

Inside I am Screaming: The Internet and Eating Disorders

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Abstract

This article investigates the use of online communities by eating disorder sufferers such as Anorexics and Bulimics and examines the arguments and issues surrounding the role of Pro-Ana (pro-anorexic) websites.

Introduction

Teenagers and young people are avid and consistent users of the Internet. Young girls in particular use the Internet to connect with friends using email, chat and message services such as MSN, as well as writing homepages and blogs (Pew Internet & American Life 2002). However, an unexpected community group has formed in this demographic, which is loosely referred to as 'Pro-Ana'. Pro-Ana describes someone who is 'pro-anorexic' and for Bulimics the term used is Pro-Mia. In this definition, people who identify as 'Pro-Anorexic' or 'Pro-Bulimic' embrace their eating disorder (ED) and generally consider it a lifestyle choice and not an illness or disorder (Ana's Underground Grotto website).

On the Internet, the term is commonly used in relation to eating disorder websites, with 'Pro-Ana' or 'Pro-Mia' describing a web-based movement or community which views eating disorders such as Anorexia in a positive light (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pro-ana). Pro-Ana sites represent themselves as online communities for those who are *existing* Anorexics and as such are not intended (as is frequently assumed) to lure non-sufferers into the illness. To the people who join them, they can be 'a place' that accepts their status without moral censure or social stigma as well as a site of advice, tips and support from fellow anorexics to help them become 'better' anorexics. While some of the Pro-Ana sites will also provide links to recovery and health sites, being 'Pro-Ana' symbolises a choice *not* to go into recovery. To an Anorexic, if you identify as 'Pro-Ana', then by definition you have chosen to live as an Anorexic or Bulimic at this point in time. The term 'permarexic' can also be used to describe those people who choose to live with their ED for the foreseeable future.

Ninety percent of the eating disorders cases diagnosed are girls and women (APA DSM-IV-TR 2000), with most cases identified in late adolescence and early adulthood. Hsu (2001) has further identified it as a disorder prevalent in young, intelligent women of high social standing. As this demographic is a high user of the online environment, the proliferation of ED communities is of particular concern to eating disorders support groups (ANAD 2006). While women are considered to be more at risk from eating disorders, it is believed that between 5 to 10 percent of people suffering from Anorexia are male, and approximately 10 to 15 percent of people with Bulimia are male. Men who suffer from eating disorders are generally found to participate in jobs or sports that require physical perfection. It is thought these percentages may actually

be higher, as some men may be reluctant to reveal they have what has come to be viewed as a 'female' problem (National Institute of Health 1993).

Eating Disorders Overview

Eating disorders (EDs) are characterised by a preoccupation with weight that results in severe disturbances in eating and subsequently other behaviours. Eating disorders embrace Anorexia, Bulimia and generic eating disorders such as purging, bingeing and night eating.

The two most high profile eating disorders are Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa. Anorexia can be defined as essentially self-starvation, as this disorder involves a refusal to maintain a minimally normal body weight, a distorted body image and a fear of obesity or weight-gain (CEED 2006). People who have Anorexia generally develop unusual eating habits such as avoiding food and meals, picking out a few foods and eating them in small amounts, weighing their food, and counting the calories of everything they eat. Its incidence is increasing in the Western world and it has been described as one of the most lethal psychiatric disorders (Eagle et al 1995; Lucas et al 1999 in Hsu 2001).

Sufferers of Bulimia are involved in repeated episodes of binge eating, followed by ways of trying to purge the food from the body to prevent expected weight gain by utilising methods such as self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, enemas, or medications fasting, and/or excessive exercise to control weight (CEED 2006).

Medical practitioners attribute EDs to a wide range of factors including a preoccupation with perfectionism (Hewett, Fiett & Ediger 1995)¹, the cultural influences of dieting (Hsu 1997), a need to control their environment (Bulik & Kender 2000; Emmons 1994), which some theorists also link to family dysfunction (Dare et al 1994 and Le Grange et al 1992 in Hsu 2001), difficulty in managing the stress of growing up (Bruch 1978, Hsu 1983), and the influence of the media (Hesse-Biber 1996; Rich 1999; Shade 2003) It is interesting to note that a distinctive feature of eating disorders such as Anorexia is that they uniformly appear in societies where food is abundant (Polivy & Herman 2002 in Shade 2003).

¹ Many studies have also been carried out to research the relationship between eating disorders and OCD (e.g. Rosen & Leitenberg 1982; Rothenberg 1983); with Rothenberg finding that eating disorders are a modern form of obsessive-compulsive disorder that usually begins in adolescence.

The Pro Ana/Mia Web Site Debate

Quod Me Nutrit Me Destruit

The above is Latin for 'what nourishes me also destroys me' and is the favourite slogan of one of the Internet's largest eating disorder communities².

At the height of its popularity (2000-2001), the Pro-Ana/Mia community (now onwards referred to as simply Pro-Ana) could be found across hundreds of websites (Wikipedia 2006). However, in late 2001, the American National Association of Anorexia (ANAD) lobbied large web servers such as Yahoo.com and MSN.com to remove Pro-Ana websites in the interests of public safety. Media celebrity Oprah Winfrey was a key player in supporting the removal of Pro-Ana sites and some detractors point to the anomaly of a woman who continues to diet and share her struggle with weight loss in the mass media, wanting to shut these sites down³. However, their removal from large web-servers has not obliterated them, resulting in these communities being pushed further underground, and some would say thus increasing their lure to the teenage users of the Internet.

In order to research this article, I had to spend some time following dead links and doing diligent searching until I came across some functioning sites that catered to the Pro-Ana community⁴. The nature of the public's attitude towards many of these sites is such that they must change addresses constantly to avoid censure, or close voluntarily as a result of harassment and flaming, or are being arbitrarily closed down by their ISPs. The Pro-Ana communities manage to stay alive by frequently changing site addresses and communicating new web addresses with their community group.

To their detractors, all Pro-Ana sites are automatically labelled as a type of recruitment tool for encouraging others into an eating disorder. However the 'pro' does not actually mean 'promotion'. It means pro or 'for' the Anorexic, as Pro-Ana sites claim to exist as a venue for existing sufferers to talk to someone, whether they intend to continue with their eating disorder or seek to give it up. All the sites that I visited carried a disclaimer along the lines of 'If you do not have an eating disorder then it is better for you if you do not develop one' and the 'Ana by Choice' website disclaimer reads in part:

This site does not encourage that you develop an eating disorder. This is a site for those that ALREADY (writer emphasis) have an eating disorder and do not wish to go into recovery. Warning! Some material here may be triggering.

² As well as evidently being tattooed on the actor Angelina Jolie's stomach.

³ While not every person who goes on a diet becomes an Anorexic, it has been argued that when young people diet during their early childhood years, they are more prone to becoming overweight teens and adults. Being overweight early in life increases the risk for maladaptive eating attitudes and elevated weight concerns, as well as negative self-evaluations and body dissatisfaction (Natenshon, 1999).

⁴ I have made a decision not to publish Pro-Ana website addresses in this article, for a number of reasons, including that they addresses change frequently; but will gladly provide these to any ACA member who emails me.

Pro-Ana Websites and Support: I found there to be degrees of Pro-Ana websites. While some did not acknowledge the possibility of recovery, others recognised that some sufferers wish to recover from their illness and as such focussed on support and community rather than dieting tips. In this way they provide an important forum for what can be both a marginalised and misunderstood segment of society. For young girls that suffer social stigma and misunderstanding of their eating disorder illness, simply being able to communicate with others who share their problems can be a huge relief:

I am an active bulimic, and I know I would be in serious trouble right now if I wasn't in contact with other mias/anas through the sites I've been on. It's really necessary to get your thoughts and feelings out somehow, and the sites are a great way to do that... (Anon Bulimic)

When you suffer from an eating disorder, you can often feel like a complete freak in society. Why can't I have a normal relationship with food? You think you are crazy. You feel completely alone. You can't tell anybody — nobody understands. You live your life with these secret rituals and safe foods and wonder if you have gone completely off the deep end. Then, you find a pro-ana forum and suddenly realise that you are not completely and utterly crazy. You have a problem, and so do all of these other people, and they have such similar thoughts and habits and fears. These forums are not one-hundred percent about "let's rally and not ever eat!!" They are about finding support and understanding. You are finally able to release everything pent up inside of you, because here they know what it is like (Anon Anorexic)

I think that to take these sites away would be removing a valuable support network that we need to carry on, not with our disease, but with our lives. Most of these people cannot get support from family or friends, and these sites are where they go to talk about what they are going through freely, without being judged (Anon EdNOS Sufferer).

However it is precisely this aspect of community and belonging and how it interfaces with an eating disorder that worries some experts. Bulik and Kendler (2000) argue that when a patient has incorporated his or her eating disorder into his or her identity, then any attempts at recovery or therapy may be viewed as a threat. They believe that unlike patients suffering from other psychiatric disorders, patients with eating disorders are often reluctant to give up or alter their quest for thinness or weight loss. Instead, they embrace their identity as ED sufferers filling their lives with support groups or therapy sessions, and continuing to focus their attention on weight. Pro-Ana communities may in this instance be unintentionally encouraging the eating disorder as they provide an environment and opportunity to belong to the "eating disorder club". Other experts concur, arguing that these 'pro' eating disorder websites are potentially deadly, because they normalise and affirm the very behavior that defines the disease (Hayashi 2006, National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders website, ANAD)

As a supporter of eating disorder sufferers, Karin Davis (National Eating Disorder Information Centre) points out, dealing with Pro-Ana communities should not be about demonizing Pro-Ana supporters. "*The people creating these are not evil,*" she says. "*They obviously find some sort of support and comfort from connecting to others who are struggling with the same thing. On the flip side, they feed off each other's problems.* (www.Healthplace.com).

The dilemma of whether it is acceptable to allow Pro-Ana websites to exist has to sit along side questions such as whether regular headlines in the average 'women's' magazine, such as how a media star has 'dropped two dress sizes in a week', or 'how to do a quick detox before bikini time', may also be harmful to the eating disorder sufferer. Women in Western society are continually bombarded with the message that it is good to be thin and that thin equals beautiful. When a quick 'detox' diet before summer is seen as an acceptable practice for the average Australian woman, censoring Pro-Ana sites that may be able to provide support or valuable links to recovery for a teenager who followed the Atkins diet in her mother's fashion magazine then found she could not stop, could be considered by some as hypocritical. Perhaps now that Spain has banned underweight models in fashion shows (Ninemsn website 17/9/06) and an Australian fashion designer caused a public sensation by using normal size women in a recent fashion week show (Sunday Herald Sun 8/9/06), the time may be right to realistically examine the prevailing culture that creates conditions where ordinary girls and women feel 'too fat'.

Common Aspects of a Pro-Ana Website

Diaries: Many author's of these websites offer personal accounts of their battle with anorexia or bulimia and how they struggle with starvation, how they feel about their body image and how they wrestle with taking control of themselves and their self-image. While the intention of some may well be to inspire weight loss among the website readers, the constant struggle and self loathing and self-castigation of the writers does not make Anorexia or Bulimia appear at all attractive. The diaries are also places to keep logs of food intake as well as 'vent' about unwelcome attempts by family members or friends to make the blogger recover from the disease, or the struggles she has in hiding her lack of eating from the rest of the world.

Discussion Forums: so that members can discuss their eating, their weight and their feelings. The forums act as both a source of dietary information and dieting support as well as somewhere to share their feelings and disclose in a non-judgemental environment. I observed the members to be very supportive and protective of each other

Weight Loss Tools: such as BMI (Body mass index) calculators, homeopathic remedies and pharmaceutical pills. However, a search of Google on any given day will reveal similar information on many sites unrelated to Pro-Ana.

Food and Beverage Hints: glycemic counters, calorie counters, lists of foods that are of negative calorie value, recipes for drinks and foods. In fact,

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all the things you can buy in the average women's or girls' magazine at your local newsagent.

A Recovery Room: this is a discussion forum specifically for recovering eating disorder sufferers. I only located these on a handful of sites.

The more militant Pro-Ana websites would typically contain some of these additional attributes:

Tips and Tricks: mostly a list of methods, tricks and hints on how to make the process of starvation easier. It may give hints on hiding weight loss from relatives and how to pass weekly weigh-ins if parents make a teenager go to a nutritionist or counsellor. These lists may also contain explicit details on how to vomit after meals with the least amount of discomfort or on what to take to make the vomiting occur more quickly, as well as listing which foods are easiest to purge. This section will also contain tips for ways of avoiding eating and not getting caught (e.g. get up early and rinse cereal and milk around in a bowl and leave in the sink so your parents think you ate before them).

Thinspiration: 'thinspiration' does exactly what the name implies, inspire readers to be thin, by displaying pictures of unhealthy skinny models and movie stars. Favourites are pictures of young celebrity role models, including teen stars Lindsay Lohan, Mischa Barton and Nicole Ritchie. Thinspiration also can include articles on being fat, famous people's height and weight, and triggering quotations such as 'Nothing tastes as good as thin feels', 'Thin has a taste all its own' or 'Food hinders progress'. Some Pro-Ana websites also encourage the use of a personal 'Thinspiration book' to always carry around as a means of remembrance when the person cannot be near a computer or they suggest the use of bracelets (see below).

The less militant sites do not contain 'Thinspiration' and may also forbid tips and caution users that they will be banned if they share tips on vomiting, hiding their food, etc. In addition, they may also provide more information available on related areas of danger such as dental problems, heart disease and diabetes as potentially dangerous to ED sufferers.

The ANA Creed (found on Pro-Ana Websites)

- 1) If you aren't thin, you aren't attractive!
- 2) Being Thin is more important than being healthy!
- 3) You must do anything to make yourself look thinner!
- 4) Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty!
- 5) Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards!
- 6) Thou shall count calories and restrict food intake
- 7) What the scale says is the most important thing!
- 8) Losing weight is good, Gaining weight is BAD!
- 9) You can never be too thin!
- 10) Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success!

Pro-Ana/Mia Jewellery

It is also possible to buy bracelets on online at eBay that are marketed specifically to ED sufferers. The bracelets signal the type of eating disorder or stage of the eating disorder a sufferer is currently experiencing. In the ED community a red bracelet signals Anorexia, purple is for Bulimia, green is for binge-eating, black is for self-harm, blue for depression, pink is for ED-NOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified) and orange is for recovering from an eating disorder. For the Anorexic, the bracelet also serves as a type of talisman they can touch or play with, to remind themselves to be strong and not to eat.

Ana is my 'Friend'

The Pro-Anorexia websites are able to provide eating disorder experts unprecedented insights into the world of their patients, revealing an obsession with the disease that may surprise even the most veteran eating disorder observers. For example in some cases, the younger sufferers can be observed to personalise their illness and naming her "Ana" (or "Mia" for girls with symptoms of bulimia), and some girls even worship her as a type of 'deity':

I tried to recover once & i gained so much weight so my savior mia came back to rescue me just when i needed it most.

I broke friends with mia as i hate purging & the damage it did to my oesophagus so now ana has befriended me.

When I refer to Ana, I refer to a person who exists in my mind. Ana tells me not to eat etc. It's a part of my identity. I know Ana is not real, but still, she is very present in my life.

Conclusion

In a democratic society people use the Internet to form both healthy and questionable alliances, that is the nature of the medium. While some argue that Pro-Ana sites should be closed down, others question the ethics of censorship and argue simply banning them does not address the problem. To the people who are pro Anorexia or Bulimia, eating disorders are a lifestyle choice and the Pro-Ana websites are a support group to the people who use them. However many others, including family and friends of ED sufferers as well as medical and mental health professionals view the concept of a pro-eating disorder community as disturbing and dangerous; citing a 'community of practice' argument whereby they argue Pro-Ana websites serve the function of normalising what is an illness, and 'making it ok' to be Anorexic.

I believe this conjunction of the Internet and eating disorders is not well understood and is an area that requires further and ongoing research.

Eating Disorder Signs

Physical signs	Behavioural signs	Psychological signs
Anorexia Nervosa Severe weight loss Periods stopping (Amenorrhoea) Hormonal changes in men and boys Difficulty sleeping Dizziness Stomach pains Constipation Poor circulation & feeling cold	Anorexia Nervosa Wanting to be left alone Wearing big baggy clothes Excessive exercising Lying about eating meals Denying there is a problem Difficulty concentrating Wanting to have control	Anorexia Nervosa Intense fear of gaining weight Depressed Feeling emotional Obsession with dieting Mood swings Distorted perception of body weight and size
Bulimia Nervosa Sore throat / swollen glands Stomach pains Mouth infections Irregular periods Dry or poor skin Difficulty sleeping Sensitive or damaged teeth	Bulimia Nervosa Eating large quantities of food Being sick after eating Being secretive	Bulimia Nervosa Feeling ashamed, depressed and guilty Feeling out of control Mood Swings

Taken from Eating Disorders Association Website
 (<http://www.edauk.com/default.htm>)

Glossary of Terms

Ana – Anorexia Nervosa

Mia or Bella – Bulimia

Pro-Anas and Pro-Mias - Bulimics and Anorexics who embrace their illness as a lifestyle, refusing to admit they are thin, and continuing to strive for weight-loss.

Permarexic – a person who has made the decision to live on only enough food as is necessary to maintain living and has adopted this as a life philosophy.

Rexie – a term used by Anorexics who believe they are living a controlled lifestyle choice as opposed to Anas, who Rexies believe are sick

Thinspiration – quotes or pictures of very thin models or movie stars to act as inspiration to stay thin.

ED – eating disorder.

ED-NOS – Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (vomiting, purging, binge eating).

CW - current weight

GW - goal weight

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