

Healthy Living Blogs: Good Source of Health Information or Promoting Disordered Eating?

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Healthy Living blogs abound on the Internet. Topics range from reviews of low calorie snacks to bloggers documenting their fitness journeys. But do these blogs really promote healthy living? Or do they promote eating disorder symptoms?

Boepple and Thompson (2014) from the University of South Florida conducted a content analysis of 21 award-winning healthy living blogs with high viewership. They defined healthy living blogs as personal websites devoted to sharing an individual's healthy lifestyle for the purposes of providing an example of healthy living to others. The blogs may describe blogger's lives, eating, and exercise habits. The researchers note that many elements of healthy living (exercise, weight loss, and healthy diet) have been linked to eating disorder symptomology when pursued for appearance-based motivations rather than health-based motivations. This study was designed to analyze the content of healthy living blogs to provide a foundation for future research studies.

The researchers selected the 21 healthy living blogs with the highest number of page views out of a selection of blogs that had won a blogging award in the past year. Blogs that were written by health and fitness professionals were excluded, since the researchers wanted to focus on blogs written by lay individuals. Two coders independently rated the blogs and had excellent inter-rater reliability.

Results revealed that all of the bloggers were female between the ages of 20-50 years old. Five bloggers explicitly disclosed that they were in recovery from an eating disorder and seven mentioned difficulties with either menstruation or fertility difficulties. Analysis revealed that much of the content on healthy living blogs emphasized appearance, thin ideals, and disordered messages about food and nutrition. These messages included self-objectifying phrases and images, fat stigmatizing language, praise for being thin, before and after images, guilt-inducing messages about food, and encouragement to substitute "healthy" for "unhealthy" foods. Interestingly, little content related to general health issues.

The authors of the research study conclude that healthy living blogs contain messages and information that could be problematic, especially for individuals at risk for or struggling with eating disordered symptoms. They note that healthy living blogs are less incendiary than pro-eating disorder blogs (ie. "pro-ani" sites); however, that fact could make healthy living blogs more problematic because they reach a wider audience and may normalize disordered behavior. More research is needed to further explore the relationship between healthy living blogs and eating disorder symptomology. As eating disorder professionals, we should be aware of the potential problematic aspects of healthy living blogs and assess if and how our patients are using these sites.

Reference:

Boepple, L & Thompson J. (2014) A Content Analysis of Healthy Living Blogs: Evidence of Content Thematically Consistent with Dysfunctional Eating Attitudes and Behaviors. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*; 47: 362-367