3 million members as of July 2020. 1200isPlenty is the smaller of the two communities, with approximately 370,000 members as of July 2020. This subreddit represents a more extreme approach to dieting through significant caloric restriction which appears in juxtaposition to the LoseIt community ideology of balance. As I began my research process, I realized that including two communities created an unfeasibly large dataset and an unfocused thesis topic. Eventually, I decided to only include the LoseIt community for two reasons: it has the largest member base and thus the largest amount of data, and by virtue of that the posts have the greatest topical range.

Reddit posts consist of a number of components, including the title, the body, the subsequent thread and replies, the time of posting, external links, and upvotes and downvotes, which serve as a binary representation of whether other users liked a given post or not. For the purposes of this research, I am focusing on the post titles, post bodies, and post comments or replies, as these are the text-based components that have the most bearing on discourse and information practices. If deemed relevant, images may also be included in the discourse analysis, as user-posted images play a large role in the accountability component of online diet communities, particularly in the case of progress pictures and food pictures.

3.6.1 Sample Size

Determining an appropriate sample size of empirical data for this study was a surprisingly difficult task. Qualitative research methods do not normally dictate specific minimum and maximum sample sizes, and are instead determined within the context of a specific research project. This is not to say that qualitative research methods make no recommendations regarding sample size, as that is not the case. Instead, due to the involved nature of qualitative inquiry it becomes clear that an overabundance of data is not amenable to most qualitative research, and also that excess data is made redundant if it is not necessary to make an argument (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This concept is referred to as theoretical saturation and was exemplified in my dataset by the repetition of similar themes that tied each thread together. At the same time, a sample size that is incredibly small is also not sufficient for qualitative research, as there can be no significant themes identified in the data, and no broader applicability of the research results. Based on these general guidelines, this study ultimately focused on thirty-seven threads from LoseIt, arrived at through a combination of theoretical saturation and theoretical sampling, which are explained further throughout the rest of this chapter.

3.6.2 Theoretical Sampling

Although random sampling was used at the beginning of the data collection process to select one hundred posts for further analysis and coding, theoretical sampling was used to arrive at the final thirty-seven threads that elucidated this study's research topics most effectively. This strategy stems from grounded theory and builds from emergent sampling, referring to "the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes [their] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop [their] theory as it emerges" (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 45). Theoretical sampling was a

useful technique for this project because it provided high amounts of flexibility during data

analysis and allowed me to continually engage with the dataset in an inductive manner (Holton

& Walsh, 2017). The benefits of emergent and theoretical sampling are seen more clearly in

Chapters Four and Five, as I follow the natural flow of the data during coding and in turn

identify the thirty-seven key threads that are most worthy of further attention. By virtue of this

project's data being digitally collected in such a large quantity, this combination of random and

theoretical sampling was required to arrive at the final data sample and ensure variety in the data.

3.7 Research Ethics

Due to the public and open nature of the collected data and lack of identifiable

information included in this research, this project does not require an ethics review as stated by

the University of Alberta Research Ethics Office's section on internet research that is exempt

from review ("Internet Research," n.d.). The nature of this research is non-intrusive and there is

no reasonable expectation of privacy for forum users, as Reddit is a vast public platform with

millions of members, and the posts on the LoseIt forum are open to everyone with or without an

account. While this information may be publicly available, I do understand the sensitive nature

of diet and body image talk, and its close ties to mental and physical wellbeing. As a result, I am

not including any Reddit usernames and am instead incorporating pseudonyms if necessary. I

am also not including any posts that contain pictures of the user if their identity is not concealed.

3.8 Data Collection

This project uses qualitative data analysis informed by a constructivist grounded theory

approach to examine discourse and information behaviours in the LoseIt community. In a study

by Altabe (1998), a comparison of quantitative and qualitative measures regarding body image

demonstrated that standard quantitative measures may miss information that is noticed using

qualitative methods, such as the role of ethnicity in body image, concluding that qualitative measures should be accounted for in body image research. Altabe's (1998) work is relevant to this project due to its emphasis on the importance of qualitative data and the strong correlation between discussions on body image and dieting in virtual diet communities. This is exemplified by the data obtained from LoseIt, which is shared throughout the results chapters and summarized by the word clouds in Appendix B.

The data for this project was gathered using the Python Reddit API Wrapper, an application programming interface that uses Python to scrape text posts from Reddit forums. This tool was chosen due to ease of use and familiarity with the programming language as a result of prior coursework. The data was then compiled into tabular CSV files, with values separated by title, score, ID, URL, number of comments, date, body, and replies. LoseIt's initial dataset consisted of the forum's one thousand most recent posts at the time the code was run, spanning from approximately July 1, 2020, to July 8, 2020. Following this, data analysis was aided by NVivo qualitative software to examine and code discourse within the community.

Before moving on to data analysis, it is important to make note of an extra step in between data collection and NVivo coding that I completed. After the initial data collection, the data was exported to an Excel spreadsheet. From there, a random sampling formula was entered into the spreadsheet and used to collect 100 posts for further examination. While the nature of the Reddit API Wrapper limits the dataset by time and number, the choice to do random sampling within the dataset ensures that I obtain a more accurate representation of the content posted in the LoseIt community. These posts were then moved into their own spreadsheet, where new columns were added for general themes and indicator words. This was where my data analysis began.
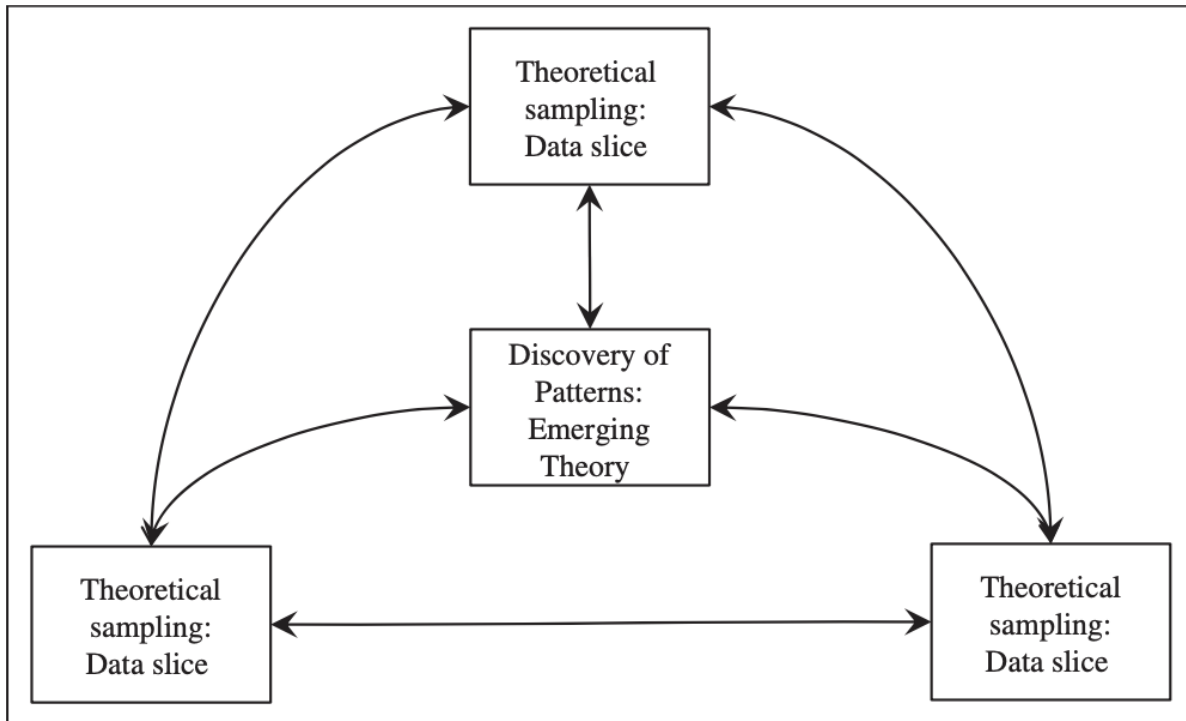
Figure 3.2 *Iterative comparative analysis process (Walsh, 2015)*

3.9 Data Analysis

After the data was collected, it was analyzed using NVivo. NVivo is a qualitative data analysis software that allows researchers working with text-based data to examine relationships, themes, linked concepts, and other aspects of textual information that relate to underlying discursive themes. In the past, Glaser (2003) has argued against computer-aided coding and analysis, noting that researchers should not rely on technology more than their own abilities; however, from my perspective this seems to be a misinterpretation of CAQDAS (computer-aided qualitative data analysis software). Computer-aided qualitative data analysis software does not mean that the software itself conducts the analysis (Friese, 2019). Instead, CAQDAS are simply a tool of the researcher, who is still responsible for the reasoning behind the study and its analysis (Friese, 2019). In many cases, the introduction of computer software has actually helped

to expose the complexities underlying seemingly simplistic activities (Bryant, 2019). My focus with NVivo was on examining conceptual relationships and thematic recurrences among the users' discourse, in order to identify the patterns associated with the members' information behaviours and social positions. This was done through the examination of key themes identified through coding each thread included in the sample.

Following the creation of the aforementioned Excel spreadsheet, a preliminary readthrough of the posts was conducted to identify initial actions that recurred throughout the threads to be noted down as memos, or "the narrated records of a theorist's analytical conversations with [themself] about the research data" (Lempert, 2007, p. 247). This broad topical examination allowed me to identify an initial set of potential codes for NVivo, but still allowed for alterations and additions. By beginning my analysis in this way, I was able to minimize bias, as there was no predetermined set of themes and codes shaping my perceptions. While the themes and codes were not predetermined, because of this study's framing in both information behaviours and positioning theory, themes relating to user positions and information behaviours were quickly determined to be relevant.

After the initial round of thematic coding was conducted on Excel, the data was exported to NVivo to undergo more in-depth coding. NVivo allowed me to develop a codebook iteratively throughout the coding process, and code at my own pace. As there were no pre-developed key themes, coding was entirely dependent on the data used in the study, and the inferences made from those data. Additionally, reflection, an important part of the coding process, was facilitated by the memo function within NVivo. This provided a layer of accountability to the analysis, as the assertions made were explained by the data, and it was easier to detect any bias or missed connections by having these moments of self-reflection. The coding process is discussed in

greater detail in section 3.10, and includes the methods employed and the actions that ended up being used as codes. These identifiable themes and codes are used to contextualize the information behaviours of these users through the lenses of Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory and Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities as it relates to identity in an online environment. Ultimately, a new, comprehensive framework of virtual information behaviours that focuses on diet communities can then be applied to different situations to illustrate the unique information environment of virtual diet communities.

3.10 Coding Process

3.10.1 Context

The steps taken during my coding process have been adapted from Holton and Walsh's *Classic Grounded Theory: Applications with Qualitative and Quantitative Data* (2017), and Bryant and Charmaz' *The Sage Handbook of Current Developments in Grounded Theory* (2019). By incorporating elements from each of these texts a clearer picture of the coding process was developed, as well as the reasoning behind each step. Prior to beginning the coding process, a brief discussion on knowledge organization needs to occur, anchored by the concepts of coextensiveness, exhaustivity, specificity, and consistency as described by Given and Olson and shown in Figure 3.3.

Coextensiveness refers to the relationship between the topics covered by coding and the project's research questions (Given & Olson, 2003). According to Given and Olson (2003), the creation and definition of thematic codes has to be coextensive with the concepts in the research question in order to obtain relevant results. There are a number of key themes in my research questions that should be covered by or related to my codes, including positioning and

information behaviours. The second concept, exhaustivity, is the breadth of representation or the

number of concepts included in coding (Given & Olson, 2003). An exhaustive codebook

includes all of the implied variables in research questions, although Given and Olson (2003)

note that relevance is researcher-dependent and flexible. When coding, it is important to balance

high recall (i.e., the ability to retrieve all of the relevant information) and high exhaustivity (i.e.,

a greater number of codes used) (Given & Olson, 2003). Specificity can refer to the level of

precision in the codes or the way the codes are applied to the data (Given & Olson, 2003).

Specificity in coding improves the precision and therefore relevance of the results. My

codebook has high specificity and low precision, meaning that although many categories and

codes were created for the data, there was significant overlap between the codes and the data

belonging to each code.

The final, and perhaps most important aspect of knowledge organization within the

context of this study was consistency, or the accuracy of categorization through coding (Given

& Olson, 2003). During my analysis I had to balance remaining consistent in coding and

remaining open and flexible to new ideas and concepts. An example of this is when I decided to

create a general code for 'health' early in the coding process. Partway through coding, I realized

that there was a significant amount of data related to mental health, as well as some about

physical health. Most importantly, the content in these posts was dissimilar, leading me to

divide the category in two and reclassify the information that had been previously coded.

Additionally, I did not include a code for demographic information until late into the coding

process. This was added out of personal curiosity to see if any interesting trends arose regarding

the gender, sex, or age of participants. Luckily, through grounded theory's use of iterative

coding, I could go back and alter past categorizations when needed, which provided me with a

sense of freedom in my research. Ultimately, Given and Olson (2003) note that the best way to avoid inconsistency is by balancing specificity and exhaustivity, which is something that I believe this study accomplishes through the creation of twenty-two grounded theory codes that cover an expansive range of forum behaviours.
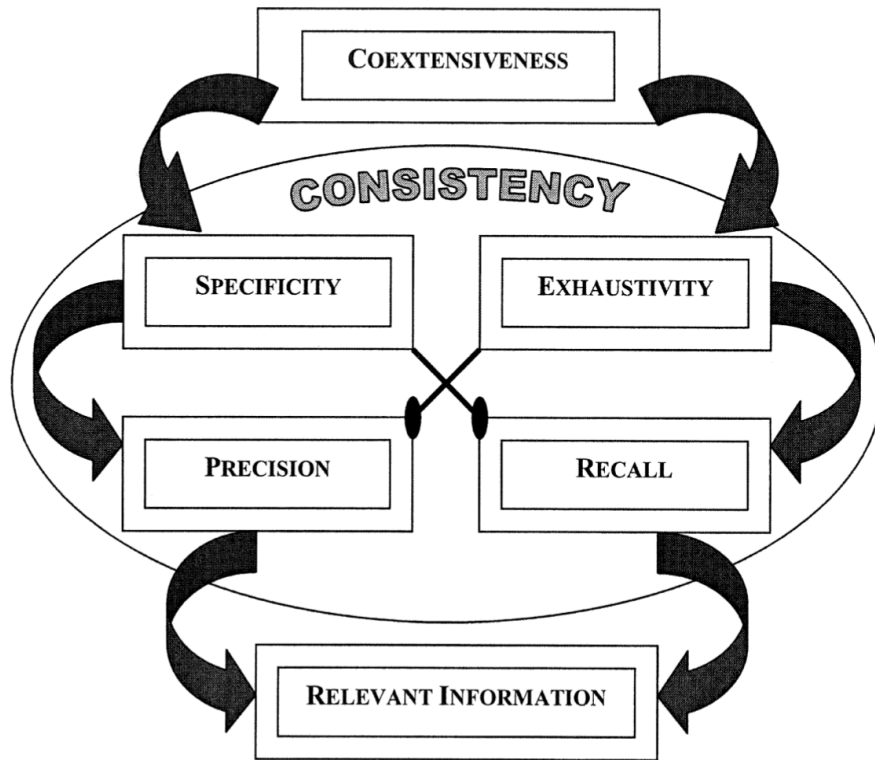
Figure 3.3 *Knowledge organization for qualitative data analysis (Given & Olson, 2003)*

3.10.2 Coverage

What follows is a short overview of this study's content coverage, numerically summarizing the process of data collection and analysis.

The data collected included:

- 1000 text posts from the LoseIt subreddit

- 100 randomly selected posts from the original dataset

- 65 post threads coded in NVivo

- 37 post threads included in the final dataset

The analysis included:

- 2 conceptual categories

- 22 codes

- 1534 coded segments

- 444 annotations

- 26 memos

During data analysis, sixty-five threads were coded before I felt certain that theoretical saturation had been reached, and through the process of theoretical sampling and coding, thirty-seven of these threads were included in this project's final dataset. The codes developed during data analysis fell roughly within the concepts of information behaviours and positioning. These are incredibly broad categories, as it can be argued that every communicative act in the digital space involves both information behaviours and positioning to some extent, however, the categories within these concepts do more to explain the trends identified within the LoseIt community (i.e., accountability, health concerns, etc.).

3.11 Codebook

3.11.1 Process

Before describing my codebook development process, it is important to note that there are two distinct types of grounded theory coding: substantive and theoretical (Holton & Walsh, 2017, see Table 3.1). Substantive coding refers to the initial process of analyzing and conceptualizing the contents of the data (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Theoretical coding refers to the integration of the developed concepts to explain the patterns and relationships between the

main categories and their related concepts (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This stage follows

substantive coding and occurs once the core categories have been fully saturated.

Table 3.1 *Types of Coding in Grounded Theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 86)*

Coding Types		Description	Purpose
Substantive	Open	In vivo (what is going on) or analytic codes (conceptual explanations).	To identify incidents in the data that appear to indicate one or more concepts.
	Selective	Coding around the core categories.	To identify properties and dimensions of the core category.
Theoretical		Coding to model relationships between and among core categories and relevant concepts.	To shape and integrate the theory.

Open coding is the first step of the substantive coding process, and means "to identify

incidents in the data that appear to indicate one or more concepts and labeling these using one or

two salient words per code—preferably verbs to capture the action in concept(s) indicated"

(Holton & Walsh, 2017, p. 80). Within this substantive coding there are two types: in vivo and

analytic (Holton & Walsh, 2017). In vivo coding is intended to capture the exact events in a

situation, whereas analytic coding is meant to provide a theoretical explanation for what is

happening (Holton & Walsh, 2017). While in vivo codes are an initial attempt at identifying

concepts, analytic codes are necessary to increase conceptual abstraction (Holton & Walsh,

2017). This first stage of coding occurred with the full set of 100 sample threads. In this stage, I

began reading through all of the threads and creating codes and notes as they arose. During this

process, I began to take note of recurring concepts and overall categories that could be formed from them.

Following open coding is selective coding. Selective coding is the process of delimiting coding to only the concepts that relate to one of the core categories and ultimately add to the production of a theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017). Concepts that are not relevant in any way to a core category are dropped during this stage, regardless of personal interest or novelty (Holton & Walsh, 2017). In this stage it is also important to revisit data that has been coded to several different concepts (Holton & Walsh, 2017); this is to ensure that the data is still relevant to the related core category. The process of delimiting speeds up the pace of analysis by allowing the researcher to focus on theoretical sampling and comparison to the core categories and concepts, which reduces the likelihood of the researcher becoming overwhelmed by large quantities of data that are ultimately irrelevant to the emerging theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017). During this step I removed extraneous codes, and began to selectively code threads that contained relevant information. I ended up with twenty-two codes, including categories and subcategories, which are summarized in Table 3.2. A full list and description of these codes can be found in Appendix A. Using this finalized set of codes, I stopped coding once I had selected sixty-five threads, as I felt that theoretical saturation had been reached due to a lack of novel information.

As previously discussed, theoretical coding refers to the process of transforming the relationships identified between and among the core categories and related concepts into a fully integrated theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This is the final stage of coding in grounded theory, and is largely responsible for the resultant emerging theory (Holton & Walsh, 2017). In this last step, I narrowed down the data into thirty-seven threads. These threads contained important

coding information that was critical to the understanding of my research results and theoretical

output.

Table 3.2 *Summary of Coding Concepts and Categories*

Top-Level Code	Type	Code	Description
Information-behaviours	Information exchange	Posting for accountability	A reference to keeping oneself and others accountable. This category includes subcategories for progress photos and statistics.
		Sharing experiences of fatphobia	A reference to a personal experience of discrimination on the basis of weight.
		Discussing physical or mental health	A reference to problems or behaviours related to health. This category is divided into two subcategories, focusing on mental health and self-care, and physical health concerns.
		Using self-deprecating language	A reference to oneself using demeaning language.
		Discussing food and/or exercise	A reference to dieting and weight loss behaviours revolving around food or exercise. This code straddles both information exchange and information sharing.
		Asking questions	An exchange of information in which a community member asks a question in hopes of getting community responses.
		Community-building through supportive messaging	An exchange of information in which a community member shares information and receives a positive or congratulatory response. This category includes a subcategory for messages of support and motivation.

	Information sharing	Providing external links and resources	Primarily in reference to community members' acquiring and sharing external links with others on the basis of an assumed information need.
Positioning		Community member positioning themselves as an expert	An exchange of information where a community member presents themselves as an expert in a particular area.
		Community member positioning themselves as a novice	An exchange of information where a community member presents themselves as a beginner in a particular area.
		Using comparison (to self and others) to position oneself	An exchange of information where a community member relies on comparison to situate themselves.
		Community member sharing demographic information	An exchange of information where a community member shares their demographic information (ie. age, sex) to situate themselves.

3.11.2 Relationships

In grounded theory, coding is more than just attaching labels to data segments. It involves writing memos and annotations, creating links between data points, and developing theory (Friese, 2019); it is not merely descriptive, it is explanatory. While Glaser (2003) did not approve of the use of CAQDAS in grounded theory, Charmaz' (2014) constructivist approach demonstrates the importance of computer-assisted analysis, emphasizing that it is the method of labeling that differentiates between general qualitative coding and grounded theory coding, as grounded theory codes for actions and not topics.

In this study, I used NVivo's annotation and memo functions to create my own links, tying my own reflections and discoveries to specific comment threads as a method of axial coding, which refers to notes about references to conditions, interactions, or consequences contained within coded segments (Friese, 2019). Following this, annotations are brief observations or notes regarding small segments of data (Friese, 2019). These are meant to signal interesting points for further discussion, anomalies, issues, or patterns. It is within these annotations that I often identified new codes or concepts, as they were made primarily during the initial open coding phase. Memos served as extensions of observations made in the annotations, synthesizing these brief observations into something more meaningful (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

Memo writing is a core component of analysis in grounded theory, and is defined by Glaser (1978) as "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst by coding" (p. 83). This is where the researcher can process and discuss theoretical ideas as they arise through the back and forth process of coding and comparative analysis seen in Figure 3.2. Essentially, memos are theoretical notes that help to establish the conceptual connections between categories within the data (Mruck & Mey, 2019). As a continual process, memo writing helps with conceptual abstraction, as well as the development of specific properties for each category (Mruck & Mey, 2019). Mruck and Mey (2019) note that it is critical that memo-ing occurs simultaneously with coding in order to transcend an overly simplistic descriptive analysis. If a researcher fails to keep up with the use of memos to capture emerging ideas, the potential for innovation is lost (Mruck & Mey, 2019); as stated by Klag and Langley (2013), "it is often in the very act of writing that productive conceptual ideas develop and crystallize" (p. 161). Memos are longer and broader than annotations and look to make

connections and commentary on a collective level more so than individual observations. The memo function in NVivo served as a journal during my analysis, and entries mainly centred on surprising themes that I had discovered during analysis, changes made to the codebook, potential relationships between categories and concepts, and moments of reflection.

3.12 Reflection

There are a number of strategies that researchers use to reflect on their personal context and bias during the research process, including personal and epistemological reflection (Mruck & Mey, 2019). While personal reflections are about the self, epistemological reflections focus on the implementation of the research project. Situating myself in this study means acknowledging that I am a young, Canadian, English-speaking woman with a wealth of privileges; however, it also means acknowledging that I have a long and disordered history with food and exercise, much of which was exacerbated by online dieting forums. Reflecting on my epistemological background, I was brought up in the Canadian education system, and I am a graduate student. My degrees have focused on anthropology, psychology, library and information studies, and digital humanities, which have shaped my understandings of knowledge, and the ways that I approach and conduct research. These personal and epistemological contexts undoubtedly shape the way I understand and interpret this project, in line with social constructivism. While this study examines the social positioning of online forum users, it is equally important to understand my own position and perspective and the role that it plays in the theory I develop. My worldview and experiences have played a large role in shaping this research project much like the worldviews of forum users have shaped how they interact in the virtual dieting space, and working to understand both of these experiences has been part of my goal throughout this research process.

There are two central components to the reflexive process that I focused on: (1) first person reflective writing to position oneself and understand my own thoughts in relation to the data, and (2) continuous communication with others to decentre my personal perspective and gain insights into external viewpoints (Mruck & Mey, 2019). Self-reflexive memos were employed throughout this project as outlets for ideas, as well as to facilitate retroactive reflection if needed. These memos are unstructured and personal, allowing for an unselfconscious exploration of ideas and insights that are not stifled by academic jargon or formatting requirements (Mruck & Mey, 2019).

Although memos serve a number of purposes (ie. theoretical, procedural, reflexive), they "have in common the role of integrating the processes of abstraction and conceptualization that move the research from data gathering to articulation of a theory or model" (Bryant, 2017, p. 198). To reach this integration stage, however, it is beneficial to engage in introspective memo-ing, in which the researcher determines what they are hoping to understand, and what their role is in the research process (Finlay, 2006). Introspection, especially in the early stages of research, allows the researcher to understand the relationship between their thoughts, their data, and their research problem (Mruck & Mey, 2019). Analyzing memos written throughout my research process helped me track the development of concepts and categories over time and the ways in which they had changed (Mruck & Mey, 2019).

Throughout the coding process, I wrote numerous memos and annotations on NVivo. While these notes focused on thoughts and findings regarding my data, they also kept track of my personal thoughts about the research process as a whole, and particularly my experiences using NVivo. This allowed me to keep track of areas where I excelled or struggled and record the ways I dealt with them. In an amusing turn of events, the aspects I struggled with the most

using NVivo were annotations and memos themselves. For quite a while I could not figure out how to create them, and once I had figured that out I could not figure out how to connect them to posts or data segments, so I was creating floating memos referencing nothing. This provides some insights into my research process and also contextualizes any possible coding or annotating errors, particularly early on in the coding stage when I was still familiarizing myself with the software. In many ways, my lack of familiarity with NVivo and qualitative coding in general was itself a limitation for this study, and this along with several other limitations are discussed below.

3.13 Limitations

The credibility of my chosen methodology in this context is difficult to ascertain, as it is a relatively contested field, especially when comparing classic and constructivist approaches to grounded theory. Additionally, I have no prior experience doing this type of research, which may limit some of my understanding of the proper protocol when conducting such a large text-based study. As a result of this, the transferability of my findings is difficult to determine until the study is complete, however due to the qualitative nature of the research and the short time frame that the data collection takes place in, there is a need for further testing before my findings can be responsibly tied to other research.

Confirmability of the data received is a particularly difficult task to achieve when relying on the online, anonymous information that I have collected. All of the information shared is self-identified, which means that any participant can be dishonest about their experiences or identity on the forums. There is also the possibility that this research determines that positioning does not play a critical role in users' information behaviours and that the premise of the study is

misguided. Instead of seeing this as a limitation, I believe that this can open doors for new areas of research, in which case the data still holds meaning, even if the argument does not.

Other issues that this research is not able to fully address are the roles of race and gender in virtual diet communities. On a social networking platform like Reddit many users do not reveal their race or gender in their posts, making it difficult to identify not only differences in community demographics, but differences in online behaviours between and among populations. For this reason, while dieting as a highly gendered and racialized practice is discussed, the roles of race and gender in the LoseIt online community are not a priority for this study, although they may be discussed briefly.

Although qualitative research can have many issues regarding validity and confirmability, this study attempts to circumvent these issues by being transparent in its goals and methods and by discussing the collected data as it relates to the relevant literature and methodology openly and honestly. While I have conducted this study with academic rigour to the best of my ability, the results and conclusions made are inextricably tied to my own worldview and experience, and understanding this context is important to my identity as a researcher. I am aware of the limitations of generalizing results from a specific sample to a more general population but acknowledge that important information can be gleaned from experiential and qualitative studies that is relevant beyond the confines of this research project (Anderson, 2010; Atieno, 2009).

3.14 Summary

This chapter serves to outline my study's research design and explain these choices in detail. First, I discussed my decision to use a grounded theory approach, as well as dispelling some common misconceptions about classic grounded theory. Following this I addressed the

differences between classical and constructivist grounded theory, and my reasons for choosing constructivist grounded theory as my research methodology. Then I identified my list of research questions before detailing the study's sampling methods and reasoning. Data collection followed this, which discussed my use of programming languages to scrape online data. The next section, data analysis, represents a symbolic break in the chapter. It provides a brief introduction to coding as a method of analysis, and is followed by an extensive chapter segment on coding. After the initial coding process is discussed, the process of codebook development is explored, which includes a table briefly summarizing the final codes. This is followed by an explanation on the importance of identifying relationships through annotating and memo-ing, which transitions into the segment on reflexive memo writing before moving to the final section, which covers the study's limitations. Now that a detailed explanation of my research design has been completed, I can proceed to Chapters Four ("Information Behaviours") and Five ("Positioning"), which discuss the results of the coding process as it pertains to my theoretical sample through a review of each code and its overarching thematic concept.

CHAPTER FOUR: INFORMATION BEHAVIOURS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter begins the results section of my thesis, which is divided into two chapters: information behaviours and community member positioning. Starting with information behaviours, I discuss the results of my data analysis through an exploration of the qualitative codes subsumed under information behaviours. These resultant codes directly address my study's first research question: What are the types of information shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well do these communities' information behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities?

Information behaviours are one of this study's two core categories and are interested in how people give and receive information within a virtual diet community, as well as the common themes that underlie community discourse. Within information behaviours there are two subcategories, information exchange and information sharing behaviours, as described by Hersberger et al. (2007). Information exchange is the clear motivator of most communication on LoseIt, with codes emerging regarding accountability, experiences of fatphobia, physical and mental health talk, self-deprecation, discussions about food and exercise, community-building and supportive messaging, and asking questions. The distinction between exchanging and sharing information is blurry, and the codes within each subcategory shifted throughout the coding process as my perspective shifted. My understanding of information sharing as described by Rioux (2004, 2005) and Hersberger et al. (2007) ultimately left me with a single relevant code: external links or resources provided by the community member. While many community posts contained what I would consider to be external discursive information, these discourses were not shared with the explicit intent that I ascribe to acts of information acquiring-and-sharing

like resource provision. I had great difficulties applying these information acquiring-and-sharing theories to my study, as certain aspects of information sharing behaviours are easier to assess through personal interviews than through qualitative coding. This is because much of the underlying motivation for and action of sharing are invisible at the surface level. The applicability of Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework to studies like mine, which focus on community discourse, perception, and outcome as opposed to individual intent, are further discussed in section 6.3.

Before I begin to discuss my demographic data and research results, I need to address my decision to separate the results and discussion chapters of this thesis. Qualitative research findings are typically ordered around central themes that combine and blend together the results and discussion, however, the large amount of data collected and analyzed, and more specifically the large number of codes that emerged during my analysis warrant further discussion. While the next two chapters explore the discursive themes of my study code by code, these themes and the implications of my findings are discussed in more detail in Chapter Six ("Discussion"), where I develop and explore a new, substantive theory of positioning and information behaviours in virtual diet communities.

4.2 Demographic Information

To contextualize my results, I must first provide an overview of the demographic information collected during this study. This was only coded in cases where a community member shared their demographic information (i.e., age, sex) to situate themselves. While I consider this to primarily function as a form of social positioning, which is the focus of the following chapter, its role in demystifying community dynamics warrants its position at the beginning of the results section.

Demographic information was the final code added to my coding set, as I originally had no intentions of including it and it is not typically considered in qualitative grounded theory studies. This is because demographics are primarily quantitative, whereas my thesis focuses on non-quantifiable information; however, I did think that it would still be interesting to collect any demographic information I could find regarding age, sex and/or gender due to my own internal biases and assumptions regarding which populations were most affected by diet culture (i.e., young women). Another reason that I was cautious about collecting demographic information was because the anonymity of online environments made it difficult to ensure member veracity, and it is important to note that the demographic information discussed here has been taken at face value from the community members' posts.

Dieting is a highly gendered practice that uniquely targets women, and a woman's self-worth is often tied directly to her appearance (Counihan, 1998). This relationship between gender, body image, and dieting inspired me to find the average age and gender or sex of the members in the LoseIt dataset. Most community members do not share this information; thus, these findings are not truly representative of the community. Yet I still believe there is valuable information to be gleaned from the available data, like potential differences between those who choose to share demographic data and those who do not.

As discussed in the literature review, language is our greatest communicative tool, and is greatly impacted by culture and context. The interpretation of any communicated message is dependent on the linguistic and cultural context of the original poster and of the individual reading it. More specifically, different contexts such as time, location, and age can greatly impact the meaning of a communication act, leaving a future incentive for research into specific cultural contexts and demographics in virtual diet communities. Reddit is an American platform

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that is highly catered towards English-speaking/writing populations with internet access. As

such, the cultural context explored in my research is primarily that of dieters that can

communicate in English and are of a higher socioeconomic status (Beck et al., 2014; Fox &

Duggan, 2013; Nölke et al., 2015). While my dataset is only able to explore a narrow cultural

context, age and gender can also affect the ways in which communicated messages are

interpreted. The following tables breakdown the ages and genders attributed to community

members within my dataset.

Table 4.1 *LoseIt Dataset Sex and/or Gender Analysis*

Sex and/or Gender	Number	Percent
Male	18	38.3%
Female	27	57.4%
Genderfluid	1	2.1%
Trans	1	2.1%

Unsurprisingly, female-identified members make up the largest proportion of the

community (Hwang et al., 2010), however, a significant percentage of members also identify as

male. While I prefer to discuss dieting using gendered terms (i.e., man, woman, etc.), the

majority of community members describe themselves using binary sexed terms (i.e., male,

female). I have left these terms unchanged to accurately portray the demographic data but refer

primarily to gender throughout this thesis. Although many men appear uncomfortable discussing

weight and body image in non-virtual settings, the anonymity that the internet provides gives

them space to be open and vulnerable. Supportive spaces online, including virtual communities

like LoseIt, present men with alternatives to the culture of toxic masculinity that permeates many

online spaces. There are two individuals outside of the gender and sex binary represented in my

data, with one individual who identifies as genderfluid and the other as trans, specifically FTM (female-to-male). For the trans community member, the specific circumstances involved in transition are relevant to their community participation as certain medical procedures during transition have weight requirements, and they post quite openly about their struggles with weight, body image, and transitioning, and the intersections between those struggles.

Table 4.2 *LoseIt Dataset Age Analysis*

Age	Number	Percent
10-19	8	17.8%
20-29	21	46.7%
30-39	9	20%
40-49	4	8.9%
50-59	1	2.2%
60+	2	4.4%

Also unsurprisingly, young adult community members between the ages of 20 and 29 make up the largest proportion of members (see Beck et al., 2014; Fox & Duggan, 2013; McCully et al., 2013). In an unexpected result, the second and third most common age brackets are 30-39 and 10-19. These are the nearest categories to the 20-29 age bracket, and are separated by only two percent. While eating disorder forums have a large teenage and young adult participant base, my own personal biases made me expect LoseIt to skew significantly higher in age, and I did not expect there to be so many teenage community members.

The overall age range identified in the data was 14 to 60+. Both of the 60+ community members did not mention a specific age, and were counted as 60 during calculations. Upon

calculating the mean the average age of identified members is 28.55, skewing towards the higher

end of the 20-29 range, which signifies that the majority of members are in their adulthood.

4.3 Information Behaviours in Virtual Diet Communities

While described briefly in the introduction, it is important to not only reiterate what

information behaviours are, but how information exchange and sharing are defined and separated

in this study. This is a hard distinction to make, and I argue that it is tenuous at best in the

context of this study. As previously stated by Case (2008), information behaviours "encompass

information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviours (such as

glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviours that do not involve

seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (p. 5). Within this definition of information

behaviours, two modes of communication are particularly important for virtual communities:

information exchange and information sharing.

Information exchange addresses how models of information behaviours, including needs,

seeking, and exchange can be used to explain the evolution of online relationships and

communities (Hersberger et al., 2007). Back and forth exchange is a foundational component of

these virtual communities, where relationships between community members are reliant on

continued and consistent communication. Thus, dependent on the strength of the bonds between

members, group membership and relationship dynamics are fluid throughout time. In a

community like LoseIt, these relationships are predicated on a common goal of weight loss, but

are maintained and strengthened through bidirectional and reciprocal information exchange

(Hersberger et al., 2007).

In contrast to information exchange, information sharing is a unidirectional information

event informed by Rioux's (2005) theory of information acquiring-and-sharing, and I use these

terms interchangeably throughout my thesis. This theory describes how individuals not only understand others' information needs, but how they interpret those needs to share their own information. Essentially, once an individual is aware of another's information needs, they are able to store and recall those needs through associations made between internally acquired information and an external information need. The event is complete when the individual is able to share the information they have acquired with the intended recipient. What I find particularly interesting about this concept is that it is understood entirely through the lens of the acquirer. The information gathered and shared does not have to actually fill any external information need, but is instead a projection onto another of what the acquirer believes their need to be. In this way, information exchange differs in that it is more like a social information practice, whereas information sharing is necessarily an individual information behaviour.

4.4 Information Exchange

4.4.1 Accountability

One of the most common codes identified in the LoseIt posts is accountability. Essentially, accountability in my research refers to a form of self-policing through discourse, in which community members use the public forum to hold themselves and others responsible for their actions. While Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework centres information behaviours, the prevalence of community accountability measures on LoseIt warrants additional discussion on social information practices. Social information practices focus on how communities collectively negotiate authoritative information, whereas the information behaviour approach prioritizes the role of individual cognitive processes during informational transactions (Neal & McKenzie, 2011). Importantly, information practices acknowledge that "people are entwined in discourses and constantly encountering pre-existing discourses that enable and

constrain social practices" (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017, para. 4). Therefore, accountability measures are information practices, whereby the community collectively decides the importance of practicing accountability, and most importantly what information is included and expected in accountability posts.

In the context of a virtual diet community accountability can mean many different things, but throughout my coding process I identified four main types of accountability posts: direct references to accountability, general progress updates, progress photos, and the provision of body measurements. Of these subcategories, posts including body measurements are the most prevalent, which signifies that numbers are still a primary measure of success for most community members. This pattern of equating failure or success with the rise and fall of the scale is a symptom of diet culture and the way it weaponizes the body against the self. Essentially, these systems rely on a perceived incongruence between the real self and the ideal self in order to enforce accountability.

Food accountability is a common discussion point among community members, who are often in conversation with themselves more than others. An interesting example of this is found below, in an excerpt from a LoseIt post about eating breakfast before a blood donation:

1. But really... I don't need 400 - 600 calories to start my day. We're doing Mexican for dinner tonight and I'm saving room for that. Plus, the salt on a sausage biscuit is very high *and* they usually give me indigestion. And I always get hungry fast afterwards. I'm thinking a scrambled egg with pepper and onion on a mini tortilla instead, once I'm home. Maybe coffee too. I don't count calories, per se, but it helps to be mindful of just how much is in those comfort foods I used to eat every day. Having written this out, I don't even want the biscuit anymore. Thanks for the accountpability!

In excerpt one, the original poster shares their internal thoughts and preemptively thanks other members for enforcing individual accountability, and in doing so demonstrates the power of accountability in an online environment, in which sharing one's personal goals with a mob of faceless 'others' creates an additional incentive to reach those goals and avoid public failure. The results of my analysis indicate that this behaviour is rooted in shame, or more precisely an aversion to shame. Shame is a recurring concept in this thesis as well as a form of embodied information, and alters how people understand and feel about their bodies.

Embodied information is information that is contained within the individual and expressed and understood through the body, which makes it particularly relevant to the context of this study (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). As suggested by O'Loughlin (1998), "the body is the inscribed surface of events; it is a text to be decoded and read—a locus of production, the site of contested meaning" (p. 276). This understanding of the body connects back to the discussion of Foucault in my literature review, in which the body itself is a reflection of the individual's ability to conform and self-regulate under hegemonic power structures. Community members share personal goals and receive informative and supportive messages in response, which motivates them to remain accountable to the community. Once these goals are publicly endorsed by others, failure to meet them becomes a source of shame for the individual, and sharing this failure is an act of virtual self-flagellation. Ultimately, members' diet and weight loss goals become 'real' only when they are heard and acknowledged by others.

Accountability posts can also include personal narratives, which are story-based information sources. Personal narrative posts are usually past-oriented, and provide important context to a member's weight and body image issues. These members are typically new or newly returning community members, as seen in excerpt two below:

2. My weight loss journey was interrupted. Now 4.5 months after having my baby, I'm

   ready to shed some weight again. I'm F/29/5'5""/CW:220/GW:150 Currently I weigh

   220lbs, that's a BMI of 36.6 or obese. I wanted to briefly tell my story and start being

   accountable again.

Information is used in this post to situate the community member as a returning dieter, with the word 'again' being used twice. The combination of personal narrative, body measurements, and accountability goals found in excerpt two can help the member develop a supportive network around them that understands their specific context. Essentially, the poster cultivates a small information world for members who identify with their situation, and the specificity of these circumstances helps build even stronger relationships between community members.

The rarest type of accountability post involves accountability buddies, in which a community member finds another member to partner up with as a more personal and direct accountability measure. These members communicate primarily through direct messages, sharing goals, hardships, and progress made throughout their journey. On LoseIt, most community members publicly share information about their accountability successes and hardships to the entire community instead of relying on a single accountability buddy.

4.4.2 Progress

Public progress updates are a way to hold oneself accountable in front of an audience and receive external feedback; for this reason, progress has been placed as a subcategory of accountability. Most progress posts focus on changes in body measurements, but there are also posts that emphasize changes in routine or mentality. Excerpt three demonstrates that community

members often cannot see the physical or mental progress that they have made until they are physically confronted with it as visual information:

3. So, this morning I took a [progress picture] and compared it to the beginning of my journey. I really needed this!!!! I feel so amazing now. I just needed a reminder that I'm doing great and just because my workouts have diminished a bit, my progress is still there, and I still feel better than I used to.

As in excerpt three, progress photos are occasionally included to accompany the updates, although there are surprisingly few progress photos in my dataset. The low number of progress photo posts may be due to the nature of online forums, in which anonymity is generally maintained and highly valued by individual posters. By remaining faceless and nameless, community members can share incredibly intimate information about their lives without feeling exposed, including mental or physical health struggles, their age and weight, and issues regarding their work and family life; however, posting images of their body removes this sense of security. To openly bare one's soul online while faceless conveys an important message that underlies these virtual diet communities and is further discussed in Chapter Six ("Discussion"); if the 'sins' one has committed stem from the mind, the body becomes the evidence of these transgressions.

Progress photos are a powerful and aspirational information source in that the pictured individual becomes a symbol of success, and a visual example of goal achievement to the community (i.e., "Incredible work, I'm at the start of my loss really but good to see inspiring and genuine stuff!"). This is done through the provision of visually embodied information in a photograph, and often accompanied by epistemic information in body measurements. These visual and numerical information sources are the most common ways in which community

members portray progress, demonstrating the prioritization of physical appearance and empirical measures above overall health and well-being. Progress pictures use visual information to celebrate the successful dieter and motivate the unsuccessful dieter, who is both inspired and shamed by the success of others.

4.4.3 Body Measurements

Discussions about accountability in the LoseIt community frequently mention body measurements, which for the purposes of this study include measurements of height, weight, proportions, and body mass index (BMI). While the LoseIt community generally promotes a balanced and well-rounded approach to health and weight loss, individual dieters prefer to base their goals on tangibles, and numbers are easy for most people to visualize and understand. This reliance on numerical information is one of the most interesting aspects of this study, and brings to light the concept of embodied information briefly mentioned earlier. There is a necessary corporeality to embodied information, in which the self and the bodies of others act as information sources; because the body is the physical representation of the self, it is inseparable from a person's sense of self and identity (Chrisler & Robledo, 2018; Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). Embodied information can thus be connected to body measurements, as these measurements provide a tangible means of understanding the body and the ways in which it conforms or strays from the societal ideal.

These concepts can additionally be understood through the lens of diet culture. Diet culture prioritizes certain body shapes and sizes, and moralizes numbers in relation to the body, whether the numbers are associated with caloric intake, waist circumference, BMI, or weight. On LoseIt, the bodies of community members are sources of embodied information that can help themselves and others navigate the difficulties of weight loss and living in a larger body.

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Body measurements are also a source of epistemic information. Gorichanaz (2017) describes information as an "epistemic entity between data and knowledge" (para. 24), in which information is simply data that is imbued with meaning. This can be directly mapped onto common body measurement tools like BMI, in which the numerical output begins as data until societal and individual context are accounted for. Divided into weight classes such as underweight, normal, overweight, and obese, the BMI measuring system further normalizes weight stigma, and this pattern of weight moralizing makes it impossible for weight and BMI measurements to remain as empirical data points. They are inextricably connected to human embodiment and self-worth and are thus always a form of information. As a result, decreasing weights and body measurements are seen as aspirational, and community members' embodied and epistemic information is used as justification of their methods and proof of their success. Although the goal that many people claim to share is improved health, their single-minded focus on numbers betrays a different truth—that they place more value on reaching a numerical goal than a health goal. While weight and BMI do not necessarily correspond with specific health outcomes, many dieters in LoseIt use these classifications as a form of meaning-laden short-hand. For instance, dieters often focus on going from obese to overweight, or overweight to normal weight, without considering what this information means beyond the number on the scale.

An interesting repercussion of this weight and number focus is that newcomers usually have trouble determining their weight loss goals. Community members may second guess their own embodied experience due to the epistemic information attached to body measurements. There is an abundance of meaning and information associated with an individual's BMI, speaking to their health, worth, will-power, and humanity. This is exemplified by excerpt four,

which is written by a young community member who wants an outside opinion about their weight and BMI:

4. i dont feel like i should be under 80kg im 15 and male. Am i wierd or wrong for thinking that? I am 15, male, 5′10 and weigh 98kg, and according to my bmi im still heavily overweigh, but other than my stomach and legs i look quite muscular and im happy with it, i dont feel like i need to be under 80kg.

Although there are people who can lose weight in a healthy, sustainable manner, the sentiments echoed in this dataset convey a more troubling picture. Overweight and obese individuals can suffer from poor mental health that they attribute to their bodies, and hold the misguided belief that 'fixing' one's body will improve their mental health or body image issues. These 'fixes' often focus on numerical information that is tied to physical embodiment. This causes additional problems when these physical endpoints are reached and the individuals continue to have mental health issues or are unable to maintain their results, as in the following example:

5. When I came out I decided I wanted to change my life. I had something to work towards, a goal, a new bright, shiny life ahead of me. and so I lost 100 pounds and got my GED, but my life's stagnated. I'm 23 and I've never found a job and no matter how many places I apply to I don't even get considered for an interview, I've gainned all of my weight back and all of the happiness and optimism I had has faded away. I'm back just like I was, slowly killing myself with food with increasingly fading hope of going back to school or changing anything about my life.

Excerpt five solidifies one of the main reasons why weight loss does not always have a positive impact on dieters' mental health—they frequently fail to address it. The euphoric feeling

that accompanies successful weight loss in beginner dieters is short-lived, and once it fades they are prone to return to counterproductive behaviours and subsequent poor mental health. Weight loss becomes associated with success, happiness, and confidence, whereas weight gain becomes a sign of failure, hopelessness, and stagnance. While the emotional associations are dichotomous, there is a through line that connects both weight loss and weight gain scenarios, which is a failure to adequately address the relationship between weight and mental health (Rand et al., 2017).

4.4.4 Fatphobia

Experiences of weight discrimination and fatphobia are periodically revealed in the LoseIt community. Weight discrimination and weight stigma remain some of the most accepted forms of discrimination in modern Western society (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). In contrast with race or sexuality, weight is something that individuals have a perceived level of control over, which allows people to justify discrimination and bullying in the name of 'health' (Felkins, 2019; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Fatphobia places the onus on the individual, "without considerations for how structural and institutional forces may limit access to resources to be fat *and* healthy" (Felkins, 2019, p. 182). As stated in my literature review, weight is directly tied to morality in Western society, and carrying excess weight is deemed as both a personal and moral failure.

Fatphobia can manifest in different ways, and throughout my coding process I identified two main types of fatphobia-related information practices: sharing experiences of fatphobia from external information sources, and internalized fatphobia. The former looks at personal stories as an information type, but both tackle the ways in which the overweight body is understood by the self and others through embodied information. In excerpts six and seven, family, peers, and even strangers are the sources of weight stigma and discrimination, bullying community members and

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permanently shaping their self-image:

6. So I'm an 18 year old guy and I've been overweight pretty much most of my life. I was fat shamed by alot of my classmates and by my family although it was not as bad.

7. I turned 17 a few months ago too and decided last month that I was sick of being called the ""chubby""/""big-boned""/\[other euphemisms my aunts like to use for fat\] kid of the family.

The most interesting conversation regarding fatphobia stems from a post titled, "Insulted by a stranger." This post is unique because it solely focuses on a singular negative experience, and not on the community member's personal goals or progress. While references to weight discrimination are found in many posts, they are usually built around weight-loss related information. In this case, the community member relies on narrative information to recount a negative experience that they had and look for encouragement and emotional support. The original post is shared in excerpt eight:

8. I was waiting in line at the shop today, and the guy being served in front of me was chatting to the shop assistant. Just as he was about to leave, he looked at me, then back to the shop assistant, and said, 'I'll let ya serve the fatarse bloke then!' Honestly, even when I was properly fat, I rarely (if ever) heard such shitty comments. But it really knocked my confidence. I know I shouldn't let it bother me, water off a duck's back and all that, but I suppose I can't help it. I don't really have anyone I'd feel comfortable complaining about this to IRL, so I thought I'd post about it here since I could use some encouraging words. All the best.

Responses to excerpt eight all focus on the provision of supportive information after this fatphobic encounter, but they do so in several different ways, most of which involve comparative positioning. Here is an example:

9. I remember some guy shouted, "You're getting fat!" when he passed by me on the street one time. Like, okay yeah, but I felt the same shame and low self-esteem you might've felt. Our worth isn't in our weights, but I'm glad we are pushing through and not inconsiderate people like these!

Instead of simply sharing their sympathies with the original poster as a form of encouragement, the author of excerpt nine shares a similar story and describes their own reaction, creating a bond through shared experience. In this way, information is being shared to build connections and provide support.

A particularly compelling observation made from the dataset, and one that I was curious about before this project even began, is the role of medical professionals in the lives of online dieters. This is discussed further in the penultimate chapter, but research shows that subpar medical treatment and distrust in the medical system are quite common in overweight and obese populations, which explains why they often turn to online communities for health information instead of medical professionals (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). While weight can be a contributing factor to many health conditions, healthcare workers often miss underlying medical issues due to their fixation on the patient's weight as the sole problem and weight loss as the sole solution (Phelan et al., 2015; Sabin et al., 2012). As stated by a LoseIt community member, "Fat blindness is real and such a hurtle to people actually getting the help they need."

Excerpt ten uses narrative form as its information type and captures the ways in which larger-bodied individuals are treated and understood by the medical system through embodied

information, as well as the phenomenon of 'fat blindness.' As the body acts as a conduit between social and material worlds, corporeal information is a necessary component of learning and knowing and cannot be ignored in accounts like the one below (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017; Yakhlef, 2010):

10. I haven't been to a primary care doctor in a few years. The last one that I went to see for a follow up appointment (after a trip to urgent care gave me the diagnosis of pink eye coupled with an upper respiratory infection) was so preoccupied with my weight that she ignored my acute health issues to run a battery of blood work and push gastric bypass during the first 5 minutes. She made me feel very uncomfortable, but I made a 2nd appointment to go over the results of the blood work, and she was completely baffled by how someone who looked as grossly obese as I did could have such "normal" levels. She seemed very disappointed to find no evidence of diabetes or high cholesterol, etc. While I was probably about 50-60 lbs heavier than I am now (not yet at my absolute highest weight), I mostly ate well, just a lot, and I walked/rode my bike everywhere (I was living in NYC at the time). She told me that since I'd been overweight since before puberty, I would "never be able to lose weight naturally" and that I would need surgery if I ever hoped to successfully keep it off. When I told her, *again,* that I was not interested in surgery, she gave me a prescription for diet pills, claiming they were "practically natural supplements." I threw away the prescription and never went back. Look, I know she was a quack and there are good and compassionate doctors practicing who actually listen to their patients, but it wasn't the first time that I'd experienced "fat blindness" from a medical professional (as I'm sure many here can attest).

Discussing past and present experiences of fatphobia and discrimination are important information practices in the LoseIt community, but occasionally the discrimination comes from within. In these rare instances, the statements appear to be a reflection of the poster's own negative perception of fat people, foisted upon another community member unprompted.

The effects of internalized fatphobia and weight discrimination in dieters can also lead to more dangerous outcomes. In one extreme case a community member openly admits to considering starvation as a means of losing weight, and cites the pandemic lockdown conditions as a reason. In this instance, information is being shared in order to receive support from others, but also to serve as a warning to others who may be falling into similar unhealthy behaviours.

4.4.5 Mental Health

General health is one of the most frequent areas of discussion within my dataset. Initially, I had one broad code for member posts that mentioned health, but I soon realized that it covered such a wide range of topics that the code needed to be further developed and specified. After this realization, I created separate codes for physical and mental health. Along with direct references to mental health concerns, I noticed that discussions surrounding mental health often overlapped with posts about self-care. As a result, I amended the mental health code to include both mental health and self-care information.

While the overlap is not always explicit, community members frequently set self-care goals stemming from their mental health issues, making the topics difficult to separate. Mental health and self-care information cover a variety of areas, including internal concerns with mental health, concerns about the mental health of others, and suggestions about professional help. Additionally, some posts share information about specific mental health conditions, whereas others discuss mental health in general. There is a grey area that exists between normal and

pathological concern over one's appearance and its impact on their mental health, and this unintentional descent into disorder becomes more apparent in the next post and response between two community members:

11. This weekend in order to "shed a little extra", I skipped eating a couple meals. I never used to do this, but now it's become more and more a habit during quarantine now that I eat alone more often. Has my obsession with weight loss started turning into a disorder? Or do I just keep moving the goal posts, and that's fine? I dunno.. Curious to see other people and how they've adjusted mentally to weight loss.

In excerpt eleven, a community member demonstrates a pattern of unhealthy behaviours surrounding food and weight loss, and in doing so they bring up an important question: how do dieters mentally adjust to weight loss? Because people's diet and weight loss goals are constantly in flux, they are able to justify increasingly extreme food and exercise behaviours. Once an individual has become adjusted to restriction and the goal of weight loss, it is difficult to escape that mentality. In this case, the author of excerpt eleven is explicitly looking for advice and an exchange of information. They do this through the collection of others' experiential and embodied information in order to better navigate their own experience. The following member's response to the above post accurately identifies the importance of mental health during weight loss, and excerpt twelve is one of the few posts in the dataset that provides information in the form of a reference service, and directly recommends talking to a mental health professional:

12. People don't always talk about the mental aspect of getting healthier and losing weight. You said yourself that you're obsessing over it. It's worrying to hear that you skipped meals. Please please talk to a professional about this. It's above reddit's ability. Just know that you're not alone and have all of us to help support and cheer you on.

The provision of information through reference services, like in excerpt twelve, is particularly helpful when the questions being asked are outside of the normal scope of community questions. As this discussion illustrates, the line between healthy and unhealthy weight loss can be unclear, and there are several instances in the community where this line is crossed.

While healthy weight loss can precede unhealthy disordered eating behaviours, there are also eating disorder sufferers who knowingly seek out weight loss communities as a source of motivational information. Participating in communities like LoseIt helps them to avoid certain triggers, as eating disorder forums are hyper-competitive, whereas an eating disorder sufferer in a normal weight loss community may see the community as a safe space. Excerpt thirteen is from a conversation between community members and is an example of this phenomenon, in which a girl with a suspected eating disorder joins a weight loss community outside of LoseIt:

13. Just today though we had a girl join with an obvious ED. (She listed her height, current weight, and goal weight, and said she wanted to go farther than her goal weight, and having looked at the numbers enough time to know they were not good numbers for her to be persuing, it would put her BMI at 16.8)

While the author of excerpt thirteen is looking to receive helpful information in response to their post, the responses paint a more somber picture. The specific context of living with an eating disorder and the embodied information associated with it are not easily understood by others. The relationship between those with eating disorders and those trying to lose weight is not surprising, especially in cases where the individual falls into the disorder through the pursuit of healthy weight loss; however, I was shocked at how frequently disordered thoughts and behaviours were discussed, and to a certain extent normalized on LoseIt. In fact, some of the diet

tips and tricks recommended in the community are identical to those found on eating disorder forums. It is easy to see why eating disordered individuals would frequent forums like this for tips, when there are regular discussions about eating ice as a snack, drinking water instead of eating when hunger arises, weighing every gram of food, and vilifying specific foods or entire categories of food. Not only are these tips unnecessary for weight loss, they are not an approach to weight loss that will facilitate a healthy relationship with food.

Food is a primary source of shame in virtual dieting communities like LoseIt. A liminal space exists between a healthy and disordered relationship with food, and most community members fall somewhere in between the two extremes. This is where the distinction between eating disorders and disordered eating is particularly important, as many of the community members have disordered eating behaviours such as an overreliance on food for comfort. The use of epistemic information in food-related posts is interesting, especially as it relates to numerical data like calories; societal conceptions of a healthy diet have a numerical component, and eating foods with a 'high' calorie count or 'bad' ingredients carries additional meaning with it, related to will-power and overall health.

LoseIt community members' share their embodied experiences of emotional eating throughout my dataset, and their struggles battling mind and body. Emotional eating, and the use of food as a coping mechanism are common, and this reliance is often a precursor to more explicitly disordered eating patterns that stem from past or current traumas and life stressors that are not being adequately addressed. Excerpt fourteen encapsulates this overreliance on food from the perspective of the individual:

14. How to overcome emotional eating? I'm 23F, 5'6 and 140lbs. I've been between 115-120 my whole life with zero diet and exercise. I've always eaten a lot and very unhealthily.

To be honest, I'm not sure why I've gained 20lbs in two months. Even with the quarantine, my daily routine hasn't actually changed that much. I've always known that I've had a problem with emotional/binge eating but I've never had to address it because I looked slim and healthy. When I get stressed, I feel almost a physical need to eat something unhealthy. After I do, it always makes me feel much better. It's really the only thing I can do to make myself feel better. Does anyone here have any experience in overcoming this?

This community member uses information to capture the essence of emotional eating, with a particularly poignant moment in which they note an almost physical response to stress that causes them to eat poorly, noting that it is the only thing that makes them feel better. Once this urge is succumbed to enough, eating becomes an immediate response to stressful situations and a Pavlovian link forms between food and stress (O'Connor & Conner, 2011; Pool et al., 2015). As seen in excerpt fifteen below, socioeconomic conditions, family dynamics, and poor mental health are all components of embodied information, and often contribute to emotional eating and the use of food as a coping mechanism:

15. Using food as a coping mechanism can develop from a variety of circumstances. I can link mine to a few things - growing up poor, my family often treated food as a prize. Because we didn't have a lot, we couldn't go and do a lot, but eating out could be justified because we would need to eat regardless. I was also given food as a reward for things so I correlate food with achievement. My family also did big meals at home a lot as a social activity. When I'm sad, lonely, or achieve a big goal I immediately think "let's fix this with or celebrate this with a dinner". I'd suggest starting by identifying whatever ideas and habits perpetuate your negative relationship with food.

The final example post touches on many of the issues discussed previously, and also represents something that I find particularly troubling on LoseIt: adolescent dieters. The community members in my dataset that are under 18 likely require more support than LoseIt can provide them. For instance, the author of excerpt sixteen expresses distress about their body and claims to not "feel human." They admit to poor mental health, a lack of money, little familial support, a hypercritical mother, and a lack of motivation. The author is also the first poster to directly mention other social media and its relationship to broader diet culture, using teenage girls and models on Instagram as a point of comparison to themself. This demonstrates how not only embodied information, but external information sources like social media and advertisements affect self-perception:

16. I just turned 17 a couple months ago and I'm so disappointed in myself. After all these years, all this time, I promised myself I'll lose weight and I barely could. That diet, workout plan, never even lasted more than two weeks. I am around 165lbs I want to lose 40 pounds. For now, at least. I know my weight loss is connected to my mental health but I don't think I can go to therapy because of money problems and my mom doesn't really support the idea. I don't know how to stay motivated. I don't know how to stay consistent. I'm so tired of never being satisfied with myself. Always HATING myself in photos. I don't feel human. Social media these days isn't a great help too.

Throughout these posts the connection between self-esteem, mental health, and body image has been made very clear. Many community members exhibit poor self-esteem and body image, which negatively impacts their mental health and vice versa. These negative feelings become centred on food, and food becomes the sole cause of and solution to life's problems, able to help and hinder the individual depending on their current feelings. It is a cyclical relationship,

in which food is used to deal with poor mental health and then the consequences of overindulgence negatively impact mental health, leading the individual back to food as a way to cope. These results have further illustrated that underlying mental health concerns are a primary contributor to many community members' weight and body image issues. By focusing solely on diet and weight loss and failing to address the underlying mental health issues that are inextricably linked to physical health, it is difficult for dieters to achieve and maintain weight loss, as true well-being is holistic, and includes both mind and body.

4.4.6 Physical Health

Moving from the mental to physical health codes led to a realization regarding the role of physical health conversations in the community. As expected, many physical health discussions involve the original poster discussing personal health issues in exchange for advice or support; however, many community members also post about other people's health issues, and the ways in which those issues affect them personally. These conversations demonstrate two important informational aspects within the community: sharing information to receive individual advice and support and sharing information about and for other people. This information most commonly centres on spouses or parents; although they are external parties, the close emotional bonds between the community member and the external subject creates a situation in which poor physical health outcomes for one result in poor mental health outcomes for the other. This realization also demonstrates two qualities within the community: external occurrences and information sources have a large impact on individual weight loss success, and LoseIt members feel comfortable enough to share deeply personal information about the lives of their friends and family.

A number of physical health posts were concerned with women's health issues like

endometriosis, polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), and pregnancy, as seen in excerpt seventeen:

17. So back in July of 2018 I had my gallbladder removed, with 26 stones in it. I didn't want

to believe that I was as unhealthy as I was, so after surgery I thought I could keep eating

greasy onion rings and crap. But I started to feel even worse so by the end of August, I

was doing CICO and walking a lot. I was 198lbs and ashamed. I also had PCOS and was

told it was unlikely I could have kids without fertility treatment. I hadn't even had a

menstrual cycle in years.

Mentions of women's health issues in the LoseIt community are unsurprising, as many of

them can contribute to changes in weight, including conditions such as PCOS, which is also

linked with difficulties losing weight that has been gained (Roush, 2010). While there are

medical conditions that result in weight gain, there are also several health issues caused or

exacerbated by excess weight itself. This is reflected in more than one instance in the dataset,

most notably in a post by a dieter who cites an obesity-induced hernia as their wake-up call.

Shifting from internal physical health to external sources of physical health concerns,

community members tend to discuss the effects of poor spousal or parental health on their own

weight loss progress. In excerpt eighteen, a member writes a post on behalf of their unaware

mother, showing concern for her physical and mental health and its correlation to her weight:

18. My mom has been struggling with her weight for a while now, right around after I turned

14 she went from being underweight to being obese in the span of around a year. There

are multiple factors that mixed in, the death of her mother, her stressful job at a big

hospital, the awful family environment we shared, her poor diet and very little daily

activity.

Although the LoseIt community cannot adequately provide information to an unwilling or unaware participant, which is what the responses deem the mother to be, community members often provide information and support to others who are open and willing. In excerpt nineteen, a member mentions the unexpected death of their father, and conveys the detrimental effect that this has had on their mental health:

19. Then at the end of July the worst thing that's ever happened to me happened. My dad died from unexpected heart failure and shattered my heart and all of my will to do anything but exist.

Losing a parent unexpectedly is a traumatic event, and as previously stated many dieters cope with trauma through excess food consumption to numb their emotions. Through a comparison of internally and externally focused physical health posts I noticed that community members are more emotionally impacted by health issues from external sources. Members are able to discuss their personal health problems in great detail with little overt emotion. In contrast, poor physical health or the death of a loved one has a significant emotional impact on the individual. It is easy to write off one's own health concerns, especially ones that are weight related, because it feels like something that can be dealt with at any time and does not necessarily require medical intervention. On the other hand, cancer and heart failure are realities of life that cannot be pushed aside and ignored. Weight loss is difficult, but there is a sense of personal responsibility in it that is absent from a diagnosis like cancer, and the fear of the unknown that death and disease cause are significant stressors and triggers for emotional and/or binge eating.

4.4.7 Self-Deprecation

The use of demeaning language while talking about oneself is quite common in the LoseIt community. Often, this self-deprecating language is also representative of poor mental

health and poor body image, however, there are cases where community members poke fun at themselves regarding totally mundane aspects of themselves or their lives. Self-deprecation is a common tool that people use to make themselves seem less braggadocious and more self-aware, and can be especially important in an online environment where it is harder to grasp someone's true personality (Speer, 2019). Constant vacillation between objectification and alienation promotes self-control and conformity in the masses and people who are aware that they are failing to conform often use self-deprecation as a shield; it is an effective shield because people can use it to tear themselves down before others do (Speer, 2019).

The majority of self-deprecating comments in my data centre on the individual's body as a locus of shame, connecting self-deprecation with corporeal or embodied information. Excerpts twenty and twenty-one showcase a range of self-deprecating posts that fit within this category, and illustrate the impact that shame has on intimate relationships:

20. I want to feel good about myself again, and I want to stop cringing out of sex because I feel I look like an unattractive, saggy whale.

21. I was ashamed and miserable with myself. I also got incredibly deep and large stretch marks on my stomach and pelvic area which I've never dealt with. So that was even more upsetting. I sobbed in the bathroom when I saw them, I didn't even want my husband to look at me naked. I did that to myself in the matter of months.

While these excerpts appear to document the effects of weight gain on relationships, what they really demonstrate are the ways in which poor body image stemming from bodily changes affects relationships. Shame and self-hatred are evident in the way that these community members describe themselves and their bodies, presenting a worrisome scenario in which their self-worth is directly equated to their body size. Interestingly, although there are a significant

number of men represented in the data, posts that centre on shame are largely written by women, in line with previous discussions in my literature review on shame and the body. Interpersonal relationships are affected by shame, but external perception is another area of concern for community members, as demonstrated in the following excerpt about a member's move to Europe:

22. I'm also terrified of fitting into the fat American abroad stereotype. I know it's a real thing, and in an ideal world it wouldn't, but I want to mitigate as much of my stress as possible by losing weight.

Excerpt twenty-two is unique in that the poster's worries are not tied only to their size, but to their size in context with their identity as an American. American stereotypes abroad often position them as loud, obnoxious, and overweight, and the desire to distance oneself from those stereotypes can add extra stress if an individual is overweight. These stereotypes are common in information sources external to LoseIt, including social media as well as mainstream media.

While the self-awareness and self-consciousness in the above post are primarily linked to external perception, they can also apply to a community member's internal perception. By linking morality with the body, LoseIt community members are taught to blame themselves for failing to conform, with posts titled "Left decrepit by months of lockdown," and "screwed it up didnt i?," demonstrating how negative feelings about one's body become a form of embodied information within the self. Although self-deprecation regarding the body is common on LoseIt, the relationship between morality and weight leads many of the community members to express a general disdain for themselves extending beyond their bodies. In the "screwed it up didnt i?" post, which is sampled in excerpt twenty-three, the community member uses self-deprecation as a shield throughout their writing to diminish the severity of their negative feelings:

23. i also had to move back in with my parents because i didn't get into the master's i applied

for and developed like... not depression but Persistent Glum Mood because i felt like i

wasn't going anywhere in my life and had to get an Extremely Bad Job at a dreadful hotel

because they were the only people who would hire me. so i started comfort eating

because I'm Booboo The Fool and obviously Food Contains Calories, Which, When

Consumed In Excess, Can Lead To Weight Gain.

A number of community members talk about themselves in a negative and serious

manner, however, there are a few who take a more lighthearted approach. Self-deprecation, even

jokingly, can convey real feelings of discomfort and low self-esteem in community members, but

in these instances the members portray themselves as generally comfortable with their progress

and absent of negative feelings towards their changing bodies. These tongue in cheek posts are

some of the only ones in my sample data that include emoticons, indicating that emoticons are

used to ensure that others know the original poster is joking, or does not take themselves too

seriously. In this way, emoticons can be seen as their own type of pictorial information, using

small images to convey emotion and tone. Emoticons are thus a form of textual paralanguage.

Throughout the majority of these posts it becomes clear that self-deprecation serves a

primarily negative function within LoseIt. While in some instances, community members are

able to joke about themselves in a way that does not appear detrimental to their mental health,

the majority of self-deprecating posts do appear to stem from impacted self-esteem. The posts

included here also demonstrate that negative feelings toward oneself have a disproportionate

effect on the members' relationships with others, and in particular their partners. Although self-

hatred is directed inward, it greatly impacts how people exist in the world and how they act

around others, and this presents a challenge that can strain partnerships.

4.4.8 Food

When it comes to information about weight loss methods, LoseIt has two major

categories: food and exercise. Food is the most discussed topic in this regard, and covers a range

of issues, including specific diets, mentalities around food, general nutrition, and food tracking.

The primary mental block when it comes to food and diet involves an obsession with food, or

more specifically an inability to stop thinking about food. Excerpt twenty-four exemplifies this

issue:

24. Hi! I have a problem with thinking about food. I constantly think about my next meal or

the cravings that I have. I've been actively losing weight for a while doing OMAD [One

Meal a Day], but the thoughts never goes away.

Food is a necessity of life, and thus dealing with food addiction or an overreliance on

food presents a significant problem in the LoseIt community. Community members have spent

years of their lives using food as a coping mechanism, and even if they have been successful in

achieving weight loss the constant and intrusive thoughts about food make it increasingly

difficult to stay on track. In order to deal with this, some members shame themselves about their

eating habits or publicly talk themselves out of certain cravings. This hearkens back to my earlier

discussion on shame and embodied information, and the ways in which accountability works to

lessen this shame by enforcing compensatory behaviours.

Several posts in my dataset negatively discuss foods that are generally considered

healthy, including hummus and chia seeds. Unsurprisingly, this negativity also surrounds foods

like ice cream and chocolate, as instead of focusing on a basic CICO (Calories In, Calories Out)

approach to weight loss, some community members take issue with entire food groups or

varieties. This is an example of epistemic information, in which individual foods have been

imbued with excess meaning and moralized as either good or bad. Occasionally a community member responds critically to these statements, which demonstrates the lack of consensus about weight loss approaches even within a community like LoseIt; shared goals do not equal shared methods. The most commonly mentioned diet in the community is the ketogenic (keto) diet, which is a high fat and low carb approach to dieting. The keto diet is a controversial but seemingly effective short-term weight loss tool; however, it can cause a number of side effects, with the lack of carbohydrates often causing what is called a 'brain fog,' as well as the 'keto flu' (Bostock et al., 2020). On LoseIt, keto is generally not considered sustainable or worthwhile, and is viewed primarily with skepticism as an external source of dietary information.

The most generally accepted approach to weight loss on LoseIt is the simple CICO formula, in which weight loss depends on more calories being burned than are consumed. The simplicity of this equation makes it widely applicable across populations. This equation involves empirical data points like total daily energy expenditure (TDEE) and basal metabolic rate (BMR), which differ based on an individual's height, weight, and activity levels. Most people use online tools to estimate these values, although they can also be tested by doctors. Once a dieter has these numerical estimates, they can adjust their intake to lose weight; however, this is often taken too far by people hoping for quick results. An overreliance on empirical data and its related epistemic information negatively impacts dieters, as they often ignore feelings of poor mental and physical health because they think they are eating the 'right' number of calories to reach their weight loss goals.

4.4.9 Exercise

The prioritization of numerical values as signs of success or failure does not only occur with food, as many of the LoseIt members talk about their fitness progress and goals in a solely

numerical sense. The focus is not on improved overall health, but on how many times they exercise per week, how much weight they can lift, or how fast they can run. Another common topic in exercise-related posts, especially for members who are new to the community or to fitness, is fear and embarrassment. Going to the gym can be intimidating, especially for those in larger bodies, and gym novices use information to convey their uncertainty on LoseIt as well as to receive advice from community members.

While a lot of gym fear stems from external judgments, exercise embarrassment does not only involve being in public or going to the gym (Schvey et al., 2017; Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). For some community members, this embarrassment has morphed into full-blown shame. In excerpt twenty-five, a member's shame has become so internalized that they have trouble exercising alone at home, demonstrating the role of shame in embodied information practices. Being alone for them is even worse than exercising with others, as they are forced to confront their discomfort without external support or distractions:

25. Because of this, I feel a lot of shame around exercising. And not even in front of other people - that almost feels more freeing, knowing that other people are there for the same reason. Since quarantine hit I've tried exercising at home by myself a few times and found it deeply embarrassing. One, to realize how out of shape I am; two, the acknowledgement that I'm not happy with my body and want to change it; three, an overwhelming feeling that I'll never be able to stick to it.

While exercise can be a difficult or negative experience for many community members, there are also positive experiences. Based on the dataset, positive experiences with exercise occur more often when the individual focuses on a realistic, non-numerical goal. Achievable, at-home workouts and goals like doing a full push-up are common in the community, but the most

frequently mentioned at-home workouts are from YouTube. My dataset contains information from July 2020 amidst extensive Covid-19 lockdowns, and this context has had a unique impact on the LoseIt subreddit as many community members have been unable to go to the gym because of pandemic-related closures. This has coincided with the astronomical rise of YouTube fitness influencers, who are primarily young women with little to no formal fitness training or certifications, making quick videos with clickbait titles to reel people in (i.e., "Get Abs in 2 WEEKS"; "10 Mins ABS Workout To Get FLAT BELLY IN 30 DAYS"). Naturally, YouTube has become many members' go-to platform for fitness videos during the pandemic.

The convenience of these at-home workouts is unbeatable, as community members can follow along with the videos from their homes, requiring minimal or no equipment. With gyms closed and immunocompromised loved ones, YouTube videos allow people to work out at their own pace, with no outside judgments. In this way, YouTube is used as an external information source on LoseIt, and YouTubers are viewed as authoritative knowledge sources. This external information is considered both accessible and authoritative, and because of this it becomes easily integrated into the community. While clinical and academic information sources are created by those with higher levels of expertise compared to most YouTube fitness influencers, their inaccessibility to the general public limits their ability to be an authoritative knowledge source for most people. In Chapter Six ("Discussion"), I further discuss the role of YouTube fitness influencers as information sources in virtual dieting communities.

4.4.10 Community-Building

Among all of the information exchange codes, community-building is the one with the most formalized posting process. Community-building threads are created or pinned by community moderators to the top of the forum homepage on a semi-regular basis. These posts

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contain impersonal information and focus on encouraging people to join community-run

challenges. The posts differ in goal, timeframe, and location, but all focus on group

accountability and information exchange as a form of relationship building. Excerpts twenty-six

through twenty-nine include a few examples of these challenges:

26. 24-Hour Pledge - Wednesday, 08 July 2020 - The Plan for Today!

27. 30 Day Accountability Challenge - July Sign Ups

28. Day 1? Starting your weight loss journey on Saturday, 04 July 2020? Start here!

29. [Challenge] European Accountability Challenge: July 8th, 2020

Community challenges like the ones above rely on member check-ins and updates, which

are a type of accountability posting that makes use of embodied information (i.e., NSVs, or non-

scale victories) and epistemic information (i.e., SVs, or scale victories) as measures of success.

While collective accountability plays a large role in community-building on LoseIt, more

pertinent information can be gleaned from personalized messages of support and motivation.

4.4.11 Motivation & Support

The previous community-building code covers more formal and impersonal information,

like posts regarding challenges and group pledges; however, those are not the only types of posts

that help build community. Although motivational and supportive information are not as

explicitly linked to community-building as group challenges, they are critical components of

relationship building between LoseIt members.

LoseIt relies on the formation of bonds between members to strengthen community ties,

and one of the main ways that this occurs is through supportive acts of information exchange.

Posts coded to motivation and positivity are those in which a community member's post includes

motivational or congratulatory information intended for another member. The difference

between the data that is coded as motivational versus supportive is minimal, but I consider motivational information to be primarily future oriented, encouraging the member to continue toward their goals. In contrast, supportive information is not action-oriented or temporally bound. To demonstrate some of these subtle differences, the following is a response that I consider motivational as opposed to merely supportive:

30. Also, I've been in your place. I lost a good 25 or so on keto only to gain it back. I saw a picture from when I lost that weight and that made me start the journey again. It's important to forgive yourself for the decisions you made in the past and do better in the present. I've spent too much time being mad/angry at myself for gaining the weight back but it's counter productive. Find a plan that works for you and just take one step, and then another. Take it day by day. You got this!

Excerpt thirty contains a feeling of forward momentum, best exemplified in the phrase "Take it day by day." The implied directionality is intended as a motivating factor, encouraging the original poster to continue their weight loss or health journey through the provision of motivational information. Having a hypothetical endpoint helps dieters, as they are able to think of their weight loss journeys as time-bound and finite. This temporally bound information works as motivation by implying that there will be a time in the future when their goals have been successfully reached.

Supportive messages differ from motivational messages in that they occur during information exchange when a respondent provides encouragement that is not goal-driven. These posts are not as common as motivational posts in the dataset due to the highly goal-driven nature of LoseIt as a weight loss community. As much of the discussion across virtual diet communities involves sharing questions and concerns that are deeply personal, support acts as an easy blanket

response to many queries. The role that both supportive and motivational information exchange play in strengthening bonds and building relationships within LoseIt is critical to its continued success as a virtual community, and this support remains more important to community formation and maintenance than the provision of adequate consumer health information.

Relying on LoseIt members for accurate health information or advice is not the purpose of the community, especially as there is minimal way of vetting members and their credentials, yet some members position themselves as authorities before providing support. In the following post, a community member opens themselves up to private messages with another member to provide them with support and information. They position themself as an authority by sharing their fitness experience and certifications, as seen below:

31. Your worth is not equated to your body size. You matter and that does not change with the number on the scale. That being said, living a life that supports your health and wellbeing is important. That includes anniversary dinners as much as it does physical fitness. If you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them. PM me anytime. I am not a personal trainer or registered dietician, but I do have some experience in the gym and am a certified strength coach.

The framing of excerpt thirty-one demonstrates an attempt at both relatability and authority. The respondent does not only intend to be supportive; they want to present themselves as a source of qualified and trustworthy information, but not qualified enough to be a true expert. This allows them to provide information while positioned as an authority without being held accountable for the information they are sharing. This topic, along with the development of cognitive authority and authoritative information in virtual spaces, is further discussed in Chapter Six ("Discussion").

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4.4.12 Questions

Common throughout all public forums, information exchange via asking questions is a regular occurrence in the LoseIt community, as well as a primary reason for creating new discussion threads. This is to be expected in a virtual community, especially a goal-oriented one like LoseIt where the majority of participants are trying to lose weight. Questions are a central component of information exchange, as the primary purpose of asking them publicly is to garner as wide a set of community responses as possible, facilitating information exchange on a large scale. This brings the role of reference services in virtual communities to the forefront, particularly as they relate to community members' questions. While other members can provide answers to questions, there is no guarantee of accuracy in these responses. In fact, during data analysis I frequently noted that the questions being asked were better suited for a search engine than to an open, anonymous online forum. This signifies an important feature of virtual diet communities: community members do not solely want advice and information rooted in science and nutrition, they also value personal advice rooted in human experience. Excerpts thirty-two through thirty-four include a few examples of questions asked on LoseIt:

32. What's high volume food?

33. Whats the different between net carbs and actual carbs on the nutritional facts label?

34. 500cals BELOW MY BMR?!?!?! Do people do that?!?!?!

These questions can all be answered using a search engine, and there are no guarantees of accuracy or consistency between the answers provided by LoseIt members. There are several possible reasons for this: 1) community members want to hear a range of thoughts based on a variety of different experiences and make a decision based on this collective experience, or 2) people want and need support when they are sharing and exchanging information. This second

point is supported by the LIS work of Harris and Dewdney (1994) and Dewdney et al. (1996), whose research on the information needs of battered women identified emotional support as one of the women's primary needs, and noted that for reference services to be effective, they "must address the affective or emotional as well as cognitive or task-oriented aspects of information needs" (Dewdney et al., 1996, p. 36). This is exemplified by numerous other posts in the dataset, in which questions are framed by the original poster's thoughts and feelings. Questions like this are different from the preceding examples in that they have been contextualized by the community member, which allows other community members with similar experiences to relate to the post more strongly and provide possible solutions that have worked for them. Once again, the focus is on shared experiences as the basis for embodied information and experiential knowledge. Experiential knowledge is one of the thematic constants identified in LoseIt community discourse and centres individual perception and experience as the foundation of knowledge. This concept is explored further in Chapter Six ("Discussion").

Another common topic for questions, particularly from new community members, relates to proper food intake. Members frequently ask if they eat enough or eat too much and provide their body measurements and caloric intake as evidence, yet they often fail to use any of the free diagnostic tools that already exist online. Instead, as seen in excerpts thirty-five through thirty-seven, community members treat LoseIt as their primary source for health information:

35. Am I eating enough to lose weight?

36. is my deficit too low?

37. If i lose the weight, will being 400 pounds now, at age 31, ruin my chances at a long life?

This reliance on LoseIt and the LoseIt member base as an accurate source of health-related information leads to an interesting observation about individual information behaviours

and social information practices. For the most part, community members trust one another as information sources, regardless of credentials. The focus is instead on trust and convenience, demonstrating how authoritative knowledge is formed, and tied not to expertise but to perception. Reddit's system of upvotes and downvotes, in which community members can positively or negatively vote on posts, is a tangible way in which this authority is developed and understood (i.e., responses with a lot of upvotes are deemed more authoritative than those with a lot of downvotes). Occasionally, when a question clearly requires professional input, members respond by recommending more qualified individual care, as in the example below:

38. Have you considered that this might be more of a psychological issue to be dealt with?

Maybe a therapist of some kind would be the best way forward?

These posts are typically community member responses to questions posed by another member, in which the necessary information cannot and should not be provided by a potentially unqualified person on the internet. For instance, in excerpt thirty-eight, a community member asks the original poster to consider some sort of professional help or therapy to deal with their mental health issues in an act of supportive information exchange. From an information studies perspective, this can be seen as a referral service, in which the respondent acts as a conduit between the original poster and the appropriate information source. On LoseIt, this appropriate information source is usually a medical professional that is better equipped to answer health-related questions.

A unique conversation that hearkens back to my concerns about medical fatphobia involves a question about the validity of a health professional's nutritional claims. In the original post a community member shares their distress about living a life of restriction, in which a dietician has told them that in order to lose weight they have to eat 1000 calories a day while

exercising as much as possible. The author of excerpt thirty-nine asks this question in response:

39. Eating 1000 cals a day plus calories burned through exercise is dangerous. I don't mean to discredit you or your dietician, but is your dietician even certified? Something just seems off here.

Throughout this thread, numerous community members cannot believe that a registered dietitian would recommend a grown adult eat only 1000 calories per day in addition to exercising. The author of excerpt thirty-nine questions the supposed word of an expert, illustrating one of the ways in which community members look out for one another through social information practices. While the dietitian is perceived as a source of authoritative information by the original poster, community consensus does not accept this information, thus questioning the authority of the supposed expert. As a population that has a fractured relationship with much of the health and wellness community, who else will make sure that health professionals truly have their best interests at heart if they do not do it themselves?

4.5 Information Sharing

4.5.1 External Resources

During the coding process I had a lot of trouble identifying instances of information sharing where a community member provided external information to another member specifically based on their assumed need. Upon further reflection, I was able to identify one code: the provision of links to external resources. While not common, there are occasions in the dataset where respondents provide a link to a diet or weight loss related webpage in response to an original poster with a specific problem or question. On a broader community level, there are also posts where community moderators provide links or information for newcomers based on an assumed general set of needs for those new to dieting. These posts are not in response to any

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community member in particular, but contain carefully curated information resulting from years of repetitive questions from beginners. As seen below, these posts link to other pages within the LoseIt subreddit, implying that the frequency with which this information is requested has led to the creation of these pages:

40. For the newbies to the sub reddit, please start here, so much good info!

    https://www.reddit.com/r/loseit/wiki/quick_start_guide

    https://www.reddit.com/r/loseit/wiki/faq

    Outside of excerpt forty, external information sources that community members provide include links about calorie tracking and body measurements, health concerns, and weight loss scams. For instance, many newcomers to the community are unsure of how many calories they should consume per day to lose weight, and more importantly, how many calories they burn in a day in the first place. In excerpt forty-one, another community member notes this concern, finds the link to a related resource, and provides it to the original poster:

41. You can do that HERE (https://tdeecalculator.net)

    In a more niche example, a member shares their concerns about sweating, and ways to deal with excess sweating. This is a very specific information need, however, the author of excerpt forty-two responds and claims to know about brands that specialize in sweat-proof clothing. Following this, they acquire and share a link to a specific sweat-proof, anti-odor clothing item, indicating that they have found this link solely for the benefit of the original poster:

42. I also know there are brands that specialize in ""sweat-proof"" shirts, underwear, and

    pants, like (https://www.amazon.com/Ejis-Comfort-Anti-Odor-Silver-

    Underwear/dp/B071K5JQ8N?th=1), so maybe try a Google or Amazon search with those

terms.

The final external information source that I want to discuss is a link for slimming patches included in excerpt forty-three. This is the only instance of a community member providing a link to a scam product, and it is written in response to someone sharing their concerns about overeating:

43. I had the same problem as you until I found slimming patches. They basically make you lose your appetite which makes me not overeating. I bought them here if you're interested: (https://fitpatches.myshopify.com/slimming-patches)

It is reassuring that this is the only post in my entire dataset that recommends and links to a diet scam product, however, this example represents a very real outcome of diet culture, in which people are willing to try anything and spend any amount of money if there is a possibility that it will lead to weight loss. Items like detox teas and slimming patches are not backed by scientific evidence, and yet brands are able to easily take advantage of chronic dieters who are desperate to lose weight using insidious marketing and advertising strategies on social media (Klein & Kiat, 2014; Rijo, 2019). These diet products and ads are examples of external information sources that are brought into the community; however, this is a rare occurrence on LoseIt. Instead, accepted external information sources focus on product recommendations (i.e., specific foods or clothing items) and YouTube fitness videos. These external information sources are allowable as a result of ongoing community consensus regarding social information practices and authoritative knowledge, but this consensus can change over time. Due to the gimmicky nature of most diet products, LoseIt is generally against them, evidenced by the responses and downvotes associated with pseudoscientific and diet product-related posts. Although external information sources have the potential to provide solutions or answer questions that cannot easily

be answered by other community members, they can also be misleading and ill-informed, which is why the community responds critically when they are positioned as sources of authoritative knowledge.

4.6 Summary

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the data collected from LoseIt as it pertains to information behaviours, and identifies and explores the ways information is shared and exchanged between community members. First, I began by providing a demographic overview of my study in order to contextualize the results. Then I discussed information behaviours, and the distinction between information exchange and information sharing for the purposes of this study. I then explored these information behaviours code by code, incorporating important examples from the dataset to provide context to my study. This included codes regarding accountability, health, community-building, weight loss methods, questions, and external resources. Ultimately, the results identified and discussed in this chapter helped generate an emergent theory of information behaviours in virtual diet communities, which is revealed in the penultimate chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: POSITIONING

5.1 Introduction

This chapter concludes my thesis results section, focusing on the second core category of community member positioning. Similar to Chapter Four ("Information Behaviours"), this chapter discusses the results of my data analysis through an examination of the qualitative codes assigned to community member positioning. These results address my study's second research question: How do forum participants use information to discursively position themselves in a virtual diet community?

Community member positioning is a central component of this study and is an important part of identity construction in online spaces. This category is interested in how community members use discourse to position themselves as participants in forum discussions. Due to my constructivist grounded theory approach, I did not rely on Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) preconceived positions, and instead arrived at a list of four codes naturally during data analysis. The codes that emerged for positioning include novice (post by a new and/or inexperienced community member), expert (post by a community member who is presented and/or understood as a source of authoritative information), comparative (post by a community member that relies on comparison to external or internal sources), and demographic (contextual information such as age or sex that is included in a post) and have significant overlap with the information behaviour codes. Where these two overarching categories intersect is an area of interest for me as I explore the questions of how and why members position themselves in different ways when sharing and exchanging information, and if there is a relationship between the types of information and the prevalence of specific modes of positioning.

5.2 Demographic Information

Much like the previous chapter, I begin this results section with a brief overview of the demographic information collected during this study. As an American platform, Reddit prioritizes the participation of English-language speakers with internet access, and those of a higher socioeconomic status (Beck et al., 2014; Fox & Duggan, 2013; Nölke et al., 2015). Due to the general anonymity of Reddit users, no racial or ethnic information was gathered, however, many users did share their age and sex alongside their body measurements. These data points provide some insight into the member base that makes up the LoseIt community.

As previously stated, female-identified members are the most represented sex and/or gender category, with 57.4%. This is followed by males at 38.3% of the identified population, and tied at 2.1% are genderfluid and trans community members, with the trans community member identifying as FTM. In terms of age, 46.7% of the member base is between 20 and 29 years of age, followed closely by the 30-39 bracket at 20% and the 10-19 bracket at 17.8%. There is a significant decrease in membership numbers for those identifying as 40 years old and over, with 8.9% between 40 and 49, 2.2% between 50 and 59, and 4.4% that are at least 60 years old. The age range identified in my dataset was 14 to approximately 60 years old, and the mean age was 28.55. Based on the data presented here, the average LoseIt member is a female or woman-identified individual in her mid- to late-twenties, which is supported by sections in my literature review regarding womanhood, shame, and the body.

5.3 The Construction of Online Identity

Following information behaviours, discourse pertaining to community member positioning is the second core category in the LoseIt data. As a reminder, positioning theory is a social constructionist theory regarding the ways in which individuals and groups situate themselves through discourse (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). In an online environment,

positioning holds an important role in identity construction, as the community member's identity is based on how they portray themselves online, as well as how others respond to this portrayal. Positioning occurs in three cyclical and interactive acts: communication acts, positions, and storylines (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; McKenzie, 2003; Moghaddam & Harré, 2010; Sabat & Harré, 1999; Tan & Moghaddam, 1999). The initial stage is communication acts, which refers to any initial form of communication; this is also where social significance is ascribed to an act, depending on the circumstances surrounding and people involved in the act (Austin, 1959). This is followed by positions, in which an individual's identity is constructed through interaction by either themselves or others. By being positioned, rights and duties are distributed to the individual, dictating their role within the communication act (Davies & Harré, 1990). Storylines are the final component and represent the narratives within a given community. This means that storylines indicate the values and messages that underlie communication acts, and when viewed collectively may demonstrate community-wide narratives. To further explain this concept, Davies and Harré (1990) note that a different storyline underlying the same communication act can change how it is understood by others.

Within the interactive acts of positioning theory, the construction of the self can be divided into four main selves: the embodied self, autobiographical self, social self, and self-concept (Harré, 2008). As the embodied self is invariant, it is not something that can be understood through online discourse and self-presentation. The embodied self is followed by the autobiographical self, which refers to how people portray themselves through stories (Harré, 2008). This self is prone to change between stories, meaning that it is both unstable and unreliable as a narrator. The social self is another unstable representation of the self, but in this case, it is the self that is shaped and transformed by interactions with others (Harré, 2008). Self-

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concept is the fourth and final component and refers to peoples' beliefs about themselves and their lives (Harré, 2008). The autobiographical self, the social self, and self-concept are malleable and impermanent, and these are the areas in which positioning theory is of particular importance to my exploration of the LoseIt virtual diet community.

There are five primary modes of positioning as outlined by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), but only two of them bear further relevance to this study: first and second order positioning, and tacit and intentional positioning. In first order positioning, people locate themselves and others through the use of storylines or other categories. This is followed by second order positioning, where people question or renegotiate their position in an interaction. As an extension of first order positioning, tacit positioning is unconscious or unintentional first order positioning, whereas intentional positioning is conscious. Within intentional positioning Harré and van Langenhove (1999) describe four additional types, two of which are relevant to this study: deliberate self-positioning and the deliberate positioning of others. Deliberate self-positioning refers to how an individual defines their own personal identity, whereas the deliberate positioning of others occurs in two main ways: gossip, in which the person being talked about is absent, or moral judgment, in which the person being talked about is present. In a virtual community like LoseIt, how members communicate dictates how they are perceived and understood. This means that positioning is primarily deliberate, in that community members are solely responsible for what they say and how they say it, but they are unable to dictate how they are perceived.

5.4 Social Positioning

5.4.1 Novice

When I began the data analysis stage of this project, two contrasting positions

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immediately began to make themselves apparent: novice and expert. Novices are newcomers to the LoseIt community, and are often new to weight loss. Many novices explicitly position themselves as beginners in their introductory posts, and long-term community members are thus positioned as experts, whether this positioning is implicit or explicit. Community members that mention their newcomer status are participating in intentional first order positioning, consciously portraying themselves as novices. This positioning is helpful in two ways: it provides context to the community member's post, and it allows others to tailor their responses to more adequately address the novice member's information needs. Other novice posts include those in which a community member unintentionally positions themself as misinformed about weight loss. Most of these posts involve tacit first order positioning, in that the community member unconsciously portrays themself as a novice through their lack of knowledge.

Beginning with the most explicit form of novice positioning, the following excerpt includes an instance of intentional first order positioning:

1. Hi everyone, I'm a completely new redditor and made my way here on the advice of a friend. I wanted to post a quick hello/introduction as a way to get my head in the game. I'm hoping to find some motivation, accountability and camaraderie in this group and from what I've read so far, it seems promising!

In excerpt one, the new community member explicitly positions themself as a newcomer to Reddit, and LoseIt more specifically. This position is reinforced by the phrase, "I wanted to post a quick hello/introduction." While not mandatory, writing an introductory post helps integrate new community members due to the supportive and helpful information they receive in response. Explicit positioning provides a greater understanding of information exchange for novice LoseIt members; however, implicit positioning is another important way in which

community members frame themselves.

In one example of implicit novice positioning, a community member is unable to determine the most effective diet for their body type. This sentiment demonstrates a lack of nutritional education, and while body type and diet are related, there is little to no scientific evidence that one's body type should dictate their diet (Vertinsky, 2002). An overreliance on this typing complicates weight loss and ignores the almost universally effective CICO (Calories In, Calories Out) method, as exemplified by the aforementioned LoseIt member. Following this, inadequate health and nutrition education is a problem that begins in elementary school for many Americans, who are the core user base of Reddit, and persists even in medical school (Adams et al., 2010; Perera et al., 2015). The lack of adequate education combined with toxic and constantly changing diet culture messaging makes it difficult to know the correct approach to weight loss for many people. The resulting poor health information literacy is especially apparent in excerpts two and three:

2. Yeah I know it could be dangerous but honestly I can't find a good balance. If I eat 1000+ calories I usually end up eating a lot more carbs then I'd like to as I don't have much low carb food around. Although if I may ask, what kind of mess did you have that kept your calories over a thousand?

3. I've been wondering if macronutrients make a difference? Or is us just CICO? The only reason I'm doing low carb is cause some of my friends said that in order to burn fat there must be no carbs to burn during activity

Excerpts two and three stem from a community discussion about the difference between net carbs and actual carbs on food labels. The author of the original post is also the author of excerpts two and three, and is on a low carb, low calorie diet of approximately 600 calories per

day. This community member is so fixated on the idea of eating low carb that they barely eat, as seen in excerpt two, and they barely eat because they do not know how to eat a balanced low carb diet. It seems nonsensical to be committed to a diet that one does not know how to adhere to healthily, and yet in excerpt three the member also reveals that it was their friends that told them that in order to burn fat they must be entirely depleted of carbs. This is not only scientifically inaccurate, but also medically dangerous advice, and this individual's posts exemplify what happens when non-experts take diet and weight loss advice from other non-experts, who often share misinformation (Noto et al., 2013). While friends and family can be helpful information sources during weight loss, being a friend is not a professional qualification.

This brings me to the final point of discussion within novice positioning, which is the role of age. A disproportionate number of community members that I categorized as novices were under the age of eighteen. For instance, excerpt four is written by a self-identified fourteen-year-old dieter:

4. tyvm!!! should i do some sort of workout when i get in the house after walking? if so, what's some suggestions? i don't really have any workout equipment. i'm 14 :) ik i'm a little "young" but i wanna get my life on track sooner than later.

This example is from the youngest known community member in my dataset. The writing style as well as the explicit inclusion of their age in the post makes it clear that this member is a beginner in the world of dieting and weight loss, and that they require external assistance and information from those that they view as experts. Including their age also demonstrates that they consider this to be an important piece of information that could impact the responses they receive. External approval and validation are driving forces for many dieters, but younger dieters like this community member are particularly vulnerable in this regard.

As stated in 5.4.1, it became apparent quite early during data analysis that many LoseIt members positioned themselves as experts. For the purposes of this study, I consider experts to be community members who share information from a place of authority within a given scenario. These members are not required to have any credentials, and more than likely do not. They provide advice and information framed in two main ways: formally and informally. Most expert posts use tacit first order positioning, meaning that the community members unconsciously portray themselves as experts through their use of knowledge and authority. The first, and most explicit, form of expert positioning is formal and scientifically framed. In these types of posts the member shares scientific or clinical information, focusing not on human connection but on 'legitimate' fitness advice and information. 'Expert' community members see themselves as uniquely equipped to answer other members' questions, and thus have an obligation to provide information in response. These expert posts are difficult to categorize as either information exchange or information sharing because they fulfill aspects of both types of information behaviours. Although the posts are primarily part of information exchange, the quantity of information they provide and the authority with which they provide it is also similar to the act of acquiring and sharing information based on an information need. The difference is that the community members are not necessarily acquiring this information for the purposes of fulfilling an information need, and instead it seems to primarily be based on pre-existing, personal knowledge. Here are some examples of scientifically framed information, beginning with a post about measuring net carbs:

5. Net carbs are total carbs minus fiber and any sugar alcohols (not sugar just sugar alcohol) carb manager is the app you want for low carb. Automatically adjusts for net carb which

is what matters.

While excerpt five contains a brief account of authoritative information, excerpt six is one of the most detailed responses in the entire dataset, stemming from a post about weight plateaus. The original poster is positioned as a community newcomer, which is solidified when they mix up their BMR and TDEE values, a rookie mistake pointed out in almost every response. This confusion prompts the following respondent to provide incredibly detailed information about weight loss and fluctuations, and it is likely that a response as thorough as excerpt six would not have occurred in response to a more seasoned LoseIt member:

6. When was the last time you reviewed your TDEE? As long as you're in deficit you're cutting fat, but depending on how close you are to your goal, it might be harder to tell because of water and muscle. So as many said your BMR should be way under your TDEE. Your BMR is per definition the kcal your body needs to keep your organs working (with you not breathing on your own and in a coma- sound harsh but thats the definition). Your TDEE is your Total Daily energy Expenditure, which is the kcal your body actually burns on a daily basis. I would recommend reading into these two things and make a deficit from max.500 kcal from your TDEE to have a healthy and sustainable weight loss.

Exercise is an important component of weight loss for most people but is not discussed in detail frequently in the community, with community members speaking more generally of goals about the number of exercise days per week, or the number of walking days per week. In the seventh excerpt, a community member responds to another poster's concern about attaining a flat stomach, although research has shown that spot-reducing fat does not work as individuals are not at liberty to choose where they lose weight from (Perry, 2011). Instead of focusing on the

impossibility of spot-reduction, the respondent focuses on what can be done to assist the process, which is primarily strength training in order to build muscle in the target area. Not only does the member share this information with the community in excerpt seven, they provide links to a beginner barbell program and a basic dumbbell lifts routine, acting as an information referral service. In addition to this, they discuss the process of weight lifting (ie. warming up, doing reps and sets, how many days per week to repeat these exercises, exercise splits), and include information about food, rest, and cardio:

7. For getting a flat stomach, most of that is going to just be continuing to lose fat - aka have a modest calorie deficit and some cardio (walking, light jogging, jump rope). For getting that "tone" or getting "tighter", getting definition, and looking/feeling fit, the majority of that will come from strength training. If there is a barbell at your gym, you can look into [Starting Strength](https://startingstrength.com/get-started/programs) \- a super great program.

While these expert responses focus on scientific and empirical information, they do allow for small inclusions of experiential information to increase their relatability. The community members in these posts almost never intentionally position themselves as experts, providing no background information about themselves or their potential qualifications, as well as limited information to validate their statements. This indicates that although they have tacitly positioned themselves as authoritative sources of information, they have no significant means of attaining validity. Additionally, these posts very rarely include external information sources or any sources to support their nutrition and fitness claims. While I expected members to take issue with expert posts, they rarely did. In fact, the further I examined the data, the clearer it became that community members did not prioritize scientific validity or externally sourced information, but

personal experience. If anything, community members responded more positively to those sharing embodied and experiential information than those sharing potentially helpful but impersonal information.

The rest of the examples discussed in this section are categorized as informal. In these posts, the community members still position themselves as sources of authoritative information; however, their posts include more appeals to emotion and collective identity. For example, due to the nature of virtual communities, expertise is often seen as a measure of time spent within a community, as opposed to specific knowledge or education. While rare, an example of this is seen in response posts like, "Btw NSV stands for non-scale victory :)." Posts like this demonstrate the relationship between language and expertise, in that community slang and acronyms may not be understood by novices, who require assistance and information from older community members. A more common occurrence is seen in excerpt eight, in which a respondent reassures another community member that is nervous about their metabolism:

8. Those metabolism tests aren't accurate at all, so don't worry about that. Most likely your metabolism is perfectly normal and you are just eating too many calories for weight loss. 1,200 calories will be a fine target for average weight loss of one pound/week.

In this response, the community member positions themself as an authoritative information source in two ways: firstly, in the way that they reassure the original poster, and secondly, in the way they dismiss the validity of metabolic tests. This is interesting because they provide no source to verify their claim, but there is an expectation that the other member trusts the validity of the information they are providing.

A less problematic type of authoritative information is found in excerpt nine. In this response, a LoseIt community member writes to an adolescent dieter who is overly concerned

with their caloric intake. Notably, the respondent stresses the dangers of undereating, and the importance of underage dieters consuming enough calories to remain healthy and grow. In these instances, older community members are positioned as experts due only to the credentials of adulthood, which creates a sense of responsibility over younger community members that is exemplified below:

9. Since you're only 16 and still growing you shouldn't be eating below 1500 cals. I'm not shocked you feel terrible. So eat 1500 and see how you feel. You'll have more energy to move around and exercise.

The final example of expert positioning that I want to discuss is one that I found particularly troubling. In excerpt ten, a community member recommends ways to train abs and eat in order to improve the abdominal muscles:

10. If you're truly 13-15% body fat, you should have a decent looking six pack, and if you don't, then you need to train your abs more and getting down to 10% won't help much. So you could maingain, that is, eat maintenance and gain muscle and lose fat simultaneously, and focus on ab workouts or working out in general.

While this is not inherently bad information, especially for someone who is focused on the appearance of their abdominal muscles, the post that this is written in response to provides important context. In fact, excerpt ten was written in response to a post titled, "Surpassed goal weight, still see myself as fat. Anyone else experience this?" In it, a community member shares information about what sounds like the beginnings of body dysmorphia and worries about becoming disordered, noting that they have begun skipping meals to reach their weight loss goals faster. Most of the responses express concern and provide supportive information for the original poster, and one even recommends professional help. With that context in mind, excerpt ten is

both misdirected and irresponsible. The respondent presents themself as an authoritative

information source for obtaining abs, but fails to address the central issue of the post they are

responding to. This type of response is entirely counterproductive, as the original poster already

displays obsessive exercise and dieting patterns, and this response validates those maladaptive

behaviours by focusing on visual and epistemic information.

5.4.3 Comparison

The most prevalent type of positioning identified in the dataset was also the last code

added to positioning: comparison. While comparison was one of the first codes added during

data analysis, I had initially classified it as a form of information exchange as it was almost

always used in response to another community member's post. It remained there for the vast

majority of the data analysis process; however, I had a realization late in the analysis stage;

comparison is used during information exchange as a form of positioning, and frequently makes

use of embodied information. LoseIt members respond to other community members' posts

using comparison in an effort to relate to one another through embodied and experiential

information; this is also an aspect of othering the embodied self. By talking about oneself in

relation to another, relationships can build and strengthen between community members, leading

to increased openness in communication. After identifying this trend, I made another interesting

observation. I had assumed that even though comparison was frequently used in response posts,

the focus would still be on the original poster's concern; this did not turn out to be true. In fact,

in many comparative responses the respondent shares information solely about themselves, not

once referencing the original poster in a meaningful way.

To illustrate this, I first discuss comparison to others as a form of positioning in instances

where the 'other' is not mentioned, as seen in excerpts eleven and twelve:

11. If I donated blood I'd make sure to eat at least at maintenance for that day. Sadly I can't donate blood though!

12. My window used to be eat at dinner so I can spend time with my husband, however with covid-19 and Shelter In Place here in California I'm now working from home and its hard to take a lunch break without food.

These post excerpts are responses to other community members' concerns; however, they are entirely self-directed. While the responses still contain relevant information, as they talk about the community members' personal experiences in relation to the originating post, they fail to provide any information or advice intended to help the original poster. If anything, these responses read as though the members are talking about themselves to themselves.

Following this first set of examples, I discuss comparative posts in which the respondent does specifically reference the original poster and share information regarding their concerns:

13. You did a fantastic job. I lost 18 pounds in 3 months before this corona pandemic and now i gain 25 pounds in this lockdown situation. Net wet gain 7 pounds 😩

14. If you're eating right it could be water weight. When I was losing I would stay the same for 4 or 5 days in a row then suddenly drop 2 lbs overnight.

In these examples, the respondents are comparing themselves to the original posters as a way of relating to and reassuring them. These comparisons are informed by embodied and experiential information. As seen in excerpt thirteen, the community member does not simply congratulate another member on their progress, they compare it to their own to simultaneously shame themself and praise the other member. Following this, in excerpt fourteen a community member tries to reassure another member, explaining that weight gains or plateaus may be the result of water retention. They 'prove' this by claiming that the same thing happened to them,

demonstrating the importance of experiential knowledge and information in virtual diet communities. Comparison on LoseIt is not solely based on comparing experiences, but also on comparing bodies and progress. In a more extreme community, like a pro-anorexia forum, this comparison fuels unhealthy competition, however, on LoseIt these sentiments often appear to be genuinely supportive and non-competitive, at least on the surface.

In the next example, a community member uses comparative positioning to relate to another member regarding eating behaviours and mental health:

15. I understand the struggle... I have the same issue, but you realize that you shouldn't and forgive yourself that you did eat over calories. I personally cant tell myself it is ok to do it this early in my progress, because it doesn't help me push myself to not do it again. But what is really helping me are: forgive myself and tell myself I will do better tomorrow, find things to do to help myself de-stress/ a different coping skills. I ask myself are you eating your emotions/bored or are you really hungry? Will I feel bad if I did eat this?

Excerpt fifteen is indicative of the unhealthy relationships with food and body image that are so common among LoseIt members. Negative encounters with shame and public scrutiny bond people together, and the nature of virtual diet communities makes members feel comfortable sharing embodied and experiential information about these negative experiences and feelings, and the detrimental effects that these experiences have had on their weight and health. Community members reflect on their own experiences to provide advice and encouragement, showing the power of experiential knowledge. These examples help demonstrate some of the reasons why virtual diet communities may place more importance on experience than academic or professional knowledge.

The final externally comparative example is an outlier in my dataset. In excerpt sixteen,

the comparison is not between the respondent and the original poster, but instead between the respondent and external people in their life. They do not respond to any particular person within the thread and only discuss the fitness levels of their colleagues, their friends, and themself. While it appears that their intention is for these groups of people to be compared to the original poster, they never make this clear, making their response irrelevant to the original discussion:

16. I have colleagues who run 5-10k three times a week, who after 3 months of lockdown were getting blistered feet from a casual walk. And friends who cycle 2 hours to work each day who now are having to train back up from a half hour ride. Personally my arm strength has just gone so far downhill without any form of gym work.

While excerpts eleven through sixteen focus on positioning as a form of comparison to others, the examples that follow showcase positioning as a form of comparison to the self. Comparison to others is the most common means by which comparison is used to position oneself, however, comparison to oneself also occurs occasionally. These self-comparisons are temporally rooted, with community members focusing on visual and epistemic information such as their past appearance or their past weight. It is an unhealthy mindset in that these individuals operate under the pretense that a return to some past version of themselves will alleviate their present problems, romanticizing their past state. Excerpts seventeen through nineteen exemplify this self-comparison and romanticization of the past:

17. Any weight that comes off of me from now until then would be amazing and would make me feel much better. I just want to be able to fit into some of my old clothes again !

18. I tried on the jeans that were a bit snug 3 weeks ago and they now fit perfectly! They're genuinely wearable, not uncomfortable to sit down in, so super happy with that.

19. It's a great day today, but my brain is trying to play tricks on me by being like "maybe

they're just a bit more stretched out now" and "maybe you're misremembering how tight

they were". But I'm ignoring those voices and feeling good about myself today

What is made clear in the above examples is that fixating on past versions of the self is a

common method of comparison for dieters. The easiest way to enact these comparisons is to

keep old clothes in a smaller size as a motivator. These clothes serve as a constant reminder of

who the dieter used to be, and the ways that they have failed since then, and the examples above

demonstrate three different stages in this process of self-comparison. In excerpt seventeen, a

LoseIt member shares that they simply want to fit into their old clothes again, using these items

as a moralized information source that acts as a measure of success. Excerpt eighteen involves

someone further along in their weight loss journey, who now fits a pair of jeans that used to be

too tight. In excerpt nineteen, self-doubt begins to creep back in. In this example, the same

member from excerpt eighteen shares that they have begun to wonder if the pants have simply

stretched out, or if they have misremembered their tightness on previous try-ons. These posts

demonstrate the potential dangers of self-comparison, especially when self-worth becomes

reliant on external and epistemic information sources like clothing size. By focusing on a past

version of oneself, growth and forward momentum are stalled. Instead of starting fresh, the dieter

tries to regress into a past self through old clothing and a fixation on nostalgia. This can be a

slippery slope, as the focus will never be on health, but instead on an arbitrary piece of clothing

simply because of the number on the tag.

5.5 Summary

This chapter concludes the comprehensive overview of LoseIt data and examines the

ways in which community members position themselves through discourse. I began with a brief

recap of the demographic data collected and discussed in the previous chapter. Following this, I

discussed positioning theory and the ways that it was understood in my study by way of community discourse. I then explored the social positions identified during my research, including expert, novice, and comparative positioning. These positions were supported with examples from the dataset. These results, alongside those identified and discussed in Chapter Four ("Information Behaviours"), help inform my study's substantive theory of information behaviours in virtual diet communities, discussed in the next chapter. This includes a discussion on the role of social positioning in these communities, the ways in which this emergent theory differs from Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities, and the implications of these findings for healthcare and health information workers.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research has been to better understand information behaviours in virtual diet communities and the relationship between these behaviours and discursive positioning. To do this, a substantive emergent theory has been developed that addresses these topics and their intersections. The development of theories specific to virtual diet communities provides insight into who participates in these communities, why they participate, and the ways in which they interact with information. Additionally, the findings of this study have important implications for the ways in which both health and information professionals interact with and understand the needs of virtual dieters. Through the application of a constructivist grounded theory approach with a focus on qualitative coding, a network of interrelated information behaviours and member positions emerge and form a framework that expands from Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities. This framework serves as the study's emergent theory, and provides an interpretation of how LoseIt community members use information and position themselves through discourse.

The chapter begins with a description of the emergent theory, beginning with the process of discovering it through qualitative coding, before looking more closely at the broad themes and relationships identified in the results. It is then examined in conjunction with the results discussed in previous chapters to uncover new findings about virtual diet communities and community member practices. Following this I discuss my theory in relation to the two main frameworks introduced in the literature review (i.e., Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities and Harré and van Langenhove's (1999) positioning theory). This allows me to compare and contrast these foundational

frameworks to my own, as well as illustrate the unique context of virtual diet spaces and the ways in which they differ from other online communities. Finally, I explore the three most important thematic observations from this study, and their relationship to the emergent theory. These three themes are: authoritative knowledge, experiential knowledge, and health information. The terms authoritative knowledge and authoritative information, as well as experiential knowledge and experiential information, are used interchangeably throughout the remainder of my thesis. This is because knowledge, as defined in relation to experience and authority, refers to information that has been accepted as true, whether by an individual (i.e., experiential knowledge) or a collective (i.e., authoritative knowledge).

6.2 Emergent Theory

Emergent, substantive theory is "a theoretical interpretation or explanation of a delimited problem in a particular area" (Bryant & Charmaz, 2010, p. 610). As part of a grounded theory approach, this theoretical interpretation is based on sets of interrelated categories that have been developed to explain a certain issue. In my research, qualitative coding is the method of developing a set of interrelated categories that together form a theoretical framework to explain the phenomenon of virtual diet communities. While qualitative coding is where I uncovered and categorized the overarching themes and concepts discussed on LoseIt, my secondary analysis is where much of the theory emerges. Memo-writing was an important part of this process, in which I explored and interpreted the results of my initial coding in order to identify the thematic links between my results. The following section describes the framework for my substantive theory and how it relates to my qualitative codes.

6.2.1 Substantive Framework

There are four important conceptual relationships emerging from my data analysis that are central to this framework. These conceptual relationships emerged during data analysis through the process of qualitative coding, demonstrating the importance of grounded theory as the methodological approach for this study. The following list summarizes this study's four central relationships:

1. The relationship between community member positioning and information exchange: This relationship tells us which member positions (i.e., expert, novice) are associated with certain information exchange behaviours (i.e., asking questions, accountability updates), as well as why and how these links occur.

2. The relationship between community member positioning and information acquiring-and-sharing: This relationship tells us which member positions (i.e., expert, comparative) are associated with certain information acquiring-and-sharing behaviours (i.e., providing external resources), as well as why and how these links occur.

3. The relationship between information exchange and information acquiring-and-sharing: This relationship informs us of the different roles of information exchange and information acquiring-and-sharing within a virtual diet community, and how this relates to Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework.

4. The relationship between information behaviours and social information practices: This relationship demonstrates the ways in which individual and collective information behaviours and practices in virtual diet communities differ, and the important roles that they both play in community identity.

These are only preliminary relationship statements that include the higher-level conceptual categories involved in this study, however, there are many additional relationships

and links that have been identified between lower-level positions and information behaviours. For example, there is a relationship between member positioning and asking questions, in which novice members frequently ask questions, and those who respond often position themselves as experts. This relationship, as well as several other relationships emerging from this study are further explored in 6.2.2.

6.2.2 Theoretical Interpretation

The results shared in Chapter Four ("Information Behaviours") and Chapter Five ("Positioning") exemplified many of the ways in which information behaviours are used in virtual diet communities. In line with substantive theory, an examination of these results allows for an interpretation of how virtual dieters in the LoseIt community use information and position themselves through discourse. During data analysis and qualitative coding, a comprehensive list of codes was identified regarding information behaviours and types of positioning in the community, with post excerpts included throughout the results chapters as examples for each code. Twenty-two codes were identified in total, with the majority of codes belonging to information exchange behaviours, followed by types of positioning and lastly information sharing behaviours. In line with the four central relationships identified above, numerous relationships were identified at the subcategory level that are important to discuss.

Firstly, there is significant overlap between community members positioned as novices and members that ask questions. The newer or less informed a community member is about weight loss or the LoseIt community, the more likely they are to seek information by asking questions. These questions can be about community norms, diet, and exercise, but are also often about mental health or individual concerns. Secondly, there is an inverse relationship between expert positioning and asking questions. This study's data demonstrated that the more firmly a

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community member positions themself as an expert in a post, the less likely they are to be seeking information or asking a question. Instead, these members are often the ones answering questions from others, writing detailed posts that are both filled with information and a sense of authority.

Following this, there is a high correlation between expert positioning and information acquiring-and-sharing. Information acquiring-and-sharing is rare in the community, but in most instances the community member providing the information is positioned as an expert. While the information being acquired and shared is not necessarily fulfilling the original poster's information need, it is fulfilling a need from the perspective of the expert respondent. The only notable way in which members acquire and share information on LoseIt is through the provision of external links and resources in response to another member's questions or concerns. This makes the tie between information sharing and community member positioning more apparent, as the original poster has no reason to consider the respondent's suggestions unless they perceive them as a source of authoritative knowledge and information.

Figure 6.1 *Relationship between expert positioning and information acquiring-and-sharing*

In relation to the previous point, there is an inverse relationship between novice positioning and information acquiring-and-sharing. Community newcomers did not provide any external links or resources in this study's dataset. As information acquiring-and-sharing primarily occurs in response to questions, members positioned as novices are not yet equipped to answer these questions with externally acquired information. Instead, as previously stated, new community members are more likely to be the ones asking questions that require external information sources. This once again illustrates the connection between information sharing and expert positioning, as the original poster may not accept the respondent's suggestions if they position themselves as a newcomer because they are unable to assert their authority.

Novice Positioning | Acquiring-and-Sharing Information

Increased naivety

Decreased likelihood of acquiring external information
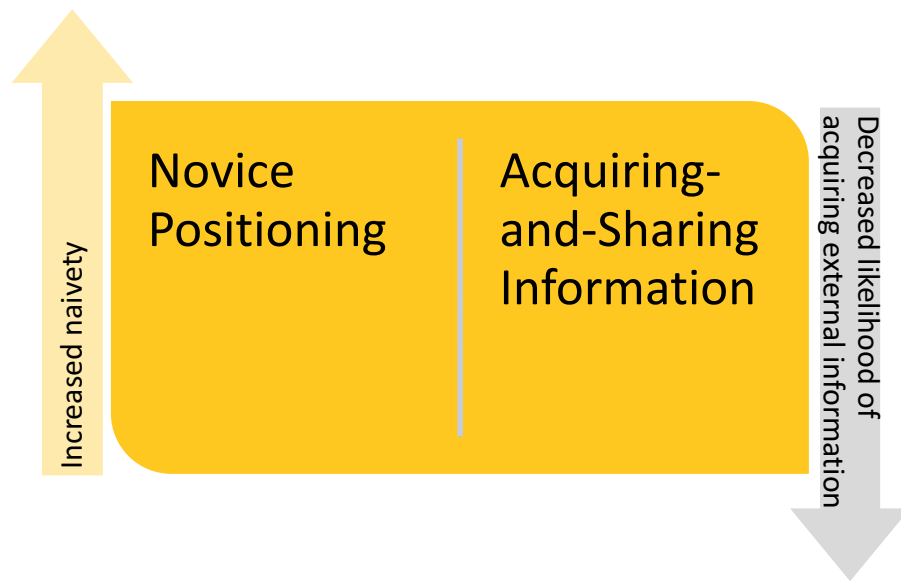
Figure 6.2 *Relationship between novice positioning and information acquiring-and-sharing*

Another important and surprising result of this study is the discovery that information acquiring-and-sharing is not a common feature of LoseIt, particularly in comparison to information exchange. Data coding and analysis reveal that community members use LoseIt primarily for support and camaraderie when giving and receiving information, not for scientific information or the provision of external resources. This provides a number of insights into the

purpose of the community and the reasons behind certain information behaviours. For example, while I find many of the questions asked by community members to be either unanswerable or more accurately answered by a search engine, this disconnect aligns with my findings that members prioritize and value information exchange between community members. The way in which many members share information through personal narratives, reminiscent of a diary entry, is also illustrative of LoseIt's true function; these posts are often devoid of questions and community-specific information, and yet publicly posting them indicates that there is a desire for bidirectional information exchange.

There is a relationship between Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities and community member positioning. As members move upwards in the information pyramid they also shift away from novice and towards expert positioning, and may eventually reach the unidirectional information acquiring-and-sharing level, in which only 'experts' participate. Foundational building blocks and social networks as information networks are the bottom two levels of the original framework, and represent the levels where newcomers join the community and begin to get acquainted with and integrated into the community, whether through joining challenges or writing introductory posts. This foundation is built on shared values and goals, and thus the connected social information network centres on information relevant to those goals, and relationship-building between like-minded and goal-oriented individuals. In my modification of the framework, found in Figure 6.3, social networks as information networks have been replaced by social information practices, which are better able to explore the relationships between information practices, community member positions, and the collective negotiation of authority.

The second tier in Figure 6.3, information exchange, is a realm where expert and novice members reside comfortably, as group discussion is the backbone of the LoseIt community. All community posters participate in information exchange, however, novice members primarily remain there, whereas experts also participate in the top tier: information acquiring-and-sharing. Information acquiring-and-sharing, as previously mentioned, is done by individuals positioned as experts, who are often long-term community members. These members feel equipped to answer questions and provide information sources to newer, or struggling members, a task that most community newcomers are not prepared for.
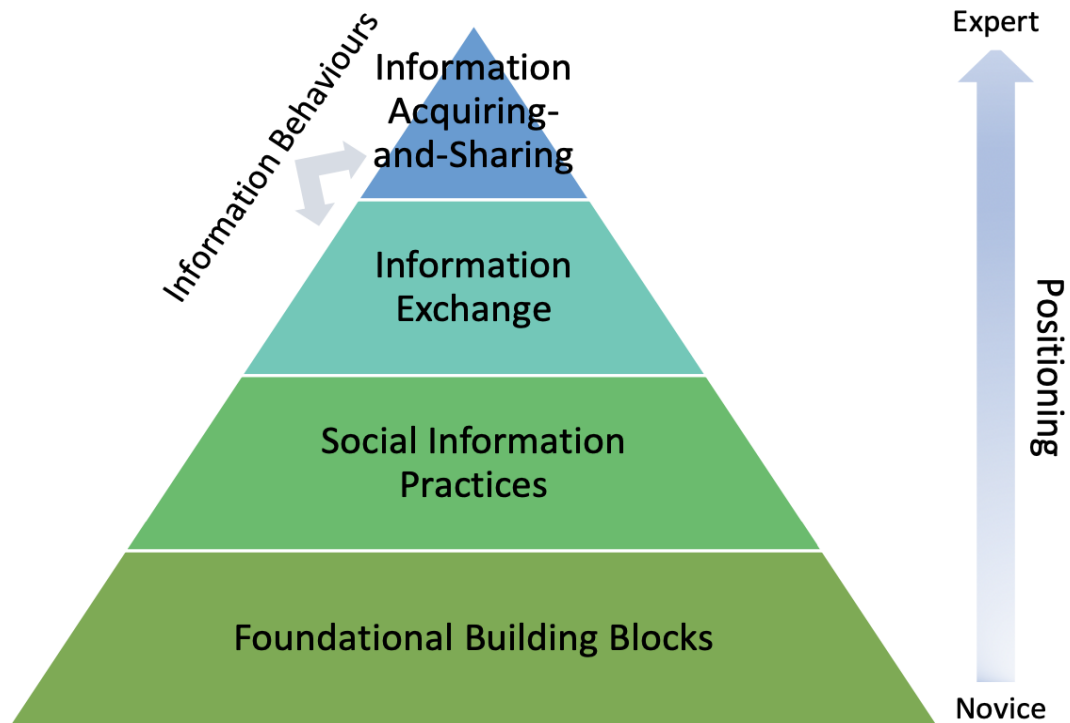
Figure 6.3 *Modification of Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities*

Comparative positioning is the most common form of positioning on LoseIt, and plays a critical role in posts about accountability, mental and physical health, and fatphobia. Community members rely on comparison during information exchange and information sharing to relate to

other members, and often share their own similar experiential information in return. Comparative positioning is strongly correlated with experiential knowledge and shared experience, and LoseIt's success as a community is heavily influenced by the shared experiences of living in a larger body and/or the desire to lose weight. While much community comparison is based on shared experiences, I believe this is not the only reason for comparison. Community members frequently position themselves in their response posts without directly addressing the original poster's situation at all. Instead, they focus solely on themselves and their own experiences. They want to be heard and not judged, and LoseIt serves as a safe space for people to share information about themselves that would otherwise remain hidden. Community members feel more comfortable opening up to virtual strangers anonymously than to people in their own lives, who may not support them or understand them.

In summary, the LoseIt virtual diet community is being used primarily for bidirectional information exchange, with a focus on relationship building, emotional support, and basic human connection, as exemplified by the prevalence of discussions about mental and physical health issues, fatphobic encounters, accountability and progress updates, and asking questions. Within these information exchange behaviours, expert, novice, and comparative positioning are used in turn to convey authority, a lack of authority, and shared experience. What this study has also demonstrated is that information acquiring-and-sharing is not a central feature of the community, reinforcing the idea that virtual dieters are more interested in emotional support and information exchange than the provision of beneficial external information sources. Additionally, while expert positioning is common in the forum, expertise is rarely qualified, and community members do not appear to care. Instead, comparative positioning is most valued in the

community, as members focus on relating to one another through embodied and experiential information to provide more meaningful support and encouragement.

As this study demonstrates, LoseIt lacks legitimate nutrition and science-based discussions and information sources, as well as qualified experts; however, instead of seeing this as a detriment, I am inclined to believe that this speaks to the true purpose of LoseIt. Essentially, LoseIt is not where people go for proper nutrition and fitness information when starting a weight loss journey; LoseIt is where people go for community and understanding in a world that stigmatizes the very existence of overweight and obese people. The camaraderie and emotional support that virtual diet communities provide is built from shared pain and understanding, and this takeaway is one that health professionals need to keep in mind. Mental and physical health are inextricably linked, and many community members' weight issues are a result of unresolved mental health problems, reinforcing the importance of supportive virtual spaces like LoseIt, where members can remain faceless and free to give and receive information regarding their innermost thoughts and feelings. This is what the healthcare system overlooks when vilifying excess weight and prescribing weight loss as a catch-all solution. My data demonstrates that virtual dieters do not connect with the clinical approach taken by doctors and other healthcare professionals when prescribing weight loss, especially when they ignore the role of mental health. Instead, what this study has shown me is that above all else, people value human connection and information that is tied to individual and shared experiences.

Several questions have been identified for future research based on these results:

- How do information acquiring-and-sharing practices differ between virtual communities and virtual diet communities?

- What is the role of anonymity in the community members' information practices?

- How and why do community members convey authority while not having

   traditional expertise? What is the role of experiential expertise in these practices?

These questions are briefly hypothesized about in this chapter based on my findings, and

additional avenues for further research are discussed in Chapter Seven ("Conclusion").

6.3 Divergence from Hersberger et al. (2007)

Throughout this study, an interesting observation was noted about information

behaviours. As seen in Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information

behaviours in virtual communities, information exchange and information acquiring-and-sharing

form the top two categories of the pyramidal framework, representing individual information

behaviours that are both bidirectional and unidirectional. While the pyramid moves from

collective to individual behaviours as it ascends through all four levels, the implication is that

each of these four steps are critical to the success of virtual communities; however, my study has

presented different findings. Information acquiring-and-sharing is not particularly important on

LoseIt, and especially not in comparison with information exchange and social information

practices.

Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework is an effective starting point when

discussing information behaviours in virtual communities, however, virtual communities centre

on a wide range of topics and by virtue of that, they serve a wide number of purposes. Different

communities may focus more on the provision of external information and knowledge; for

example, in a hobby community about gardening some community members are considered

experts who are able to provide effective and accurate information about planting methods and

growing patterns. Virtual diet communities differ from these hobby communities in that they are

centred on the body, or more specifically a vast array of widely variable bodies. Because of this,

there is increased difficulty when providing advice that is meant to be broadly applicable to individual bodies. Thus, community members focus on what they can do, which is provide supportive and encouraging information, creating a situation where acquiring and sharing information is largely irrelevant to a member base that is looking for human connection and experiential knowledge.

The two overarching codes from my data are community member positioning and information behaviours. Within community member positioning there are four codes: expert, novice, comparative, and demographic. Information behaviours contain most of the codes, with two main categories for information acquiring-and-sharing and information exchange. Information acquiring-and-sharing contains only one code, for the provision of external links and resources. Information exchange contains the rest of the subcategories and codes. These subcategories include accountability (includes progress, progress updates, body measurements), health (includes mental health and self-care, physical health), fatphobia, self-deprecation, weight loss methods (includes discussions about food, discussions about exercise), community-building (includes motivation and positivity, support), and asking questions. The number of nodes following each code listed above reflect the communicative preferences of the LoseIt community members.

One of my initial research questions for this project was about the types of information shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well LoseIt's information behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities. The information behaviours listed above align relatively well with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework, however, there is a question of whether social information

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practices are more conceptually relevant to this virtual community setting than information behaviours and social network analysis.

Information exchange behaviours such as those involved with community-building align with the foundational building blocks of virtual communities. Social networks as information networks also align with community building but coincide best with community discussions about food and exercise, in which members discuss and search for information about diet and fitness among community members. I have replaced this social network tier with social information practices in my modified framework, which more effectively capture the importance of authority and collective negotiation in virtual communities. The third stage of information exchange aligns with every code, as information exchange facilitates the existence of virtual communities, including asking questions, talking about health issues, and discussing accountability and progress. The fourth and most individualized tier of information acquiring-and-sharing is firmly tied to the provision of external resources, as well as expert member positioning. This demonstrates that although information acquiring-and-sharing does not hold the same importance in the LoseIt community as it may in other virtual communities, there are still elements of community information behaviours that align with each stage of Hersberger et al.'s (2007) pyramidal structure. Finally, community member positioning ascends from novice to expert alongside the information pyramid.

While my study has identified a number of divergences from Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities, it is important to note that these are based solely on my observations and interpretations of the relationship between the framework and my data. This is due primarily to my difficulty in fully differentiating information exchange from information acquiring-and-sharing. They are defined separately in

Hersberger et al. (2007), as they are in this thesis, and while this distinction is clear on paper, I found it much harder to identify in practice; information exchange is said to be bidirectional, whereas information acquiring-and-sharing is a unidirectional information sharing event. In practice, the distinction often felt nebulous, with posts floating in a liminal space that I could not quantify. This is demonstrated in an anomalous response post from my dataset, which illustrates one of the ways in which information exchange and information sharing might be too categorically limiting. It is a response to the previously discussed "Insulted by a stranger" post, in which a community member is on the receiving end of an unwarranted fatphobic encounter. Instead of providing supportive and encouraging information like the majority of respondents, one poster comparatively positions an extraneous third party, stating that they "follow someone on IG [Instagram] who lost over 200 pounds and she was simply riding her bike and one of the two men that were walking by her said "Look at that fat girl" and it destroyed her." Shared experiences and experiential information can form strong community bonds; however, this post circumvents that by sharing a third-party's experience with no direct relevance to either the original poster or the respondent. In this case, is this an information exchange act, or information acquiring-and-sharing? The respondent uses Instagram as an external information source, which is common in information sharing; however, they also use experiential information when sharing their own perspective, which is a facet of information exchange. This example captures some of the difficulties I encountered during data analysis and qualitative coding.

Ultimately, although the results of my study align relatively well with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) work, my findings in the previous chapter suggest that their conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities does not adequately address the ways in which community and information interact with and understand one another. The framework prioritizes

information behaviours, which have long been the focus of information studies, centering individual cognitive processes; however, information behaviours are unable to address the role of community in information exchange in the way that social information practices can. Social information practices have taken an increasingly important role in LIS research since 2007, as research focuses shifted from the individual to the collective. These practices focus on how communities collectively negotiate authoritative information, whereas the information behaviour approach prioritizes the role of individual cognitive processes during informational transactions (Neal & McKenzie, 2011). Social information practices acknowledge both the new and pre-existing discourses that people interact and intersect with, as well as how these discourses influence and shape social practices (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017). While Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework does address community membership and social information networks as foundational to virtual communities, at no point are social information practices explicitly discussed. Additionally, this focus on information exchange and information acquiring-and-sharing does little to address the types of information that are found within virtual communities. Within the LoseIt community and its specific context as a virtual diet community, these information types include embodied and experiential information as it relates to the body, authoritative information, epistemic information and empirical data, referral services, and external information sources (see Table 6.1); this taxonomy is a direct result of my research.

Table 6.1 *Glossary of Information Types Found on LoseIt*

Information Type	Definition
Embodied information	Information that is contained within the individual and expressed and understood

	through the body (i.e., personal narrative, stories).
Experiential knowledge	Information that has been gained through personal experience and internal reasoning. It overlaps significantly with embodied information.
Authoritative knowledge	Information that a community has decided is legitimate and justified through a process of collective negotiation (i.e., epistemic information).
Epistemic information	Empirical data that is imbued with meaning (i.e., progress photos, body measurements, numbers). Epistemic information bridges the gap between data and knowledge.
External information sources	Information that has been externally acquired by an individual and shared with others on LoseIt (i.e., social media, advertisements, diet products). This is a common part of information acquiring-and-sharing but can also be a part of information exchange.
Referral services	When a community member acts as a conduit

	between another member and the appropriate information source. It is not an information source in and of itself but is highly correlated with external information sources.

6.4 Social Positioning

Although positioning theory informs an important part of this study's analysis, my interpretation of it has strayed from the forms of positioning that I focused on when discussing Harré and van Langenhove (1999) in my literature review. First and second order positioning, as well as tacit and intentional positioning as discussed by Harré and van Langenhove (1999) are relevant to the positions identified during data analysis, however, they are secondary to the importance of social and moral positioning. The most enlightening observations made during my data analysis were in regard to members positioning themselves with certain roles during an interaction: expert, novice, and comparative. This is most clearly exemplified by the juxtaposition between expert and novice positioning, which is clear both through the content and context of the posts.

An interesting observation relating back to Harré and van Langenhove (1999) is the difference between tacit and intentional positioning as it relates to expert and novice positioning. While many community newcomers intentionally position themselves as novices by explicitly stating it (i.e., "Sorry if im posting this the wrong place im new to reddit :)"), members positioned as experts rarely state that they are. Instead, expert positioning relies primarily on authoritative self-presentation through discourse and community affirmation of this expert status. Posts written by novices often include intentional positioning, asking questions, and mentions of

youth (i.e., "i'm 14 :) ik i'm a little "young" but i wanna get my life on track sooner than later"); posts written by experts often include tacit positioning, answering questions, and the sharing of detailed diet and fitness information.

Comparative positioning differs from these role-oriented positions, as comparison does not apply to a specific role; however, what comparison does is position the community member as both similar and dissimilar. Comparative posts are primarily responses, and the respondent portrays themself as 'other,' but also as a person who relates to the feelings and experiences of the original poster. This form of positioning is central to relationship- and community-building on LoseIt and demonstrates the importance of shared experience and experiential knowledge in forming bonds within virtual diet communities.

When I began this study, one of the questions I was most curious about was: how do forum participants use information to discursively position themselves in a virtual diet community? My findings have indicated that there are three main and disparate ways that this occurs:

- Explicit positioning, associated with novice positioning
- Expert positioning and authoritative knowledge
- Comparative positioning and experiential knowledge

The prevalence of explicit or intentional first order positioning has already been discussed, particularly regarding novice positioning, however, authoritative knowledge and experiential knowledge are also of critical importance to member positioning. Authoritative knowledge is of particular relevance to expert positioning within my study, and experiential knowledge is strongly associated with comparative positioning. These are discussed in further

detail in the following sections, as well as the ways in which information is used to convey and reinforce these positions (6.5 Authoritative Knowledge & 6.6 Experiential Knowledge).

6.5 Authoritative Knowledge

Authoritative knowledge and information play an important role in the LoseIt community, alongside the concept of cognitive authority. In the context of a virtual community, authoritative knowledge refers to the ways in which participants are able to enforce or influence people's beliefs and behaviours through discourse. Authoritative knowledge was originally defined by anthropologist Brigitte Jordan (1997) as follows:

> The knowledge that participants agree counts in a particular situation, that they see as consequential, on the basis of which they make decisions and provide justifications for courses of action. It is the knowledge that within a community is considered legitimate, consequential, official, worthy of discussion, and appropriate for justifying particular actions by people engaged in accomplishing the tasks at hand. (p. 58)

It is important, however, to distinguish between authority and validity; members are able to make claims that are generally accepted in the community regardless of the validity of the information if they are deemed knowledgeable. Because of the member's perceived authority, others may not only accept this information, but enforce it within themselves. Cognitive authority is an additional measure for understanding authority. Informed by the work of Patrick Wilson, cognitive authority refers to the ways in which "an individual decides whether a particular information source is authoritative for her or him" (McKenzie, 2003, p. 263; Wilson, 1983).

As much of the information shared on LoseIt is second-hand and experiential knowledge, community members engage in cognitive strategies to determine the authoritativeness of the

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individual sharing the information. Authority is a two-way process, which means that one cannot decide to be an authority, and instead must be accepted as an authority by others (Wilson, 1983). In this way, Wilson (1983) notes that being an authority differs from being an expert, as one does not require recognition to be an expert. This aligns with my code for expert positioning, in that the individuals positioning themselves as 'experts' are not necessarily experts but are instead people who have been placed in positions of authority during community discussions. Following this, cognitive authority is a matter of degree; members can have differing amounts of it (Wilson, 1983).

Cognitive authority is also context-dependent, meaning that an individual may vacillate between levels of authority regarding different subjects (McKenzie, 2003). Community members who present themselves as experts when responding to others choose to speak with authority because of their familiarity with the topic. Appearing trustworthy and knowledgeable about the questions a poster responds to is more important than actually having the requisite knowledge and information (McKenzie, 2003; Wilson, 1983), as seen in the following response to a question about shifting abdominal fat: "Genetics —I have no science or evidence to back this up, but some people have experienced a "softening" of their fat before a whoosh on the scale." Although people are the experts of their own life experiences, this can be dangerous in a virtual diet community where people are enacting highly individualized advice on the basis of false expertise. Listening to friends, family, and 'expert' community members clarifies general experiences involved in their weight loss journeys, but there is no vetting process for members and their information sources, leading to misinformed but well-meaning respondents sharing information that is not applicable beyond their own context. A common approach to combating this potential health misinformation is information triangulation, which involves seeking and

assessing information from various authoritative and non-authoritative sources before making

decisions (Greyson, 2016).

Cognitive authority is fluid and shifts throughout time and place. On LoseIt, each

conversation is a blank page, and authority is reconfigured within each conversation thread

through discourse and community negotiation. To put it more clearly, expert members often

receive many upvotes and responses to their posts, thanking them for the information or asking

follow-up questions. Because their first response has been deemed credible, they become the

target of additional questions within the thread, positioning them as the 'expert' in this scenario.

Without providing any credentials or sources to support their claims, they have become an

authority. If they respond to another thread more casually, and provide little information, this

does not occur, demonstrating the transient nature of social positions in virtual spaces.

Ultimately, authoritative knowledge is decided upon by a community. In the case of LoseIt, each

original post and subsequent reply thread represents a new conversation in which authority and

credibility are constituted and reconstituted based on the perceived validity of a member's shared

information. Community-based knowledge is the result of community-based decision making,

and while individuals are the ones conveying authority, this authority only exists for as long as

the community enforces and accepts it.

Community-based knowledge is the result of social information practices, which posit

that authoritative knowledge is an outcome of community negotiation (Neal & McKenzie, 2011).

While social information practices thus have an important role in the development of

authoritative knowledge, they are also part of embodied and experiential knowledge, accounting

for the discourses that shape people's social practices. Because of this, codes related to both

social positioning and information behaviours were linked to authoritative knowledge, as the

community collectively decides what information is authoritative, and which community members are authorities in a specific context. Another component of social information practices as they relate to authoritative knowledge is apparent in the way that LoseIt members use the community as a reliable source of health-related information, with threads boasting titles like "Am I eating enough to lose weight?" and "is my [caloric] deficit too low?" Essentially, community members trust one another as information sources regardless of true expertise or relevant credentials. The focus is instead on trust and community relationships and because of this, authority is informed by perception, not expertise.

An interesting example of authoritative knowledge that recurs throughout my dataset is the knowledge of YouTube fitness influencers (i.e., "Yesterday - officially completed the 28 day Chloe Ting summer shred! The last day was TOUGH, but I did it!"). The role of online fitness influencers in virtual diet communities is clear, and YouTube exercise videos allow community members to remain at home if they are unfamiliar with the gym or are ashamed of their appearance or fitness level. Another layer of this relationship that is currently relevant is the Covid-19 pandemic, which has made remaining at home a global priority. Many fitness influencers are not qualified experts and are instead relatively normal people who are conventionally attractive, enjoy exercising and know how to make videos. This means that they are more accessible than traditional trainers, both in the information they provide and in the intensity of their workout routines. This accessibility increases their relatability, and viewers do not feel talked down to and instead feel like they are part of a community. The authority provided to online influencers is then also the product of groupthink. As fitness YouTubers gain more subscribers, newcomers assume that they must be knowledgeable sources of authoritative information. This is cyclical, and the more subscribers an influencer accumulates the more

authority the influencer obtains in the online fitness space. Dieters want realistic and accessible

fitness information, and YouTube is the perfect platform to find this more relatable content.

Throughout the pandemic, the role of YouTube as a fitness platform has increased, and it has

become an important external and authoritative information source on LoseIt (Pimentel, 2021;

Suciu, 2020).

The visual aspect of online fitness videos is also key to the success of these influencers,

as fit bodies represent the current ideal, and visually embody success to the chronic dieter.

Dieters become attached to this ideal body that they see reflected back at them through both

social media and the mainstream media, and desire it regardless of its unattainability (Berlant,

2011); this becomes doubly problematic due to the "homogenization of the media, where

representation is often limited to identities that conform to normative ideals of beauty" (Evans &

Riley, 2014, p. 3:9). To strive for such a narrow and unlikely goal is a form of cruel optimism,

which involves a "relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose

realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic"

(Berlant, 2011, p. 24), and the pursuit of this goal provides people with a sense of purpose and

meaning in the world. This purpose is then reinforced by the ideal lives and bodies that fitness

influencers present on social media.

Another aspect of authoritative knowledge is its relationship with epistemic information.

On LoseIt, epistemic information takes many forms, and is most notable in empirical and

numerical data, as well as visual information like progress photos. Epistemic information bridges

data and knowledge, imbuing data with meaning. Because of this, progress photos become

powerful sources of information, combining epistemic information from body measurements and

visually embodied information to create an image loaded with meaning. This can cause an

internal incongruence when the visual and numerical information are perceived as misaligned, which is exemplified by the following community member: "Time to do some 12 week progress shots, im going to do these every 12 weeks even if im not so happy with what I see..there is 23lbs difference between these shots - I kinda hoped for more difference in how i look."

Visual and numerical information are common methods of conveying weight loss progress, and demonstrate the value assigned to physical appearance and empirical data points. This is seen even more clearly in many community challenges, which draw a connection between embodied and epistemic information in the form of non-scale victories and scale victories. Essentially, non-scale victories focus on goals that relate more to experience and embodiment, whereas scale victories focus on the epistemic information associated with numerical values. Another way that empirical data becomes epistemic information is through body measurement and nutrition tools like BMI, BMR, and TDEE calculators. While these tools provide numerical data, the data is necessarily embedded with meaning at societal and individual levels, and the tools further enforce this meaning by classifying people by size and caloric intake. They act as tangible proof that one is overweight or consumes more calories than recommended for their height and activity level, putting the onus entirely on the individual. Moralizing weight permanently entangles epistemic and embodied information, as self-worth becomes a direct outcome of body size, and changes in one's body are strongly influenced by their relationship with these epistemic information sources (i.e., think of how toxic many people's relationships with their scales are) (Pacanowski et al., 2015). Because of these ties, people that are trying to lose weight become overly concerned with the number on the scale, or their daily caloric intake, and struggle to set goals that are less tangible.

External information sources also play a role in authoritative information and include a

wide variety of sources such as people, social media, advertisements, and diet products and websites. In my dataset, family, peers, and even supposed friends were the primary sources of weight discrimination for community members, demonstrating how fatphobia is often perpetuated by those closest to us (i.e., "I was fat shamed by a lot of my classmates and by my family"). Family, and particularly spouses or parents, are also sources of external stress, and the data showcased a connection between the poor health of a parent or spouse and poor health for the community member as a result. Additionally, internal fatphobia can be exacerbated by external diet culture, primarily through social media and advertisements. Social media relies on marketing the ideal body just as much as it does the actual product being sold; this creates a scenario in which certain products are linked with certain types of models and body types, and affects the self-esteem and self-perception of those who do not fit this ideal and are constantly inundated with these messages. This also creates situations where brands that sell scam products can thrive by pairing misinformation with visually appealing results to market their products, similar to the previously discussed slimming patches which a poster claims, "basically make you lose your appetite." As a final note, although this study was unable to account for sociocultural context and cultural differences, external information sources were linked to stereotypes and national identity in at least one scenario (i.e., an overweight American does not want to fit the stereotype of an overweight and obnoxious American when abroad).

Most external information sources on LoseIt are YouTube fitness videos or product recommendations, instead of social media advertisements and diet products. These sources have been accepted as sites of authoritative knowledge due to a process of community negotiation, which involves information exchange as well as member voting. The process of votes and discussions to assess credibility is effective, but there are occasions where a community

member's problem or question is too serious for the community to collectively answer. In this case, members often refer the original poster elsewhere, either through providing a relevant external information source, or by recommending a specific service that can help them (i.e., recommending therapy for community members struggling with their mental health). These reference or referral services are important in instances where a question is outside of the scope of community responsibility. Although there is no guarantee of accuracy in the information given in response to member questions, community members still seem to prefer asking other members instead of using a search engine. Referral services are then an important component of virtual communities, as community members are able to receive support when they are sharing and exchanging information, even if the result is an external referral. This echoes the work of Harris and Dewdney (1994), who found that reference services needed to address both the cognitive and affective component of information needs in order to be effective.

6.6 Experiential Knowledge

Experiential knowledge is a central component of virtual diet communities like LoseIt, and there is a particular emphasis on knowledge stemming from shared experience. Academic Thomasina Borkman (1976) first defined experiential knowledge as, "truth learned from personal experience with a phenomenon rather than truth acquired by discursive reasoning, observation, or reflection on information provided by others" (p. 446); in essence, it applies to all of the things that people know and remember based on their personal life experiences, which are construed as true. Compared to professional knowledge, experiential knowledge is a primary source of truth in self-help groups, which share thematic overlap with virtual diet communities (Blume, 2017). While medical professionals use professional knowledge in their clinical work, experiential knowledge is more holistic and action oriented; this knowledge is pragmatic and

aims to provide realistic solutions to immediate problems (Blume, 2017). Experience is a critical component of identity development, and shared identity is largely the cause and result of shared experiences. For example, while overweight and obese people in most of North America do not have one singular understanding of reality, the shared experience of weight stigma shapes their understanding of themselves and others. Experiencing weight stigma and discrimination throughout life alters the way in which they view themselves and others, and these shared experiences with other overweight people facilitate bonding. Intersectionality is another layer to consider in future research, which accounts for the unique struggles of larger-bodied people that also belong to other minority groups, including those oriented around race, gender, or sexuality (see Carla Rice's *Becoming Women* (2014) for additional information on these intersections and how they impact self-image).

Experiential knowledge allows the members of LoseIt to understand their personal and collective struggles as a community, and search for ways to cope with them through giving and receiving information, often in the form of personal narratives. It most strongly correlates with my comparative positioning code, in which participants respond to other community members with information about themselves and their understanding of the community member's concerns (i.e., "Ignore those people. I also heard many more comments like that when I was simply overweight than when I was actually obese"). The provision of experiential knowledge and shared experience are foundational to LoseIt, which relies on members' shared experiences of weight problems, weight stigma, and a desire to lose weight. Without this common ground as a foundation, there is little incentive to share personal information about oneself and build supportive relationships with other community members.

Because comparative positioning is prevalent in response posts on LoseIt, information exchange acts as the primary facilitator of comparison, with discussions about shared mental and physical health problems, similar experiences of fatphobia, and responses between individuals with similar original body measurements and goals. As previously stated, not all community comparison is based on shared experiences with others, however, it is the most significant form of comparative positioning by a wide margin. Community members also compare themselves to external friends, family, and colleagues, as well as to their past selves (i.e., "I have colleagues who run 5-10k three times a week, who after 3 months of lockdown were getting blistered feet from a casual walk"). If anything, members who focus on past 'versions' of themselves are still focused on experiential knowledge but directed inwards. This form of comparison is dangerous because the member may romanticize a version of themself that no longer exists, instead of aiming to become the best version of their future self. Focusing on the past self can also be a way to ameliorate feelings of shame, or even to serve as future motivation.

Comparative positioning is the backbone of LoseIt and allows individuals to connect with one another and provide support through experiential and embodied information. While the information shared by community members may not be applicable to others, the intent behind the provision of information is what matters. Dieters sharing honest and realistic information about their triumphs as well as their struggles is empowering and inspires other community members to continue their own journeys. This is especially impactful when compared to the many harmful and unrealistic weight loss methods promoted on social media.

Shame is a common theme in my data, and one of the clearest forms of embodied information found in this study, present in posts about accountability, exercise, food, and self-deprecation. Embodied information is self-contained information that is a product and process of

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the body. Essentially, the body is a site of production, but also a "site of contested meaning" (O'Loughlin, 1998, p. 276). Much like my earlier discussion on epistemic information, embodied information has an interesting role in how numerical information is understood by dieters. For example, regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, one community member shared this: "BMI has gone down from 43.2 to 38.2 - alot of work lest to do but if i did catch the virus I would have a better chance, I see every pound lost as a 0.5% increase on my chances of survival, its helped:)." Embodied information uses the self and others as sources of information, making the body's physical form inseparable from a person's identity. This makes body measurements evidence of embodied and epistemic information, in which the values themselves have a larger societal meaning, but they also provide a means of processing one's own body within that societal context. Another important source of embodied information is found in personal narrative or story posts. As an information type, personal stories use embodied information to describe personal and individual experiences that are able to connect with a larger audience (i.e., "I feel compelled to write after reading your story"). This is important on LoseIt because it captures the individual experience of existing in a larger body, and how larger bodies are understood and treated by the self and others. These experiences, which are often negative, are especially problematic when they describe mistreatment at the hands of the medical community, which is further discussed later in this chapter.

While not discussed explicitly in my dataset, I believe that the desire for human connection is the single unifying theme that underlies the information shared by the entire LoseIt community. This is also why I believe that personal stories or narrative posts that use embodied information and experience are the most common. At a rudimentary level, many people know how to lose weight: eat less and move more. Weight loss requires more calories to be burned

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than are consumed; it is a basic formula that is widely known, but its simplicity does not represent the difficulty involved in following it. The community challenges, progress updates and supportive responses, posts about hardships and health issues, and general questions all speak to one thing: people want to feel like they are a part of something and use information as cultural capital to do so (Bourdieu, 1986). This holds special relevance for virtual diet communities, in which many community members share information about feeling ostracized by much of society, either in the past or present. To not only be part of a community, but one that hears and understands your struggles is a powerful connective force that creates and maintains bonds. Community members are united in their desire for change, and the struggles that this desire is rooted in.

Virtual communities are not technically necessary for weight loss, nor are they the best place to go when looking for accurate information, yet millions of dieters flock to them (Lewis et al., 2011); this is the power of human connection. In a virtual world where participants can remain faceless and nameless, they are able to connect on a deeply personal level, sharing information about their highs and lows with an audience of like-minded people. They see themselves reflected in the stories of others, and in their pasts, presents, and futures. They celebrate each other's victories and mourn their losses. The responsibilities are shared by the community, but so are the successes.

There are several reasons that I concluded that human connection is central to LoseIt. The first reason is related to the types of questions asked and the information shared by community members. While there are many legitimate questions in my dataset, there are many that are more amenable to an external information source (i.e., a search engine or a person in the member's inner circle). Initially, I questioned the purpose of asking these questions, as the original poster

would have no way of verifying the information without additional research, creating more work for themselves. As I explored my findings, I considered the possibility that the community members might simply want someone to talk to and receive support from, or to further integrate and solidify their presence in the community (i.e., "I'm curious what others have done to melt the last 15 lbs as it seems what I am doing is pretty much keeping me where I'm at"). People ask questions hoping for responses, and while a search engine provides a response, it does not provide it with personalized information or supportive messaging. Following this is the existence of community challenges. Community challenges serve two main purposes: ensuring accountability and building relationships. By running community-wide challenges that centre on supportive messaging and group accountability, human connection is emphasized through information exchange. While participants feel some pressure to succeed due to accountability measures, they also feel the support of other participants, propelling them to success.

Progress posts are another area where human connection and information exchange hold importance. Progress posts are not explicitly related to human connection, but it is an underlying reason behind writing a progress or accountability post. When virtual dieters write progress posts, the intent is to receive feedback by way of supportive information. Community members share these updates with other community members because they are the people that have been alongside them during their journey. Additionally, they are the people who understand them better than perhaps even those in their immediate community, appreciating the full meaning and implications of the information being shared in their progress updates.

I want to emphasize that I am not saying that all LoseIt members are inherently lonely or isolated people who lack human connection. Instead, I am saying that there is a loneliness in not having shared experiences with people in one's real life, who may listen but not fully understand

(i.e., "I'm heading out for dinner this evening with my friends and nothing fits me. I am the fat friend too and am conscious of people noticing a weight gain in me"). Existing in a body that society has deemed wrong is an isolating, oftentimes lonely existence, and the ability to connect with others who understand that exact experience is a sort of freedom—the freedom to feel understood and share information that one would never say out loud without fear of repercussion. Obviously, there are still plenty of people on LoseIt who do not understand one another, but by virtue of the community's substantial follower base there is almost always someone who is entirely in sync with the original poster.

The final, and most significant area of discussion that I deem a symptom of loneliness relates to health issues, especially those pertaining to mental health. While primarily linked to mental health, loneliness and the need for human connection are related to physical health as well. Multiple community members shared information about necessary medical procedures that had weight requirements that they did not meet. In response, other members would use experiential information and comparative positioning to make them feel less alone. In other examples, individuals would discuss the death or poor health of a loved one, and receive numerous responses based on both understanding and support. Mental health is also a critical component of the loneliness that I identified on LoseIt. A significant number of posts in my dataset either implicitly or explicitly mentioned struggling with mental health issues. These community members rarely discussed receiving professional help, and instead conveyed feelings of self-hatred or unhappiness regarding their appearance or behaviours (i.e., "I've felt very low for a few days, I'm trying not to turn to food"). They also commonly discussed the experiences that had brought them to this place of struggle, and these points ended up overlapping with self-deprecation and fatphobic encounters quite frequently.

The relative anonymity of Reddit communities like LoseIt is central to its effectiveness in dealing with loneliness and isolation. There are a few reasons that this is, including privacy, vulnerability, comfort, and detachment from the information being shared. Reddit is a public platform; however, it is often treated by members as an open diary, performing a balancing act between public and private. Participants perceive themselves to have a certain level of privacy when providing information that is absent on platforms like Facebook that are directly tied to their name and identity. Because of this privacy and anonymity, people share information about themselves that they are not comfortable sharing with others in real life. There is also an element of transience to Reddit; people can scream into the void via their posts, sharing things that are personal and vulnerable without having to face consequences for what they say in real life. Community members can respond with criticism or support, and although the supportive information adds to overall community-building, these are generally passing relationships based on shared experiential information. Vulnerability on LoseIt can be contained within a conversation thread, and deleted if the member chooses; however, vulnerability in real life cannot be taken back. Sometimes, people just need a place where they feel comfortable enough to vent or share their deepest fears without having to own up to them the next day. They do not want the pitying looks, or the family and friend interventions, or the forced heart-to-hearts—they want private solidarity in numbers.

6.7 Health Information & Healthcare Implications

The final question I had when I began this study was: what are the implications of this study's findings for LIS and health information workers? This is a question that I am not sure I have yet found the answer to. While the results of this study elucidated several areas of importance for healthcare professionals in more explicitly relevant fields, such as doctors,

dieticians, and nutritionists, it is more difficult to tease out how these findings can be applied to health information work.

The most significant finding of this study is that experiential knowledge is more valued than academic or theoretical knowledge in a virtual, support-based setting. This does have implications for health information workers in their work with both the public and with other healthcare workers. Instead of focusing on empirical research and working quantitatively, a precedent has been set to stop and think about the qualitative data. What information does the public really need to know about diet and weight loss? What do they want to know? Are these the same? Do healthcare workers need to incorporate more emotion-centred thinking into their practice, and what is the role of health information workers in this transformation?

Ultimately, I believe that there is a similar takeaway to be had for library and information workers when dealing with diet and weight loss-related material. Throughout my study, comparative positioning ended up being the single-most common form of positioning in the LoseIt community, demonstrating that connection through shared lived experiences and experiential knowledge is central to support and success in virtual dieters. Health information is often quantitative and leaves little room for the type of emotion-centred support that most dieters require. Additionally, it reinforces current clinical practice, which several of the LoseIt members took issue with. If anything, I think that this study has shown that both research creation and provision need to be expanded. Healthcare workers need to treat their patients with respect and humanity regardless of their size, and this requires greater understanding on their part (Gudzune et al., 2014). To better their understanding, it is then important to increase training and research on diet communities that takes a qualitative approach. As an extension of this, that also means that health sciences information workers need to be equipped to provide resources and support

regarding dieting that takes a more holistic approach and considers the individual at the heart of the issue. This is not to say that healthcare and health information workers need to be more vulnerable in their service provision, as they do not have the same shield of anonymity that virtual dieters have. Instead, I ask for honesty and understanding. Giving someone with weight issues a numerical weight loss goal and a meal plan does little to address the underlying issues that have brought them to a place where weight loss is beneficial. Bias against overweight people is a problem within the healthcare system and continues to impact the quality of their medical care (Budd et al., 2011; Vallis et al., 2007). In fact, a study by Gudzune et al. (2014) showed that even perceived judgment from primary care physicians had a negative influence on weight loss; while perceived judgment made patients more likely to attempt weight loss, they were not more likely to lose weight. Although the quantitative, numbers-based approach is an important part of medical research and practice, it can limit the ability for patients to connect or relate to their healthcare team.

Many of the LoseIt members relayed stories about poor medical treatment and discrimination at the hands of the medical system, and this has rightfully caused them to distrust it (i.e., "Look, I know she was a quack and there are good and compassionate doctors practicing who actually listen to their patients, but it wasn't the first time that I'd experienced "fat blindness" from a medical professional"). It is critical that this relationship is righted, for dieters, overweight populations, and healthcare workers. Millions of people now turn to virtual diet communities to receive support from others in similar situations, but they also ask questions and search for health information. The problem is, there is no vetting for expertise or validity in these communities, and as a result it is easy for community members to share and receive

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misinformation that is potentially harmful. Much of this misinformation comes directly from diet culture marketing and is not supported by scientific evidence.

In addition to this, the internet has facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation at an astronomical rate, making it increasingly difficult for the common layperson to discern truth from fiction—this is where the medical community must step in. To stop people from harming themselves with unhealthy diet and exercise behaviours, healthcare workers must work to fix this relationship and regain public trust. With trust comes respect, and it is a mutual respect that is needed. As obesity rates continue to climb worldwide and dieting rates rise in tandem, it is clear that current popular approaches to diet and weight loss are not effective. Healthcare workers are not meeting the people where they are, but are instead forcing people to meet them at their level. This in turn alienates a community that already faces ostracization in many facets of society, making them unlikely to follow through on their prescribed targets.

With the world going virtual, there is one solution I have in mind: virtual healthcare workers that function within online diet communities. This includes health information workers and others like doctors and dieticians. These community members should not be fully integrated into the community to the extent that they are participants, but instead function as information conduits on a semi-regular basis. What I have in mind for this is similar to the Reddit AMA (Ask Me Anything) feature. Subreddits frequently host events called AMAs, where a professional or other individual relevant to the topic of the subreddit holds a virtual question and answer session in a contained conversation thread. These AMAs are usually pinned to the top of the subreddit by a moderator, making it the first thing seen when someone enters the community page. I think that this idea could be very helpful in a community like LoseIt, which could host weekly or monthly AMAs with healthcare professionals. For instance, there could be 'ask a registered dietician,'

'ask an eating disorder psychologist,' or even 'ask a health sciences librarian.' In all of these instances, it would be beneficial to have a health sciences librarian or health information worker on standby to research and provide external information sources and reference services.

While a health sciences librarian might not seem particularly relevant, they are effective researchers and often work behind the scenes to help other healthcare workers find resources, which means they would be able to quickly provide informative links in response to member questions, as well as parse through the information provided. Part of my confusion during data analysis was the prevalence of community members asking questions that were better-suited for a search engine, and while much of it stemmed from the desire for human connection and support while giving information, I have also realized that many people lack science- and health-related information literacy. As information workers are trained in information literacy and assessment, they are able to assess the validity of resources, as well as understand and explain them to community members.

6.8 Summary

The primary concern of this chapter has been the development of a substantive theoretical framework of positioning and information behaviours in a virtual diet community, as well as identifying the similarities and differences between my conclusions and those of Hersberger et al. (2007) and Harré and van Langenhove (1999). The secondary concern of this chapter has been to address this study's initial research questions and explore their relation to my data analysis' central themes of authoritative knowledge, experiential knowledge, and health information. First, I began by discussing my study's emergent theory in relation to the data analysis and results, as well as potential practical implications of these findings. Following this I explored my theory in relation to Hersberger et al. (2007) and Harré and van Langenhove (1999),

as well as the ways in which these theories intersect in my study. I then looked more closely at two of the main overarching themes involved in community member positioning: authoritative knowledge and experiential knowledge. Within authoritative knowledge, I discussed the role of cognitive authority and its relation to community and social media 'experts.' Regarding experiential knowledge, I wrote primarily of its relation to comparative positioning and shared experience as a foundational component of community. As a single unifying factor within experiential knowledge, I discussed the desire for human connection that propels much of the activity in the LoseIt community, and the powerful connections that can be forged through understanding. Finally, I explored the relationship between the healthcare system, healthcare workers, and virtual diet communities, and addressed some of the ways that this relationship may be improved.

This chapter has unveiled several novel and important findings regarding virtual diet communities. Community members value experiential and emotion-centred information behaviours more than the formal and clinical approach of the medical community. Authoritative knowledge is tied to expert positioning and experiential knowledge is tied to comparative positioning; the outlier is novice positioning, which is often explicitly stated by the participants in their posts. Asking questions is associated with novice positioning, and has an inverse relationship with expert positioning, which is the sole source of information acquiring-and-sharing in the community. By virtue of this, as individuals become further integrated into the community they can shift from novice to expert, but this 'expertise' must be accepted by community members to be deemed authoritative knowledge. In the next and final chapter, I conclude this study with a summary of my research project, as well as a discussion on its current limitations and implications, and its future research potential.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

The final chapter of this thesis briefly summarizes the study's findings in response to my initial research questions, followed by a discussion on its limitations and practical and theoretical implications. Finally, the potential for future research is addressed, including areas both internal and external to LIS work.

7.1 Research Summary

What are the types of information shared and exchanged in virtual diet communities, and how well do these communities' information behaviours fit with Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities?

Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities fits relatively well with the results of this study with the addition of my modifications. Reflective of their framework, information exchange and information acquiring-and-sharing were two of the central information behaviours identified in my study, as well as social information practices. They represent bidirectional and unidirectional communication, shifting from collective to individual information behaviours, although in each case the focus remains on individual cognitive processes. Interestingly, while still a component of the community's information behaviours, information acquiring-and-sharing was not common, especially in comparison to information exchange.

Social positioning's relationship to information behaviours runs along a perpendicular axis to Hersberger et al.'s (2007) user satisfaction scale, with community members repositioning themselves along the expert/novice continuum during different interactions and tiers of the framework. Ultimately, I developed twenty-two codes during qualitative coding and data analysis, belonging to two main categories: community member positioning and information

behaviours. Most codes aligned with information behaviours and were divided further into either information exchange or information acquiring-and-sharing. Information exchange contained most of my codes, including accountability (includes progress, progress updates, body measurements), health (includes mental health and self-care, physical health), fatphobia, self-deprecation, weight loss methods (includes discussions about food, discussions about exercise), community-building (includes motivation and positivity, support), and asking questions. Information acquiring-and-sharing, as stated throughout this thesis, was more difficult to pinpoint, and the only code placed there was the provision of external resources and links.

Throughout this thesis, my findings have suggested that Hersberger et al.'s (2007) conceptual framework of information behaviours in virtual communities does not address the full scope of interactions between community and information practices in an online environment. Information behaviours, which are directed inward, focus on individual cognitive processes and are thus inadequate means of addressing collective information practices within a social community. Social information practices centre on the ways in which authoritative knowledge and information are collectively negotiated by communities, and the addition of this concept to Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework improves its applicability. Although the current framework touches on social aspects of community, including social information networks and community membership, social information practices are never explicitly mentioned. Virtual communities exist for every topic and interest imaginable, and as a result, the information discussed and shared within and across communities varies greatly, which is another area that information behaviour research does little to address. In the case of LoseIt, common information types include experiential information, embodied information, authoritative information, empirical data, epistemic information, external information sources, and information referral services.

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While information acquiring-and-sharing is not as important on LoseIt as it may be in other virtual communities, and social information practices are a much-needed addition to Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework, it is still clear that this framework was a useful starting point for understanding the information behaviours and practices of the LoseIt virtual diet community.

How do forum participants use information to discursively position themselves in a virtual diet community?

Three primary and distinct ways in which forum members discursively positioned themselves in the LoseIt community were identified throughout this project: explicitly, expertly, and experientially. These positions are knowledge- and information-based, which means that they are determined by either the community member's perception of their own knowledge (i.e., explicit positioning) or by the type of information being shared in a post (i.e., expert versus experiential). Explicit positioning was linked primarily to self-identification practices by community newcomers and was associated with weight loss questions and introductory posts. In these early stages, novice users are still becoming integrated into the community through information exchange and other forms of community-building like community-wide weight loss challenges.

In contrast, authoritative knowledge and information were highly associated with expert positioning in this project, as well as information acquiring-and-sharing. Authority was commonly asserted through the use of external information sources, social information practices, and epistemic information. Authority in online communities functions as a two-way process, in which being accepted as an authority by others is as important as presenting oneself as an authority. Expert positioning is thus a result of not only a community member's discursive

presentation, but also the way in which others respond and interact with them in each scenario.

The type of information being shared is also an important component of authoritative knowledge.

Through qualitative coding and data analysis I identified a relationship between information

acquiring-and-sharing and expert positioning, in which those who felt equipped to locate and

provide specific resources with other community members did so with perceived authority,

regardless of credentials or qualifications. This is a significant component of LoseIt, as true

expertise is unverifiable without supporting evidence, thus the presentation of authoritative

information plays a central role in determining expertise. This observation alludes to the

malleability of expert positioning. In line with Wilson's (1983) work on cognitive authority,

community members may participate as an authority in one conversation thread and not in

another, dependent on factors like their level of comfortability with a given topic. Once

positioned as an expert, members' positions are often reinforced through a feedback loop, as seen

in the last chapter's discussion on online fitness influencers. LoseIt embodies this phenomenon

and demonstrates how community-based knowledge and collective negotiation function in a

virtual environment.

Finally, experiential knowledge and information were most frequently found alongside

comparative positioning. Experiential knowledge was also commonly supported by epistemic

and embodied information. This allows users to come together under shared struggles and

experiences that are common to weight loss. Shared experience and experiential knowledge are

foundational components of LoseIt, as weight struggles and the desire to lose weight are

common among most community members. This provides an incentive for members to share

personal information and gain acceptance from the community. Information exchange is the

main conduit for experiential knowledge, and is widely seen in conversations about health,

discrimination, and weight loss progress. More specifically, comparative positioning through information exchange is the main communicative pattern on LoseIt, and the sharing of personal narratives and honest information about health and weight loss are the most emotionally impactful ways that dieters position themselves in conversation. There is an undercurrent of vulnerability found in much of the information shared on LoseIt, and this honesty is what community members value when engaging in social information practices.

What are the implications of these findings for LIS and health information workers?

This study clearly identified the importance of experiential knowledge in virtual diet communities, and more specifically its enhanced importance in comparison to academic or theoretical knowledge. This is especially relevant in virtual diet communities like LoseIt, which centre support-based information and human connection. Chapter Six discusses this disconnect further and concludes that there is a fractured relationship between overweight populations and the healthcare system. Actual and perceived judgments and bias against people who are overweight by healthcare professionals is still a barrier to care for many, leaving people who are overweight (many of whom may try dieting) feeling that healthcare workers are judgmental and lack empathy. This is not to say that all healthcare workers necessarily lack empathy, but that patients do not perceive the type of understanding that they require to be vulnerable and share information in the way that they do online. To combat this, there are changes that can be made to healthcare and health sciences information work, whether that work involves the public or others in the healthcare field. Instead of focusing solely on quantitative research and data when approaching a weight loss problem, it is imperative to search for relevant qualitative studies as well. Weight loss struggles are largely related to mental health, which the LoseIt data demonstrated, and by focusing so heavily on numerical information as a health marker,

healthcare workers and dieters alike are prioritizing the wrong things. Why don't people examine how they feel about weight loss? What caused them to originally gain weight, and has weight loss had any impacts on their mental health? Is fixing one's relationship with food possible in the long term? What do people even want to know about weight loss that they don't already know? Why do they choose online spaces instead of medically approved weight loss programs? What can information workers do to help? These are some of the questions that this study has brought to the surface for me.

The commonality of comparative positioning on LoseIt demonstrated the importance of shared lived experiences and experiential information in support-based communities of virtual dieters; however, information studies literature does not reflect or focus on these realities. Instead, quantitative, numbers-based studies are emphasized and given increased legitimacy (Togia & Malliari, 2017). Unfortunately, this focus fails to consider the importance of human connection and emotionally supportive information provision in diet communities, and community participation is often tied to a member's initial weight gain and any eventual attempts at weight loss. A more quantitative approach also supports and reinforces the medical status quo, which is the source of tense relationships between the medical system and some LoseIt members.

In terms of practical implications, this study demonstrates that there is a precedent to conduct more qualitative research on virtual dieters, as well as overweight and obese populations to understand their thoughts and needs regarding health-related information. This also requires additional training for health sciences information workers regarding resource provision of sources that view diet and weight loss through a more holistic lens. And finally, as previously mentioned I believe that Reddit is an incredibly effective social media platform for open communication and information exchange, and that getting healthcare professionals involved in

virtual diet communities through hosted events like AMAs will benefit all parties. Community members will be able to ask questions anonymously and receive scientifically backed information, and healthcare professionals will be able to better understand the needs of the populations that they serve.

7.2 Limitations

The limitations of my research design were previously discussed in section 3.13, however, I would like to reiterate some of them here, as well as add some additional limitations that I identified further into my study. As previously mentioned, my lack of experience doing grounded theory research in addition to my lack of familiarity with NVivo and qualitative coding in general was itself a limitation for this study. I created and explored the codes that were apparent to me, but the resultant scope of my project may differ from that of another researcher. This impacts the transferability of my findings, as well as the short time frame included in my dataset and the qualitative nature of my approach. While my findings and their context are important and novel in LIS, further research and testing involving similar virtual communities is necessary to add to the existing literature.

I have not surveyed the population being studied personally, which is my biggest limitation; however, this choice serves a dual purpose. Part of the power of social media platforms like Reddit is their anonymity, and the openness that stems from that. I wanted my study to focus entirely on that data, unselfconscious in nature. Additionally, my focus for this project was on the specific ways that people interacted with one another in public conversations. This means that my focus was not on their underlying intention, or their regrets after writing a certain post, but rather on the way that their words were presented and interpreted within a specific context and within a given moment. In essence, this study focuses on perception, as that

is really all we have in anonymous online spaces. I can take what I want from the words people are saying, but the anonymity and the lack of context mean that I am unable to know or verify their true intentions.

Due to the anonymous nature of Reddit, my data cannot be confirmed or validated. The information shared regarding things like body measurements and life experiences are all self-identified, which means that any participants can be honest or dishonest about the information they are giving or receiving without detection. Another limitation resulting from Reddit's anonymity is the inability to adequately account for race and gender on LoseIt. On LoseIt, race and ethnicity are essentially never discussed, and community members are typically only seen if they post progress photos. Sex, on the other hand, is discussed occasionally, but many community members still do not tie it to or share their own gender identity, and when it is shared it is rarely validated with an accompanying photo. As a result of this there is no way to ascertain the roles of race and gender in the community, or if they even play a significant role at all.

An additional confounding variable that can be seen as either limiting or enlightening is the Covid-19 pandemic. My thesis idea was developed prior to the pandemic; however, data collection took place during it. As a result, there is no way of determining if and how the LoseIt community has changed during these times, unless additional comparative research is conducted with pre- or post-pandemic data. Before concluding this section, I would like to once again note the impact of my own worldview on the outcomes of this study. Throughout this project I have tried to remain transparent in my methods and assumptions, however, the conclusions that I have drawn from my results are ultimately a product of my own embodied experiences, which have shaped and moulded my relationship with diet culture and virtual diet communities. With

that said, there is still important information that can be taken from this study that is relevant

beyond its initial application.

7.3 Implications

7.3.1 Practical Implications

Based on the key features of the LoseIt community noted above and in the results

chapters, healthcare professionals have a responsibility to acknowledge the ways in which their

approach to diet and weight loss in patient populations has contributed to the prevalence of

virtual dieters and virtual diet communities. In addition, virtual dieters should ensure that the

current focus on anonymous information exchange effectively supports their user base without

also platforming fake weight loss 'experts' and facilitating the spread of misinformation.

Extending from this idea, research is warranted into the lack of information acquiring-and-

sharing on LoseIt, as well as the lack of scientifically backed advice and information provided by

community members. Do virtual diet communities have the potential to blend scientific and non-

scientific discussion while still fulfilling their emotionally supportive role? Should they?

From this, community stakeholders will be able to implement and enact change in the

community through events like AMAs and other scheduled or more formalized interactions.

7.3.2 Theoretical Implications

The theoretical goal of this work was related to the development of an emergent theory of

information behaviours and positioning in virtual diet communities. While this is only a

preliminary study into a vast and exciting area of the internet, more work needs to be done before

my findings can be confidently applied to other areas. What this study did reveal is that there is

in fact a connection between the way community members position themselves and the ways in

which they use information, and it has begun to unveil some of the innovative ways in which

Hersberger et al.'s (2007) framework can be modified and related to other theories. My thesis also identified some of the underlying constants that are central to virtual diet communities, and the role of information behaviours in these constants. This confirms that although further research must be done, my emergent theory is relevant to the healthcare and LIS communities. Through positioning theory, I was also able to analyze how different types of knowledge are expressed and understood in a virtual environment.

7.4 Potential for Future Research

Several avenues for future research have been uncovered throughout this study that involve both healthcare and information fields. For information professionals, particularly those working with health sciences information, there is an incentive for further research into how information behaviours play out in virtual spaces, particularly in relation to diet and weight loss communities. How do information acquiring-and-sharing practices differ between virtual communities and virtual diet communities? What is the role of anonymity in the users' information practices? Why do users ask questions that are better answered by a search engine? How and why do users convey authority when discussing weight loss methods while not having any expertise? As my study focused only on the content in community members' posts, there is also a need to survey or talk to community members in a more controlled environment. For instance, to discover why members may falsely convey themselves as experts or novices during interactions, or to understand how and why members' identities shift between comments and discussion threads. The relationship between successful weight loss and expert positioning is also an interesting area: do community members feel that they should not provide advice or resources until they have successfully implemented them themselves in a provable way (i.e., weight loss and success via visually embodied information)? Or is it more important to come to

terms with their own bodies and develop resilience to external pressures before enacting their expertise?

Following this, there is also future research potential within healthcare. In order to understand why millions of people are joining online weight loss communities and relying on them for support, research must first explore where and why the relationship has broken down between overweight populations and the medical community. How has the medical community let down overweight and obese people in the past, and what types of changes are they recommending to their patients? What is the relationship between the healthcare system and virtual dieters? What types of health information are wanted and/or needed by virtual dieters? How can the healthcare system and its workers alter their practices to cater more to these disenfranchised communities? How can healthcare professionals use social media platforms like Reddit to better serve communities like LoseIt?

7.5 Conclusion

Virtual weight loss communities have existed for as long as I have been on the internet. For years, people hoping to lose weight have flocked to online platforms like Reddit to join communities of like-minded people and pursue shared interests or goals. As more and more people join communities like LoseIt, misinformation and fake expertise pose an enhanced risk to healthy weight loss practices. How community members understand and interpret online information and the people behind it is of great importance, and it is necessary to strengthen the dialogue between virtual dieters and healthcare professionals, as well as amongst one another in the community. While there has been much quantitative, health-related research into diet and weight loss, information studies research has not spurred many qualitative studies of information behaviours or practices and community member positioning, especially in a virtual diet

community. As a result, little is known about virtual dieters' wants and needs as they relate to weight loss and weight loss information. For the continued growth of the field, further efforts to research and understand the information behaviours and practices of virtual dieters and the ways in which health information is consumed online are needed to elucidate these important and often overlooked components of virtual interactions.

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Appendix A – NVivo Thesis Codebook

Code Name	Description	Files	References
Information behaviours	Information behaviours "encompass information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviours (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviours that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information" (Case, 2008, p. 5).	65	1136
Information exchange	Information exchange is a bidirectional information-sharing event. Information exchange addresses how models of information behaviours, including needs, seeking, and exchange can be used to explain the evolution of online relationships and communities (Hersberger, Murray, & Rioux, 2007).	65	1091
Asking questions	An exchange of information in which a community member asks a question in hopes of getting community responses.	43	77
Community-building through supportive messaging	An exchange of information in which a community member shares information in order to promote and strengthen community bonds. This category includes a subcategory for messages of support and motivation.	39	176
Motivation and positivity	An exchange of information in which a community member shares information and receives a positive response aimed to provide motivation.	38	137
Support	An exchange of information in which a community member shares information and receives a supportive message that does not focus on motivation.	7	12
Discussing physical or mental health	A reference to problems or behaviours related to health. This category is divided into two subcategories, focusing on mental health and self-care, and physical health concerns.	46	221
Mental health and self-care	A reference to problems or behaviours related to mental health. This includes self-care behaviours, as these topics were often discussed in tandem.	37	164
Physical health concerns	A reference to problems or behaviours related to physical health. This can involve health concerns related to oneself, or health problems of related individuals that have impacted the community member.	25	57
Posting for	A reference to keeping oneself and others accountable, whether it is through a personal	14	65

accountability	or collective community effort. This category includes updates regarding progress.		
Progress	A reference to personal progress in attaining goals, typically regarding weight loss. This category includes subcategories for progress photos and statistics.	46	161
Progress photos	Any instance where a community member has accompanied their progress post with an updated progress/weight loss photo.	6	6
Body measurements	Any instance where a community member has shared their physical statistics in their post as a point of context (ie. height, weight, lbs lost).	40	119
Sharing experiences of fatphobia	A reference to a personal experience of discrimination on the basis of weight.	11	40
Using self-deprecating language	A reference to oneself using demeaning language.	30	60
Weight loss methods	A reference to dieting and weight loss behaviours revolving around food or exercise. This code straddles both information exchange and information sharing.	40	372
Discussing exercise	A reference to weight loss behaviours revolving around exercise. This can include personal or impersonal information (ie. general fitness tips vs. personal fitness updates).	19	134
Discussing food	A reference to dieting and weight loss behaviours revolving around food. This can include personal or impersonal information (ie. general nutrition advice vs. personal nutrition goals).	32	209
Information sharing	Information sharing is a unidirectional information-sharing event. This concept is primarily based on Rioux's (2005) information acquiring-and-sharing concept, which refers to the ways in which an individual understands the information needs of others and shares their own information on the basis of those needs.	19	28
Providing external links and resources	Primarily in reference to users acquiring and sharing external links to others on the basis of an assumed information need.	19	28
Positioning	Positioning theory is a social constructionist theory which posits that both individuals and collectives use discourse to situate themselves, and that this positioning occurs as a cyclical and interactive process in three acts: communication acts, positions, and storylines.	59	344

User positioning themselves as a novice	An exchange of information where a community member presents themselves as a beginner in a particular area.	38	63
User positioning themselves as an expert	An exchange of information where a community member presents themselves as an expert in a particular area.	46	118
User sharing demographic information	An exchange of information where a community member shares their demographic information (ie. age, gender) to situate themselves.	10	10
Using comparison (to self and others) to position oneself	An exchange of information where a community member relies on comparison to situate themselves.	47	153

Appendix B – LoseIt Data Word Frequency Clouds

Figure C.1 *Word frequency cloud including the entire LoseIt dataset*

Figure C.2 *Word frequency cloud including the final LoseIt data sample*