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# Pro-anorexia Communities and Online Interaction: Bringing the Pro-ana Body Online

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## **Abstract**

This article details the making of community and bodies in online environments, specifically the online pro-anorexia community. Building community among members of these groups is particularly fraught because tensions over claims to authenticity permeate these groups. Because these are embodied practices and online spaces are presumably disembodied, participants constantly grapple with authenticity, largely through the threat of the ‘wannarexic’. Participants manage these tensions through engaging in group rituals and deploying individual tools that attempt to make the body evident online. This article documents the way in which tensions around authenticity and embodied practices are managed through treatment of the wannarexic.

## **Keywords**

anorexia, body, eating disorders, embodiment, internet, new media, qualitative analysis

In 2001, *Time* magazine published an article entitled ‘Anorexia Goes High-Tech’ (Reaves, 2001). The article details the proliferation of pro-anorexia (or pro-ana)<sup>1</sup> websites, sites the article claims are

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designed to help anorexics and aspiring anorexics learn techniques for weight loss, hide their disorder from parents and doctors, and support those on deprivation diets. The article claims that: 'If you're a woman on the verge of anorexia, and you visit this site and read the warning (that the site is for anorexics only), chances are you're going to see it as a dare.' The article and the experts interviewed for it criticize the sites for seeking to normalize anorexia, recruit new anorexics, and using celebrity images and high-tech graphics to appeal to young women, those most vulnerable to developing an eating disorder.

Seven years later, in 2008, *Newsweek* published an article entitled, 'Out of the Shadows' (Peng, 2008). Similar to the *Time* article, it detailed the often shocking content of pro-ana sites, the potential danger these sites pose for young women, and the difficulty of eliminating the sites. Importantly, the *Newsweek* article cites a trend away from *individual* (and relatively static) pro-ana websites toward *communities* of people interested in living a pro-ana lifestyle on network sites like Myspace, Xanga, and Facebook. The article suggests that at the same time as these groups have gone 'underground' to avoid being taken down, they have also become more *interactive* and the discussions have become more personal and less focused on technical weight-loss tips than their predecessors. Because these newer online spaces are centered around interaction and community-building, rather than simple information transfer, a psychologist quoted in the article suggests that, though these groups may provide non-judgmental support, they may lure young girls into eating disorders by providing not only tips but also friendship and community.

These articles are but two examples of the hundreds of articles critical of pro-anorexia sites published in the mainstream media since 2000. Popular press articles critical of pro-ana culture promote a sense that these groups and sites are recruiting grounds for eating disorders, are spreading rapidly, and have an immediate negative impact on the young people who view them. These particular articles characterize the moral panic reflected in and perpetuated by this public discussion over the existence and proliferation of these communities.<sup>2</sup>

The *Time* and *Newsweek* articles reflect the reality that with increasing access to new media, those with (or claiming to have) eating disorders have congregated outside of hospitals and clinics,

crafting a thriving pro-eating disorder community on the internet. A pro-ana community can take many forms, a bulletin board, a static website, a blog, groups on social network sites or email groups. There is no offline corollary to these online groups; these groups bring together people who rarely talk about their disorder face to face in non-therapeutic settings (Pascoe and Boero, forthcoming; Warin, 2009). In general, a pro-ana community is one that is non-recovery oriented, offers weight-loss tips, generates support, and provides non-judgmental community that does not take a negative attitude toward eating disorders (Giles, 2006; Shade, 2003).<sup>3</sup> Pro-ana online communities, and specifically these discussion groups, are ways for people to find each other, develop a common language and set of symbols, provide and receive support, and craft what participants call a pro-ana lifestyle. Members also offer and ask for 'thinspiration' or 'thinspo', pictures of exceedingly thin women to inspire participants to continue on their quest for thinness. They share weight-loss tips. Participants are both supportive and incredibly aggressive with one another. They police who is allowed on the sites, guarding against people they call 'wannarexics'. The interactions in these spaces challenge clinical notions of the isolated anorexic and offer a view into a world of anorexia built on interaction and, indeed, community. Given the clinical focus on anorexia as an individual psychopathology, the idea of an 'anorexic community' seems to be a contradiction in terms. Yet, as we and others have found, these sites are indeed communities where people craft and execute individual and communal body projects (Riley et al., 2009; Warin, 2009).

In pro-anorexia online communities women separated by geography, age, and lifestyle log in to share their struggles, goals, triumphs, and failures in living a pro-ana lifestyle. These online discussion groups are organized around body size and bodily practices and, as a result, are fraught with the contradiction that online spaces are fundamentally disembodied ones. This article investigates how members of pro-ana online communities grapple with this contradiction and engage with issues of authenticity and embodiment in online spaces. Because of the disembodied nature of the internet these women need to find and develop ways to make their bodies apparent online. Not surprisingly, authenticity is, thus, a fraught subject in these pro-ana groups because their topics revolve around offline bodily practices central to their individual and group identities. Thus

participants have developed several processes of verification, inexact as they may be, through which they seek to identify those who are truly 'ana'. In this article we argue that participants have developed group rituals and deploy individual tools to bring the body online and to address the quandary of authenticity in the pro-ana online community.

The process of online embodiment in pro-ana discussion groups is similar to that of offline body projects, in that online embodiment is an interactional achievement. Thus, the presence of the online anorexic and the interactional practice of creating a pro-ana community supersede questions about the importance of the materiality of the body and bodily practices. That is, whether or not women are diagnosably anorexic is beside the point. It is the interactional creation of community through discourse that is important. Similarly, in offline interactions, anthropologist Mimi Nichter (2001) found that talking about weight loss and diets is almost ubiquitous among young girls. However, *talking* about diets is far more common than dieting itself. Thus, even in offline environments, what people say they are doing and plan to do with their bodies and what they actually are doing are often different things. In online environments the talk about eating practices is central, since it is the very conversation about bodies and eating that facilitates community and identity.

Engaging in this type of body talk, members of these online environments construct 'a sense of community through a sense of shared embodiment' (Ferreday, 2009: 198). Embodiment online, as offline, is performative, relational, and constructed through discourse, something we call, 'enacting embodiment'. West and Zimmerman (1991) suggest that gender is not something that we simply 'are' but something that we 'do'. Thus, much as the gendered self emerges through interactions with others, so does the embodied self. Just as one cannot opt out of the doing of gender (Blackman, 2008; Butler, 1993; West and Zimmerman, 1991), the doing of embodiment is also not a voluntaristic project. For people to be culturally intelligible they *must* engage in gender performativity (Butler, 1993); similarly, to be intelligible in these particular online communities, participants *must* engage in bodily performativity.

This argument that enacting online embodiment is achieved interactionally and discursively does not mean that material bodies

do not matter or that members' understanding of their flesh and blood bodies and their associated body projects does not inform their self-representations online. The online body of the pro-ana anorexic is a discursive construction, yet this construction remains rooted in the material body in complex ways that create a reciprocal relationship between the pro-ana community, members' representation of their bodies online and their offline bodily practices. Though our focus is on online bodies and communities, we maintain a view of the online and offline body that sees them as constitutive of and constituted by these virtual communities (Shilling, 2003).

While there may be many parallels between enacting embodiment online and off, there remain critical differences between the two constellations of practices. The online body does not exist in some tactile form for others to read as an offline body might. Thus, the analytic separation of enacting embodiment online and off is an important distinction to make in the case of the pro-ana community, where members appear to have different embodiment practices in their virtual and face-to-face communities. Yet, as our online and offline selves and bodies become increasingly intertwined, it will be important to revisit this distinction.

In this article, we argue that participants enact online embodiment interactionally and discursively in these seemingly disembodied online spaces. We look at how people engaged in the bodily practices associated with self-starvation bring their flesh and blood bodies online and how these efforts to authenticate the body online in turn shape the contours of the pro-ana community. When participants claim an authentic pro-ana identity by bringing the body online, they do this both as a group and as individuals. As a group, participants enact online embodiment on these sites through a series of group rituals. These rituals include weigh-ins, posting photographs, food reports and other group activities. By participating in these rituals group members develop tools of authenticity through which they can 'enact online embodiment' individually and lay claim to a pro-ana identity while (and through) depriving others of it, usually through labeling them a 'wannarexic'. These tools of authenticity include knowledge, aggression and examples of experience. Through these tools participants gain authority in a given group and thus help to police group boundaries and norms.

## **Bodies, Eating and New Media**

### *Framing Eating Disorders*

Examinations of the online pro-ana world represent the latest step in an evolving cultural understanding of the emotions and ideologies underpinning self-starvation practices. Historically, eating practices we now see as disorders, such as self-starvation and intentional purging have been imbued with moral and religious meanings (Eckermann, 1997; Vandereycken and van Deth, 1990). Voluntary self-starvation was regarded as a spiritual practice, a form of demon possession or a way to get closer to a divine that was distinctly feminine (Brumberg, 2000; Vandereycken and van Deth, 1990). With the rise of the disciplines in the late 19th century the meanings of self-starvation moved from the spiritual to the medical realm (Eckermann, 1997; Hepworth, 1999; Brumberg, 2000; Vandereycken and van Deth, 1990). Understandings of self-starvation moved from religious ones to medical or psychological ones which find the roots of these practices in a family system and claim they are buttressed by a sexist society (Brumberg, 2000; Vandereycken and van Deth, 1990). That said, the moral meanings which formed the basis of religious understandings of self-starvation continue to undergird medical models as well (Eckermann, 1997). Though we now operate under a highly medical/psychological model of anorexia and other eating disorders, some authors argue that even with this more psychologized understanding of self-starvation there are still moral meanings associated with these practices, particularly as individual and social health are increasingly seen as moral obligations of good citizenship (Boero, 2007; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Metzl, 2010). Hesse-Biber (1996) argues that thinness is a 'cult' in which thin is sacred and fat is profane. This spiritual and moral dichotomy is in part what spurs the current war against fat while implicitly sanctioning and encouraging eating disordered practices, which are then in turn imbued with their own moral meanings (Gordon, 2000).

Medical and psychological research indicates that eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness; about 10 percent (Gremillion, 2002; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006; Koski, 2008; Warin, 2009). Excluding subclinical cases (or those that are not serious enough to warrant medical or psychiatric treatment), eating disorders affect between 1 and 4 percent of young adult women (Shorter et al., 2008). Seemingly, eating disorders are increasing as

diagnoses have risen more than 50 percent since the 1970s (Gremillion, 2002). Most who receive a clinical diagnosis never fully recover from the disorder, and many continue in cycles of recovery and relapse for multiple years (Gremillion, 2002). Given these rather grim statistics, it is understandable that the existence of online communities is of concern to those who are invested in understanding the causes and cures of eating disorders.

Not surprisingly eating disorders are a gendered phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> Women are far more likely than men to engage in disordered eating (at a ratio of roughly 10 to 1) (Gordon, 2000; Hesse-Biber et al., 2006). In fact 90–95% of the sufferers of anorexia and bulimia are women (Koski, 2008). In particular, women who identify as more feminine are more likely to develop certain eating disorders and, though masculinity is increasingly predicated on being ‘fat-free’ and building up muscle mass, this focus on thinness rarely leads to traditionally defined eating disorders (Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Pritchard, 2008). In spite of evidence linking normative femininity to eating disorders, most traditional forms of treatment do not emphasize developing a feminist identity or integrate feminist critiques of feminine ideals that emphasize thinness and body perfection (Koski, 2008; Warin, 2009).

Because of their gendered nature, eating disorders have been of particular interest to feminist scholars. Feminist theorizing about eating disorders both builds on and critiques medical and psychological models. In general feminist scholars have suggested that we need to better see the connections between eating disorders and the requirements of normative femininity (Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1993; Warin, 2009). Second-wave feminists analyzed anorexia as a response to normative expectations of femininity and women’s lack of power and control under a system of male oppression (Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1986; Orbach, 1986; Warin, 2009). These analyses did not question the diagnosis of anorexia and bulimia as pathologies, only the lack of a gendered analysis of their etiology (Bordo, 1993; Warin, 2009).

Recent feminist theorizing has taken a more discursive approach to self-starvation, focusing on the ways in which constructions of femininity and the thin ideal fundamentally constitute the disorders themselves (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1993; Bray, 1994, 1996; Warin, 2009). Expectations of femininity are contradictory, and anorexia represents both resisting and acquiescing in normative femininity.

In this way social control is 'etched' on the anorexic body (Bray, 1994, 1996; Gremillion, 2002). This relationship between social control and the body has been interrogated by feminist scholars and scholars of the body. It is not simply that bodies are controlled, but that bodies and subjectivities are fundamentally shaped through the operation of modern power. Thus, the self-discipline and control often associated with anorexics can be seen as the appropriate 'doing' of self-surveillance. If anorexia represents self-control, self-discipline, and will power, bulimia symbolizes the opposite, a lack of control, will power, and discipline (Allen, 2008; Bordo, 1993; Hornbacher, 1999). This holds true for the way in which online communities frame anorexia and bulimia as well (Allen, 2008). While both anorexia and bulimia can be seen as deviant behaviors (Darmon, 2009), the character qualities associated with bulimia imply an even more stigmatized position. With its focus on the way in which social control and definitions of femininity fundamentally constitute modern notions of disordered eating, it is this latter iteration of feminist theorizing that is perhaps most helpful in analyzing online pro-ana communities.

### *Online Communities*

Extreme and 'deviant' communities such as pro-anorexia and pro-suicide groups, where stigmatized and isolated individuals may find like-minded others and support for their practices and identities (Adler and Adler, 2008; Bell, 2007; Sanders, 2005), proliferate on the internet. Internet discussion groups bring together marginalized individuals and allow participants anonymity as well as the opportunity to experiment with their identities (Gavin et al., 2008). Thus, the internet has facilitated the coming together of once isolated and marginalized individuals with others like them in a place that offers the safety of physical distance and anonymity. Before the spread of digital communication most anorexics would only meet with others like themselves while in treatment programs (ironically rendering those the places where they learned to be 'more' anorexic).<sup>5</sup> Given this important role in community-building, these online spaces should not be thought of as *virtual* communities, but as *real* communities based on real human interaction convening in a virtual space (Campbell, 2004; Rheingold, 1993; Riley et al., 2009).

The development of an 'ana-language' and the formalization and legitimization of specific rituals sustain the online pro-ana community (Day, 2007; Riley et al., 2009). The sites feature 'how to' tips about how to lose weight and avoid food, thinspiration, BMI calculators and calorie counters (Maloney, 2008; Riley et al., 2009). Participants often explain their behaviors in ways that are more positive and agentic than medical discourses which tend to focus on anorexia as pathology. This reframing provides participants a sense of control, accomplishment and attractiveness (Perez, 2007). Their eating disorders in many ways transform from individual pathologies to collective actions they enact through their communal identity work (Whitehead, 2010). In addition to describing their eating practices as not pathological, participants also imbue their practices with religious characteristics, framing certain symbols and practices as sacred and others as profane (Maloney, 2008; Riley et al., 2009; Warin, 2009). Through this type of reframing of eating disorders, these sites both replicate norms of femininity as well as provide a place to rebel against hegemonic depictions of women who self-starve as victims with little agency beyond controlling what they do or do not eat (Day and Keys, 2008).

Online pro-ana communities challenge many dominant psychological and medicalized conceptions of eating disorders. These women form supportive communities (Tierney, 2006, 2008) where they reject facile characterizations of anorexia as a disease, and instead engage in complex discussions of anorexia as a lifestyle choice (Richardson and Cherry, 2006; Shade, 2003). This complexity gives these sites the potential to disrupt the medical model of eating disorders (Ferreday, 2003; Richardson and Cherry, 2006; Shade, 2003; Tierney, 2008), without entirely abandoning it. Participants selectively and situationally draw from this discourse (Brotsky and Giles, 2007; Fox et al., 2005). However, medical and mental health researchers, eager to label these sites as problematic, have conflated anorexia, an eating disorder, with pro-anorexia, a standpoint that allows for a more neutral and less judgmental approach to particular eating practices and identities associated with them. Members of these groups take pains to differentiate a pro-ana lifestyle from anorexia, offering a distinction between the disorder and a new way of conceptualizing the creation of community around stigmatized bodies and spaces (Brotsky and Giles, 2007; Giles, 2006; Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006).

Many have blamed these websites for increasing rates of eating disorders, high rates of relapse among recovering anorexics and bulimics, and the general intractability of these disorders (Gailey, 2009). Indeed, some studies indicate that after viewing these sites women are likely to view their bodies more negatively (Bardone-Cone and Cass, 2007) and women who visit these sites have lower self-esteem than those who do not visit them (Harper et al., 2008). In part because pro-anorexics describe their identity more positively than non-pro-anorexic anorexics it is true that they are more resistant to recovery (Lyons et al., 2006) and that visiting these sites also correlates with a delay in seeking treatment (Gavin et al., 2008). However, the link between these sites and increased levels of eating disorders is not inevitable (Davis, 2008; Lyons et al., 2006; Mulveen and Hepworth, 2006) and, given the multifactorial nature of eating disorders, these sites are unlikely in and of themselves to cause disorders. However, many mental health professionals and academics are invested in recommending solutions to these sites as a 'problem' in part because of their increased visibility, the shocking nature of some of their content, and their availability as a concrete target in understanding a problem that is not easily understood (Bardone-Cone and Cass, 2007; Bell, 2007; Clemens et al., 2008; Pollack, 2003; Shade, 2003). Focusing on these sites is also a way to deflect attention from larger cultural messages around eating and body size found in mainstream media outlets which are not so different from the ones promulgated on these sites.

In the rush to declare these sites dangerous and shut them down, the process through which people interact and engage in various body projects on these sites has been left unexplored. Though, as Walstrom (2000) indicates, these websites are bodiless, pro-ana sites seem to contradict this assumption, occupying an interstitial place in debates surrounding the materiality of the body and perhaps rendering essentialist versus constructionist debates over the body irrelevant or at least oversimplistic (Shilling, 2003; Turner, 1997). Though the interactions on these sites are disembodied, the projects and activities they promote, support or admonish are fundamentally embodied. This article explores the processes and contradictions in those embodiment practices.

## **Method**

This research is drawn from observations and analysis of postings and images on the 14 most populous publicly accessible pro-ana

online discussion groups found on the social network site MySpace. We found the groups for this study by searching for key words 'ana', 'mia', and 'ednos', terms that represent the popular internet slang for 'anorexia', 'bulimia', and 'eating disorder not otherwise specified'. The membership of these 14 groups ranges from 70 to 608 member profiles, for a total of 3354 profiles, about 500 of whom posted at least one comment. The groups featured a total of 2156 different discussion threads. We followed each site from its inception (anywhere from September 2005 until September 2006) until November 2006. None of these 14 groups is still in existence as they violate MySpace policy and have been closed down, migrated to other sites, or have become 'private' groups under new and more ambiguous names.

The breadth of this study dwarfs all other studies of pro-ana communities to date, most of which focus on postings over a number of days or smaller numbers of groups for an unspecified time frame. Given the breadth of our textual analysis we have been able to become familiar with many of the participants and recognize nuances that would not have been noticeable upon first evaluation of the data.

We chose to study MySpace groups because at the time of this research MySpace was the largest social network site in the United States. We also chose MySpace because it has tools for personalizing pages and groups that Facebook and other social networking sites did not have to the same extent at the time of the study. Additionally, MySpace was especially popular with a racially diverse segment of teenagers and young adults, as opposed to Facebook which tended to be more popular among slightly older and whiter users.

We chose to analyze discussion groups, as opposed to static websites where content is largely controlled by the site owner for two reasons. First, as the *Time* magazine article we opened with rightly observed, with advances in technology, there has been a trend in the community away from static groups and towards more interactive social networks (Reaves, 2001). Second, groups are more dynamic than static pages, giving us an insight into the meaning-making processes of the pro-ana community, and showing changes in the community over time as new members join and others leave. Similarly, choosing groups on MySpace allows us to look at the relationship between personal pages and group pages, as well as following individual posters from group to group.

Though online environments allow researchers to observe communities and interactions that might otherwise be hard to access, there are a number of drawbacks to this sort of research. The first is that it is hard to know what one is seeing. Indeed, as we noted, it took us some time to understand the patterns of interaction in these communities and to avoid understanding these groups through the lens of a moral panic. Similarly, in online research sites as in more traditional ethnographic sites, people disappear. When particular members deleted their accounts, their comments would disappear, sometimes making it difficult to follow a given thread. Additionally, sometimes conversations originated on sites other than MySpace and migrated to the groups we studied so we were not always sure about the details of the beginning of a given conversation. Likewise, in matters of interpretation we could not always double check our interpretation of a situation against what 'really' happened. Finally, there is the question of whether or not the people we studied did in fact have diagnosable eating disorders. However, we are not trying to measure the effect of these groups on individual behaviors or argue that the groups 'spread' eating disorders. Thus, members' discursive constructions of self and community are far more relevant to our study than whether they actually *are* anorexic by the agreed-upon diagnostic measures of the moment.

### **The Pro-ana Anorexic and the Wannarexic**

Although traditional and clinical analyses of eating disordered people have often painted a picture of isolation and secrecy (Fallon et al., 1994), in the online discussion groups we studied, relationality was central to the construction of a pro-anorexic identity.<sup>6</sup> Nowhere is this relative identity construction more evident than in understanding the role of the 'wannarexic' in the pro-ana community. While we do not wish to reify a monolithic picture of *the* anorexic, members of the groups we studied share certain characteristics which offer an image of an anorexic significantly different from the image given to us by current medical, psychological, or second-wave feminist models. The pro-ana anorexic does not seek to hide her body or her disorder, often acts aggressively, actively searches out membership in a pro-ana community, and shows ambivalence about both anorexia and recovery.

The identity of a pro-ana anorexic is not only a relational identity but a defensive identity (Giles, 2006). Community members must not only defend themselves from ‘haters’ or those who see the community as dangerous and unhealthy, but, more significantly, they must defend the community from wannarexics – people who want to take part in the community but whose credibility as eating disordered is in doubt. The wannarexic might be considered a specific form of a ‘newbie’, a figure whose presence ‘reinforces a sense of community’ (Ferreday, 2009: 14). Much like the wannarexic, the newbie ‘is always presented as precarious, and even dangerous’ (Ferreday, 2009: 15). The specter of the wannarexic looms large in efforts to assert one’s own authenticity as an anorexic and to challenge the authenticity claims of others. This is the ultimate insult, as it implies a person does not belong, lacks knowledge of those in the pro-ana community, fails at her weight-loss goals and does not possess the strength and dedication central to a pro-ana identity. The wannarexic treats anorexia as a fad, something that can be adopted and discarded at will. The following posting entitled ‘How to be Thin’ by AnaAimee illustrates the quandary of online embodiment and the role of the wannarexic in this quandary:

Step One: Go find your favorite thinspiration picture. Step Two: Post it on your site. Step Three: Tell everyone that it’s you. Step Four: Call anyone who claims it’s not you a fat wannarexic. Congratulations! You’ve just become thin, no dieting or exercise necessary.

This quote points to the anxiety produced by the inability to verify people’s body size and offline practices as well as the power of insulting someone by calling them a wannarexic. Through these sorts of interchanges, participants on these sites continually engage in boundary work where they attempt to define who is and who is not a true member of the pro-ana community and establish the realness of their anorexia, given presumed bodily practices and sizes.

Participants on these sites accuse others of being wannarexic when those others lack knowledge about eating disorders, fail at their weight-loss goals or seek to go on a diet rather than make a commitment to anorexia as a lifestyle. Posters on the pro-ana websites see themselves as more committed, more in control, and more dedicated to thinness than dieters who may go on and off diets or who are just

looking to lose a few pounds. This dedication and control is at the core of a pro-ana identity. The following post from Mena illustrates this well:

All these 'anorexics' that you're talking to are a bunch of stupid young girls who think their crash diet is an eating disorder. They stop when they fit into their prom dress, they stop when summer is over. You're getting your info from a bunch of wanna's who pray to the aNa GoDdEsS!!!

In other words, wannarexics are no better than dieters and those who often go to the extreme of praying to 'ana' or deifying the disorder in fact expose themselves as wannarexics. A true pro-ana anorexic does not see the disorder as a deity to whom she prays, but a strict lifestyle choice.

The insult of wannarexic is intimately tied to perceived body size and willpower. In fact, body size is so important in proving one's status as pro-ana that those who fail at their weight-loss goals fear being labeled with the epithet. As one poster writes about her eating disorder, 'But the truth is that I don't even think I have one. I think I'm too fat to have one. I'm convinced that I'm just a "wannarexic."' This poster may also be strategically labeling herself a wannarexic, thereby pre-empting other members doing it for her. Regardless of this poster's motives, not losing weight indicates a lack of the will power and strength, so lauded by members of this community, to be a pro-anorexic.

To be pro-anorexic, group members also need to demonstrate that they are familiar with typical eating disordered strategies for weight loss. Revealing a gap in that knowledge leaves a person open to being labeled a wannarexic. Group members routinely publicly identify wannarexics for their lack of knowledge around weight-loss strategies. Members tease or respond to them with sarcasm and false information, a sort of 'wanna-baiting' in which non-wannarexic members can lead-on wannarexics and then expose them. In the following post, a wannarexic is teased for asking advice on purging. Members respond with tongue-in-cheek comments about eating soap to induce vomiting:

DawnMarie: What is the best way to purge?

Acid: Eat soap, that shit works EVERYTIME. And get the good smelling kind, so you think you're eating something yummy.

ED Slave: How does eating soap help u purge? . . .

ED Slave: I know what u mean it's damn annoying. I still don't get the soap thing tho. I do the old fashion way I guess, didn't know there where that many tricks to purge. But I'll stick with the fingers.

Mena: You NEVER heard of eating soap? Ummmmmmm. You must not really have bulimia, then. That's the oldest trick in the book. The 'dove' pink bar gets the best upchuck . . . I still can't believe you all have never eaten soap. Wow.

Acid: MMMM, watermelon scented SOFT SOAP . . . a few swigs of this and UP it comes!! You can even smell the watermelon scent AFTER you throw up your double meat burrito . . . Definitely my fav!!

Mena: OMG I'VE USED THE WATERMELON ONE!! So smooth-e!!! Have you tried the Jergens almond soap? Literally tastes and smells like marzipan going down AND coming up . . . ESPECIALLY after you do the 'butter fast' . . . Sometimes I just like to shave a bar soap with a cheese grater onto my dessert so it kind of doesn't taste as harsh. Jeebus – I can't believe these gals have never heard about soap. Ha. When I was in the hospital they used to supervise my shower to make sure I didn't eat the soap.

Acid: I unwrap my Irish Springs just like a Hersheys chocolate bar . . .

Mena: OH MY GOD! ME TOO! Have you tried the new yellow bar??? It's outstanding.

Jennifer: The yellow bar is my BITCH! :)

I'm Different: Never herd of eating soap . . . I'll try it. I heard hydrogen peroxide works too. They used it on dogs, so it's safe for humans also.

Ms. Metal: Do people actually honestly eat soap?

Fake Love: Do you have the immune system of a dog you stupid fuck?

At first glance, this exchange is a profoundly disturbing discussion of using dangerous chemicals as a purgative in the quest for thinness. Indeed, it is this type of post that is often highlighted in media coverage of pro-ana sites and groups, furthering the idea that these

communities are dangerous and perhaps even deadly. However, what is actually happening in this post and many others like it is that Acid, Mena, Jennifer, and Fake Love ‘wanna-bait’ DawnMarie, ED Slave and Ms. Metal. In response to the request for tips on purging, Acid posts a claim about eating soap that Mena, Jennifer, and Fake Love quickly pick up on and run with, moving the discussion into ever more extreme territory. I’m Different and Ms. Metal seem to take the bait and ask for clarification or verification of soap as a method of purging. Eventually, Fake Love aggressively ends the discussion, ‘outing’ the wannarexics by exposing the ridiculousness of soap-eating as a method of purging and, more importantly, the naiveté and gullibility of those who are not authentically pro-ana. In doing so, Fake Love also reinforces the insider status and realness of Acid, Mena, Jennifer, as well as the ‘wanna’ status of others.

The presence of the wannarexics and members’ efforts to keep them out of the pro-ana community also contradicts the common-sense notion that these sites are recruiting grounds for eating disorders. Rather, we found that members actively try to limit the number and quality of new members so as to create more elite and authentic groups and thus elite and authentic individual identities. In order to avoid the label of wannarexic and to ferret out wannarexics, group members participate in authenticity rituals to make the body apparent online. Through the sanctioned practice of these rituals, they gain the authority to police group boundaries as Acid, Mena, and Jennifer do.

### **Authenticity Rituals: Pictures, Check-ins and Group Activities**

Given the disembodied environment in which these groups exist, participants have developed a variety of online rituals to bring their off-line bodily practices online. Because the question of authenticity is never fully settled and the specter of the wannarexic never fully repudiated, these rituals are important techniques for managing anxiety about ‘realness’ as well as continually reiterating group values and enforcing boundaries. We observed three general categories of rituals: posting pictures, check-ins (statistics and food reports) and group activities (fasts and surveys).

The most obvious way members make authenticity claims is by posting pictures of themselves. As AnaAimee’s earlier comment

about wannarexics indicates, pictures are key to establishing oneself as anorexic. For instance, a member named Fasting Fireflies posts:

You can always pick the wannabes, the ones with only skinny celebs in their pictures and a whole ton of pro-ana crap on their MySpace. I bet if you asked them why they don't have any pictures it would be because they 'just like started being ana like 5 weeks ago.'

If a poster doesn't have any pictures of herself on her own website, she is already calling into question the authenticity of her bodily practices. Thus, one needs to maintain the pictures of oneself on one's own site and post pictures of oneself on the discussion group.

Participants post pictures of themselves to show to others that they are actually thin. Group members will take pictures of themselves, often reflected by a mirror, or accompanied by a tape measure or a scale asking others if they have lost weight, how much others think they weigh or how much others think they should lose. For example, Wiggling Out posted a picture of her legs, collarbones, and waist to get others' opinions on her apparent weight. She claims that the scale reads 130, but that she looks like she weighs 110 writing, 'Most ppl say I look thinner than 130. What do you think? I say I look about 110.' In their responses to images of her body, others confirm her status as anorexic given her body size. ADHD-ana wrote, 'I'd say you look about 95. I'm loving your triangle!' Mena follows this comment by writing, 'I say 90.' Apparently inspired by these two comments Wiggling Out asks, 'Wow I have a 90, can i get an 85?????????' However, Mena, attempting to keep the body size conversation authentic, writes, 'Well, I'm gonna be realistic and stick with 90. We have to be HONEST with you so you remain faithful to Ana.' Posting pictures, presumably of oneself, is a way to line up offline practices with one's online presentation of self. However, even if, as AnaAimee suggests, people post and maintain pictures of themselves online, embodiment still remains unsettled as people can and do accuse each other of posting fake, outdated or photo-shopped pictures. Thus, additional rituals become a necessary and continuing piece of the authenticity projects of these groups.

Another way that these participants make their bodies evident online is through 'check-ins', where they report to other group members what their current statistics are and post lists of what they have

eaten. Members engage in 'check-in' rituals in which a group member will ask others 'how much have you eaten today?' or for their 'stats'. Group members post the requested information, once again making the body present online to affirm authenticity and ward off accusations of wannarexia. In a typical check-in ritual, a member will ask other members what they have eaten in a given time period and members will respond in varying degrees of detail and analysis. The most common check-in ritual is the 'stats' check-in, where participants call on each other to post their current weight and other meaningful statistics such as body mass index (BMI) and measurements. This usually includes some version of a listing of their highest weight, their current weight, their lowest weight and their goal weight. One moderator, for instance, began one of these rituals by asking, 'How bout we start some stats?' Members responded with posts like the following:

Sick with Feeling: Name: Stacy / Age: Almost 16 / CW: 95 / LW: 92 / HW: 120-125 / Height: 5'3".5-5'4" / ED: Anorexia Nervosa / GW1: 90 / GW2: 85 / GW3: 80 (It just keeps getting lower . . .) / Fun Fact: I recently dyed my hair bleach-ish blonde ^\_^ / Stacy.<sup>7</sup>

Too Skinny and Sad: Age: 19 / Height: 5'4" / CW: 108 / HW: 130(\*gags\* / LW: 100 (before first hospitalization) / GW: 100 / GW2:95 / LTGW:90

Looking for Perfection: Name: Missy / Age: just turned 21 / CW: 120 / LW: 110 / HW: 155 / Height: 5'8" / ED: Anorexia Nervosa but have had mia tendencies off and on / GW1: 110 / GW2: 105 / GW3: 100 / Diagnosed: Yes . . . have been for 6 years now and i am in therapy, group work, and seeing a psychiatrist . . . my life sucks / <3 Missy

In this way participants paint a discursive picture of themselves by sharing their struggles to be thin, listing what their goals are and how far away they are from those goals. As Sick with Feeling's post indicates, the final goal is ever changing, because it can never really be attained. In fact, for the purposes of this ritual, achieving the final goal is not actually important. What is important is that it allows the members to do online embodiment by providing a discursive image, history and future for their bodies. They can also demonstrate legitimacy by expanding the information they include in the check-in beyond just statistics, such as Too Skinny and Sad's inclusion of her

hospitalization and Looking for Perfection's assertion that she has been diagnosed for six years now. Through including their experience and the length of time they have been 'sick' these members avoid being labeled wannarexic by seeming too 'new' to these types of eating practices to be familiar with the lifestyle changes they require.

Finally, the participants in these groups engage in group activities (often offline) that they organize online. These group activities consist of fasts, taking surveys or agreeing to wear a particular bracelet color (usually red) to indicate their membership in a pro-anorexic group. These activities are a way for participants to demonstrate a serious commitment to an anorexic lifestyle and show that they are not just looking for a wannarexic's 'quick fix'. For instance, group members engage in their individual eating disorders together through organized fasts. On the group *Ana, Edna and Me*, *Wigging Out* posted a thread asking, 'Who wants to fast with me? I am starting at 12 midnight tonight. I have a ? tho, I am going for like a week and we have to flip the clocks for DST. Well so do I count it as an extra hour?' Participants immediately responded excitedly:

Hyper: Ugh just fast for an extra hour. It's not that difficult. I'll fast with you!

Wigging Out: Oh gosh, ok. Hey and thanks IM SO EXCITED!

Hyper: ME TOO!!! Call me crazy, but i love my joints aching and being all sore and getting muscle atrophy ... i finally feel like 'm doing something right.

Fasts are activities that bring the groups together and seem to encourage the individuals participating to stick to their goals. But again, whether members are actively participating or not, they are discursively participating both in the fast as well as the embodiment ritual.

Together, these three processes form a constellation of authentication practices that manage but fail to resolve anxieties about making the body present online by doing online embodiment. These group rituals serve to encircle the contours of the pro-ana community by providing an almost constant stream of activity with the implicit or explicit goal of maintaining and defending the group.

## Tools: Aggression, Experience and Knowledge

In addition to *group* rituals, members of the communities we studied used a variety of tools to assert their *individual* authenticity as eating disordered as well as to lay claim to their rightful membership in the pro-ana community. We have identified three primary individual tools – aggression, experience, and knowledge – that are routinely employed and deployed by members in attempts to define and reinforce the boundaries of the pro-ana community, and establish and maintain individual legitimacy as ‘real’ anorexics. Thus, these tools are an essential part of enacting embodiment as they establish the body of the individual and the community in online environments.

The members of the pro-ana community use aggression as a tool to enforce the boundaries of the community, to assert and re-assert their own authenticity, and as a way to respond to those who critique the pro-ana community, ‘haters’. While aggression in general is common on these sites (Day and Keys, 2008), three types of aggression stand out as central to the assertion of community membership and identity: self-aggression, aggression as motivation, and aggression against haters and wannarexics.

Self-aggression usually manifests as a member insulting herself, talking about how fat or ugly she is and asserting her desire to take action based on this self-critique. A typical example of this self-aggression is seen in Famous’ post entitled, ‘Someone fucking call me fat before I eat again’:

Holy shit people ... It’s like i fucking have food ducttaped to my hand!! I can’t stop eating ... then i purge ... then ... i don’t feel like i’ve got it all out ... so in turn the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. Is anyone following me?? I need some people who understand to either call me a fat ass ... or gimmie some hardcore advice ... ew. i’m gross ...

Self-aggression not only appears to be a tool to motivate oneself to be more dedicated or stringent in food restriction, exercise, or whichever eating disordered practices a person engages in. Self-aggression is also a tool used to signal to other members one’s dedication and status as a true anorexic, not a wannarexic or someone trying to lose a few pounds for vanity’s sake. To be sure, talking disparagingly about one’s weight is not limited to the pro-ana community. Others have found that ‘fat

talk' or 'diet talk' is a common ritual among adolescent girls, even those without eating disorders. This talk serves a number of purposes including community-building and the social exclusion of actually fat people (Ambjornsson, 2005; Nichter, 2001). What distinguishes the self-aggression of the pro-ana community from more 'normal' adolescent self-deprecating body talk is not only the greater level of aggressiveness, but the response such talk garners from other community members who, instead of reassuring others that they are not fat, instead point out how fat *they* are.

Related to self-aggression is what we call 'motivating aggression' through which members use insults to inspire each other to succeed in meeting their goals. Below, one member thanks Jessie for her motivating insults:

Jessie: Oioi fatties. Yeh u all better be fasting. Cos ur all fat as fuck and need to!!!! So put that piece of cake down and go run, and i don't want u back til ur legs are guna fall off and ur 10 pounds lighter. Haha i feel so mean for writing things like that. But u all know i don't mean it. Just a continuation from the other ur fat thread. xxxx.

I know more than You: See, that's the sort of motivation i need lol like constantly keep going keep going keep going.

One sign that a person is not familiar with the expectations and interaction rules of the community is the misinterpretation of these insults as truly mean-spirited or malicious. When this happens, members often point out that such aggressive posts are meant to motivate or to chide other pro-ana anorexics, rather than discourage them.

Finally, as we documented above, in the discussion about eating soap, aggression is directed toward wannarexics. The presence of wannarexics in these communities serves to both strengthen and threaten the authenticity claims of 'real' members and thus aggression towards these people serves to protect the pro-ana community from being diluted by fake anorexics. Indeed, as other studies have found, wannarexics can blur the lines between authentic and inauthentic and thus require an aggressive response (Brotsky and Giles, 2007) to keep them from becoming the dominant voice of these groups.

The second tool we identified is 'experience'. Experience is wielded as a way to both illustrate one's history with eating disorders and to invalidate the authenticity claims of others. Claims to

experience most often come through sharing ‘horror stories’ and ‘recovery tales’. Horror stories are stories about the side-effects – physical, emotional, and social – of anorexia and other eating disorders. Members share stories of side-effects ranging from tooth decay as a result of bulimia to dizziness and the development of lanugo as a result of weight loss (lanugo is fine hair that can appear on the bodies of long-term anorexics and it is often stated as a goal or source of pride by members). These horror stories are often dramatic and chronicle the very real physical side-effects of sustained disordered eating. Familiarity with these sorts of side-effects also bolsters one’s claims to authenticity. A strategy employed by members seeking to establish authenticity through experience is to appear blasé, unconcerned or even happy (though not too happy as that may indicate wannarexia) about these effects. A common example is sharing about experiencing amenorrhea, a frequent side-effect of long-term anorexia. Experienced members are not alarmed by losing their period, seeing it as a status symbol and a sign of their ‘realness’ and commitment to an anorexic lifestyle. The sharing of side-effects and horror stories is a tool for making the body evident online as it allows for the iteration of embodied experience and enables a member to develop credibility as an anorexic. Members also use experience as a tool in detailing their experience in recovery programs. Members with detailed knowledge about the ins and outs of recovery programs use this knowledge to assert authenticity and to offer advice to other members on how to go through recovery programs without actually recovering.

Finally, knowledge is used as a tool to establish authenticity. Though members often eschew psychological and clinical analyses of anorexia and eating disorders, the ability to cite and understand clinical definitions and knowledge about eating disorders is, ironically, a way to establish individual authenticity and challenge that of others. Frequently these challenges happen through citing current clinical guidelines for the diagnosis of anorexia, bulimia and EDNOS. For instance, responding to someone she perceives to be a wannarexic, Mena reiterates the clinical guidelines of anorexia and labels the poster she is responding to as EDNOS:

Mena: Actually, sorry to break it to you . . . but unless your BMI IS BELOW 17.5 and you no longer get your period YOU ARE NOT ANOREXIC. That’s FACT. You would be EDNOS if ANYTHING.

So-ya. If your BMI is above 17.5 I guess you are faking it. This was just information for everybody to know about the clinical criteria for anorexia . . .

Real or perceived knowledge of how to sustain a 'healthy' existence as an anorexic and knowledge of nutrition are also frequently used to establish experience and legitimacy. Indeed, new members will often ask for advice on eating and health, and veteran members will use these requests as an opportunity to showcase their nutritional and medical knowledge (if they do not simply discredit the request for information as a sign of wannarexia).

Together, aggression, experience, and knowledge form a collection of tools used by members of pro-ana discussion boards to enact embodiment, asserting their identity as authentically eating disordered and policing the boundaries of a community made tenuous by the realities of trying to establish 'realness' in an online world.

## Conclusion

In tracing the contours of a digital community built on bodily, eating, and representational practices, we have shown the negotiations and rituals surrounding the inexact process of trying to make bodies real in online worlds. Our data indicate that the presence and practices of these online communities provide new insight into the evolving understanding of self-starvation practices, and the way that participants enact online embodiment in a space that is seemingly disembodied. Through engaging in group rituals and deploying individual tools, participants indicate that being pro-ana is fundamentally a social, interactional, and performative enterprise, not primarily a matter of individual eating practices or even individual weight.

Rituals of online embodiment are employed as community-building and sustaining strategies. Individual tools are used to bolster claims to authenticity. Given this, the project of online embodiment happens at two intersecting and co-constitutive levels. In using rituals and tools members are building and maintaining a community as well as crafting individual online identities. Members create, sustain, and defend the contours of the pro-ana world and the identities of members of it through group rituals and deployment of individual tools. Central to the maintenance of the community is the ongoing quest to make the body present online, both individually and socially.

We draw two preliminary conclusions about the nature of online embodiment in the pro-ana world. First, embodiment, online and off-line, is a relational project. Participants in these communities seek out spaces in which to be overt about their eating disordered practices and identities, and to build rapport with others they feel to be kindred spirits. However, what our data have also shown is that this relational project is as built on enforcing the boundaries of the community as it is on bringing new people in, indeed, even more so. Aggression towards wannar-exics reveals a dynamic of bolstering the identity claims of 'insiders' by highlighting the illegitimacy and inauthenticity of outsiders.

Closely tied to this relationality is the fact that boundary work in these communities is also embodiment work. By engaging in rituals and using tools that not only enforce the boundaries of community but make the realness of bodies central to the definition of community, members of pro-ana groups create their own bodies while at the same time creating a new social body in the pro-ana community. Rituals like photo posting and tools like aggression and knowledge allow members to enact embodiment as well as confirming or challenging the veracity of the embodiment claims of others.

These are not simply virtual bodies, they are the online representations of real bodies engaged in the body projects of anorexia. Thus, these representations and struggles for authenticity can tell us much about the embodied experience of pro-ana anorexics. Though they may not tell us exactly what their 'real' bodies look like or exactly what causes and cures eating disorders, these communities can tell us much about how people negotiate their material bodies in an increasingly online world and this can give us insight into anorexia outside the clinic or the therapist's office.

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### **Notes**

1. Members of these groups identify with a variety of eating disorders, including anorexia, bulimia, compulsive overeating and

eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS), yet they generally classify themselves and the groups as 'pro-ana'. Thus, we focus mainly on anorexia and members who identify as anorexic for two main reasons. First, most of the group members identify with anorexia or a 'pro-ana' lifestyle whether or not that is their actual disorder and, second, in the hierarchy of eating disorders that emerges in these groups, anorexia is at the top and those who can achieve authenticity as anorexics have a cachet and credibility that others respect and strive to achieve (Giles, 2006).

2. For a more extensive exploration of the moral panic surrounding these sites, see Ferreday (2003).
3. It is impossible to know how many pro-ana sites or groups exist, partly because they are often hidden by privacy settings or intentionally misleading names, and partly because many groups that remain public are relatively short-lived as they are often forced to shut down. However, we do know that pro-ana sites and groups continue to exist and proliferate and conservatively number in the hundreds, potentially thousands given the international nature of the phenomenon.
4. Eating disorders are also raced and classed. Though much research focuses exclusively on gender, there are also racial and classed components to eating disorders. However, given the image of the anorexic as white, middle-class, and female, intersections of gender, eating practices, race and class are often obscured by the 'de-classed' and 'de-raced' white, middle-class female. Stereotypes of black women often mask eating disorders among them as well as fuel them (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003; Thompson, 1996). Scholars have noted that in general, African-American women have higher levels of positive body perceptions than do white women (Lovejoy, 2001). Yet, increasingly, in the context of the 'obesity epidemic' this strong body image is being re-cast as risky, unhealthy, and dangerous (Boero, 2009). Though the bodies and disordered eating of women of color are all but invisible in conventional images of anorexia, both black and white women are subject to the 'panoptic gaze' in terms of body ideals and are thus expected to meet or at least attempt to meet these ideals (Reel et al., 2008).
5. In fact, of the 20 participants we interviewed, almost all of them stated that they had not spoken socially (apart from on a treatment program) about their eating disorders before going online.

6. Indeed, others have found relationality or relatedness to be a crucial aspect of the lived experience of anorexia both on- and offline (Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 1996; Warin, 2009).
7. On the sites, members frequently use the following abbreviations: CW = current weight, GW = goal weight, HW = highest weight, LW = lowest weight.

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