The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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E-community Support for Weight Loss

This is an exploratory study with a qualitative content analysis of the e-community forums to examine how these forums promote healthy eating, exercise, and social networking to encourage weight-loss. Two websites have been chosen: http://www.3fatchicks.com and www.weightwatchers.com. The selection of the sites were based upon information obtained from www.alexa.com; a website that has built an unparalleled database of information about a variety of sites that includes statistics, related links, and comparison data for each site.

There is building evidence that being in a support group of people, who have similar weight-control issues, would be beneficial to those involved; not only because of the motivating factors by being accountable to a 'group', but for the emotional and mental support as well. Thus, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the support of an e-community for those who have weight control issues. An e-community is defined as an online (or virtual) community where "groups of people with common interests and practices that communicate regularly and for some duration in an organized way over the Internet through a common location or mechanism" (Ridings et al., 2002).

In a January, 2007 Golden Globe acceptance speech, America Ferrera, who plays Betty in Ugly Betty, stated, "Thank you to the foreign press for recognizing this show and this character who is truly bringing a new face to television… and such a beautiful, beautiful message about beauty that lies deeper than what we can see." Based on Yo Soy Betty La Fea, the groundbreaking Colombian telenovela that became an international phenomenon, Ugly Betty is a show about a slightly plump plain-Jane from Queens who works in the superficial world of high fashion where image is everything. What Ferrera is referring to in her speech, is the almost ubiquitous and equally unrealistic media message about beauty. "Female beauty in the media is packaged and peddled as an illusion that anyone can cultivate," (Goodman, 2002).

Throughout history, women have been bombarded by daily images of the 'ideal beauty' through the media, family, and friends (Kim & Lennon, 2007). These venues tell women that beauty can be achieved by using, wearing, purchasing, or even ingesting certain things that make them more desirable. Women buy into the message of a western ideal through extreme exercising and extreme dieting (Thompson and Stice, 2001) with western ideals of thinness pervading the society at an exponential rate. Most weight loss studies focus on white females and there is an assumption that the media role models are distinctly part of Western culture (Wykes and Gunter, 2005, pg. 168). The issue of body

image has been further convoluted with the growing importance of the Internet as an alternative advertising medium. Earlier studies have neglected the role of Internet in body image issues with special reference to online communities. There is strong evidence that "e-communities" impact both weight loss and body image issues, the question is how and to what extent.