WEIGHING IN: A STUDY OF BLACK WOMEN’S ONLINE WEIGHT LOSS NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

According to the United States Office of Minority Health, Black women are the most overweight demographic in the country (Health, 2009). The purpose of this study is to better understand the narratives of Black American women’s weight loss experiences as told through online narrative creation (blogging). Through the lens of participant observation, the researcher performs a thematic, narrative analysis on the weight loss stories of five (5) Black American women over a six month time period (March - August 2011). Research questions revolve around cultural and gender-related challenges to weight loss, cultural themes within the narratives, and the motivations and triumphs in overcoming these challenges.

Key findings of culturally related challenges to weight loss were (a) negative, collective social attitudes toward health, (b) cultural expectations of Black women’s physical appearance, (c) poor generational health habits, and (d) a lack of resources. Black women’s narratives reveal cultural themes such as (a) the use of Black lexical trends, (b) references to Black pop culture, and (c) narrative spotlights on Black celebrities’ health in the media. Black women’s stories disclose themes of gender-related challenges to weight loss. These include (a) gender relations with the opposite sex, (b) gendered expectations of women, and (d) challenges of womanhood. Women in the study
find motivation to lose weight through achieving an idealized body; support from the blogosphere; impressing other women; and compliments from others in society. Research also shows that triumphs to overcome challenges include themes of physical accomplishments, seeking therapy and embracing feminism (taking back control of women’s lives).

This study is the first of its kind—the thesis seeks to fill gaps in literature on online content creation by minority groups, as well as takes the narrative analysis approach to the study of health blogging. The study has implications for the work and research of several fields. In academia, the paper contributes to scholarship on the communicative power of narrative. Black Studies scholars may find interest in this paper as it discusses Black storytelling in a new media form. Findings in regard to both the cultural and gender related weight loss challenges in the narratives have implications for research by health professionals interested in Black women audiences. The participant-as-observer aspect of this study encourages future possibilities for members of underrepresented populations to continue to take ownership of communications research related to pertinent issues within their own cultural and gender communities.
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There are many people who have helped me get to this point. With my whole heart, I would like to thank Jesus Christ—to Him I owe my work and life. I am abundantly grateful for my encouraging friends and family. Also, I really appreciate the faculty and staff of Georgetown University’s Communication, Culture & Technology Program—thanks for your willingness to be a part of this journey with me.

Respectfully yours,

CHRISTINA L. BULLOCK
DEDICATION:

The research and writing of this thesis is dedicated to my parents, James and Runia Bullock.

With love,
Christina
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INTRODUCTION

Bell bottom jeans were a big deal at my middle school. Everyone wore them—well maybe not everyone. I remember being bigger than many of my classmates (who were white) and feeling jealous of other girls for having thighs small enough to wear whatever jeans they wanted. I hated how my thighs rubbed together when I walked. I hated that I never felt comfortable to wear shorts or anything that showed my legs. It made me sad, angry and every other emotion in between.

In high school I tried to turn things around and began to improve my eating habits, exercise regimen and even made the volleyball team. I slimmed down. I received so many compliments from my (white) classmates; I also remember how many negative comments I received about my weight loss from my (Black) friends at church. Faced with contradictory messages from two different communities in which I wanted to belong (of whether or not a larger or smaller body was favored), my weight fluctuated in high school and college.

The summer after I graduated from undergrad, I was employed as a camp counselor; and between supervising teenagers in summer school and apartment hunting for my big move to Washington, D.C., I decided to get back in the gym. One day after my daily workout, I went to the women’s locker room to change out and decided to step on the scale. At 5’3,” I weighed in at 178 lbs.—the heaviest I had ever been in my life.

This thesis was inspired by that moment—the moment when I realized that I was at my fattest and needed to do something about it. I turned to the internet only to find a plethora of mainstream (white American) promotions for weight loss programs and health information. I found very little health resources for Black women that were culturally relevant to my struggles
and experiences. Still on an up and down weight loss roller coaster after my first year in graduate school, I began to notice an increase in weight loss advertisements in the media featuring women of color. For example, Jennifer Hudson, a Black American recording artist, appeared in numerous Weight Watchers commercials and magazine advertisements (“Weight Watchers Is Working for Me,” 2012). Shortly after I viewed the Jennifer Hudson ads, I noticed celebrities of color such as Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson, Raven Simone, Jordin Sparks, Queen Latifah, among others who were in the spotlight for their dramatic weight loss results.

I watched these women of color take control of their health; this motivated me to get even more serious about my own fitness. My journey led me to a community of women like me on the World Wide Web, who also noticed the prevalence of Black women and their weight loss results in the media. This community was within the blogosphere—Eureka! Here was a place for women battling obesity to support one another and to create content relevant to their interests and life experiences. There was hope and I knew that I could change.

I do not attempt to write as a health expert or fitness guru. However, I am a researcher and a Black woman who now weighs in at 45 lbs. lighter than I was when I started the journey to fight obesity last year. When I began the Introduction, I told the story of how I struggled with being overweight at a young age, my conflict of emotions after I faced different worldviews on body image, and how the discovery of the Black weight loss blog community gave me confidence to do better. Before I found these blogs, my motivation to lose weight was missing its power. But when I read first-hand weight loss stories of women like me (Black like me), I felt and knew I could win.
This study is focused on the importance of the narrative in communication research. I chose a qualitative analysis approach to study a specific demographic in order to explore a diversity of stories and experiences in a way that cannot be quantified. Moreover, the qualitative approach was a better fit for the study because it tackles complicated issues that are not easily defined—narrative content on blogs are subjective. Blogs are the platform used by Black women in the study to reveal their weight loss narratives. I performed a narrative analysis of five separate blog sites over a six month period to better understand the experiences of a unique, minority community. The research questions posed in the study examine the themes related to cultural aspects of blog narratives; stories about the cultural and gender-related challenges to weight loss; as well as how these women keep their motivation and overcome challenges in their stories.

First, I review the literature related to this genre of research. I note scholars’ recognition of narrative as a legitimate way to research the human experience; the use of narrative to understand cultural and gender-related experiences; blogging in the blogosphere; and culturally relevant information seeking practices of marginalized groups. I discuss the methods of research, and detail the steps of coding the data and a three level thematic analysis approach to create an explanatory framework to answer the research questions. Afterward, the paper provides a conclusive reflection on the findings and discusses limitations in the scope of the study, along with suggestions for future research.

It is my goal to contribute to the scholarship on a distinct topic and population that has yet to be explored in communications research. I bring my own personal voice to the research as a member of the population studied in this paper. Personal reflections are written in *italics* for
emphasis throughout the paper. It is my hope that the thesis will evolve into a future, larger research project. I also want this study to act as a catalyst for more studies by Black American women, for Black American women. More specifically, studies should continue to seek a better understanding of how Black women create and use culturally relevant content on the World Wide Web today.
CHAPTER 1

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Narrative, a Theoretical Framework

The Narrative Paradigm

There are many different ways to tell a story. Stories are so much a part of the human experience that we cannot remember life without them (Mortimer, 2002). Stories are as diverse as human beings and when they are shared, “we can appreciate the enduring nature, together with the variety and contrast, of the narrative form,” (Mortimer, 2002, p. 38). Scholars have argued that narrative, or story-telling, is a legitimate way to better understand people’s experiences. Research by Walter Fisher asserts that “human lives are experienced in narratives,” (West & Turner, 2010). Assumptions of Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm are (a) humans are naturally story tellers; (b) decisions about a story’s worth are based on good reasons, (c) good reasons are determined by history, biography, culture and character, (d) rationality is based on people’s judgments of a story’s consistency and truthfulness and (e) We experience the world as filled with stories and “we must choose among them,” (West & Turner, 2010, p.346). Fisher purports that narrative exists as “universal,” and may be found in every culture of humanity (West & Turner, 2010).

Coherence of the story is most important in the study of narrative rationality (West & Turner, 2010, p.351). Structurally, narratives are consistent when the story flows in a logical manner. Narratives are measured by the “believability” of their characters (West & Turner 2010). Foss (1989) describes narrative as “a way to order and present a view of the world through a description of a situation involving characters, actions, and settings that change over
time,” (Foss, 1989, p. 229). Narratives are also assessed by fidelity, or the “truthfulness or reliability” of the story (Foss, 1989, p.352). In order to better understand narratives, researchers must identify and provide an analysis of the events, audience, setting, themes, narrator and temporal and causal relations in the story (Foss, 1989).

Fisher argues that though some narratives may have inaccuracies, if the stories meet the criteria of coherence and are found relevant to an audience, the narratives may be popular and widely accepted (West & Turner, 2010, p.354). Fisher (1985) also suggests that the nature of validity of narratives relates to “communicative functions,” which are (a) teleological, (b) dramaturgical and (c) normative (Fisher, 1985, p.352). Normative functions (or cultural functions within communication) expressed in narratives contribute to the perceived authenticity of stories (Fisher, 1985). Narratives are so much a part of the human experience that we cannot ignore the cultural functions of storytelling. This thesis will further examine cultural aspects of Black narratives that are rooted in a history of stories passed down through generations.

**Narrative: Communities and Cultures**

**Black Cultural and Historical Contexts of Narratives**

Storytelling has the ability to create a powerful connection between the teller and the listener. Banks-Wallace (2002) describes these connections as “touchstones,” or “things that remind people of a shared heritage or past,” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 411). In *Talk that Talk: Storytelling and Analysis Rooted in African American Oral Tradition*, the researcher provides a historical and cultural context for storytelling. Banks-Wallace (2002) argues that storytelling is one of the most “recognized traditions in African/American cultures,” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p.412).
Historically, the most revered person in the traditional African community was the “griot,” or “oral historian,” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p.412). The sharing of stories is historically seen as “sacred” to the African American community through deep rooted traditions of folklore; this folklore is said to nurture its people, “sustaining a unique cultural identity, and undergirding the struggle for spiritual and material freedom,”(Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412). During slavery, Blacks often used narratives to express hardships in “everyday life contexts” that were shared among one another (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412).

This type of story sharing was pervasive in my childhood; I learned the most about my African American heritage and ancestors from stories I would hear from my parents and grandparents about social inequalities and hardships faced in a racist society—these narratives of struggle and triumph were sacred; I began to feel a sense of self-identity and pride from storytelling of the past.

In the last fifty years, there has been a rise in scholarship in the analysis of the African American narrative through oral traditions and texts . Research has shown that common themes in African American oral storytelling traditions are “a) survival against all odds; b) an unshakable communion with and faith in God/Spirit; c) true wealth defined as loving relationships with family, friends, and the larger African American community; and (d) the triumph of goodness justice, cunning, and/or wisdom over money, strength ,” (Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 418). Banks-Wallace’s (2002) research also recognizes the contributions of the prominent National Association of Black Storytellers (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Even today, this organization’s mission is to continue the African American art of storytelling through passing on “folklore, legends, myths, fables and mores,” through annual storytelling events for people of all ages (“National Association of Black Storytellers,” 2012).
**Women’s Health Narratives**

Narratives have been studied through the lens of many disciplines. Along with cultural aspects of narratives, this thesis is interested in the stories of women and how they reveal their health experiences to the outside world. Mortimer (2002) studied the stories (through personal interviews) of twelve women suffering from Endometriosis, a gynecological condition with symptoms of pelvic pain during menstruation and other complications (Mortimer, 2002). Mortimer examined the narratives of each of the women in “graduated levels of explanation and meaning,” (Mortimer 2002, p.iii). After performing the narrative analysis, research found that there were a number of emergent themes related to women’s illness experiences that included “fertility issues, relationships, occupations, and self-concept, both physical and psychological,”(Mortimer, 2002, p.woiii).

**Black Women’s Health Narratives**

Robinson-Moore (2008) suggests that “critical-interpretive research is a way to make women’s lives visible and their voices heard, allowing an understanding of women from their own perspectives,” (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Other narrative studies have explored the stories of Black women experiencing life-threatening illnesses. Lawson (1998) studied a Black woman’s perception of breast cancer risks while undergoing chemotherapy (Lawson, 1998). Lawson’s method for gathering data was through personal interviews. Emergent themes in the data included beliefs about breast cancer and lack of symptoms, fear of gynecological exams and family history among others (Lawson, 1998).

414). Still today, it is important to use narratives to delve more deeply into the Black woman’s experience through what she says and how she says it. The culture of Black women is unique, filled with a host of culturally and gender-related interests and experiences. This paper will contribute to scholarship through the narrative analysis of Black women’s stories in another life-threatening illness perspective—through the lens of the morbidly obese.

**Obesity and Black Women in America**

According to the United States Office of Minority Health, African American women have the highest rate of obesity in the country (Health, 2009). In a study done by the United States Office of Minority Health between the years of 2005-2009, African American women over the age of 20 were reported to be 8% more obese than African American men and almost 20% more obese than non-Hispanic white women. Obesity leads to a number of health-related problems. African Americans are more likely to have heart disease and die from heart disease. They are also “twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as non-Hispanic whites.” Black Americans are also more likely to have high blood pressure than any other population (Health, 2009).

The problem of obesity is significant in the African American community for a number of reasons. Many of the obesity-related health issues in the Black community can be attributed to socioeconomic factors. Research at the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health shows that women who come from lower income families are more likely to be obese than women who have higher incomes (Kumanyika, 1987). Socioeconomic status is strongly related to ethnic and racial backgrounds (Kumanyika, 1987).
According to a study in 2008 of poverty in the United States, women are more likely to be below the poverty line than men (Cawthorne, 2008). More specifically, African American women face the highest rates of poverty than any other group in America (Cawthorne, 2008). Poverty statistics point to problems of access to health resources related to combatting obesity. Low-income African American women tend to make less health-conscious decisions about food and have food preferences that are less healthy than those who have higher incomes and come from other racial groups (Cawthorne, 2008).

**Black Women and Critical Race Theory**

**Black Women, Beauty Ideals and Disordered Eating**

The issue of obesity in Black women has ignited studies of Black women’s body image and perceptions of beauty in society. Kumanyika (1987) noted that research suggests that Black women have traditionally been “less concerned about overweight and less subject to the social pressure to be thin than white women,”(Kumanyika, 1987,p. 43). Studies also show that Black women are less likely to have eating disorders than their white women counterparts (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011). Scholars have attributed African American cultural definitions of beauty to cultural roots in Africa. For example, the Annang of Nigeria, “may relegate a bride-to-be to a ritual fattening room, where her primary purpose is to gain weight,” (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011, p.907). Large body frames not only represent beauty, but a “high socioeconomic status,” (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011, p.907). Definitions of beauty in the Black community are multifaceted and based on other aspects of women’s beauty such as style and presence (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011, p. 907)
Culturally, African American women possess strong ethnic identities (Shuttlesworth & Zotter 2011). Studies show that the cultural ideal of fuller figures often protects Black women from developing certain eating disorders that are typically seen in Caucasian women populations such as anorexia or bulimia (Shuttleworth & Zotter, 2011). However, the fuller-figured standard of beauty may increase Black women’s risk of obesity and binge eating (Shuttlesworth & Zotter 2011). In a study of 301 Black and Caucasian college women, it was found that Black women have lower levels of eating pathology, have the highest sense of ethnic identity, and are more likely to over eat to achieve a fuller figure (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011).

**Black Women, Beauty and the Self**

Higgins’ Theory of Self helps to explain reasons why some African American women may seek to attain the fuller-figured ideal of beauty (Shuttleworth & Zotter, 2011). The theory is comprised of three components. First, “the actual self is the perception the individual has of the self,” (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011, p.908). Second is the ideal self, or “aspirations an individual has to improve the actual self,”( Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011 p. 908). Last, is the “ought self, or the notion of perceived external pressures to alter the self,”(Shuttlesworth & Zotter,2011, p.908). As African American women begin to achieve their ideal selves, (and overcome actual selves) they may “reduce the level of distress and negative emotions that accompany such a discrepancy,” (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011, p. 42).

**Black Beauty and Social Comparison Theory**

Though Black women may want to live up to standards of beauty in their own communities, a Social Comparison Theory approach to Black beauty offers a different insight into this search for beauty and self. For example, Cheryl Thompson (2009) uses the Social
Comparison Theory to better explain the interrelatedness of physical attractiveness and self-esteem. Like all women, Black women may be influenced by the mainstream media’s ideal of beauty (Thompson, 2009). Research by Franz Fannon suggests that the mainstream cultural preference for whiteness creates “psychic inferiorization,” (Thompson, 2009, p. 841). Thompson notes in her research that, “If White is inherently beautiful in a society, than something such as Black hair must be worked upon before it can become beautiful,” (Thompson, 2009, p.841).

This paper will explore narratives about the Black female body as it is often assumed that it must be “worked upon before it can become beautiful,” and the struggles to find self in a society that often says what the body ought to be.

**Black Beauty and Social Contracts Theory**

Studies show that the attractiveness of a person is directly related to the social acceptance the individual receives (Robinson-Moore, 2008). Research exists to better understand Black women’s struggle to cope with the juxtaposition of seeking to achieve the mainstream ideal of beauty and beauty standards in Black culture. A Cultural Contracts Theory approach to understanding identity negotiations in Black women’s beauty suggests that there is a “relationship between black females and beauty paradigms,” (Robinson-Moore, 2008, p.3).

Black women are faced with issues of the dominant standard of beauty that is “non-negotiable,” (Robinson-Moore, 2008, p. 10). As stated in the previous discussion of Black Women, Beauty Ideals and Disordered Eating, the standard of beauty among African Americans is many times viewed as multifaceted and flexible; here is the contradiction. Robinson-Moore (2008) notes that dominant ideals of beauty are presented as “ready-to-sign contracts” to marginalized groups; minorities either assimilate or become social pariah (Robinson-Moore, 2008, p. 12).
The three premises of non-negotiable contracts experienced by marginalized groups are “1) identities require affirmation as theories of self are either affirmed or in some way validated by others, 2) identities are being constantly exchanged and influenced, 3) identities are contractual—politically, socially and culturally binding through communication, and penalties are incurred when these contracts are breached (through refusal to assimilate),” (Robinson-Moore, 2008, p. 21-23). A study of thirty-eight audio interviews of African American women concludes that one of the most common types of cultural contracts among Black women and society are “quasi-completed contracts.”(Robinson-Moore, 2008, p.13). Women expressed that they are not ready to fully assimilate and give up their personal, cultural concepts and perspectives of the definition of beauty (Robinson-Moore, 2008).

Similar to Robinson-Moore’s study of cultural contracts regarding Black women’s beauty standards in skin color, this paper seeks to uncover the narratives of Black women as their bodies are negotiated in terms of thinning down.

**Cultural Relevance and Information Seeking**

The new media age allows populations to seek out information that is relevant to their interests. As previously discussed, there are a plethora of unique issues experienced by Black Americans and more specifically, Black women. Though the internet offers a multitude of information to the public, all groups are not equally represented on the World Wide Web (Warren et al, 2010, p. 673). African Americans in particular, are overrepresented online in the areas of entertainment and sports. However, there is a significant lack of information on financial and health matters for African Americans online (Warren et al., 2010). Research shows that there is an inherent bias in the design of the internet in regard to the usability of this medium by
low-income populations. In the past decade, the number of African Americans using the internet has drastically increased (Warren et al., 2010).

Research has also shown that identity plays a role in information seeking, including searches conducted online through the web (Warren et al., 2010). In a study of African American “ethnic and class based identities on the world wide web,” black individuals indicated that they begin to trust online information that is accurately relevant to their identity (Warren et al., 2010). This identity relevant information builds a sense of trust for specific media content. In the study, Black participants reported that this relevant information would make them feel comfortable to engage with similar media forms in the future (Warren et al, 2010).

Past research has delved into the ability for the internet to act as a catalyst for new content production online by minority groups (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004). In a study of the internet for empowerment of minorities, researchers address specific inquiries about how the internet empowers African American women. The study suggests that black women’s creation of online content empowers them to change the status-quo and seek to rid themselves of stereotypes often seen in the online health information community (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004). For example, the SisterNet website, created specifically for African American women to collaborate with one another about community health and social problems, allowed members to disseminate and gather information among friends online and offline to better meet the needs of their communities ((Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004).

I suspect that the underrepresentation of culturally relevant health information online points toward the recent trend of Black women’s creation of weight loss blogs. Free and accessible blogger sites on the internet provide Black women with a place to create and share
information on pertinent health issues. The creation of personalized and culturally relevant blog sites allow the Black population to build a repertoire of online content “for us, by us,”(Blog 2011) that is to say, Black people are taking control of the content that is publicly and widely accessible about their own communities. This paper seeks to better understand the stories of Black women through their online narratives. Blogs are the medium through which these women reveal their experiences in the struggle to lose weight.

**The Blogosphere**

Narratives can be found in numerable forms. Due to its versatile nature, narrative can be anything from essays to conversations (Foss, 1989). One of the most prevalent forms of narrative today is found in online journaling, or blogging. According to Jones and Alony (2008), weblogs are “frequently modified web pages in which dated entries are listed in reverse chronological sequence,”(Jones & Alony, 2008, p.433). Weblogs function as an “amalgam between a diary, a web site and an online community,” (Jones & Alony, 2008, p. 433). Weblogs provide bloggers, or the creators of weblog content, with the opportunity to journal on a diversity of topics and personal experiences (Jones & Alony 2008).

Weblogs were nicknamed “blogs,” in 1999 by Peter Marholz ( Shevked and Dakovski, 2006). The blogosphere, or interconnected community of all blogs on the internet, has grown by the millions in the past decade (Jones & Alony, 2008, p. 433-434). There have been a large number of studies on the proliferation of the blogosphere and its versatile content in the past few years (Jones & Alony, 2008). It is important to further explore the aforementioned phenomena, and more specifically, how the blogosphere meets the needs of populations.
Motivations for Blogging

The study of blogs has been widely accepted as a reliable source of information for researchers in a number of academic fields (Jones & Alony, 2008). Many blogs are public and easily accessible to internet users. Blogs are capable of providing researchers with comprehensive data sets on a plethora of subjects. Scholars have become increasingly interested in reasons and motivations for blogging (Jones & Alony, 2008). Through reviewing the research of over a million bloggers, Jones and Alony developed a “schema of seven needs blogging answers,” (Jones & Alony, 2008, p.436). These needs consist of the “need for self-expression, need for recognition, need for social contact, need for introspection, academic needs for knowledge and interests, need for documentation and the need for artistic activity,” (Jones & Alony, 2008, p. 436).

There have been similar findings in analyses of bloggers’ motivations. For example, a general study of almost 200 bloggers’ motivations through a Uses-and-Gratifications approach, suggests that there are seven primary reasons why people blog (Li, 2005). This thesis focuses on how Black American women express their weight loss stories through a number of blogging topics that relate to their gender and racial backgrounds. It also addresses the gaps in literature on culturally relevant information seeking and creation of content online through exploring themes related to the cultural and gender experiences of each of the bloggers.

Motivations for Weight Loss Blogging

In recent years, there has been a great increase in the number of blogs related to health, and more specifically, blogs related to weight loss (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). Research in this area of blogging has evaluated the functionality of these blogs, along with
blogger motivations and topics of interest. For example, in a study of 10 women’s weight-loss blogs, researchers identify several motivations for blogging about weight loss. These include 1) providing social commentary on fatness, 2) achieving a cathartic experience, 3) writing the self and 4) social support. These blogs provided narratives about the struggles to lose weight in a society that looks down upon the morbidly obese (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011).

Weight loss bloggers write about their opinions on social issues such as societal standards of “weight, diet, food, health and fitness,” (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011, p.5). Bloggers’ feelings of personal catharsis from writing about their weight loss struggles online works as a way for them to fight urges to overeat (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). In the study, a blogger notes that she can “dump all the crap” on the blog rather than “eating food to make me feel better,” (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011, p.5). Blogging about emotions and personal feelings is also an introspective mantra in weight-loss blogging (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain 2011).

**Weight Loss Blogs and Writing the Self**

Writing the self is also an integral facet of the online weight loss narrative. Representations of the body are the focus in these blogs; bloggers may use photographs or timelines as ‘body announcements’ about weight loss (Leggatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). As time progresses, body announcements become a way for bloggers to “sustain past selves,” (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011, p.7). Writing about the self (coupled with photographs and other forms of proof of weight loss) contributes to the perception of the authenticity of the weight loss blog and works as a way to hold bloggers accountable to the rest of the weight-loss blog community (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011).
If nothing else, weight loss blogs serve as a socially supportive community for those struggling with obesity (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). Audience involvement through comments, blog rolls (or links to other blog sites from one site to another) contribute to the sense of social support weight loss bloggers may feel (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011). A 2010 study of fifty-two weight loss bloggers revealed that the social support gained from the weight-loss blog community is comprised of empathy, accountability and venting/advice seeking. This research showed that there is a rich, communicative experience for bloggers who are connected to one another through common experiences (Legatt-Cook & Chamberlain, 2011).

Cyberdieting: Blogs as Adjuncts to Women’s Weight Loss Efforts presents a grounded theory approach to better understand the structural, functional and thematic aspects of weight loss blogs. Eight women’s weight loss blogs were found to have side bars containing main blog entry titles, general photos, graphics, images and non-photographic images (Rausch, 2006, p.66). The blogs also all had the ability for others to post comments, links via blog rolls, and badges, or icons identifying the blogger’s membership in specific web communities (Rausch, 2006). The study found that the primary topics of discussion in weight loss blogs among women were life stressors, barriers to weight loss (such as lack of energy and the unavailability of healthy food choices), and weight-related illnesses (Rausch, 2006).

Rausch’s (2006) content analysis of women’s weight loss blogs seems to be one the first of its kind; it boasts a multicultural sample. Bloggers identified themselves as living in Australia, the Caribbean, and the United States. Race groups identified in the sample were White, Black and Hispanic. Though the sample is diverse, Rausch does not discuss in-depth topics related to cultural, racial and gendered issues. This thesis seeks to fill gaps in literature about the cultural
and gender-related aspects of the weight loss struggle. Though Black women’s weight-loss narratives may contain similarities to topics found in previous research on weight loss blogging, the study explores stories specific to a community with unique needs, interests and world-views.

**Moving Forward**

There are several aspects of this thesis that make the study the first of its kind. First, I am presenting a thematic, narrative analysis approach to the research of Black women’s blogs narratives. Second, there has been no research on weight loss blogs through the lens of narrative analysis. Past research has focused on personal interviews and focus group interviews of women for narrative analyses. Thirdly, there are no other studies of Black women’s weight loss blogs to date. More specifically, Black women’s online weight loss narratives have not been explored in a way that seeks to better understand how this population reveals experiences specific to their communities. Literature exists on the information seeking practices of African Americans on the world wide web. However, this literature lacks breadth and depth about aspects of health-related content created by Black Americans that speaks to their own communities. The study will also help to fill gaps in the literature about an underrepresented population in health communication and narrative criticism. *It is my hope that this study will propel future communication research on women like me.*
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

The thesis proposes to investigate the research questions through a qualitative study of Black women’s weight loss blog narratives. The research questions were 1) What are some of the culturally-related challenges to weight loss that Black women reveal in their narratives? 2) What are some other cultural themes of Black women’s weight loss blog narratives? 3) What gender related challenges are discussed in Black women’s weight loss narratives? 4) What motivations and triumphs do Black women reveal in the journey to overcome the challenges of weight loss?

The study employs the narrative analysis approach to better understand the narrative content of the blogs. More specifically, a thematic narrative analysis was performed on the data in order to better understand the themes that emerged surrounding the research questions. Kohler and Riessman (2005) describe thematic analysis as “useful for theorizing across a number of cases—finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report,” (Kohler & Riessman, 2005).

Along with narrative, thematic analysis, the participant observation research method was used throughout this study. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I identify myself as a Black American woman who has battled being overweight as long as I can remember. I share some basic similarities with the bloggers in the sample in regard to racial identification, health challenges and online information seeking to combat these health challenges. Atkinson and Hammersley (1994) suggest that all social research may be considered as participatory and that there are several variations of participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). In this study, I take the position of participant as observer, where I closely read, code and analyze the
data, but I do not participate by blogging or interacting in any way in the women’s blog communities. Throughout the analysis, you may see lines of texts in *italics*—these lines are my own thoughts and reflections as a participant-observer in the study.

**Blog Selection**

In order to select blogs for the study, I employed the purposive-snowball sampling approach, as outlined by Rausch in her analysis of women’s weight loss blogs (Rausch, 2006). A content analysis of women’s weight loss blogs by Rausch (2006), selected blogs for the study through purposive-snowball sampling through Google keyword searches and a set of criteria that matched her research interests (Rausch, 2006). Modeled after Rausch’s study, I began my method by performing a search on [http://www.google.com](http://www.google.com) for “Black women+weight loss blogs.” I first clicked on the second result, Black Girls Run! Blog website and followed the website’s blog rolls, or links to blogs that Black Girls Run! follows. The Black Girls Run! health blog serves as a health resource for Black women with information on weight loss and fitness topics (“Black Girls Run!,” 2012). From the Black Girls Run! Blog, what appeared to be 8 Black women’s weight loss blogs were found in the blog roll. I then began to click through the blog rolls of these 8 blog sites in order to search for other Black women’s weight loss blogs to be included in the study.

After clicking through the links and blog rolls of the original 8 sites and the blog rolls of the other sites, I reached saturation, or the point when there were no other Black women’s weight loss blogs found for the study. There were 54 blogs identified as potential subjects for the narrative analysis. Modeled after Rausch’s (2006) study, I used a set of criteria to narrow the
sample to a manageable, in-depth narrative analysis. Below is a set of criteria used to identify the requirements for blog selection.

**Criteria for Blog Selection**

1. The individual represented in the blog must self present as a woman.
2. Blog must be written in Standard American English or African American English (Ebonics).
3. The blogger must explicitly state that her purpose is to reveal her weight loss journey.
4. The individual must identify herself as Black American through pictures and statements in her narrative.
5. Blogs must be created by women between the ages of 18 to 40.
6. Blogs selected must not be sponsored by a commercial weight loss entity.
7. Blogs must be maintained between March 2011 to August 2011.
8. Entries must contain dates in reverse chronological order with a calendar, timeline or archive to date back to older posts.
9. Entries must average at least 4 blogs per month during the time period of March 2011-August 2011.
10. Blogs must be publicly accessible.
11. Blogs must include progress photos and reports.
12. Blogs must have followers/blog rolls.
13. Bloggers must identify themselves as morbidly obese.

The criteria used to select a data sample for analysis were specific to my interests as a researcher. Though it may have seemed obvious that some of the women were of Black descent
(I am a Black woman and am pretty good at identifying others in my racial group) through photos, it was equally important that the bloggers stated that they identified as “Black” and American or “African American” in their narratives. This issue was important because there are many variations in physical appearances in the Black population. A woman may appear to be Black, but may not identify herself as such.

Throughout the study, I will refer to the women as ‘Black Americans,” a more general term due to inability to determine whether or not all or some of the women are of African descent of the populations of Blacks that were brought to the United States as slaves, or have ethnic roots in other nationalities. Along with self-presenting their racial backgrounds, bloggers selected were required to be morbidly obese. Individuals are considered to be morbidly obese if they are 100 pounds heavier than the ideal weight for their bone structure, gender and height (“What is Morbid Obesity?,” 2012).

The dates selected for the analysis of blog entries were the dates between March 2011 and August 2011. I selected this time period for several reasons: (a) January and February is usually a time of New Year’s resolutions and people are often at their most heightened state of health awareness-- I did not want this time period to interfere with more natural thoughts and perspectives on weight loss; (b) in my personal weight loss journey, March 2011-August 2011 was the time in which I lost the most amount of weight—I was interested to see what other women like me were revealing in their narratives while I was on my journey; and (c) a six month time period would allow the analysis to develop through a change in seasons and progress posts.
Steps in Data Analysis

Six months of posts from March, April, May, June, July and August 2011 for 5 blogs were selected for analysis. All blog entries during the selected time frame were printed (2 copies) for analysis. 4 of the 5 blogs were printed from the original blog site. 1 of the 5 blogs’ texts were copied and pasted into Microsoft Word Processor and printed due to a problem printing the blog entries directly from the original website. As outlined in narrative analysis research by Mortimer (2002), the narratives were analyzed for three levels of meaning. First, the entries were read twice in total before performing any analysis. This “first level of meaning is a basic understanding of the woman’s story,” (Mortimer, 2002, p.113). The second level of meaning focuses on finding emergent themes revealed in the narratives (Mortimer, 2002). This second level of meaning helped me to better understand what the women were saying in regard to the research questions. Finally, Mortimer identifies the third level of meaning as “interpretation and explanation,” (Mortimer, 2002).

To address themes among the research questions, I modeled my approach to create codable data of research on dissertation writing from Foss & Waters (2007). In order to find themes in my data that were relevant to the initial research questions, I had to identify “units of analysis” for a coding scheme. Foss & Waters (2007) describe units of analysis as “a specific kind of example and it serves as a scanning device for coding your data in order to answer your research question,” (Foss & Waters 2007, p. 186). The concepts and ideas that created my units of analysis came from my research questions. In this case the units of analysis came from the blog and were phrases related to the research questions.
The units of analysis were given a code in order to find emergent themes from the data. For example, the first research question sought to better understand the cultural challenges to weight loss. The unit of analysis, or excerpt of the narrative related to the first research question, was coded as a specific example. Afterward, a theme emerged from the code and was placed into a themed category (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**
*Example of Coding Scheme*

This strategy was used to address all of the ideas and concepts relevant to the research questions. These findings were marked in pencil in the margins of the pages of the entries. Once units of analysis and codes were determined within all relevant excerpts of the data, themes emerged and were placed into categories throughout the entire analysis.

A separate document was created in Microsoft Word for each of the five blogs. The documents served as an information and coding sheet for the analyses (see Appendix A).
codes for each blog were typed in each respective document with a citation of the page number and date of the entry where the code originated. After completing this process, I began to sort the codes in each document. After the codes were sorted in the documents, I began to look at all of the documents holistically to find coherent themes among the codes.

After completing the aforementioned processes, I created another Microsoft Word document in order to compare and combine sorted codes to organize the themes of all of the 5 blogs together. I typed the name of codes as headers in the document, and excerpts with citations that were relevant to the codes from all of the blogs were placed in their respective sections. These labels gave me the ability to recognize coherent themes throughout all of the bloggers’ narratives in regards to the research questions. A chart was created denoting which themes were present in each respective blogger’s stories (see Discussion, Themes and Characters).

The third level of meaning is the “interpretation and explanation” phase of the narrative analysis (Mortimer, 2002, p.116). Here, I began to work on what Foss & Waters (2007) define as an “explanatory schema,” for the data. (Foss & Waters, 2007, p. 196) Coded data categorized into labels allowed me to shuffle the quotes and examples of themes from all of the blogs around in order to find patterns in the data. I felt comfortable with my explanatory schema once the sorting of my data met three criteria as set by Foss & Waters (2007). 1) The schema encompassed all of the major themes of categories of the data 2) The schema was marked by coherent relationship between the labels--all of the labels function to answer the research questions and 3) The schema employs “reasonable inference,”-- I was easily able to explain how the schema fits the labels to address each of the research questions (Foss & Waters 2007, p.206).
A Few Notes

Though the blog sites are publicly accessible, future research may include personal interviews with the creators of the weight loss blog narratives studied in this paper. Therefore, bloggers in the sample have been given pseudonyms and will not be referred to by their real names in order to protect the women’s identities. Aliases of the bloggers were determined by the character traits and themes revealed in the narratives of each of the bloggers’ stories. Excerpts of the blogs will be quoted throughout the analysis, with an ellipses “(…)” used to denote a section of the text that is not necessary to quote from the narrative for length purposes.

For religious reasons, I will not spell out expletives in the narratives, but will use an exclamation point “!” to replace letters in expletives written in the blog post entries. Quotes from the narrative will not be edited for grammatical or spelling errors for two reasons; the first is that it is important to reveal the narratives as authentically as possible and second, some narratives use American Standard English, African American English (Ebonics) or a mixture of both languages. This study will not begin to define a “proper way” for Black women to tell their weight loss stories; each woman’s voice is valuable to her personal narrative.

The study revolves around five main characters. The characters in the study are self-identified Black American women, who have created online weblogs in an effort to share their stories in the struggle and journey to lose weight and reach their health goals. Below is a brief biographical sketch of the characters.
**Latoya**

Latoya is 25 years old and lives in Columbus, Ohio. She has been a weight loss blogger since May of 2008. In May 2008, Latoya weighed in at 257 lbs. and has a goal weight of 120 lbs. During the time of the study, the blogger weighs in at 138 lbs. In her “About Me” section, she says that she is a “hip-hop loving investment professional…on a journey to reach superior levels of great health and fitness!”

**Nichelle**

Nichelle is from North Texas, is 27 years old and weighed in at 320 lbs. when she started her weight loss journey in 2008. She weighed in at 170 lbs. in 2011. In her “About Me” section she says, “I’m a young woman who has fought problems with weight loss for years. After picking up weight at a rate of 20 lbs. a year, I finally decided to slow down, take some time to assess what I was doing to myself and why it was happening so fast.”

**Temima**

Temima is 33 years old, lives in Texas and is married. The blogger averages 19 blogs per month during the time period selected. She adopted three children and she says that being a mother is her most important job. She writes, “I was banded November 16, 2010...here is my story...the good, the bad & the ugly!” In November 2010, Temima weighed in at 311 lbs. and weighs in at 280 lbs. during the time period of this study.
**Tisha**

Tisha is 36 years old and is from Seattle, Washington. In August 2009, she weighed in at 275 lbs. In 2011, Tisha weighs in at 176 lbs. Tisha writes, “I reached my highest weight in August 2009, tipping the scale at 275 pounds. At 5’5 inches tall I was considered morbidly obese! I was only 30, there was no way I could live my life happy and settled in an overweight body.”

**Deiondre**

Deiondre is from Texas and started at 308 pounds and weighs 292 pounds in her July 2011 weigh in. She is 29 years old and describes herself in her “About Me” section as “an artist and mother trying to share my gift with the world.” She describes her blog as a “weight loss journey” as she is “trying to get super sexy.”
CHAPTER 3

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Q1: What are some culturally-related challenges to weight loss that Black women reveal in their narratives?

The first research question was concerned with bloggers’ experiences related to the cultural challenges faced on their weight loss journeys. These challenges are specific and unique to the community of bloggers. Several themes emerged in regards to these cultural challenges to weight loss---these included (a) negative, collective, social attitudes toward health; (b) cultural expectations of the Black women’s physical appearance; (c) poor generational health habits; and (d) a lack of health resources. The stories of the bloggers reflect these themes in a way that speaks to their perspectives on weight loss experiences.

Negative, Collective, Social Attitudes Toward Health

Black women’s narratives reveal that there are negative attitudes toward healthy eating, stigmas of eating disorders and psychotherapy by others within their racial groups. These negative and collective attitudes create a challenges for each of the women in their stories.

Negative Attitudes Toward Healthy Eating

On May 19, Nichelle discusses judgment by others for healthy eating. For example, the blogger describes a hypothetical situation in which she refuses to eat desserts at the workplace and may be judged by others for “not doing what everyone else does,”(Nichelle). She writes,

There are countless stories, shared by readers on this site, of how people have chastised them for not doing what everyone else does—for goodness sakes, your
‘Black Card’ can be revoked because of it—or do what they can to throw you off track…all because they feel judged by your choice to live differently. (Nichelle)

The blogger notes that people can receive backlash from others for “living differently,” and even lose their proverbial “Black Cards.” Losing one’s black card is an expression commonly used by some in the Black community to mean that an individual does something that can result in getting one’s “blackness called into question if you are guilty” of certain “transgressions,” (Leon, 2008). In this instance, the blogger discusses healthy eating and the threat of having “your black card revoked” becomes enemy to weight loss (Nichelle). The blogger reveals that making healthier food choices can result in exclusion from the Black community—this may create a fear of alienation. This collective push against healthier eating may force the individual to choose between 1) a healthier lifestyle or 2) inclusion within one’s ethnic community (Nichelle).

On March 11, another woman describes her challenges with sticking to a healthier diet while surrounded by attitudes that reject healthy eating. She says,

Plus all my friends are fat and have no desire to lose weight. They feel it will take away from fun eating (...). When I turn vegetarian everybody turned their lips up at me and had the yuck face. (Deiondre)

The narrator reveals the problem of collective attitudes among her friends, describing them as “fat” with “no desire” to become healthier. The narrator receives negative reactions from her friends for trying to better her health. This is not only a challenge to staying committed to her healthy eating habits, but it becomes discouraging to the woman. In this instance, the woman’s experience of having her friends’ “lips turned up at her,” for eating healthy, situates the woman as inferior to others (who are not eating clean) in the story.
On April 25, a blogger writes about the cultural aspects of eating. She begins her discussion with a quote from “Food Is Not Just Food in the Black Community,” (Nichelle). The blogger describes in detail the problem of eating healthy in the Black community.

When I look at communities like my own, I see the problem that Julier sees, but in reverse: a collective that rejects the notion of healthier eating—thereby rejecting the medicinal benefits of such—simply because the cultural capital of Eating The Way We Do is so important. (Nichelle)

Here, the blogger asserts that the reason why African Americans are not as health conscious is because of specific cultural attitudes toward healthy eating. The collective cultural attitude to reject healthy eating becomes enemy to weight loss. To the blogger, healthy eating is dismissed and replaced with an attitude of “food as cultural,” rather than “food as medicinal,” (Nichelle).

The blogger continues her narrative on “food as cultural” and reveals her thoughts on why the cultural attitude of rejecting healthy eating persists in the Black community. She notes,

And really, think about the remnants of Black tradition and culture—our religion, our families, our everything was broken down and stripped from us in an effort to demoralize us and keep us captive. One of the most obvious things that couldn’t be taken from us was our food—the very thing that didn’t require dialogue to teach. I mean, c’mon—once you know how to make gumbo…it’s like riding a bike. (Nichelle)

The blogger attributes cultural habits of unhealthy eating to the history of Black American culture. She reveals that the “remnants” of Black slavery in the United States left us without a sense of culture. The lack of cultural identity of Blacks caused them to cling to food as culture
(Nichelle). The enemy to making healthier food choices is not just an attitude of collective rejection to healthy, but an attitude rooted in a community of loss of culture.

**The Stigma of Eating Disorders**

On May 28, a blogger titles her entry, “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Eating Disorders When Dieting Wasn’t Enuf,” (Nichelle). The blog’s title is inspired by Ntozake Shange’s 1975 play “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf,” (AALBC, 2012). The blogger reveals the story of how she became desperate to lose weight and made efforts to become bulimic, “I give myself a little time to recognize what I had done, then I go over to the sink and shove a butterknife down my throat. Nothing happened. I immediately panicked,”(Nichelle). Furthermore, the narrative reveals the problem of being Black with an eating disorder. She has received many messages (in the triple digits) from Black women “(…) admitting to living and thriving on laxatives to empty out (…) we’re willing to ignore this as a community because it’s easier to write it off as white girl sh!,” (Nichelle). Her blog entry points toward Black cultural attitudes regarding eating disorders as only a problem of the Caucasian community, where White women are more culturally pressured than Black women to be thin (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011).

**The Stigma of Psychotherapy for Eating Disorders**

Black cultural attitudes toward seeking therapy, specifically for eating disorders, was also identified as a challenge to Black women seeking to achieve better health and weight loss goals. Nichelle notes, “I am keenly aware of the stigma within the Black community regarding seeing a therapist---either it’s white girl sh!, it’s for crazy people,” (Nichelle). She quotes people in the
Black community telling someone with an eating disorder that “You don’t need a therapist, you need to go speak to a pastor,” (Nichelle).

A psychology research study of over 200 African Americans has shown that Blacks have low expectations of psychotherapy due to a number of factors. These factors include “stigma, lack of knowledge, lack of affordability, lack of trust, impersonal service, and lack of cultural understanding,” (Thompson, Bazile, & Akbar, 2004, p.19). The blogger references to the Black community’s dependence on the Black Church for coping with mental illnesses. Research has shown that in the history of the Black Christian culture, spiritual worship services served as a “refuge in a hostile white world,”(Cannon, 2007). The research echoes the blogger’s revealed experience and helps to shed some light on the cultural barriers associated with health problems prevalent the community.

Cultural Expectations of Black Women’s Physical Appearance

Black women reveal in their narratives that there are cultural expectations related to their bodies and hair that create challenge for them on their weight loss journeys.

Cultural Expectations of Black Women’s Bodies

On March 10, a woman posts an entry about growing up obese (Latoya). She notes, “From age 10 and up, I was a thick girl. Pushed aside as just an early developer, my figure wasn’t a real concern until I got older,”(Latoya). The narrator’s discussion of being a “thick girl” and “pushed aside” echoes the previous discussion of the Black cultural perception of women’s bodies. Larger bodies of women are often valued and encouraged by the Black community (Shuttlesworth & Zotter 2011).
Cultural Expectations of Black Women’s Hair

On May 13, a blogger discusses her experience with Black hair issues and exercise. She notes that she grew up chemically straightening her hair, and going to the hair salon religiously since her childhood (Nichelle). Due to feeling pressures to look like her white classmates with long hair, the blogger revealed,

I just knew I needed to have straight hair, and I was succumbing to what I needed in order to get it (…) I was in a salon weekly, spending $40 for a wash/rinse/press…and $80 once a month for my relaxer. Two hundred dollars a month to acquire this look that I had coveted since I was four years old. (Nichelle)

The blogger questions her priorities, asking herself why she spent so much time and money on her hair and let her weight get out of control (Nichelle). The blogger recalls taking an F in a physical education class because she did not want to get in the swimming pool or run the mile in the physical test to protect her hair treatment (Nichelle). In this instance, straight hair becomes the enemy; in order to keep straight hair, one must sacrifice and go without sweating—without sweat there is no significant weight loss. The challenge becomes prioritizing a standard, or expectation to assimilate and maintain straight hair as a Black woman.

Furthermore, on July 5, another woman posts a blog about Black Americans and swimming. She notes,

It may be seen as a stereotype, but Black people really are in the minority groups who know how to swim. Statistics claim that nearly 70% of Black children, today, are unable to and only 31% of adults can. (Latoya)
Nichelle’s post about not going swimming because of her hair may point towards one factor as to why Latoya states that Black Americans are less likely to know how to swim. These observations reveal a larger challenge to efforts to exercise and weight loss.

**Poor Generational Health Habits**

Bloggers’ narratives show that there is a cultural, generational challenge to weight loss in their life experiences. For example, on March 21, a blogger describes that her mother also has an obesity problem that has affected her health (Temima). She writes,

> My mother was instructed to follow a specific diet to help control her blood sugar and blood pressure (…) She is not happy about that because I am not a fan of soul food…her favorite. (Temima)

Soul food, an African American cuisine that dates back to Black slavery in the United States, is typically “high in calories, fat and sodium,” (Gourmet, 2001). The blogger attributes the ailing health of her mother to obesity related problems. The reader is lead to believe that the narrative attributes high-calorie soul food favorites as one factor affecting her mother’s health (Temima).

The challenge is no longer just about making better health choices, but an obstacle becomes moving past poor cultural, generational habits.

Quite similarly, another blogger posts an entry about generational challenges to weight loss. On March 11, Deiondre tells a story about her family’s anti-health habits and attitudes.

> My grandma even threaten to call Child Protective Services because I fed my daughter Tofu. (i don’t really like her much). My grandma is old school. She cooks nothing but soul food. My mom now has Diabetes from years of fried pork chops and chicken, that’s how I grew up, (Deiondre).
The bloggers’ short story about the poor health habits of her mother and grandmother further exemplify the challenge to overcome obesity as one that extends to familial ties; the struggle is rooted in the culture of generations. The blogger recognizes that generational obesity has a negative effect on her own weight loss journey. On July 26, she writes a post dedicated to a list of things that cause her to have a lack of motivation to exercise. She notes, “I wonder what made me lose my motivation (...) Everybody in my family is fat anyway.” The narrator reveals that the obesity problem in her family is an enemy to the betterment of her health and contributes to her feeling “lazy,” (Deiondre). In these stories, Black women are positioned as victims of generational obesity and obesity-related illnesses.

**Lack of Resources**

Themes within Black women’s narratives reveal that the lack of health counseling, food options, and monetary resources create a challenge for them to reach their health and weight loss goals.

**Lack of Health Counseling**

On May 3, a blogger discusses an article on race and obesity counseling. The blogger discusses that Black patients are less likely to receive advice about weight loss than other races. Blacks suffer from obesity more than any other race in the United States (Health, 2009). She recollects on her own experiences going to the doctor’s office in her teens. She writes, “the physician, never—never—mentioned my weight,”(Nichelle). The blogger notes that the doctor would tell her that she was “just tall,” and never bothered to discuss healthier food selections and exercise (Nichelle).
The narrator believes that there are two main reasons why doctors do not address obesity with their Black patients 1) Black Americans do not go to the doctor often and doctors do not want to scare Black patients away and lose business and 2) doctors assume that Black patients are poor and have no resources to maintain a healthier lifestyle (Nichelle). The challenges to weight loss here are two fold; there is a lack of health knowledge in the Black community, coupled with a lack of aggressive weight loss counseling by health professionals targeting the community itself. Here, the Black woman is positioned as victim to ignorance; she is uneducated about ways to improve her health and there are no active forces to change this reality.

**Food Deserts**

On August 18, one blogger posts an article about health and obesity programs for young Black women. She writes that there are a number of reasons why young Black women continue to gain weight even after being exposed to obesity programs. She uses facts of the study, such as a lack of “teaching parents about providing healthy foods,” to show misconceptions of the Black community. The blogger gives her opinion and argues some of the findings in article. She writes,

> For starters, “teaching parents about providing healthy foods,” is very different from increasing access to such. Access plus education, to me, is the only formula that will provide results. (Nichelle)

The blogger presents that another challenge to weight loss in young women (even if given the knowledge about healthier living) is the lack of education and monetary resources of some Black families to provide to their children (Nichelle).
On May 13, a blogger posts an infographic article on obesity in the United States (Nichelle). She provides a commentary on the articles’ assertion that Black Americans are America’s fattest people. The woman also describes the articles’ portrayal of children living in unsafe neighborhoods facing higher risks of obesity. As discussed in the previous section on obesity and poverty levels, Black women are the most poor in the United States (Cawthorne, 2008). The blogger notes that the reason for higher obesity levels in unsafe neighborhoods (that are also predominantly Black) is due to a “lack of grocery stores in their communities” (Nichelle). Here, the woman positions the Black community as victim to a lack of healthy food choices and where obesity often wins.

**Lack of Monetary Resources**

Temima’s narratives are unique in that she discusses how lap band surgery has helped her with her weight loss goals. On March 16, she titles her story, “How can I ease the pain?” “How can I ease the pain,” describes challenges of weight loss and the ailing health of her mother. She writes,

> It totally sucks that she will be spending her 50th birthday layed up in the hospital.

> I wish I could afford to pay for her to have lap band surgery. I can’t…but I can teach her my new healthy living habits…we will not get to this place again.

(Temima)

The blogger reveals that she is not financially able to give her mother the medical-health resources necessary for her to live a healthier life (Temima). The blogger (who is still struggling to lose weight herself) must overcome a lack of resources to bridge a knowledge gap about healthy eating with a close family member. In the narrative, the woman plays two roles 1) The
blogger and her mother are victims who suffer from lack of monetary resources (her mother is unable to get the health care that she needs and the blogger must watch her mother’s pain) and 2) The blogger must become a heroine for her mother when she herself is still struggling in the battle to overcome obesity.

**Q2: What are some other cultural aspects of Black women’s weight loss blog narratives that are present in the data?**

The next research question explored other prominent cultural themes and aspects of Black women’s weight loss blogs that were not directly related to weight loss challenges experienced by the narrator. Research found that the use of lexical trends, references to Black pop culture, and spotlights on Black celebrities’ health and events in the media were all themes present in the narratives. *It was especially beneficial to have culturally identified as Black American as a researcher. I was able to identify lexical trends and other cultural aspects of the blog as a member of the community I researched.*

**Lexical Trends**

The use of Black American lexical trends is a theme that permeates each data sample. For example, a blogger writes on March 7, that she has not written a blog “in a grip,” (Latoya). *The phrase “in a grip” is commonly used in some Black American communities to denote a large quantity.* In this instance, the blogger is expressing that a large amount of time has passed. The phrase may be recognizable by others in her community and may contribute to the perception of cultural authenticity of the blogger.

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Similarly on April 15, a blogger poses a question to her readers about bread and soda. She talks about her guilty pleasures asking, “Are cookies and tortillas chips considered bread?!? I’m just asking…because I don’t know if I can break myself from them. Seriously those Multi Grain tortilla chips are FIYAH!!!” (Temima). The expression “FIYAH” may be recognizable to those in her community from the 1984 hit song “The Roof is On Fire,” by old school rap group Rock Master Scott and the Dynamic Three.(“Rock Master Scott & the Dynamic Three,” n.d.) However, the term fire is often used by some Black Americans today to mean great or wonderful. The blogger uses this term to describe how much she enjoys the tortillas for emphasis.

In another instance, on March 13, a blogger tells a story about her childhood. She writes, “If my miracle girdle solved my dress dilemma, I wondered what one would do for my regular clothes—specifically, my school uniforms that were snug as a mug.”(Latoya). The phrase “like a mug,” or “as a mug” is commonly used in some Black American communities to mean a large amount or a lot. The uniform is said to be “snug,” a term also used by the Community to mean tight-fitting. Therefore, “snug as mug,” is recognizable as an experience of her school uniform being too tight, and in this case, her uniform is too tight because she is overweight (Latoya).

Latoya also writes a post on March 9 titled, “What you WON’T do is…” The phrase “what you won’t do” is common in some Black American communities to describe what someone or something should never do again. Latoya’s “What you WON’T do’s” is a list of things she does not like related to healthy foods and gym experiences such as when people sell her stalk pieces of broccoli and when people “ask to use my yoga mats,”(Latoya).
In another instance on March 29, a woman discusses issues on weight loss and dating in heterosexual relationships. She tells her audience that even though she is small, she is not anti-fat, or against relationships in which men want a larger-figured woman. She writes

I’m in a unique position with this blog. In short, I’ve been big and I’ve been small I’ve dated as both. That being said, I’ve written it before, and I’ll write it again. I was the bomb when I was big, and I’m the bomb now that I’m small. Stop trying to shove my round behind into that square peg. I’m not an anti-fat person.

(Nichelle)

*The term “bomb” is often used in some Black communities to mean exceptional or great.* The blogger expresses that she was amazing before and after she lost weight. To her community, she is recognized as someone who is confident in herself in spite of her physical condition or appearance (Nichelle). *This statement of being “the bomb before and after,” echos the discussion of the African American culture’s concept of the multi-faceted beauty of a woman that moves past her weight and into other qualities she possesses* (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011).

On May 11, a blogger posts an entry about how much she disdains exercise, but does not want to be an overweight person who feels self pity (Deiondre). She titles the blog, “Let’s Be Real. *The notion of “being real,” or relentlessly truthful, is a commonly known concept in many Black communities.* The blogger’s “real,” or spoken truth, is that she “must exercise in order not to be fat,”(Deiondre). The blogger’s entry title therefore emphasizes that her narrative is completely honest about her feelings on being overweight.
References to Black American Pop Culture

| Black women’s narratives reveal unique cultural themes in reference to Black music, movies, and theater. |

Black Music

On April 25, a blogger discusses her playlist selection for her workouts. She refers to Black American singer Keri Hilson’s song, “All the Boys,” as one of her favorites (Tisha). On May 9, a blogger titles her entry, “Eating Clean Without Droppin’ Racks on Racks on Racks!” (Latoya). The phrase “racks on racks” is a reference to the 2011 hit rap song, “Racks” by Christopher Miller, also known as Yung Chris (Blum, 2011). Yung Chris says in an interview with USA Today that “racks, of course, is the money,” (Blum, 2011). Therefore the blogger’s post title referencing “eating clean” without “droppin’ racks” is meant to give advice on how to eat healthier while spending less money. The blog entry describes how growing a garden of fruits and vegetables will allow people to eat healthier for cheap (Latoya). The use of a familiar song enhances the cultural authenticity of the blog. On July 26, Latoya also references a song in a discussion of Michelle Obama’s Shackburger incident, saying that the media was trying to catch the First Lady, “Eatin Dirty,” (Latoya). “Eatin Dirty” is a play on words from the rap song “Ridin,” with lyrics about racial profiling and police patrols (“Chamillionare Ridin’,” n.d.).

Black Movies and Theatre

On June 5, a blogger writes an entry about Sensa® branding and how the company often markets its anti-hunger product with pictures of fruits and vegetables. The blogger writes,

What also tickles me about Sensa® branding is that the adverts often feature a bowl of fruit, or salad. Umm, HELLURR, people are not overindulging on
apples, berries and romaine lettuce! We don’t need help slowing down on those things, Dr. Hirsch. I think you know that, though. (Latoya)

The blog’s use of “HELLURR,” is meant to be sarcastic about Sensa® branding its products with healthy foods (Latoya). Also “HELLURR” is recognizable to me as a reference to a catch-phrase by a well-known character in Black theater and movies named Madea Simmons. Tyler Perry, creator and actor of the Madea character, uses Madea in his performances (both plays and movies) to portray a strong Black woman like his family members who have influenced him in his life (Show, 2009). The phrase “HELLURR” is recognizable by others as comedic and provides even more authenticity of Blackness to the blog.

**Spotlights on Black Celebrities’ Health in the Media**

On July 6, a blogger spotlights the first lady of the United States (a Black woman), Michelle Obama, in an article about her consumption of a 1,556 calorie ShackBurger and diet coke. The blogger begins to describe the criticism that Michelle Obama received due to her fighting child obesity campaign. The blogger defends Michelle Obama’s actions and begins a discussion of the importance of balance in one’s healthy lifestyle (Latoya). The blogger notes, “I’m just relieved that our First lady doesn’t eat like this every single day, unlike the average American diet of all-fast-food everything. That should be the takeaway,”(Latoya).

On June 17, another blogger promotes First Lady, Michelle Obama in an article about putting her daughters on a healthier diet in the Huffington Post. The blogger defends Michelle Obama. She writes, “Doesn’t sound like a diet to me. Sounds like a lifestyle change,”(Nichelle). The blog entry not only supports and features a well-known African American woman and
mother, but she presents a discussion on the importance of teaching young women to eat healthier (Nichelle).

In another instance, on April 12, a blogger features First Lady Michelle Obama’s partnership with Beyonce Knowles (an internationally known Black R&B, pop vocalist and actress) to fight childhood obesity through creating workout music videos. She posts the video for her readers to view (Nichelle). On April 6, similar spotlights on Beyonce’s “Move Your Body,” video are posted in another woman’s blog. She notes that schools across the United States participated in a live stream of Beyonce’s video as a part of Michelle Obama’s Let’s Move Campaign. The blogger explains, “That’s right, middle school students are getting a pass to do The Running Man, some Salsa and even the infamous Dougie during their day—without recourse, lol,” (Latoya). Here, the spotlight on Black celebrities and public figures adds to the culturally relevant content of the blog and sheds light on efforts made by prominent Black Americans in the media to combat obesity.

Latoya also writes about the American mainstream trend of “planking,” where people take pictures doing a “plank” or abdominal strengthening exercise in random locations and share the pictures on social media sites. On the July 2 post on planking, the blogger notes that, “(…) Some black folks began to participate a little late,” (Latoya). The post then includes pictures of Tami Roman (Black reality show actress on Basketball Wives), Russell Simmons (a famous Black music producer), and Chris Brown (a young Black hip-hop, r&b and pop artist) planking in places like the gym and on furniture (Latoya).

On April 7, a blogger spotlights Oprah Winfrey (a famous Black American philanthropist and retired talk-show host) and her television network’s new series titled “Addicted to Food.”
The blogger notes that “Addicted to Food” highlights a famous Gospel artist, DeJuaii Pace, who is also Black. The blog entry features Oprah Winfrey’s Network as another option for viewers to see a “more dignified weight loss reality show,” (Latoya).

On May 29, a blogger features Serena Williams (a famous African American professional tennis player) in her entry on the tennis player’s “Racy New Ad,” (Nichelle). She writes,

Okay. I admit it. I love Serena. A lot of people have something to say about her…but I don’t care. She’s an extremely successful athlete who kicks major butt on the court, and she’s been a major role model for me in being a fit woman of color. (Nichelle)

The blogger’s entry about Serena Williams as a “role model for being a fit woman of color” is especially telling of the cultural-consciousness of the blogger (Nichelle).

On March 13, Latoya posts an entry about Jordin Sparks’ (a young American singer with Black ethnic roots who got her start on the television show American idol) dramatic weight loss—“shedding 30 pounds and six dress sizes,” (Latoya). The blogger discusses the public opinion and Jordin Sparks’ response to criticism about her weight loss after professing that she embraced being full-figured. She defends Jordin Sparks on May 9, saying “(…) At the end of the day, whether you’re in the limelight or not, all you should be is true to yourself. It’s your life, it’s your story,” (Latoya). The blogger posts a similar article on May 5, featuring the extreme weight loss of a famous Black actress, Raven Simone. The narrator discusses the criticism that Raven Symone has received due to her refusal to divulge how she lost so much weight. The blogger writes,
I guess she didn’t get the memo that when you’re a celebrity and you lose weight-you have to make a spectacle out of it; get a sponsor (or two) and motivate others to do the same. ‘Tis your duty! However, I believe she has every right to NOT share the ends and outs of her journey. (Latoya)

In both spotlights of Black celebrities who have undergone weight loss transformations, the blogger is able to express the ways in which the public criticizes these Black women for their personal weight loss journeys (Latoya).

On June 2, a blog entry discusses the recent weight loss of both Jennifer Hudson-- a famous Black American R&B singer and Star Jones, a well-known Black television personality. It was discovered in 2006, that Star Jones lied about how she lost her weight on the television show the View (Tooley, n.d.). However, the blogger notes that Jennifer Hudson lost weight through a 20-month, healthy weight loss plan. She comments on the unfair judgments made about Jennifer Hudson by the media:

Jennifer Hudson was whisked away to the hospital due to severe stomach pains. I knew it wouldn’t be long before it was assumed that her sudden ailment was a result of complications from her alleged weight loss surgery (... ) Just because Star Jones lied does not mean that every Black woman lies about her weight loss journey. (Latoya)

The blog’s spotlight on both celebrity women continues to raise a discussion about the personal nature and aspects of Black women’s weight loss journeys.

On March 12, a blogger spotlights Janet Jackson (an internationally famous singer and actress of Black American descent) and her recent authorship of the book titled True You: A
**Journey of Finding and Loving Yourself.** The blogger posts an article about the book and tells her readers to enter into a contest to win the self-help memoir (Latoya). On May 7, the blogger promotes a book release by Jennifer Hudson surrounding her weight loss journey (Latoya). On June 11, the blogger promotes a new workout DVD to help women get “sexy abs” by black celebrity trainer Jeanette Jenkins and singer Kelly Rowland (Latoya). The focus on books and other media by Black women contributes to culturally relevant content; the blogger and reader become aware of specific, pertinent resources.

**Q3: What are some gender related challenges to weight loss discussed in Black women’s weight loss blog narratives?**

The third research question addressed the gender related challenges to weight loss revealed in women’s stories. The data points to gender relations with the opposite sex (particularly in heterosexual romantic relationships), gendered expectations of women, and the challenges of womanhood as obstacles to their health goals. Women describe themselves as victims of obesity through societal expectations and projection while remaining heroines in their households.

**Gender Relations With the Opposite Sex**

Black women’s narratives reveal that they experience challenges due to pressures in heterosexual romantic relationships and men’s assertion of control over Black women’s bodies. On March 11, a blogger discusses problems she is having in her relationship while trying to stick to Weight Watchers. She reveals that she spoke with her boyfriend about her decision. “I finally told my boyfriend. He laugh real hard and said in his Ugandan accent, for what, your beautiful, I don’t want no skinny women,”(Deiondre).
In this instance, the blogger’s significant other does not want her to become thin. This echoes the Literature Review’s section on Black cultural expectations of the female body (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011). The challenge is the struggle between what the woman wants for herself on her weight loss journey and recognizing the desires of her romantic partner (Deiondre). One blogger is very adamant about never letting a man control her own expectations for her body and weight goals. She writes, “It’s not about just liking “bigger women.” It’s about how much control your mate tries to exercise over your appearance—should your mate love you and support you regardless (…) or should they feel justified in complaining,” (Nichelle). The challenge here, is determining what is best for the body, despite what a male, romantic partner may believe or voice to a woman.

Nichelle states that she underwent a conundrum in her weight loss journey due to external pressures about what she should look like. She says that though she has received a lot of pressure to be thin, she was also pulled toward seeking to achieve a larger figure as a Black woman. She writes:

Black men love curves, and if I lose mine, surely no man would want me then (…) I not only need to have curves, but I was worthless without the right kind of curves (…) the only thing that didn’t matter in the equation was what I wanted to look like in the end (Nichelle).

The woman recognizes the challenges of making personal weight loss goals, while others point towards the approval of a man to determine an acceptable body size (Nichelle).

On June 16, another woman cites her relationship problems with her boyfriend as a setback to her health goals. The blogger posts that the frustrations within her relationship have
“thrown her off,” (Tisha). She says, “I’m all thrown off. Eating like crap, skipping workouts, drinking … you name it, I’ve been doing it!” In this case, the male counterpart does not pressure the woman to look a certain way, but relational issues with a man create another obstacle for her in her weight loss goals. On the other hand, a blogger feels a lack of motivation to exercise because she is no longer in a relationship (Deiondre). On July 26, the woman makes a list of what she wishes she had to motivate her to lose weight. She posts, “I have no man to look good for,” (Deiondre). The lack of a romantic partner creates a challenge for the woman to try to stay fit and exercise.

Gender issues and weight loss topics are also revealed in Latoya’s post on August 6 about Boris Kudjoe’s (a well-known Black actor) twitter page controversy. In her narrative, the woman describes her frustrations with Boris Kudjoe’s publicly crude jokes about “300 pound fat women in thongs gnawing on chicken wings,” (Latoya). The blogger is further disgruntled after sharing more of Kudjoe’s tweets, which included the trending topic “#FatExcuses MEN LIKE THICK GIRLS There’s a difference between a healthy and sexy stacked goddess (easy Boris!) and an unhealthy obese one,” (Latoya). The narrator notes that “(...) it’s really crazy to witness how strongly some people feel about other people’s bodies and not necessarily their health,” (Latoya). The post also sheds light on a situation in which a man critiques the body of women, which to the blogger is done with “little sensitivity, or even compassion,” (Latoya). On July 5, another blogger also feels similar sentiments as Latoya’s narrative. Nichelle notes that though others may perceive someone as beautiful, it does not reverse the woman’s health issues (Nichelle). This is echoed in Latoya’s assessment of Kudjoe’s complaints about “fat women,” citing that he is not
actually concerned with the health of women, but rather, is more caught up on the appearance of
the female body (Latoya).

**Gendered Expectations of Women**

Black women reveal that there are certain gendered behaviors of expected of them that
create a challenge to their health goals. In a blog about “dealing with implied judgment,” a
blogger writes on May 19 that there is a difference of expectations between Black men and Black
women to exercise. She notes,

> As for exercising this doesn’t seem to be a problem for men of color. They are
> encouraged to shoot hoops, run track & bike all day. Yet when a woman of color
> wants to partake in an activity it’s viewed with ulterior motives. She must be
> trying to lose weight for the summer; or she’s trying to be cute (or white).

(Nichelle)

The woman’s post reveals a double standard about perspective on men’s and women’s motives
to exercise and achieve health goals. These challenges to losing weight are not described as
physical, but there is a pressure (noted by the blogger) to act within one’s gender expectations,
and in this case, Black women’s expectations are to live a sedentary lifestyle (Nichelle). The
Black woman is subjected to gender-related expectations, while men’s gendered expectations
allow them to win in their health related activities.

A blogger posts an entry about the challenges women face seeking to lose weight in a
male-dominated society. She writes,

> You eventually realize that yes, there is something that intentionally keeps
> women out of the weight lifting area: a general societal understanding that women
aren’t supposed to be strong. That muscles are the realm of men, and having them would make a woman look...manly. (Nichelle)

The narrator reveals that there are gendered expectations of both the male and the female body. Women, as the weaker of the bodies, are pressured by what they are “supposed” to look like, despite their personal goals. The blogger continues the story by expressing her feelings on societal expectations for women to stay thin, “The expectation is that I’d starve myself. I’d sustain on carrots and diet coke. That’s what women do (...) Maybe then I’d have earned the right to male attention,” (Nichelle). The woman’s narrative exposes a host of complications to desires to lose weight. First, the woman feels pressure, not only to be thin, but how she becomes thin.

According to the narrative, society tells her that she is not allowed to be “manly” and lift weights---for if she did, she would abandon her femininity (Nichelle). Deprivation, the more feminine option, is not only prolonged “suffering,” but the goal is to earn the attention and approval of the opposite sex (Nichelle). The enemy is weight, but the battle is with expectations of how women should lose the weight---only then are women’s bodies validated by others (who themselves have no need or pressure to undergo said starvation and suffering).

On March 10, a blogger tells the story of problems of growing up obese as a young woman. She describes the frustration with not being able to “shop in the Junior’s section anymore,” and “being a size 14 at 13,”(Latoya). The woman recollects on a bus evacuation drill day at her middle school when she was forced to jump off the back of her school bus. She reveals,
My left knee snapped, crackled and popped and when it was all said and done I was (...) in insurmountable pain. In the midst of me trying to comprehend what went wrong with my ingenious dismount plan, I hear someone yell “She got on a girdle! My skirt was all the way up. (Latoya)

The blogger’s story expresses not only the humiliation she felt, but the health problems trying to hide her girdle caused. She notes that the reason she jumped so fast off of the bus and hurt her knee was due to her fear of others seeing her girdle. The girdle, in this case, becomes a way for the young woman in the story to hide her obesity from others. The “fat” of the young woman is exposed to others and she is both emotionally and physically hurt. In fact, the blogger notes that her grandmother gave her the girdle to hide her muffin top; the enemy becomes pressures women feel to hide fat (Latoya). If not for the drastic attempt to hide the girdle, the narrator would not have to deal with constant knee troubles while trying to exercise (Latoya).

**Challenges of Womanhood**

Several women note that womanhood is a challenge to weight loss; women’s stories reveal that motherly duties, as well as the female physiology, pose serious difficulties for them to reach their goals.

**Motherhood**

A blogger posted an entry about the challenges of motherhood on March 16. She writes that she feels a sense of guilt when she chooses to exercise after work rather than going home to be with her children (Temima). This feeling of “doing a disservice” to her family shows the woman’s commitment to her loved ones and the challenge of motherhood in prioritizing weight loss activities. In another story, the woman reveals that she has been unable to exercise because she has to take care of her young children (Temima). On March 29 she writes,
Last night I slept in my workout clothes. I wanted to be ready when the alarm went off at 5’oclock (...) At 4 a.m. Bologna woke up. He was wet and hungry…By the time I got the diaper changed, the hubby had made the bottle (...) Needless to say the extra few minutes of sleep put me behind schedule. (Temima)

Here, the enemy to weight loss is not only the feeling of guilt for prioritizing health over motherly duties, but motherhood creates an obstacle to her health goals along with the emotional stress of being away from her children (Temima).

On August 16, a woman tells a story about how her husband goes out of town for 2 months. She is forced to take care of the household by herself (Temima). The blogger lists everything that she has to accomplish, such as giving her three children baths, doing laundry and cooking dinner. The change in schedule and increased responsibility causes her to miss five days of exercise (Temima). Quite similarly, another woman describes the challenges of motherhood to weight loss. On May 18, she writes that “Jordin Sparks said she made weight loss a priority. Well being a single mother I can’t make it my number one Priority but I can make it a 3rd,”(Deiondre). Once again, it is revealed that the women feel it is important to put the job of motherhood before their own health goals. The Black woman is heroine to her children and to her household, but these heroic acts make her a vulnerable victim to obesity.

**Female Physiology**

Bearing children is also cited as a challenge for a woman in her weight loss goals. She notes, “I am finally starting to notice the progress in my abs!! Finally!!! I believe having two c-sections is playing a role in the slow journey back to flat abs smdh!”(Tisha). Another physiological challenge noted by a blogger is menstruation. On April 17, a blogger reveals that
she cut exercise out of her schedule due to painful menstrual cramps which she refers to as “the turmoils of womanhood,”(Deiondre). These two physical barriers (effects in the aftermath of pregnancy and menstruation) position the Black woman as either battling Mother Nature or victim to Mother Nature.

**Q4: What motivations and triumphs do Black women reveal in the journey to overcome the challenges to weight loss?**

The last research question sought moments of victory in the plot of Black women’s weight loss stories. I was interested in what motivates these women to continue their journeys despite cultural and gender-related challenges to their health goals. I was also concerned with the way in which these women’s narratives reveal success. Emergent themes in the research show that Black women receive motivation from several sources (a) achieving idealized bodies, (b) support from the blogosphere, (c) impressing other women, and (d) compliments from others in society. Triumphs experienced by Black women were attributed to (a) overcoming physiological challenges to womanhood, (b) moments of physical accomplishment, (c) seeking psychotherapy, and (d) embracing feminism—women taking back control of their lives and health.

**Motivations**

**Achieving Idealized Bodies**

On March 8, a blogger wishes she could “get back down to my stripper size,”(Temima). The blogger says that she does not “actually want to be a stripper,” but would like to go back to “looking like a big-butt coca cola bottle,” (Temima). Similarly, on June 16, a blogger notes that she wants the “figure and shape of a competitors body…minus the competing,” (Tisha). These
motivations to meet an ideal look or appearance seem to be a mantra throughout the blogs. On March 23, another blogger describes her motivation to lose weight on an aesthetic level. The woman writes that she wants to be “sexy,” and “aesthetically pleasing or beautiful,”(Deiondre). She posts, “If I can just get the taco meat out of my legs, I’ll be happy,”(Deiondre). The motivation in this instance is less about health and more about her outward appearance once she reaches her goal.

On April 8, the woman titles her blog entry, “Never Lose faith.” In never lose faith, she discusses her goals to “lose 3 more pounds” to get back to her low weight of 199 (Deiondre). She reveals, “I’m never going to lose faith that one day I will be skinny,”(Deiondre). Here, the motivation for the woman is to be thin and her post is purely concerned with her appearance. She continues, “I’m not sure if I’m suppose to pray to look beautiful (…) but I at least want to be happy with the skin I’m in,” (Deiondre). Achieving the ideal body motivates the woman to one day be happy with herself. If she can conquer fat, then she will conquer ugliness.

Deiondre writes that she wants to look like a “Nolly and Ghollywood star.” On May 3, she posts a picture of four full-figured Black women on her page and notes, “Those women are beautiful, and have the ideal body I would love to have,”(Deiondre). At first, this narrative may seem contradictory to Deiondre’s post on never losing faith to be “skinny” and “beautiful,”(Deiondre). However, through a close reading of her narrative, it is clear the bloggers’ ideal of achieving “skinny” is defined as a quest to have a full-figured, curvy, and toned body. This ideal echoes the Literature Review’s previous section on the Black cultural ideal of the fuller female body (Shuttlesworth & Zotter, 2011). The bloggers narrative on her
motivations and ideal look portray the Black woman as motivated to overcome obesity with her own cultural ideals in mind, rather than the ideals of mainstream America.

**Support and Encouragement from the Weight Loss Blog Community**

On August 17, a woman writes a post in the form of a letter to some of her blog followers who have been struggling to lose weight after lap band surgery. She tags and mentions each of her followers in the post by name and writes, “You are an inspiration to me. You have fought and kept fighting. Even when the weight isn’t coming off. You keep fighting,” (Temima). The blogger reveals in her narrative that she receives inspiration from other bloggers who have similar experiences in their weight loss struggles. It is through this blog community that she receives motivation to face her challenges. She writes to the women “It lets those of us…especially me know that I may not drop 100 pounds this year…but I can still do it. It may take awhile…but it is still possible,” (Temima). Not only does the woman’s blog community provide inspiration and support for her weight loss, but the community is a beacon of hope for her to continue to be determined to reach her long term health goals (Temima).

In a progress report entry, a woman reveals that she has gone from wearing a 3X shirt to wearing an XL shirt and is “now working out 5 days a week,” (Temima). On April 4, she thanks her readers for their encouragement, “Thanks for the compliments on my pictures. It is great to be called beautiful by other beautiful women. It warms my heart,” (Temima). The encouragement of other women in her blog community allows her to feel support in her weight loss journey. Tisha also posts about the support she has received from other bloggers. On April 18 she writes, “The crazy amount of support I received over the past few days (from women that I don’t even know) is overwhelming! I’ve even started on the path to forging new friendships!”
Support from other women in the blog community continues to motivate despite challenges.

**Impressing Other Women**

One of the main motivations for losing weight for one blogger is to impress other women. On May 28, she notes, “I might be going back to my old stomping grounds in Atlanta for vacation in July (...) I want my friends to see me without my baby weight! I want to impress them all,” (Deiondre). Here, the motivation for the woman is to look good to other women in her social circle. On July 26, she also posts an entry with a list of things that could motivate her to stick with her exercise plan. The woman notes that she would be able to exercise more if she had other friends to compete with (Deiondre). It seems that there is repeated pattern of the blogger revealing that she would like to lose weight in order to compete with and impress other women around her (Deiondre).

**Compliments from Others Outside of the Blogosphere**

In a post about taking Zumba classes, a blogger describes having a feeling of satisfaction when she receives compliments from another woman in the class. The blogger notes, “She said I make her want to do the moves as good as me. LOL. It was awesome. The lady is very petite and beautiful. But she wants to dance next to me,” (Temima). The story of the petite woman in Zumba class describes acceptance that the blogger feels, despite being overweight. This experience was encouraging and she writes, “I didn’t want to go. I went and I am so glad I did,” (Temima). Here, the Black woman feels valued in spite of self-consciousness and worries.

Another woman posts a blog about the positive feedback she receives in the office about losing weight. On July 6, the blogger notes that her “size 20 pants” are “getting saggy in the
butt,” (Temima). The woman reflects on how her coworkers notice her recent weight loss saying, “OMG…you look so slim today. I mean you really look slim…and sexy.” At the end of the story, the blogger says that she began to “walk a little taller,” (Temima). The positive feedback she is getting about her body functions as encouragement and marks progress as seen by others in her weight loss journey.

**Triumphs**

Black women triumph over challenges in their narratives through moments of physical accomplishment that include, 1) overcoming physiological female problems, 2) progress in their exercise regimens and 3) weight loss results.

**Moments of Physical Accomplishment**

**Overcoming Physiological Female Problems**

Tisha notes that exercising has helped her with some of her physical female challenges. For example, on July 25, she reveals that she has overcome Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, “I decided to stop taking my pills in February to see if my weight loss could/would play a factor in regulating my cycle on its own? Shockingly for the last four months my cycle has started and stopped on its own on time!” (Tisha). Staying loyal to her diet and health goals has had a positive effect on what were once debilitating painful menstrual cramps (Tisha). In this instance, the Black woman is victorious over obesity and over Mother Nature.

**Progress in Exercise Regime**

On March 22, a blogger posts an entry titled “Workout glow,” (Temima). The woman describes her feeling of accomplishment after staying in the gym despite embarrassment. She writes, “By the way, there were several people in the gym working out. Usually this would make me turn around and go back home. I don’t want anyone to see my breathing hard. Today, I didn’t
care,” (Temima). The blogger presents a moment of overcoming an obstacle and perseverance to exercise. She notes that she noticed a small woman staring at her while she was on the treadmill, “like she couldn’t believe I was running,”(Temima). This is a moment of triumph for the woman as she aggressively attacks her weight loss goal. The Black woman prevails in spite of the multitude of challenges that stop her from going to the gym.

**Weight Loss**

On July 27, a blogger says that she has her shirt tucked into her pants. This is a great accomplishment for her and she notes, “I have my shirt tucked into my pants for the first time since I was 21, OMG …it feels good…and I look good too. LOL,”(Temima). Other moments of triumph are seen in Tisha’s stories. Her April 22 post is dedicated to “110 pound (and counting) weight loss in pictures,” where she shows how far she has come on her weight loss journey.

**Seeking Therapy**

Black women reveal that they are going to seek psychotherapy for their health and mental issues.

On July 27, a woman posts a blog about her “confessions.” First, the blogger confesses that she has not been exercising for the past two weeks, but promises that she will go back to Zumba classes. Her next confession, is that she is dealing with her “issues” head on. She writes, “I finally made the first step on dealing with some of my issues. I found and met with a therapist yesterday. I felt better after the session and I am looking forward to seeing her again,”(Temima). The woman’s confession of going to see a counselor for her mental health directly addresses the challenges to weight loss presented by Nichelle’s post about the lack of seeking psychotherapy in the Black community (Nichelle).
Embracing Feminism/Women Taking Back Control Their Lives

Black women’s narratives reveal that through their weight loss journeys, they are able to take back control of their lives in order to promote positive change in their health.

Nichelle writes a post on April 14 titled, “How Losing Weight Made Me a Feminist.” In her post, the woman describes breaking free of societal standards and expectations of the female body. She noted,

In deciding to focus more on me, I had to focus on how things affected me. That included the stigmas that prevented me from being able to fully embrace my whole self and the things that make me happy(...) Lifting weights makes me happy (...) Dieting and depriving myself makes me stabby. (Nichelle)

In this story, the woman realizes that she must focus on her personal goals and journey, rather than on outside pressures and expectations (Nichelle). The blogger continues her narrative saying that her weight loss journey caused her to become a feminist who loves herself in “all totality,” (Nichelle). This feminism, described by the narrator, allows the woman to break down stereotypes and discover what she wants for her life (Nichelle).

The cultural stereotype of the “strong Black woman” is dismantled in a July 23 post about facing emotional weakness. Nichelle reflects on her struggles with emotional eating. She says that her emotional eating was rooted in seeking to find “peace” in a world where she could not acknowledge her own feelings. The blogger then references a story she read about Black women being the “mules of the world.” The metaphor works in the story to describe the way in which Black women are seen as “everyone else’s work horse,” and unable to tend to self. The
blogger asserts that Black women should reject the culturally embraced phrase of “strong Black woman,” and accept their struggles, insecurities, and journey to better health (Nichelle).

The moral of the story: “It takes a strong woman to face her weaknesses head on with a desire to change them,”(Nichelle). The story reveals that the Black woman rises to power once she takes control of her life and her health.
Chapter 4:

DISCUSSION OF THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Each of the stories provided in the weight loss narratives points toward a larger journey and narrative. Women speak in the first person and become the protagonists, fighting a host of challenges and revealing experiences along the way. It is imperative to discuss the individual qualities of each of the bloggers to better understand how themes are revealed in their stories. Research found that each blogger possessed distinct character traits that were revealed in the way they wrote about themes related to this study in their narratives. These character roles were the antiheroine, heroine, dynamic, round and static characters. Below are the themes that dominated each bloggers’ stories related to the research questions (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Themes Found in Black Women’s Weight Loss Narratives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Latoya (Antiheroine)</th>
<th>Nichelle (Heroine)</th>
<th>Teressa (Round)</th>
<th>Tisha (Dynamic)</th>
<th>Desondre (Static)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1: Negative, Collective Social Attitudes Toward Health</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q2: Cultural Expectations of Black Women’s Physical Appearance</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Q3: Poor Generational Health Habits</td>
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<td>Q4: Lack of Resources</td>
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<td>Q5: Black Lexical Trends</td>
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<td>Q6: References to Black Pop Culture</td>
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<td>Q7: Spotlight on Black Celebrities’ Health in the Media</td>
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<td>Q8: Gender Relations With the Opposite Sex</td>
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<td>Q9: Gendered Expectations of Women</td>
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<td>Q10: Challenges of Womanhood</td>
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<td>Q11: Motivations: Achieve Idealized Bodies</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Q12: Motivations: Support From the Blogosphere</td>
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<td>Q13: Motivations: Impress Other Women</td>
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<td>Q14: Compliment From Others in Society</td>
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<td>Q15: Triumphs: Physical Accomplishments</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
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<td>Q16: Triumphs: Seeking Therapy</td>
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<td>Q17: Triumphs: Embracing Feminism–Take Back Control of Her Life</td>
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The Antiheroine: Latoya

I argue that Latoya is the anti-heroine in her weight loss narrative. The antiheroine has heroic qualities, but does not completely fulfill the traditional role of the heroine (“Antiheroine,” 2000). I named this blogger Latoya because it has the Black American name meaning, “woman who is honored,” (“Names-Meaning of Latoya,” 2009). She is the character who possesses admirable qualities, but still struggles to triumph over obesity. Latoya describes herself as someone who is on a journey to reach “superior levels of health and fitness.” In relation to the research questions, Latoya’s narratives are filled with lexical trends, references to Black pop culture and spotlights on Black celebrities and health. She also discusses gender relations, ideal body types and finds motivation from physical accomplishments. The blogger does not reach her goal weight by the end of the selected time frame for this study.

Latoya’s narratives are very focused on the weight loss success and struggles of Black women in the public eye. Her narratives include stories and articles about the dramatic weight loss of Jill Scott, Raven Simone and Jordin Sparks among others. These media spotlights often reject mainstream society’s criticism of the women and defend their right to privacy and personal health goal setting. Latoya also posts DVD workouts and other exercise plans created by Black celebrities such as Kelly Rowland, LaLa Vasquez, and Ciara. Her narratives about the unfair pressures to be thin among celebrities allow her to relate these pressures to her own life experiences.

Latoya also situates her stories about gender related challenges to weight loss around news and events online and in the media. For example, her narrative discussing Black actor Boris Kudjoe’s twitter rant on overweight women, allowed her to reveal her feelings about the
pressure to lose weight by men and the insensitivity of the actor to women with serious health issues. Latoya situates Black women as victims to not only health challenges, but to pressures of the opposite sex and society to obtain a certain body type. The story of the girdle is one of the most telling in Latoya’s narratives. She vividly describes pressure that she felt as a teen to wear a girdle (given to her by her grandmother) in order to look slimmer in her school uniform. *I can remember having to wear a girdle at the age of 10. It was very uncomfortable and often left me bruised and scarred, but at the time, I would have tried anything to look smaller in my dresses.* In a moment of epiphany on March 10, Latoya writes, “Oh I also refuse to rely on any girldespanxshaper to define my body. I’ll let my workouts do that.”

I argue that Latoya plays the role of the anti-heroine because she is not as close to her weight loss goal as other bloggers, but she has made significant strides and positioned herself to be an example to others. She writes, “(…) My passion to facilitate accessibility and empower others to seek better health—will continue to fuel me.” Latoya’s entries are informative and contain a host of culturally relevant health and weight loss content for others to read. Many of the blog posts criticize the status quo, and she often calls out society for victimizing the morbidly obese. A self-proclaimed motivator and health-conscious writer, Latoya’s character is not the traditional heroine---she is flawed and has not conquered her battles.

**The Heroine: Nichelle**

Nichelle is the all-around heroine in this study of Black women’s weight loss narratives. In stories, the heroine is the character who “is noted for special achievement in a particular field,” (“Heroine,” 2000). Nichelle’s name means “victorious maiden,” (“Nichelle Name Meanings,” n.d.). Her stories are full of Black lexical trends, discussions of Black cultural
attitudes on health and societal gendered expectations of women’s bodies. She has lost the most amount of weight of all of the bloggers and writes as a victor who understands the struggles of victims of obesity. At the end of the selected time frame of the study, Nichelle’s blog post discusses embracing feminism as a way to overcome obesity through taking back control of women’s bodies and lives. In Nichelle’s About Me section, she writes,

I don’t think I have all the answers. I DO know that the answers I DO have are the ones that have helped me lose – and continue to lose all the weight that I’ve shed over the course of one year. The knowledge that I’ve developed over this year will change my life, and it’s unfair for me to horde it all for myself when I know my sisters – regardless of whether or not you’re a sister, per se – could benefit from hearing it. (Nichelle)

Nichelle reveals that her purpose in writing about her experiences is to share her knowledge about weight loss to other women. She takes on the role of the heroine, providing information on her personal weight loss plan and healthy living. While Latoya’s narratives criticize society and the media for victimizing the morbidly obese and women’s bodies, Nichelle’s stories encourage a change in mindset about health and fitness.

An example of Nichelle’s heroine role is portrayed in her narratives about outside pressures to look a certain way. Nichelle criticizes and rejects the notion that men have the right to pressure their wives and girlfriends to change their bodies. On March 29 she writes, “Guilted me into changing my body in ways I don’t want? No thanks.” Nichelle completely rejects any one else’s definition of what women’s bodies should look like. Similar moments of self-actualization and triumph are revealed in Nichelle’s July 23 “Death to the Strong Black
Woman,” narrative. She explains that Black women must start to acknowledge their feelings, stresses and challenges rather than eating for comfort. Her stories are a call to action saying that issues such as emotional eating and failure to go see a therapist are “problems that we must fix.”

Nichelle’s narratives about the need for change in perceptions of weight problems in the Black community fits her role as the heroine. Nichelle’s discussion of the Black, collective social attitude toward eating disorders exposes truths about the number of Black women whose struggles go unsung. She is transparent in her stories about her past of binge eating and plans to become bulimic. Her stories about “shoving a knife down my throat” are retrospective. Nichelle uses her stories as a way to show that these problems can be overcome with hard work. She writes in her May 28 post,

I write this for all the Black women I know and love- even the ones who e-mail me that I’ve never met- who are just done with the dieting, done with the pain, done with the self-hated, done with the pressure, done with it all. I’m writing this for each woman who is ready to stop and just…find God within herself…and love her…fiercely. (Nichelle)

Nichelle’s stories challenge women to do better and her drastic weight loss, coupled with strong opinions on taking back control make her shine as a true heroine in the stories.

**The Round Character: Temima**

Temima is the round character of the weight loss narratives. Round characters are well developed in literature, complex and possess “contradictory traits,”(Ervin, 2011). I named her Temima, meaning “whole and honest”—her character role is one that is realistic about the complications of her weight loss journey (“Temima Name Meanings,” n.d.) In relation to the
research questions, Temima’s narratives have themes of Black lexical trends and spotlights celebrities and health issues. She also describes the pressures of society’s idealized bodies of women. Temima finds support and encouragement from blogging; compliments from others; and moments of physical accomplishments such as going down in dress sizes. What distinguishes this character from others is that Temima reveals that she has had lap band surgery in order to assist her to control her eating. Her physical struggles are often from dealing with the lap band and many of her narratives address other bloggers who have similar experiences with lap band surgery.

Temima’s narratives reveal many challenges to her weight loss goals and internal struggles. Peppered throughout her stories are generational obesity-related health problems and the challenges of motherhood. She writes in her March 16 post, “I hurt because I feel like I’m neglecting my kids by going to exercise after work and then going to the hospital until visiting hours end.” Temima’s emotional moments of going to visit her mother in the hospital and “wishing I could afford to pay for her to have lap band surgery,” reveal some of the blogger’s obstacles while coping with her own weight loss battles.

Additionally, Temima receives motivation and encouragement in her journey through the blogosphere. She writes letters to her followers to let them know how much they inspire her to continue on her weight loss journey. Temima writes in a post on April 29,

There are times when I feel like I am going to fail on this journey. Then I read the inspiration post of so many women who have fought the good fight and won. I know that I will one day be an inspiration to someone else. (Temima)
It seems she contradicts herself in the following passage, saying that “I will never be perfect, but I’m not a failure either.” She fights feeling like she will fail and has moments of success. Temima will and go from writing about her health goals to discussing how she ate chips and cookies. Her narratives point toward her struggle, as well as her hope to reach her goals. By the end of the study, Temima continues to fight. Her narratives are written with aspirations such as “I WILL wear a bathing suit.” She shifts from being hurt to feeling motivated and epitomizes the struggle in her stories. *I can relate to Temima’s story, my weight loss journey was far from perfect.*

**The Dynamic Character: Tisha**

Tisha may be considered the dynamic character in her weight loss story. Dynamic characters undergo a permanent change in the story (Ervin, 2011). She experiences the most change throughout her narratives and exemplifies strong work ethic—her name means, “one who is strong willed,” (“Meaning of Tisha,” 2009). In relation to the research questions, Tisha’s narratives contain themes of spotlights on Black celebrity health in the media and the challenges of womanhood. Tisha receives motivation to overcome obesity through wanting an idealized “competitor’s body” and support from the blogosphere. Tisha undergoes a drastic weight loss experience through the time frame of this study and she shares her experiences in a way that reveals major struggles and triumphs.

Though Tisha has lost a great amount of weight, what distinguishes Tisha from the “heroine” characters is the way she reveals her narratives and describes her journey. She does not say that she purposes to inspire in her narratives. On the contrary, Tisha writes that her blog is about her “healthy lifestyle transformation.” Her “About Me” section boasts, “I have a new
found love and passion for health and fitness! A year ago I never would have never imagined or dreamed saying something like that!” She is change personified in her story—this dynamism is pervasive in themes that emerged in her narratives.

Tisha’s stories contain a host of before and after photos—she writes about motivations and successes through her noticeable physical accomplishments. Tisha takes pictures in a bikini and writes about entering into a Million Dollar Beach Body game. On April 4, she writes about her physical accomplishments and change. She notes, “My new bikini! A huge change but I want more change! I have to keep telling myself that my old self no longer exists. The big girl that used to live here has moved, she’s gone!” In her last post on August 1, she writes, “As far as my weight loss goes I’m pretty much done! I can’t even believe I’m saying this!! (...) This year I am living at my goal!”

Tisha’s narratives reveal themes of the physical challenges of womanhood related to weight loss. For example, she writes that having two C sections has slowed her down from getting “flat abs” on June 1. However, she says that she finally sees a difference in her stomach. This moment of expressing the gender-related challenges to weight loss is followed by a triumph. Similarly, on May 11, Tisha describes the pains and challenges of PCOS. However, her July 25 post celebrates her “regular menstrual cycles” due to dedication to working out. These changes revealed in the narrative show the transformation she asserts in biographical section.

**The Static Character: Deiondre**

I argue that Deiondre is a static character in her story. She undergoes few changes throughout her story. Static characters stay the same in literature (Ervin, 2011). I named this character Deiondre because the name means “valley,”—Deiondre’s narratives predominantly
remain in a place of struggle and challenge throughout the six month time period. Though she describes losing some weight within her narratives, the majority of her stories discuss problems with few moments of victory. In relation to the research questions, Deiondre uses Black lexical trends and discusses celebrities who have lost weight in the media. Deiondre’s narratives reveal moments of triumph from physical accomplishments and changes in her appearance only.

Themes that emerge throughout Deiondre’s blog posts were centered around her troubles, until the very end of the time frame for this study. On April 6, Deiondre writes a post titled “no difference.” She discusses her frustrations with seeing no difference in her weight “since June 2010.” In this post, Deiondre complains about her weight and the challenges she faces due to her friends’ lack of care for their health. Though she criticizes her friends for lack of health consciousness, she continues to talk about this challenge throughout her narratives. On July 26, she compiles a list of things that she wishes she had to motivate her to lose weight. She writes, “If I had a friend who was also into weight loss (it’s a lonely world here).” While other bloggers describe Black collective social attitudes about healthy living in a way that exposes and informs about a problem in the Black community, Deiondre reveals that these attitudes discourage her on a personal level.

Deiondre’s challenges are also related to gender relations within her romantic, heterosexual relationship. Not only does she feel pressure to disregard her health around her friends, but Deiondre also writes about criticism she receives from her boyfriend who “don’t want no skinny women.” Her list of problems continues throughout her narratives. After a break up with her boyfriend, Deiondre reveals that she lacks motivation to work out because she “doesn’t have a man to look good for.” The aforementioned examples show how Deiondre’s
narrative differs from others; she speaks as a woman in a constant state of struggle, rather than someone who has fought and won against these weight loss challenges.
CHAPTER 5
LIMITATIONS, CONCLUSIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

The study found that there were several themes that emerged relative to the initial research questions. First, the Black women’s weight loss narratives have themes that point to four culturally-related challenges to weight loss, (a) negative, collective social attitudes toward health; (b) cultural expectations of Black women’s appearances; poor generational health habits; (d) and a lack of resources. Some cultural aspects of Black women’s weight loss narratives include (a) themes of lexical trends, (b) references to Black pop culture and (c) spotlights on Black celebrities’ health in the media. Gender-related challenges to weight loss revealed three main themes in the Black women’s stories (a) gender relations with the opposite sex; (b) gendered expectations of women; and (c) physiological challenges of womanhood. Black women’s narratives disclose motivations and triumphs in overcoming the challenges to weight loss. Motivations were (a) women’s desires to achieve an idealized body; (b) support from the blogosphere; (c) impressing other women and; (d) compliments from others in society. Finally, triumphs to conquer the challenges to weight loss were (a) physical accomplishments; (b) seeking therapy; (c) and embracing feminism and taking back control of women’s lives.

There are several limitations to the research of this study. In the blog selection process, it was imperative that selected blogs have entries between the months of March and August. The study did not take into account when the blogs were created. Bloggers may have created their narratives months and or years apart from one another. The study did not control for the dates of creation of the blogs. Therefore, women’s narratives may be set in different phases of their weight loss journeys. In the initial blog selection process (began with basic snowball
sampling), 54 blogs were identified that I suspected were written by Black women. However, after narrowing my criteria and employing the purposive snowball sampling approach, many blogs were excluded from this study. The criterion that was the most discriminating was the explicit statement of racial identification as a Black person. Future research may study blogs by women who self-present as Black through photographs and other context clues in order to research a larger sample and find even more diversity in emergent themes.

I employed a systematic and careful coding process to understand how characters positioned themselves and their journeys in their narratives, as well as analyzed themes that became clear in the data relative to my research interests. These interpretations were purely derived from the words on the page. I could not make any assumptions about the motivations for writing these blogs and topics of choice for the blogs. Unless a blogger made blatant statements about feelings such as, “I feel happy,” or “I feel sad,” I was unable to be sure about the inner thoughts and senses of the writers. Future research should consider interacting with the bloggers through having participants in the study fill out a survey or participate in an interview process to better understand feelings and thoughts about why these women write these narratives and about how they make choices in creation and information seeking of culturally relevant content.

It is also important to note the differences between blog narratives and other stories. Bloggers’ stories are presented to their audiences in “short-shorts,” and writers may shift topics easily between current posts and previous posts. Blogs may also only offer a “short clip” of the experiences of the writer on a certain topic or theme. Stories may lack a definite beginning and end, as posts are sometimes unpredictable. Bloggers may write twelve posts one week and a mere two posts the new week. The study controlled for the average number of posts by each
blogger in March thru August 2011. However, the study did not take into account the amount of time that passes between each blog. Future research may look more closely at the amounts of time that passes between blog posts on Black women’s pages to further evaluate the coherence and consistency of stories after and before breaks in time among blog entries.

This thesis in no way represents the ideas, beliefs and identities of all Black American women who have been overweight or morbidly obese in their lifetimes. Certain biases are intrinsic to this study—bloggers selected have regular access to a computer (enough to average 4 blogs per month). The paper assumes that bloggers have acquired a fair amount of digital literacy through their maintenance of a blog. Future research may conduct interviews with Black American women on and off of the blogosphere about their respective journeys to lose weight.

This study is a humble beginning to communication scholarship on a significant health topic and community of individuals. There are several aspects of Black women’s blog narratives that I would like to explore in the future. I am interested in the blogs’ comments features as a collaborative tool within Black women’s weight loss blog communities. Throughout the narratives, women describe the support they receive from other bloggers to continue on their journeys. I would like to analyze comments on each blog entry for themes on collaboration, inspiration and cultural identification among bloggers’ interactions. I am also interested in conducting focus groups with Black women weight loss bloggers to better understand how they identify other blogs as authentically Black and culturally relevant to their health interests. Other research questions for the focus groups should consider motivations to blog and other tools and resources Black women use to support their health goals.
Themes revealed in Black women’s weight loss narratives are unique to each blogger’s interests and experiences. Findings related to both the cultural and gender related challenges in these stories have implications for research in the health field. This kind of research may be helpful to health professionals who seek to better understand important topics of marginalized populations in their use of the internet as a sounding board to express their feelings and concerns about health and morbid obesity.

Black studies scholars may find interest in this paper for its discussion of the Black oral tradition in a new media form. Black storytelling has not only taken to the internet and blogosphere, but allows content to be made public about specific health issues relevant to Black people. As academics, we become more aware of the communicative power of narrative and shared experiences. The participant as observer method used in this study may have implications for researchers performing qualitative communication studies as a way to discover human behaviors and experiences, along with introspective reflection. This study encourages future possibilities for members of underrepresented populations to continue to take ownership of communications research related to pertinent issues within their own cultural and gender communities. It is my hope that this paper ignites more Black health communication studies on the World Wide Web—we really need it.
APPENDIX A

BLOG NARRATIVES INFORMATION AND CODING SHEET

1. Blog Header Title and Subtitle:
2. Web URL:
3. Does the blog meet the following criteria?
   a. The individual represented in the blog must self present as a woman. ___
   b. Blog must be written in Standard American English or African American English (Ebonics). ___
   c. The blogger must explicitly state that her purpose is to reveal her weight loss journey ___
   d. The individual must identify herself as Black American through pictures and statements in her narrative ___
   e. Blogs must be created by women between the ages of 18 to 40. _____
   f. Blogs selected must not be sponsored by a commercial weight loss entity. _____
   g. Blogs must be maintained between March 2011 to August 2011 ______
   h. Entries must contain dates in reverse chronological order with a calendar to date back to older posts _____
   i. Entries must average at least 4 blogs per month of the during the time period of March 2011- August 2011 ______
   j. Blogs must be publicly accessible _____
   k. Blogs must include progress photos and reports _____
   l. Blogs must have followers/blog rolls _____
   m. Bloggers must identify themselves as morbidly obese (100 lbs over their healthy weight) _____
4. Blogger’s name:
5. Blogger’s assigned name:
6. Average amount of posts per month between March 2011-August 2011
   Name/nickname/screen name of author(s)
   a. Age: As identified on the site by the primary author.
   b. Height/Weight/BMI
   c. Weight Loss Goal
   d. Starting Weigh/BMI in March 2011
   e. Final Weight BMI in August 2011
   f. Country, state, and/or city of author residence/birth
   g. Race and/or ethnicity of author and how identified? Photographs? Statements in narrative?
   h. Author occupation, education/and or job industry
   i. Current marital status: M_______ D_______ S_______ W_______NI____
   j. Children? (Yes, No)
   k. Health conditions, illnesses, diseases, disorders, and/or problems of primary author:
1. What other information about the blogger is provided in the weight loss narrative?

7. Coding related to research questions:
   a. What are some culturally related challenges to weight loss that Black women reveal in their narratives?
   b. What are some other cultural themes of Black women’s weight loss blog narratives?
   c. What are some gender related challenges to weight loss discussed in Black women’s weight loss narratives?
   d. What motivations and triumphs do Black women reveal in the journey to overcome the challenges to weight loss?
REFERENCES


