
Informed Diet Selection: Increasing Food Literacy through Crowdsourcing

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Abstract

The Internet offers plenty of options for those who want to lose weight. Choosing among the practically unlimited number of weight loss diets, exercises, and pills, advertised as borderline magical, is however challenging. We present *The Diet Explorer*, a crowd-powered, knowledge base that can be queried in real-time to discover weight loss diets that best match personal needs. Our long-term goals are to help people in making better-informed dieting decisions and ultimately reach more satisfactory diet outcomes.

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Introduction

The obesity epidemic is one of the greatest threats to health and wellbeing throughout much of the world. Despite information on healthy lifestyles and eating habits being more accessible than ever before, the situation seems to be growing worse [4]. And for a person who wants to lose weight there are practically unlimited options and temptations to choose from. Food, or dieting, is a booming business, and thousands of companies and vendors want their cut by pitching their solutions, particularly online (Google) where people first turn to find weight loss information [3]. In our work, we have set to harness the wisdom of crowds in making sense of available diets, and to offer a direct way for users to increase their food literacy during diet selection.

The Diet Explorer

The Diet Explorer is a crowd-powered online knowledge base that contains an arbitrary number of weight loss diets that are all assessed in terms of an arbitrary set

Preliminary User Study

50 participants were recruited from *Prolific Academic*, a crowdsourcing platform for academic research. Participants provided ratings for 20 diets in terms of 6 criteria (50*20*6 = 6000 unique ratings).

Then, 20 new participants from the same source were tasked to imagine they need to lose weight, find diets with The Diet Explorer, and to fill in a final survey.

Finally, another 20 participants were recruited for the same task, but instead of our tool they were to use Google to find their optimal diets (a between-subjects design).

Our results show no statistically significant difference observed in trustworthiness, relevance, and satisfaction of results between The Diet Explorer and Google. However, our results show that The Diet Explorer is significantly faster to use for discovering diets.

Based on participant feedback, the tool can be improved by including links to meal plans and considering dietary restrictions (e.g., vegetarian or vegan diets).

of criteria. Both can be added in runtime, but to begin with we have bootstrapped the tool with 20 weight loss diets from Wikipedia. Examples of included criteria are “long term success potential”, “affordability”, and “overall nutrition” (see Figure 1, top).

Indicate the importance of the following aspects in your diet:
(note that you do not have to use all sliders. Just use the ones you care about!)
...and we will find diets that best match your unique needs...

→ The diet has rapid weight loss potential - **40 - Very important**

✕ The diet has strong Long-term success potential - **Does not matter at all**

\$ The diet is affordable - **Does not matter at all**

⚡ It is mentally easy to stick to the diet - **60 - Slightly important**

○ The diet provides all the nutrients needed for well-being? - **90 - Important**

♥ The diet is generally recommended by others - **Does not matter at all**

RESET SLIDERS REVEAL RESULTS

Based on your data and preferences, you'll succeed most likely with:

The weight watchers diet [Show details...](#)

Users have rated this diet as follows:

- Helps lose weight fast? - **Average**
- ✕ Is suitable long-term? - **Above average**
- Is generally recommended? - **Above average**
- \$ Monetary costs? - **Above average**
- ⚡ Mental demand? - **Average**
- Provides all the needed nutrients? - **Above average**

A brief overview:
Weight Watchers International is an American company that offers various products and services to assist weight loss and maintenance. Founded in 1963 by Queens, New York, homemaker Jean Kidditch, it now operates in about 30 countries around the world, generally under names that are local translations of "Weight Watchers". The core philosophy behind Weight Watchers programs is to use a science-driven approach to help participants lose weight by forming helpful habits, eating smarter, getting more exercise and providing support.

The low-fat diet [Show details...](#)

The Body For Life diet [Show details...](#)

The mediterranean diet [Show details...](#)

The low-carbohydrate diet [Show details...](#)

ADJUST CRITERIA FINISH TASK / FINAL SURVEY

- Note that you can experiment with the sliders by going back and changing the configuration.
- When you're done, please complete the final survey before completing the study (the green button above).
- Copy the URL here (https://prolific.ac/submissions/complete?cc=2A3C0XHF) -- this is also given to you the end of the survey.

Figure 1. Top: indicating criteria importance. Bottom: best-matching results, based on crowdsourced knowledge.

The online tool relies theoretically on *wisdom of the crowds*, and the underlying crowdsourcing concept has been shown to provide trustworthy results in related studies [2]. In this work as well, the crowds first assess all the options (i.e., diets) in terms of all the criteria using a scale from 0 to 100. Once the knowledge base

contains sufficiently data, end users can then use the same criteria by indicating their relative importance to discover the diet(s) that best match their personal needs and preferences. Finally, the best matches are shown to the user (Figure 1, bottom).

Discussion

There is no clear consensus among the weight loss communities on what are the best diets, nor can there ever be. Different people have different needs, and diets have different characteristics. Thus, people often opt for personalised diet plans, even if this might put their own health at risk [1].

Using our embeddable tool, diet-literate webmasters can help their audiences to discover reliable diets. They can also choose to either have the crowds assess the diets, or simply hire experts to assess the diets. Going forward, we will include “scientific validity” as one of the criteria. The developed tool is flexible in this regard, and we believe that it can be used as a reliable and trustworthy starting point for those interested in starting on a weight loss diet.

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