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Constructing the virtual body:
Self-representation, self-modification and self-perfection in pro-eating disorder websites

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ABSTRACT

Reshaping the body is a characteristically modern pursuit, an essential part of the quest for self-identity. As interpersonal communications have moved online, the way the body is represented and understood on the Internet has become a central issue. There is, however, some concern that the objectification of the body and the fragmented nature of communication structures have had a negative psychological effect, leading to increased rates of loneliness and body dissatisfaction. The increased number of individuals with disordered eating practices is often seen as a result of the changing social forces that construct individual bodies.

This research project uses discourse analysis to investigate the way members of one pro-eating disorder website represent their bodies online, combining theories of the body as an object of identity expression with research into online embodiment and self-representation.

This research finds that website members see their bodies as communicatory tools. Expressing feelings of isolation and voicelessness in regard to their offline lives, they make connections online based on the similarity of their offline bodies and common body modification goals. The website becomes a substitute home, where the body's representation can be highly controlled. This body often feels more genuine and representative of the individual than the emotional, offline body. Kept secret offline, this Internet-based schema for understanding the body appears to have significant effects on the offline bodies of members.

As part of pro-eating disorder movement, members are trying to take control of the social construction of their bodies, rejecting medical, mass-media and social definitions of normal and abnormal bodies. Online, the diseases of anorexia and bulimia are personified in female form as the idols of a cult-like movement. Representations of members' bodies become successive iterations in negotiating and bounding group membership and ideas of the elite perfect body.

INTRODUCTION

'What would life be without Facebook? Like a sky without stars'
(Wijaya Abundjani, Indonesia - Quoted in Fletcher, 2010)

For citizens of the modern mediapolis, life is increasingly lived online and everyday life is inexorably intertwined with online activity. Ninety-three percent of Americans between the ages of 12 and 29 regularly spend time on the Internet (Pew, 2010). British people spend more than one-third of their leisure time online (TNS, 20008) and the average Australian spends almost seven hours each month on social networking sites (Nielsen, 2010).

The rise of social networking sites marks a coming of age of identity on the Internet. These sites provide a highly structured mirror of offline social spaces, allowing users to create public or semi-public profiles with codified connections to others (Boyd & Ellison, 2008: 211). To a greater or lesser extent, these sites require users to put their transfer their offline identities online. For instance the market leader, Facebook (2010), states that members must keep their contact information up to date and provide no false information.

While firmly based in offline bodies, online communication may allow new possibilities for self-representations and identity construction. The increased prevalence of online communication can also be seen as part of wider debates about the breakdown of traditional social and familial structures, the rise of niche communities, and an increased diversity and fragmentation of lifestyle choices. While the effects of this changed communicatory structure remain to be seen, understanding these changes it is an especially salient question in regards to young people who, while still in the process of forming their identities, are the largest population of social networking site users.

This research examines the way that individuals represent their bodies online on one particular social networking site. This is a pro-eating disorder website, in which (primarily) young, Western women seek support in developing, maintaining, and coping with the behaviours necessary to become extremely thin. They upload photos of themselves for comment and critique, share stories in their blogs, seek support in forums and find 'thinspiration' in quotes, pictures and artwork.

Eating disorders are generally understood as a modern, Western phenomenon, aberrant psychological responses to conditions of overabundance and an overemphasis on thinness, beauty and body malleability. The pro-eating disorder movement is an entirely online

phenomenon. Arguing that eating disorders are a lifestyle choice rather than a disease, they seek to provide a supportive environment for those who choose this lifestyle. Although it is impossible to know the full extent of their offline effects, experimental studies have shown that participation in these websites changes the way viewers feel about their offline bodies, helps individuals pursue and maintain eating disorders, and hide these practices from their families and friends (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010).

While this site is simply one of a myriad of niche social networking sites, it is linked to serious and deadly diseases, afflicting the young and vulnerable and seemingly intertwined with modernity. An examination of how users represent their bodies on this site can help shed light on how the body is understood by the numerous individuals with disordered eating patterns and the way that highly-mediated individual bodies can be reshaped through online communication and interaction.

A note on terminology

There are three medically-defined eating disorders: anorexia, characterized by a refusal to maintain a healthy weight; bulimia, characterized by cycles of binging and purging often through self-induced vomiting or the use of laxatives; and binge eating disorder. The most common medical diagnosis is, however, a non-specified or hybrid eating disorder (Palmer, 2001: 18).

The behaviours associated with eating disorders (binging, purging, chronic dieting, caloric restriction and over exercising) are far more common than the disorders themselves. Many individuals engage in these behaviours in the pursuit of low body weights without the full spectrum of psychological traits associated with the disorders (Bordo, 186). Dieting and body image concerns are accepted as normal and non-eating disordered individuals often talk about their bodies in the same terms as those with diagnosed eating disorders (Hesse-Biber, 1996). While this paper will use medical terminology where appropriate, it will more frequently use the term disordered eating, which includes but is not limited to medically diagnosable disorders.

These websites are commonly referred to as pro-eating disorder, pro-anorexia, pro-bulimia, pro-ana or pro-mia. However, not all these sites explicitly encourage eating disorders and many display conflicting feelings about disordered eating (Borzekowski et al., 2010). Not all visitors to these sites have medically defined eating disorders or desire extremely

underweight bodies; instead participation allows them to 'don the symbolic language' of eating disorders (Johnson, 2003: 46). What links these sites, however, is the language and images they use to represent and define physical bodies and it is these communication patterns that are the subject of this research.

THEORETICAL BASIS

The Malleable Modern Body

'Society purports false assumptions that the body is infinitely malleable and that an imperfect body reflects an imperfect self.'

(Rathner, 2001, p 101)

The corporeal body is the site of the individual within the material world. It is both an object and a target of power, a biological system and a social construction. Individual ideas of what bodies are and are capable of doing are shaped by societal values, but also seem constrained by biological imperatives. The extent to which biological understandings of the body are socially constructed is a subject of considerable debate. Biologically, disordered eating is described as resulting from hormonal imbalances, genetic traits and environmental conditions. However, categorizations of disease and normality can also be seen as socially constructed, part of the configuration of power within society.

Societal influence on individual bodies can be understood in different ways. Foucault theorizes self-regulation as a result of societal influences so strong they are unconsciously internalized (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001: 98). However, self-regulation can also be seen as a byproduct of vague and fragmented societal standards, resulting in the need to use the body as a communication device to define identity and social position (Stårderud, 2001: 38). The disordered eater can thus be seen as someone who has over-internalized societal demands for thinness (an individual, psychological problem) or as one caught at the crossroads between conflicting societal messages (a problem with societal standards).

The proliferation of opportunities to reshape the body can be seen as both liberating and repressive. While the vast majority of individuals pursue body modification willingly, the multimillion-dollar industries that facilitate these changes actively promote self-dissatisfaction (McRobbie, 2009: 62). To a certain extent, the existence of options for body modification means individuals must pursue desirable bodies or risk signalling they do not care how others perceive them. In the case of disordered eating, the debate over personal

choice and cultivated dissatisfaction is extremely prominent, given the long-term health consequences and possibility of death. However, the freedom not to eat has also been powerfully liberating in the context of political hunger strikes, and modern disordered eaters can be seen in similar terms, protesting repressive familial or cultural conditions (Lee, 2001: 48).

Lending support to the idea of a socially constructed body is the fact that the proliferation of options to remake the body seems to have resulted in an ever-increasing convergence of bodies toward a particular societal ideal. This ideal varies culturally and as Western culture has spread the body ideal and body relationship embedded in this culture has apparently spread with it, with increasing rates of eating disorders in areas adopting western cultural values (Nasser, Katzman & Gordon, 2001). However, these changes may be due to the way normal and abnormal are understood rather than a fundamental change in behaviours.

The promise of body remodeling may ultimately be an illusion. The legacy of pop-singer Michael Jackson's high-profile health problems due to frequent surgical procedures to lighten his skin and remake his features gave public face to the consequences body modification (Lacayo, 2009). Despite powerful self and social construction forces, the body subjected to too great standardization 'opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism.' (Foucault, 1975/1979: 156). Yet as cases of death due to anorexia show, it is also possible for the organism's proper functioning to be subsumed by the individual's desire to refashion their body.

Thin Bodies

'Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels.'

(Supermodel Kate Moss, Quoted in Costello, 2009)

Thinness is just one part of a package of gendered, racialized, sexualized and class-based attributes commonly used as symbols of supposed inner traits. There is a tendency to simplify thinness as representing 'restraint, moderation and self-control' and fatness as 'moral failure, the inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed and self-indulgence' (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 4). However, the thin body symbolizes different things for men and women, gay and straight men, Westerners and Asians, black and white women, and among different classes and professions. The particular self-representational package associated with pro-eating disorder websites is most common in young, Western, middle- and upper-class

females. However, the beauty goals formerly confined to this demographic have spread to non-Western individuals, men, working class women and pre-teens (ibid).

Attempts to understand why thinness has become so desirable can be divided into three broad categories. Biologically, it is argued that plumpness was a good signal of health during conditions of scarcity, and common infectious and chronic diseases; now under conditions of abundance, thinness is a better signal of health. Those who take thinness to the extreme are seen as sick and in need of treatment but this perspective does not see a widespread societal problem.

In contrast, proponents of social construction often investigate the desirability of thinness either from the perspective of who benefits or the perspective of how it is represented. Female thinness has been theorized as a rejection of the reproductive, maternal body (Bordo, 1993: 206) or as a strategy to emphasize fragility and reduce the apparent threat to men's economic and social positions (McRobbie, 2009: 67). Both these perspectives give agency to those who pursue thinness by explaining why it is socially rewarded.

Other studies ascribe tremendous power to the media and economic interests in encouraging thinness. The glorification of thinness is seen as an economic strategy to increase consumption of diet products and surgical procedures, working in tandem with calls to eat and enjoy to create a cycle of continual consumption (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 35). Thinness can also be seen as part of celebrity culture, where a particular beauty package elevates celebrities over others (Groesz, Levine & Murnen, 2002).

However, this focus on thinness obscures a wider social phenomenon of bodily control. A study of emotional responses to pro-anorexia websites found an almost identical decrease in self-perception in a control population that viewed female fashion websites with normal size models, suggesting negative self-image is related to the way the body is understood rather than simply exposure to thin bodies (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007).

Susan Bordo points out that anorexics often do not see themselves as fat overall, but focus on specific fleshy body parts such as the stomach, breasts and thighs (1993: 189). She argues that eating disorders should be seen in the same light as bodybuilding and exercise, attempts to control the tumultuous inner body and ensure a desirable outward appearance.

Eating normally, eating abnormally

'Food is a blinding fetish in our culture… We simply do not know the uses of food, and our ignorance is explosively dangerous.'

(Douglas, 1982: 123)

Food is one of the most basic aspects of life, its production, preparation and consumption wrapped in structures of economic and social power (Probyn, 2000). Food is the cause of and the answer to problems, both a reward and a vice. As individuals have become distanciated from food production and preparation, the rituals and etiquette that once governed food consumption as a social practice have been devalued (Esterik, 2001: 22). Definitions of normal and abnormal eating have changed and dieting is now seen as normal behaviour, even among individuals who are not overweight (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 14).

In addition to social categories of normal and abnormal eating, are the medical classifications of disordered eating. These disorders are considered a relatively new phenomenon with anorexia an obscure disease until about 1960 and, the now more common, bulimia unknown before the 1970s (Gordon, 2001: 1). However, food refusal, from religious fasting to political protest, has a long and complex history; it is possible through historical analysis to identify similar eating behaviours under different monikers (Di Nicola, 1990).

Medically, eating disorders are understood as diseases. An individual with an eating disorder is abnormal and should be rehabilitated so that they can be reintegrated into social life as productive economic units (Vocks, 2010). As such, medical research studies the causes and possible solutions to eating disorders at an individual level (Bulik, 2001; Schur et al., 2009).

Social theories, in contrast, understand disordered eating as a perfectly logical response to a society that rewards thinness (Hesse-Biber, 1996). This research, including a large body of feminist theory, sees disordered eating as the byproduct of a system of gender and media oppression. Rather than the normal/abnormal distinction of the medical model, social theories draw parallels between disordered eaters and others based on their internalization of certain societal values. Bordo theorizes eating disorders on a scale between the conflicting societal demands of consumption and control: anorexia representing extreme control; overeating, extreme consumption; and bulimia as the 'characteristically modern personality construction' that attempts to balance control and consumption (1993: 201).

Eating disorders have also been examined using an anthropological approach, drawing parallels with religious asceticism (O'Conner, 2000) or ritual eating practices (Esterik, 2001). Rather than seeing eating disorders as the byproduct of an oppressive social system, these theories understand disordered eating as the result of particular socialized behavioural patterns that manifest themselves differently in different cultural settings. Nasser, for instance, argues that the bodily marking and control practices of Muslim women who choose to veil themselves are a cultural equivalent to anorexia (1999).

While medical theories often undermine the agency of eating disordered individuals and, through their focus, preclude options for societal change, both social and anthropological approaches often lose the individual in their broad focuses. These approaches differ based on how they define disordered eating but they all agree that understanding individual relationships with the body is key to addressing disordered eating.

Representing the body

> 'The mirror-phase is a drama whose internal impulse rushes from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, captive to the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality.'
>
> (Lacan, 1949/1968: 74).

Problems of self-identity and self-image, of coming to terms with the differences between the body as experienced, as represented and as desired, are not limited to disordered eaters. Indeed the idea that accepting the body as representing the totality of the individual requires certain intellectual sacrifices is a central concept of Lacanian psychoanalysis. This mirror phase, when children recognize the body reflected in the mirror as representing themselves, signals an entrance into the social world where individuals understand themselves and their bodies based on how they are seen by others (Lacan, 1949/1968).

Knowing the crucial importance of how they are perceived, individuals seek to manipulate the signals they send to others, controlling their bodies, voices, speech and gestures. This is what Goffman calls the 'information game,' where individuals consciously and unconsciously control their appearance and attempt to understand the way and extent to which others control themselves (1959: 7).

As part of this endless game, mirrors and photographs hold a special relevance because they allow individuals to assess how they are seen. In our body conscious society, close

examination of these representations is often frequent and critical (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 70 – 71). For the disordered eater, this is a painful but addictive process, for although the body as represented is deemed grossly inadequate, the individual feels they must know 'the truth' of how they appear to others.

Photographs provide a second order function in this process as they can be distributed to give off particular signals or restricted, if it is believed they would give off undesirable signals. While photographs have long played this dual role, as part of social networking sites, their importance has dramatically increased. Online photographs provide the visual cues traditional associated with social interaction and are the primary means through which the online-offline self is judged (Zywica & Danowski, 2008).

While the information game continues online, the changed medium changes the rules of the game. Many cues present in the offline world disappear online and thus the processes of building identity and identifying deception changes (Donath, 1999). As social interactions increasingly take place online, the means through which individuals represent their bodies online becomes a central concern.

Virtual embodiment

> 'Virtuality is not a premise or assumed feature of the Internet; on the contrary, is a social
> accomplishment.'
> (Slater, 2002: 539).

The emergence of Internet-based communication was initially met with much enthusiasm that problematic categories of race, sexuality, age and ability could be left behind; this new space would allow individuals to recraft their bodies and thus their places in the social order (Haraway, 1991/2000; Nguyen & Alexander, 1996; Lupton 1995/2000).

Early research into online identities supported these views. Sherri Turkle's 1995 book 'Life on the Screen' concluded that the Internet-based interactions allowed users to live parallel lives, experimenting with different genders, ages and personalities, and building more flexible and full offline selves as a result (267). However, an examination of Turkle's more recent work shows how understandings of Internet-based identity have changed. She now describes users as 'tethered' to their online identities, watching their lives speed by, barely able to keep up, but hooked on the Internet as a means of connecting with themselves (2008: 130).

Historically, new technologies have often been seen as revolutionary but are soon incorporated into existing power structures. Many of the recent changes in the online environment have been specifically designed to remove the distinctions between the online and offline, making the Internet a safe place to interact and do business (Slater, 2002) without the pitfalls (and potentials) a disembodied, semi-anonymous space could provide.

Furthermore, many users did not seem to want to use Internet-based communications to create new understandings of offline bodies. Instead individuals build online identities that reflect conventional offline fantasies (Slater, 2002: 538). Rather than a natural property of online spaces, Slater argues that this virtual body is a 'social accomplishment,' based on the selective and skilful employment of certain tools (ibid: 539).

As the Internet has become integrated into existing social structures, the maintenance and augmentation of offline identities has replaced identity play as the dominant form of identity action. Where the idea of multiple identities remains, it is criticized as potentially harmful, separating users from their offline lives (Griffin, 2010; Sigman, 2009).

A person's online interactions are now seen as an integral part of their identity. However, much of the research in this area, having recognized the importance of the online, examines it in isolation, assuming a fixed and stable offline self to which the online identity can be traced back. This approach forgets the problems of self-identity and self-representation more generally, the mirrors and masks that are also present in the offline world. Instead of stable offline identities, both online and offline identities exist simultaneously in constant negotiation, with offline identities just as tenuous and virtual as their online counterparts (Gunkel, 2010: 136).

Given the association of disordered eating with mediated images and self-evaluation, combined with the secrecy with which many individuals hide their body modification practices, the proliferation of disordered eating websites is hardly surprising. The eating disordered body as imagined can be understood as always virtual (Ferreday, 2009: 188), and thus in an online environment that allows users to realize their offline fantasies, the projection of the disordered eater's body online perpetuates virtualization of the body.

Eating disorders online

> 'The body rituals women practice, and the extent to which they sacrifice their bodies and minds to this
> goal, seem to create a separate reality.'
>
> (Hesse-Biber, 1996: 5)

The pro-eating disorder movement emerged online in the late 1990s, powered by free hosting services that offered individuals simple ways to create their own websites (Shade, 2007). Pro-eating disorder websites collect 'thinspiration,' images that represent the bodies members intended to become (Ferreday, 2009). They offer instructions and advice, ranging from diet tips and caloric counts copied from mainstream sources, to instructions on how to induce vomiting or hide an eating disorder from family and friends (Borzekowski et al., 2010: e7). Interactivity and community are key components of pro-eating disorder websites, with more than three-quarters allowing users to communicate in forums, upload their own pictures and artwork, or receive personalized information (ibid: e3).

Much of the research into these websites emerges from the existing bodies of work on disordered eating. Medical researchers focus either on describing the content of the site, so they can be better understood in contexts of prevention and treatment (Norris et al, 2006; Borzekowski et al., 2010), or the effects of these sites on users (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008). These studies do not consider the communal and evolving nature of these sites, viewing them as static objects to which individuals can be exposed. Surprisingly there appears to be no study in the medical tradition that asks why eating disordered individuals create and frequent these websites in the first place, viewing them instead as an end point, part of an influential media that encourages disorders.

In contrast, research from the social science tradition often focuses on the communal nature of these sites. Giles, a social psychologist, investigates pro-eating disorder websites as an example of 'naturally occurring discourse' and identity negotiation, something that is almost impossible to observe in the offline realm (2006). While these studies provide interesting insights into prevailing discourse in the pro-eating disorder community and how the community defines itself (see, for instance, Johnson, 2003), they often fail to address differences between online and offline discourse and identity, or to make linkages between the two. These communities are seen as entirely online and discourse on the websites is often not situated within a wider context.

Unlike the medical and social interactionist research traditions, feminist researchers often discuss how the pro-eating disorder movement intersects with wider discourses on the body

and health (Pollock, 2003; McRobbie, 2009). Rather than focusing on the community, these studies tend to focus on the individual, examining the narratives that are shared online (Walstrom, 2000) and the support networks that are created between users (Pollock, 2003).

All three of these strands of research grew out of offline theories and methodologies. As such they often assume unproblematic connections between online and offline individuals, concentrating either on one or the other. They often do not consider general theories of the mediated body and online embodiment. Given the body specific nature of disordered eating it is surprising that these theories do not appear to have been considered in reference to this area.

Approaching the eating disordered body online

> 'Is not the digital universe of cyberspace the ideal medium in which to construct such pure semblances which, although they are nothing 'in themselves,' pure presuppositions, provide the coordinates of our entire experience?'
> (Žižek, 1998)

As a conceptual framework this research will apply theories of the body, its self-representation and self-construction, in the context of one pro-eating disorder website. In light of the prevalence of disordered eating practices and the explicit attempts made by these sites to challenge medical categorizations of abnormality, this research will examine disordered eating as a broad social phenomenon. It will investigate the discursive techniques used by site members to represent their bodies, asking what societal structures shape individual understandings of the body. It will also investigate the extent to which this website might provide a separate social structure in that governs individual bodies or whether this can be considered part of other, wider, configurations of symbolic meaning.

This research will consider self-representation and the pursuit of online embodiment as inherently problematic tasks. Combining Ferreday's argument about the virtuality of the eating disordered body as represented (2009: 188) and Slater's observations about the 'social accomplishment' of virtual body building (2002: 539), this research will examine how users of pro-eating disorder websites construct their (virtual) bodies. Rather than examining the online persona as a parallel or experimental identity, it will attempt to critically interrogate how website members understand the relationship between their online and offline activities, and the relationship between themselves, their physical body and the visual representations of their body. This application of theories that problematize simple conceptions of

online/offline identities marks a potentially new direction for research into pro-eating disorder websites.

This direction may inspire criticism based on an understanding of disordered eaters as isolated and abnormal individuals. It is easy to discount anything one defines as 'madness'. However, only a thorough investigation of the way disordered eaters construct their bodies corporeally and virtually will bring us any closer to understanding the perverse nature of the fluid-self where the body becomes the enemy.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Researching the eating disordered body online

> 'To heal anorexics and help others, we need to study the niches they've fled. That's where culture-wide gender and media oppression explanations err... We need thick description, not righteous anger.'
>
> (O'Connor, 2000: 8)

The value of a case study

In order to address the question of how users of pro-eating disorder websites represent their bodies online, one website was chosen for in-depth analysis. Case studies are often critiqued for a lack of generalizability. However, Yin argues this critique ignores the difference between statistic and analytic generalization. The point of a case study, he argues, is 'to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistic generalization)' (1994: 10). Thus, throughout this study, observations will be compared to the existing body of research to ask whether they support, contradict or expand upon existing theories.

Case studies are valuable because they examine the voices and perspectives of subjects and the interactions between these subjects in the context in which they take place (Tellis, 1997). An analysis of multiple websites was considered for this research. However, a single website was deemed preferable because it would allow a greater depth of analysis and avoid the problems of overgeneralization and discontextualization that cross-website comparison entails.

The particular website was chosen over other pro-eating disorder sites for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is unusually large in both scale and scope, providing data about many

different individuals, operating within the same environment. It is also unusually sophisticated, providing options for online embodiment, communication and interaction not available on other sites. Data on the site is also easily accessible.

Analyzing discourse

Discourse analysis techniques were used to guide data collection and analysis. This methodology entails a close examination of the process of communication based on the theoretical postulate that discourses 'always operate in relation to power... [and] are part of the way power circulates and is contested.' (Hall, 1992: 295). The power of discourse to regulate individual bodies runs through much of the work of Foucault, who investigated how categorizations such as madness and homosexuality have been used to control and shape individual bodies (1961/1989, 1975/1977).

Since self-representation is so central to body dissatisfaction, discourse analysis can be seen as a particularly valuable methodology for the investigation of disordered eating. Walstrom draws parallels between therapy and discourse analyses because they both focus on how eating disorders are produced, sustained and dismantled through personal narratives (2000: 243).

The methodological process employed in this project combines two analytical techniques. The first is Fairclough's three-stage method of discourse analysis, which analyzes the formal properties of the text, the intertextual elements and the socio-cultural context of the text's production and reading (2001: 21 – 22). This method, however, is geared toward analyzing text, so visual analysis techniques, such as those outlined by G. Lee (2001), were used to create a modified process for visual images.

Other methodologies such as content analysis and interviews were also considered. Content analysis can provide an empirical summary of large amounts of data; however, in order to choose meaningful categories for analysis an in-depth understanding of the data is required. Interviews, while a potentially illuminating methodology, were not pursued due to ethical concerns.

Conducting research online

As the pro-eating disorder movement exists almost entirely online, it can only be examined in this context (Johnson, 2003: 1). However, the way that the Internet is conceptualized affects the methodological and analytical process. The nature of online activity, however, is highly contextual and rather than making assumptions, this research will seek to explain how individuals use the Internet in this particular context.

The possibility that individuals engage in deception and identity play online; use exaggerated or offensive language in order to provoke reactions; or compartmentalize their lives, expressing only one side of their personality, are all potential pitfalls of online research. However, these tactics are also present in the offline world and if adequately identified the existence of these practices can also be valuable explanatory tools.

Given its constantly changing and highly linked nature, Internet researchers often have difficulty establishing their sampling frame. Pro-eating disorder websites are often closely linked to each other (Johnson, 2003) and this website is no exception. However, this project examines only material that is hosted on the site.

Studying vulnerable populations

Users of pro-eating disorder websites are clearly a vulnerable population, some are minors and some struggle with a variety of mental health problems. The Association of Internet Researchers Ethical decision-making and Internet research guide (AoIR, 2002) was used to guide ethical considerations.

All the materials examined as part of this project were either completely publicly accessible, or required a simple email-password combination in order to access the information. Within the password protected area, prominent text warns users that all contributions can be viewed by the public.

The posting of insulting and hateful messages is quite common, within the password protected area, and there was evidence of other researchers and journalists soliciting contacts. It seems reasonable to assume that most users understood their contributions could be subject to critique and analysis.

The site's terms of use policy forbids the download of site materials without permission. An e-mail was sent to the site moderator outlining the proposed research project and asking for permission to include materials from the site in the research. However, no response was received and therefore this research was conducted in compliance with the site's terms of use policy. Individual members were not contacted due to the risk of emotional harm.

An overview of the methods and ethical considerations employed by similar studies was conducted to establish research norms. The majority of these studies appeared to use direct quotations, site names and identifying information with no discussion of ethics, implying that since this material could be accessed by anyone it was ethically permissible to analyze and reproduce this information.

Giles, in his discourse analysis of pro-eating disorder sites, addresses some of the ethical considerations and withholds specific details such as site names and addresses (2006). Walstrom, who was herself a recovering anorexic and was participating in the support group she examined prior to and concurrent with her research, appears to be the only researcher who made contact with the individuals under study (2000).

After a thorough consideration of the ethics of the proposed research, the decision was made to protect the anonymity of the site and the individuals involved as much as possible, offering greater protection than the majority of studies in this area. The site name and address will be withheld. All quotations, usernames and personal details included in this research have been altered slightly, while maintaining the spirit of the original, in order to protect the anonymity of their authors. Given these precautions and the limited nature of this research project, it is unlikely the site or any individual user will be harmed as a result of this investigation.

This research project

> 'Practically all (91 %) of the [pro-eating disorder] web sites were open to the public, and most (79 %) had interactive features. A large majority (84 %) offered pro-anorexia content, and 64 % provided pro-bulimia content … Thirty-eight percent of the sites included recovery-orientated information or links. Common themes were success, control, perfection, and solidarity.' (Borzekowski et al., 2010)

An introduction to the site

The website chosen for study is one of the largest pro-eating disorder websites. It has its own domain name and is supported by the donations of its more than 66,000 registered

members. Rather than focusing on a specific eating disorder, it intends to create a supportive environment where disordered eaters can talk about whatever concerns them.

The majority of the content was created by members. A list of recent activity shows that new content is added every few minutes. All the features of modern social networking sites are present. Users can create profiles, establish a list of friends, send personal messages, upload photos and artwork, participate in forums and maintain a blog. This is a far cry from the eclectic collections of images and personal thoughts that constituted the first pro-eating disorder websites.

This site was established by an anorexic teenager. However when she felt she could no longer run the site, she passed its maintenance to a male friend, who says he has never had an eating disorder. The timeline of this process is unclear, however, the site has been in existence since at least 2007.

The moderator runs a number of different websites, including similar ones for those suffering from depression and for individuals with tattoos and other body modifications. He provides a protective, fatherly presence, telling members, 'There are always some bullies... don't fight with them. Ignore them and let me deal with them.'

He writes that he initially wanted to save people who had eating disorders but, after taking over the site, realized the importance of community it offered. Although he sometimes wonders if he is doing the right thing in maintaining the site, he believes the support the site provides outweighs the harm it might do.

Summary of methods and procedures

The site hosts more than 100,000 pictures with thousands of comments, 500,000 forum posts, 1000 pieces of art work, 60,000 member profile pages, as well as, an uncountable numbers of blog posts. New content is added every minute. An examination of all these materials is clearly impossible given the time scale and methodological structure of this project.

Research was conducted in two main phases. In the first phase, every section of the site was examined in order to identify key themes and practices. For smaller, discrete sections the entire content was examined; for larger sections, only the most recent content was examined. In the largest, most active sections such as the photo galleries, forums and blogs, only several

hundred items were reviewed. While within this limited examination key themes were clearly present, it should be remembered that the data on this site appears to date back several years. There is a possibility that older information is of a significantly different calibre and an equal possibility that a researcher accessing the same site several years from now will identify different themes.

In the second phase, individual data items were examined using the discourse analysis techniques laid out in the methodology section. Fairclough's three stages of analysis (2001) were applied to textual items, with a modified three stage analysis for visual items.

Fairclough's technique is, however, a bottom-up approach designed to analyze single data items. If this research only examined individual items, it would fail to address things that were not said and discourses that were excluded or marginalized due to the technical and social structure of the site. Therefore while individual items were analyzed using a bottom-up approach, concurrently the site itself was analyzed using a top-down approach, first asking what social-cultural context governed the production and reading of data on the site, then asking what discursive linkages and textual/visual properties were prevalent due to the structure of the site itself.

There are many explicit sub-cultures within the site, including fitspo (an area focused on fitness and exercise), bitchspo (focused on expressions of anger and rebellion) and scenespo (an area where thinness is part of wider fashion culture with clothing, hair, makeup, piercings and tattoos also playing a large role). While a full analysis of all these subcultures would be fascinating, it is outside the bounds of this research project. Instead this research focuses on the dominant discourses within the community that apply to the majority of members.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

The body as a unifying force

> 'My body looks exactly like yours.
> Bellybutton ring and everything.'

> 'i won't go a day without logging in here, cause it feels like home.'

Members describe the site as their 'home' and other users as 'family.' Expressing feelings of isolation in regards to their offline homes and families, the site becomes a substitute home where individuals find the acceptance and support they feel is not available offline.

This is a highly cohesive community. The use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' demonstrates that members include themselves with and feel able to speak for others. In order to maintain this community, the site's code of conduct forbids any behavior deemed antisocial, offensive or disruptive. While insulting and hateful commentary remains common, this stance toward criticism allows these comments to be excluded or ignored; posters are called 'idiots' or told to 'get a life.'

These observations match those of Giles who found that members of pro-eating disorder websites use negative commentary as an opportunity to assert themselves and define the bounds of their community (2006).

The site invites users to contribute to a discussion on beauty, put themselves forward as beautiful and comment on others beauty. However, this discussion takes place within very defined limits; beauty must be thin, and it is almost exclusively young, white, Western and female. Male bodies and older bodies are marginalized, unable to achieve the standards of beauty espoused on the site. These bodies exist at the sidelines; in their own separate forums, where they sometimes express frustration that they are not accepted as part of the wider community. Non-white bodies are accepted but are racially marked, taking about themselves and being talked about in racial terms. There are no disabled bodies.

Individuals with normal or overweight bodies are accepted on the site as long as they are dissatisfied with their bodies, recognizing thinness as ideal and are actively shaping their bodies towards an ultimate beauty goal. This goal does not necessarily have to be, although it often is, an unhealthily low weight.

In contrast to theories that see the eating disordered body as lacking gender, website users often represented themselves in sexual terms. Members who maintain their breasts despite dramatic weight loss are complimented and envied, and some users say they want to be thin in order to be more attractive to the opposite sex. Although celebrities and models are traditionally seen as the most powerful influences in establishing extreme thinness as desirable, many of the photos seem more influenced by soft-pornography, featuring members kissing or posing in lingerie.

An 160-lb African American woman, who calls herself BlackBeauty, posts a photo of herself lying on a couch in lingerie; she is hoping to lose 12 pounds and says she would not be happy very much thinner. She writes: 'While most of the women on this site have an eating disorder... I have my own goals. I joined the site so that I could make friends and maybe to support people who also support me. I am insecure too.'

In her profile, BlackBeauty says she feels lonely offline; on the site, she can belong somewhere. She wants a support system to help her loose the weight she gained when she turned to alcohol to solve her family and relationship problems.

This is a typical story for site members. They feel isolated in their offline lives and feel that if their bodies were different their offline lives would be better. On the site, they establish close connections with others based on the similarity of their bodies, drawing closer as they share the difficult process of remaking their physical bodies.

Members take comfort in connecting with physically similar bodies and are eager to draw parallels between themselves and other members. Comments such as 'we have exactly the same body' and 'this is just like looking at my reflection' are very common. Users also note shared material items such as furniture, bed sheets, and clothing. As one of the testimonials states: 'I used to feel so alone but when I joined the site I found a group of girls just like me.'

In addition to connecting over similar bodies and lives, the intention to look like other members is also commonly expressed, with comments such as 'I want your thighs,' 'I am going to look like this by the weekend' and 'Can we swap bodies?' This is the essence of 'thinspiration,' representations of the body held up as examples of what one wants to become. From a starting point of physically similar bodies, site members, who meet the base requirements for participation, are also engaged in a process of becoming more like each other as they pursue shared standards of beauty.

The body as art

> 'I want to be a porcelain doll, beautiful, flawless, loved, looked at but never touched. So delicate that you are afraid you'll break me. Nothing behind the flawless smile on my face. It doesn't matter what's inside as long as you don't see.'

In representing their bodies, members often evoke the world of fantasy, describing themselves as goddesses, angels, dolls, princesses, and fairies. These characters are both common idols of childhood feminine fantasies and the literal objects and roles used to act out these desires. On the website, instead of dolls and play-acting, the self-constructed body becomes the literal medium through which these fantasies are expressed.

In areas of the site dedicated to artwork, video and poetry, members represent their ideas of the perfect body. There is, however, a great deal of similarity between the art sections and the, much larger, photo galleries; many of the pieces of artwork are photographs of bodies and many of the photographs in the general galleries are reminiscent of those in the art sections. Individuals see their own bodies as the fragile canvases onto which they work, describing themselves as 'paper,' 'porcelain' or 'china,' language which also reinforces whiteness as the norm.

Other practices that change the appearance of the body canvas, such as tanning, cutting, piercing, plastic surgery, tattoos, clothes, hair dying and nail painting, are also commonly discussed. Users explicitly link these practices to weight loss, rewarding themselves for having achieved certain weights with a haircut, a manicure or a visit to the tanning salon. The thin body is thus a base material with which art can be made.

Tattoos and piercing are highly valued, often presented photographically and commented on in exactly the same way as thin bodies. In both instances, members focus on the pain and commitment necessary achieve the appearance, and other members either state that their bodies are similar or that they intend to make their bodies appear similar.

These modification practices explicitly focus on the surface of the body. The body, as represented, on the website is a two-dimensional phenomenon, as seen through mirrors and photographs. The goal is often to become so thin as to disappear, to be as light as a feather or as thin as paper, visible only through controlled representations of the body canvas.

This focus on the external body is seen as a form of escape from the internal body, controlling and masking the turmoil of the inner body. However, in contrast to Bordo who sees body

control practices as attempts to control a fleshy and organic inner body (1993: 189), website members are more likely to describe an emotional inner body. The beautiful, albeit thin, veneer of the body canvas disguises feelings of depression, anxiety and isolation. Users are instructed: 'keep smiling and fool the world that you are happy with your body.'

The body as a superiority

> 'I can't stand people who get weight loss surgery. It's cheating. I want to yell at them. I worked hard to be thin. It took will-power and months of exercise and restriction.'

There are very few photos of celebrities and models on the site. While these bodies are admired, members recognize that media images are often modified to appear more attractive. In one case, a user states she cannot trust celebrity photos and, in another conversation, actor Jennifer Aniston is criticized for having photos of herself manipulated so she appears thinner in the media.

Members do not seek to replicate the bodies of actual celebrities but rather strive to achieve the idealized fantasy body from which these mediated representations derive. There is a sense of superiority that members do not use manipulative presentation techniques to achieve the appearance of thinness. One user complements another saying 'you are thinner than everyone in Hollywood' and, in reference to the debate over media manipulation, another writes 'I don't want to just look skinny but actually be skinny.'

What is understood to differentiate members from the wider population is not their goals, but their ability to commit to these goals. Articles from mainstream media sources focusing on thinness and dieting are put forward as examples of the fact that site members are not abnormal, they are just abnormally good at achieving the body that everyone apparently wants.

Thinness is presented as extremely simple: 'stop being lazy and eating fatty food, that's all you need to know.' Others are seen as weak because they cannot refuse food. As one user writes: 'I just have a high standard of what just good enough for me, and I am strong enough to do what it takes.'

While it is assumed that everyone finds the thin body desirable, it is also recognized that it is possible to be too thin. Members who present emaciated bodies are often told not to lose any more weight. In a community that focuses on extreme control of the body and food intake, it

is understood that one can lose control of this drive for control (essentially developing a serious eating disorder).

The website describes itself a place where individuals with eating disorders can find balance. In the lengthy testimonials section, many users state that they would have committed suicide or be in a much worse situation if it was not for participation in the site. One user calls the site 'a way for the dying to avoid death.'

While it is impossible to know the offline effects of the site, it does appear to provide some balance to the lives of members. Individuals are sometimes encouraged to seek help or treatment, not to lose more weight and to take care of themselves. Self-harm is generally discouraged and there is little evidence of suicidal or truly desperate messages. Members exhibit care and concern for others wellbeing; messages such as 'haven't seen you here in a while. hope you are doing ok' and 'message me anytime if you want to talk' are common.

In the context of a community where the controlled body is the symbol of the superiority of the individual, members actively try to help others maintain this tenuous control. The body becomes the boundary between life and death. Variations on the adage 'eat to live, don't live to eat' are very common and eating enough to live is as important as not living to eat; the body must be maintained as the highest form of living art.

The body as a performance

'I'm going to make myself look like you. No matter what. *screams at body* LOOK LIKE THIS!!!!'

In a series of six photos 21-year-old Kaya poses seductively wearing a red and black corset, black wings and black underwear. Her body is so skeletal that it elicits a great deal of concern from other members; some say she has gone too far, others complement her but tell her not to lose any more weight. Kaya responds, saying she knows she has a serious eating disorder and is in the process of seeking treatment.

Offline, and even on the site, extremely thin bodies are often met with revulsion. However individuals continue to want to exhibit their bodies as works of art. The site provides a place where the body can be presented as art and performed as a representation of the individual.

On the site there are explicit rules to this performance. The body is always presented with disgust, as a work in progress, never as a final totality. Variations on the quotation 'get

beautiful or die trying' are common, but are also sarcastic for it is understood that there is no end to getting beautiful and that every individual (whether sooner or later) will die while still trying to perfect themselves.

BeautyinPain, a young woman from Australia, uploads a photo of herself with the caption 'how much should I lose?' and the subtitle, 'please name my worst features.' Seventeen users comment on the photo; fifteen say she is stunning, perfect just how she is, and the other two say she is beautiful but could work on toning her muscles. BeautyinPain thanks everyone who commented saying: 'you made my year :) after so much hatrid toward my body, youve no idea how much it means to me.'

Members believe express the view that it is vain or embarrassing to be happy with their bodies. When photos are presented on the website, they are often accompanied by captions, such as 'fat, fat, fat' and 'still not thin enough.' However, users expect to have these comments contradicted. If the bodies presented online are criticized, this arouses widespread hostility. Those who present their bodies with the most vehement hate generally receive the most positive commentary, and are overwhelmingly thankful that their bodies can be 'thinspiration' for others.

The large number of carefully posed suggests that many members are proud of their bodies and want them to be seen. It is hard to know how much self-hate is exaggerated when presenting the body online; however, one comment may prove illuminating in this regard. In response to a photo presented with typical negative self-commentary one user responds: 'did you really write "still fat"??? you are just BEGGING for attention.' In a community where negative commentary is normally responded to immediately, weeks after the comment was posted there were still no responses to the accusation of exaggerating self-hate.

Pollack (2003: 247) points out that young people often articulate self-identity through discourses of personal freedom, risk and danger. As part of the all-important task of constructing a personal narrative, the performance of self-hate, the proverbial troubled childhood, is an important step in justifying the risks of pursuing bodily perfection. The visual presentation of body pride combined with a textual presentation of body hate is part of the social standard of personal narrative construction on the site, signalling that self-hate has been addressed and controlled through body modification.

While the body in many cases is performed to communicate the individual's superior moral character in channelling self-dissatisfaction into the beauty quest, this performance can also

be a call for help to stop the cycle. LillieBeth, a Canadian teenager, writes in her blog that she tried to tell her best friend she had an eating disorder but her friend didn't understand. She concludes: 'Fuck you. I don't need your help. I'll just keep doing it until you see I'm not OK.'

The body as an outlet

> 'I want to scream. I don't know why but I think it would help. But if you scream, they will think you are crazy and lock you up. So I'll just stay silent and wish I could scream.'

'Bitchspo' is a special area of the site dedicated to expressions of rebellion. In one photo, Sunshine, an American teenager, holds her middle finger up toward the camera, her other arm extended to take her picture. Her eyes look out of the top corner of the frame and a teddy bear's foot is just visible in the bottom corner. In a photo-editing program, she has completely erased her mouth and written over the top STFU (an abbreviation for 'shut the fuck up'). The next photo replicates the first, with the word FAT replacing STFU.

This idea of voiceless rebellion is a common one on the site; members photograph themselves with their mouths covered with duct tape or measuring tape. The refusal to allow food into the mouth is a corollary to the inability to express oneself through speech. In the absence of the ability to speak about problems, the body becomes the mechanism through which emotions are communicated.

Members express a great deal of anger toward family, friend and the media, both for setting unrealistic standards and for standing in the way of the pursuit of these standards. However, members feel voiceless, unable to respond to these pressures. Daily annoyances are frequently detailed in member blogs, often accompanied by apologies that the site is the only place the user can talk about their problems. Practical advice on how to solve problems is almost never given. Instead the website is simply a venue where emotion can be expressed.

The body is similarly seen as an expression of anger, rather than a solution to problems. Some members engage in self-harm, and speak about cutting themselves in very similar terms to the way that they speak about controlling their weight, as a release of anger and emotion, an activity that calms and controls the body. Cutting is often juxtaposed with controlling eating; when individuals consider their eating out of control they cut themselves, when they are in control of their eating they do not need to cut themselves. Both practices are responses to an emotional situation that cannot be communicated through speech. The body and the website becomes an outlet for the expression of emotion. This expression is

sometimes intended to communicate to others through the medium of the physical body; not 'these are my problems' but 'look what my problems made me do.'

Members, who feel voiceless and isolated, often express that if their bodies were more attractive they would have more friends and their family would take them more seriously. Thus the body is both a tool for communication and, in its ugliness, a barrier that prevents adequate communication.

In Sunshine's first photo, STFU covers an erased mouth. She has forced herself into voicelessness, replacing her mouth with a command not to speak, yet it seems she also feels forced into not speaking. She expresses her anger through the site, photographing herself at home swearing toward the camera and uploading this photo so others can see.

The second photo, where the word 'FAT' covers Sunshine's mouth, provides an interesting contrast to the first. In the first, a command prevents speech, necessitating expression through the medium of body representation. Should the second be interpreted in the same way, with feelings of fatness preventing speech and necessitating expression through the body? Or does this almost identical photo have a different meaning, with fatness preventing eating and the decision to restrict food intake causing the loss of voice?

The body as an anchor and a prison

> 'Keep your little secret and never tell those fake friends on the outside'

> 'I will not betray the thin, beautiful girl inside me.'

Seeing their bodies as communicatory tools, members engage in continual self-surveillance as they attempt to reshape the body to match their fantasy. The physical body, as represented, is never deemed adequate and users do not want to accept their bodies as representing themselves. Mirrors, scales, and cameras are hated for the representations they reflect, which undermine the body fantasy. Members refer to themselves as 'thin girls hiding in fat bodies' and feel that weight loss will reveal the real body to which their mind is connected. As such the physical body in representation and corporeality becomes an object that must be fought, disconnected from the mind of the individual. As one user writes, 'I will starve myself tomorrow. I will NOT accept THIS body.'

Many of the photographs are specific commentary on individual self-surveillance practices; members photograph themselves looking in the mirror, standing on the scale or trying on

clothing. In a series of three photos titled 'alone at home,' anabananabear photographs herself looking critically into the mirror. The photograph mostly shows her in reflection, with only the back of her head visible outside the mirror. The caption reads: 'crying. i feel so fat.'

These images, rather than showcasing the body, describes how anabananabear feels about her body and how, when home alone, she tearfully surveys her body, finding it inadequate. However, many users reply telling anabananabear she looks beautiful and she thanks them.

Although she waits till her family goes out, anabananabear is not alone during this process of self-surveillance. The majority of photos on the site are apparently taken by the user themselves, often reflected in a mirror, specifically for inclusion on the site. As such the community and its standards are present while the body is prepared for presentation.

The few pictures that show members in social settings are often used to emphasize the isolation the user feels when her body appears in the offline world. Hiimjessica, an American teenager, posts a photo of herself grinning for the camera on the beach. She stands close to the photographer, looking upward to someone taller than herself. She writes, 'from the photo you'd think im happy. but notice im wearing my shirt at the beach :(.'

This image emphasizes the mask users feel they must wear offline, where others do not understand how to read the signs with which they present their bodies. The influence of the community is felt during everyday life, and events from everyday life are retroactively reinterpreted online. In contrast to theories of online embodiment that see the Internet a place where users can establish parallel identities or where offline individuals are tethered to their online identities, members of this website anchor their online identities in their offline bodies.

The offline body is put forward as a commitment to the site and its ideals. Members list numerous attributes in their forum signature, marking different highest weights, lowest weights, current weights and goal weights. A listing of progressively lower weights signals a continual commitment to the community and provides a badge of progress. Users also commonly list their (apparently real) names, ages and locations in their profile. While there is no way of verifying this textual information, offline attributes are overwhelmingly what define users on the site.

The body becomes the physical anchor that connects the online and offline experiences of members. It is the offline body that defines the online user, but, often, it is the online

community that represents the way the body is understood. On the site, the user's 'real' body and 'real' feeling about their body, kept hidden offline, can be revealed.

Tiny, a twenty-two year old American, uploads a photo of herself, pale and apparently asleep in hospital with a feeding tube in her nose. This picture was clearly not taken by her, and was probably not intended for upload onto the site. This image, which in many contexts would be seen as a terrible example of a disease ravaged body, becomes a symbol of strength and rebellion on the site. Other members emphasize with the Tiny, telling her 'fuck those doctors' and encouraging her to stay strong. They detail their experiences with forced feeding and express sadness that Tiny had to go through the process. As part of the online community, offline events take on new meanings and users insulate themselves against these events through community discourse.

It is impossible to know the full extent of the effects of community membership in the offline world, the extent to which members feel more comfortable, and genuine in their online bodies and identities than their offline equivalents. However, if members are to be believed, the online community is the primary means by which they evaluate themselves and the offline becomes the time that a individuals play with alternative identities. Users state that the site is the only place they feel safe or able to express themselves. The online standards by which users evaluate their bodies are kept separate from others offline; however, this does not diminish the power of the community. As one user writes: 'I didn't tell anyone else about these secret, hidden parts of my life which became the whole thing.'

The body in convergence

> 'My life follows Ana's instructions,
> 'She's my salvation and my destruction.'
> 'Ana is my best friend. She will lead me to thinness.'

Writing in 1996, Hesse-Biber describes what she calls the cult of thinness as having all the hallmarks of a religious cult except a spiritual leader (10). However, online it appears that leaders have been found in the personifications of anorexia and bulimia as Ana and Mia. The words Ana and Mia are very common on pro-eating disorder sites, often part of site names and used more frequently than their longer form equivalents. Their use is so widespread this terminology has been unquestioningly adopted by much of the research literature, often simply understood as a shortened form of the respective conditions.

However, these terms are much more than just an abbreviation. A quasi-religious movement has been built around these personified disorders. Johnson, for instance, investigates how this movement was built in reference to Christianity, with the Ten Commandments becoming the Thin Commandments; the 23rd Psalm, the Ana Prayer; and the Apostles Creed, the Ana Creed (2003).

Ana is the personification of anorexia in female form and, the less common, Mia, of bulimia. Ana and Mia are understood as having a perfect body and perfect behaviours. However, neither are depicted in artwork nor are the specific qualities of their bodies referred to. It is as if their bodies have achieved such thinness that they cease to exist, fulfilling a common fantasy disordered eaters. Users address posts and diary entries to Ana, and create letters and instructions from her.

Given her disembodied nature, Ana can be both a separate persona, with whom the user communicates and who acts as a guide or an example, or as an internalized part of the individual themselves, one of many conflicting voices in the user's head. Ana is a friend who helps the individual along the path to thinness, giving support, strength and instruction, but members also speak of physically being Ana.

In her investigation of eating disorder support groups, Walstrom refers to eating disordered voices and her battle against her own anorexic voices (2000: 244). Ana and Mia can be understood as these eating disordered voices, the side of an individual that despises the body. However, where previously the voice was isolated specific to the individual, the pro-eating disorder movement brings these voices together, creating a collective embodiment of individual eating disordered voices.

When website members represent their bodies online, they provide successive iterations in establishing what the perfect body means within the community, actively building the rules of the 'cult of thinness'. Online bodies become quasi-communal property, with users defining themselves and their goals in relation to other members' bodies. These body representations define what it means to live with Ana, to follow Ana and to be Ana. The cult of thinness has found a spiritual leader in the collective bodies of its members, who articulate their own feelings through the collective mouths of these idols.

Members use the tools of the online environment to create virtual bodies that exist within strict communal boundaries. However, these bodies are built from representations of offline

bodies that, due to the understanding of the body as a communicatory tool, have themselves become virtual.

Moving forward

In light of these findings, several areas for further research become apparent. Firstly, alternative methodologies could be employed. A content analysis of data on the site is an obvious next step and could address questions pertaining to prevalence of these representational practices and establish whether there is any correlation between these practices.

Interviews and ethnographic research would also add greatly to research in this area. Both methodologies, however, are rare due to ethical concerns. A book currently in production by Pascoe and Boero will be the first, to the knowledge of this researcher, to include interviews with users of pro-eating disorder websites (C. Pascoe, personal communication, 2010). This does not, however, negate the utility of future interviews that would allow participants to explain themselves in their own words. In light of the observation that feelings of voicelessness seem to drive individuals to communicate through body modification, interviews would facilitate new channels for communication.

A second direction for further research would be to expand the data under investigation. There have been numerous content and discourse analyses of multiple pro-eating disorder websites; however, few specifically address issues of body representation. It would be interesting to see if the observations from this website hold in other pro-eating disorder websites, especially small personal sites, those that are more explicitly committed to promoting eating disorders, and those that are not publicly accessible.

These findings could also be compared to other types of site to see which self-representational practices persist. A research project previously carried out by this researcher on a social networking site committed to bodybuilding identified numerous similar and analogous themes. Rather than examining disordered eating as a category unto itself, we should seek to explain how these practices are situated within a wider culture of body modification and representation.

A cross-media study of certain key discourses identified in this research would also further understanding in this area. This study observed self-representational practices that seemed more influenced by pornography, art and fantasy than the traditionally implicated celebrity

and fashion culture. More research is this area is necessary, however, in order to identify the discursive structures that shape the eating disordered body.

Lastly, research in this area very rarely addresses issues of freedom and harmfulness. While this was not the goal of this research, questions of harm and individual agency, while exceedingly difficult, clearly deserve to be addressed in this area. Further research should actively question common discursive patterns that eating disorders are a 'problem' and a 'disease' from which certain individuals 'suffer.' Rather we should interrogate the social structures in which these practices are embedded.

Further research in this field must take a critical approach to the existing classifications of normality and abnormality and the distinctions between online and offline bodies; marginalizing disordered eaters and simplifying self-representational practices will do little to further understandings of the increased virtuality of the highly-mediated body.

CONCLUSION

On the website, members are united through representations of their offline bodies. Expressing feelings of isolation and loneliness in regards to their offline lives, online they find solidarity in sameness. Representations of the body become quasi-communal, with users defining themselves and their goals in relation to others. These representations also define the overall goals of the community, personified as Ana and Mia.

These representations of the body become the canvas through which personal narratives are built. The body is dressed up and performed, modified and controlled as a representation of the individual's personality. This body canvas is a mask that hides emotional turmoil in the offline world and expresses it in the online one.

Online, the appearance of the body, so elusive in the offline world, can be highly controlled through the selective use of photographs and text. This highly controlled online body is thus felt to better represent the self than the offline body.

As part of a modern society that views the body as a malleable object, the move online seems to provide a new stage in this process. Virtuality is a tool used to realize offline goals of beauty and belonging, control and self-expression. The secrecy of the community is part of its allure. Members feel isolated but superior offline among others who do not understand the symbolic language of disordered eating.

Thinness is one of many symbols of body control within the community, part of a package of modifications that includes tattoos and tanning, clothing and cutting. It is, however, seen by many members as the ultimate expression of bodily control because it reduces the body itself, bringing the outward appearance closer to what is believed to be underneath and providing the material from which other art is created.

While there is little explicit reference to celebrity and fashion culture, general ideas of body perfectibility pervade. Beginning from the first pro-eating disorder websites, users began to take control of how their body fantasies were represented, allowing them to develop a voice that they felt was hidden offline. The online body is represented in relation to fantasy, angles, goddesses and dolls, combining the ideals of fragility and power.

Voicelessness and isolation appear to be key factors in driving members modify their bodies and embrace self-actualization online. With disordered eating affecting mainly young, affluent, Western women and teenagers, it must be asked whether this demographic experiences greater feelings of voicelessness and isolation than others, or whether are there equivalent body modification practices in other demographics.

To participate in this community, the online body must be anchored in the offline, linking and existing in both realms. Members choose and shape the online social structure that governs how they understand their bodies. Often individuals see their offline identities as the mask and the online environment as the only place where the 'real' body can reveal itself. As a biological organism, however, the body corpus remains in the offline world. There is only one physical body, regardless of the configuration of symbols and signs used to interpret it. In the highly mediated realm of online body modification, the offline body becomes increasingly virtual, a tool with which individuals play a potentially dangerous information game.

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