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Published online: 09 Jan 2014.

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'We're just like Gok, but in reverse': Ana Girls – empowerment and resistance in digital communities

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'Pro-Ana' Internet sites can foster or celebrate anorexia and bulimia nervosa in young women. Clinical discourse portrays anorexia as a problematic and deviant 'condition', while Pro-Ana/-Mia spaces offer an arena that appeals to control over how bodies are represented. We draw on data from a seven-year ethnographic study of young people's online worlds, from forums, postings on Pro-Ana sites and online interviews with Pro-Ana users, to illustrate and illuminate young women's perspectives and the extent to which this transgressive movement strives for voice. We argue that 'being' Pro-Ana offers 'practitioners' liberation from cultural critiques of the body. The websites suggest that famously thin women, whose 'beauty' has already been culturally validated, have overcome similar problems to Pro-Ana readers, and offer a re-formulation of cultural identities to provide legitimate (and validated) means to reach this 'perfection'. In this respect, they represent important sites of agency and resistance.

Keywords: Pro-Ana; Pro-Mia; online transgression; adolescent voice

The difference between want and need is self-control (Ana-Dream)

Introduction

It has long been recognised that the social nature of interactive arenas encourages young people to engage actively with their lived culture and to experiment with its structures and practices (Buckingham, 2008). In this paper, we raise some of the debates concerning young people's manipulation of, and experimentation with, the digital representation of the body. In particular, we discuss the advent of Internet sites – both overt and covert – that appear to deliberate upon, foster or celebrate anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa and other 'eating disorders', particularly in young women. The underground Internet movement of the 'Ana Girls' (Uca, 2004) and the so-called 'Pro-Ana' (Pro Anorexia) digital forums are seen as controversial spaces that promote eating 'disorders' as a legitimate lifestyle choice (Dias, 2003). This paper explores the extent and means by which this transgressive movement strives for voice.

Young people have often been early adopters of technology (Rainie & Horrigan, 2005). These 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) instinctively turn to the Net to communicate, understand, learn, find and undertake everyday tasks (Livingstone, 2009). Although they are avid consumers of the Web, they also constantly construct and change its online content (Ashton, 2009; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010). Young people create and use digital spaces for social interaction, identity expression, media production and

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consumption – and do so with a proliferation of voices, cultural forms and styles (Gee & Hayes, 2009; Green & Hannon, 2007; Hodkinson & Lincoln, 2008). While much of this is conducted innocuously, with broad courtesy and dignity, there are numerous examples of where the Internet fosters non-conformity, adolescent rebellion; the transgressive behaviour we have labelled the 'dark side' of Internet use (Crowe & Watts, 2013). In general, where adults perceive the negative or inappropriate use of the Internet, they see this as a risk to young users (Ackland & O'Neil, 2011). This is commonly held to be 'internet addiction', gaming addiction, broad risks such as exposure to sexually explicit material, online victimisation, harassment, cyber bullying or sexual solicitation (Kuss & Griffiths, 2011; Livingstone & Haddon, 2009). Little has been written or explored concerning the marginal activities of the users themselves. Social websites bring millions of strangers together, generally around shared experiences of kinship and friendship. In such online worlds, new social customs are defined, and customary norms and taboos are redefined (Crowe, 2011).

The prevalence of online 'Ana'

'Pro-Ana' is a term used to promote the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. It is commonly referred to by anorexics simply as 'Ana'. The term is often personified as a girl called Ana – a third-person or confidant with whom one can share one's most intimate thoughts:

> You may call me Ana. Hopefully we can become great partners. In the coming time, I will invest a lot of time in you, and I expect the same from you. (Letter from Ana, Ana Dreams)

> With hard work I will leave this dark place behind me, but you, Ana, you shall always be my friend. (Jade)

Interestingly, this 'friend' is sometimes expressed in quasi-religious terms as a protector figure:

> We believe in Ana, the Protector, Liberator of the Mother, Who teaches us control ... (Thinnerthanthis)

> I will devote myself to Ana. She will be with me where ever I go, keeping me in line. No one else matters; she is the only one who cares about me and who understands me. I will honour Her and make Her proud. (Thindragon)

The less common term 'Pro-Mia' refers similarly to bulimia and some users have again constructed an 'Ana-modelled' confidant, named 'Mia' (on some sites as 'Mia the Mirror') who offers similar guidance, support and friendship:

> Seeing how we'll become so close, you can just call me Mia. That's what my best friends call me, my loyal friends. Over time, you will think of all I do for you too. (MiaMe)

One of the principle difficulties of analysing pro-anorexia discourse is that, like anorexia itself, it is often contradictory (Burke, 2009). Pro-Ana organisations differ widely in their stances. Most claim that they are principally a non-judgemental 'space' for anorexics, a place to discuss the illness and to support those young women who choose to enter recovery. Others deny that anorexia nervosa is a mental illness and claim rather that it is a 'lifestyle choice' that should be respected by doctors and family. Recent reviews (e.g. Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006; Perdaens & Pieters, 2011; Rouleau & von Ranson, 2011) have explored the themes in these websites and discuss, for example, the prevalence of lifestyle descriptions and 'thinspiration', commonly inspirational photo galleries and quotes that aim to serve as motivators for weight loss.

Among mainstream clinicians, both anorexia and bulimia nervosa are regarded as a serious mental disturbance, where symptomatic features include denial of illness and strong resistance to treatment. In some cases, this can lead to extreme bodily devastation, even to death. Effective treatments of the disorders are seen as considerable challenge. Detractors of Pro-Ana websites see obsessive interest in body weight and the attendant health risks to young women in starving, or binge purging, being fuelled by the dramatic increase in the number of such sites (Rouleau & von Ranson, 2011). The most common complaint is that, although websites may outwardly appear simply supportive to users, they are actively maintaining or exacerbating users' eating disorder symptoms.

In contrast, anorexics may collectively normalise their condition, defending it not as an illness but as the achievement of self-control, a move towards success and perfection, and an essential part of their identity. Such advocacy has flourished on the Internet. Although it is hard to determine the exact number of Pro-Ana forums, Brotsky and Giles (2007) offer a scope between 200 and 400, whilst some studies estimate the number to be as high as 500 (Dias, 2003; Hansen, 2008; Wilson, Peebles, Hardy, & Litt, 2006). This virtual presence is maintained primarily through close, coherent, support groups centred on web forums and blogs. More recently, Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia pages have been reported in even larger numbers on social network services such as *Tumblr*, *Xanga*, *LiveJournal*, *Facebook* and *MySpace* (Juarascio, Shoaib, & Timko 2010).

However, such figures are often little more than informed guesswork. Despite these high estimates, Pro-Ana forums remain difficult to locate. They are frequently the focus of both parent and professional concern, usually resulting in their removal by host sites/ providers so that there is always a need to keep their location as secret as possible, as MiaMe explains:

> Being Ana or Mia, freaks parents out so we keep it, and our meeting places, as secretive as we can until they get froze out.

But being 'froze out' (having a site removed) often means that another forum is waiting in the wings to take its place:

> The sites come and go, but Ana is always there, waiting for us to find her. (Kim)

The transience of the sites and the secretive nature of the Ana girls necessitate an elaborate game of cat and mouse to remain one step ahead of the 'authorities'. A complex interplay of codes, buddies and holding systems has been developed around some of the forums, which facilitate free movement for the initiated whilst relegating those who would harm the community at a 'safe' distance. We argue that in this respect Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia forums represent transgressive spaces, free from the 'dangers' of adult gaze (Lipsky, 1978) that offer young participants some degree of autonomy and agency. In particular, we explore how, for some young people, identifying themselves as Pro-Ana or Pro-Mia is an expression of resistance to adult definitions of propriety. Whilst we acknowledge the problematic nature of theorising resistance in contemporary cultural settings (Raby, 2005) we simultaneously observe that places and spaces used by young people can always be seen as potential sites of active resistance (Katz, 2001).

Studying Ana

The data we cite throughout this paper are illustrative rather than exhaustive; our purpose is to illuminate the phenomenon of young people's cyber-social choices and acts of identity creation, rather than a detailed statistical analysis of their overt behaviour. We offer illustrative quotes and field-note entries from the ethnographic data collected online

to support these arguments. As Carrington and Hodgetts (2010) note, young people deploy a growing range of 'mashed' and innovative textual forms in a range of social contexts online and offline. The use of these terms acknowledges the embeddedness of digital technologies, text and practices such as mobile phones, social networking sites and online gaming in the lives of young people in contemporary culture and acts to reinforce this placement. Since Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia sites are secretive arenas, it is not our intention to provide explicit details of the places we visited or to cite the real online identities of participants. Wherever possible, we have retained the form and syntax of the written quotes and these will need to be read with some appreciation of current text forms.

Online sites allow young people to construct and rehearse a range of identities (Dowdall, 2009). Within this, we take the view that identity is not unitary but is both multiple and situated (Mishler, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). Indeed, Mishler has argued that identity is better understood as a matrix of sub-identities including those corresponding to relationships and centred on 'inter individual variability, discontinuities and turning points, ... [a] multiplicity of self definitions' (1999, p. 154). Donath's (1999) paper outlines the ambiguity of identity in disembodied virtual communities:

> In the physical world there is an inherent unity to the self, for the body provides a compelling and convenient definition of identity. The norm is: one body, one identity ... The virtual world is different. (p. 19)

When exploring websites such as these, one enters a complex social world, a subculture that brings together many of the problems and possibilities, and sometimes more, of the relationships operating in the non-virtual world. Understanding these innovations requires examining users' online behaviours, specifically the types of textual (e.g. forum 'chats') and non-verbal (in this case, photographic) actions. In this paper, we draw on research material from a wider seven-year ethnographic study of young people's use of online worlds, in which its young users have spoken freely about their online identity activities. A range of data have been gathered by one of us (NC) as an online participant. Data were collected from forum threads and postings on the sites themselves and from online interviews with Pro-Ana users.

There is perhaps always going to be methodological tensions in undertaking this kind of research. One of the major challenges for the online researcher is to move from meeting people 'in the flesh' of the material world to working in the insubstantiality of the virtual arena (Mann & Stewart, 2000). We suspect that wider anxieties concerning the role and nature of technologically created spaces call into question the 'cultural immersive' approach of virtual ethnographic research. Within the context of this paper, we are somewhat ambivalent to this argument. We take the view that the 'social' nature of new technology is fundamentally cultural (Delanty, 2003) since digital space represents 'life as lived ... reproduced in pixels and virtual text' (Fernback, 1997, p. 37). We argue that Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia web forums are socio-cultural spaces that offer legitimate context for agency and in terms of social research are not intrinsically different from other (material) spaces. The process and validity of ethnography in such arenas should be recognised as any other ethnography (Hine, 2005).

The particular data cited in this paper are drawn from a six-month study of participants in four Pro-Ana/-Mia forums and from wider contact with the Ana/Mia community. As we acknowledged above, this study forms part of a more substantial consideration of the ways that young people use online spaces and places. We had already encountered some of the participants in our research into online gaming space, and they were happy to allow access to other aspects of their (virtual) lives. It was these young people who acted as 'gatekeepers' into the Pro-Ana world:

> ... on Wednesday I agree to meet "Runic-Heart" on Runescape. Although she usually enjoys our expeditions, tonight I can see that she is distracted. I question her about it expecting her to tell me about boyfriend trouble, schoolwork or parents – so often the subject of our conversations on here. I am surprised to learn that her ISP has closed down her website. Over the next 45 min or so, Runic-Heart introduces me to the world of Pro-Ana... I am fascinated and want to know more, Runic-Heart laughs and tells me this "is wel gona fuk up ur research I bet LOL" ... The next night, Runic-Heart introduces me to her two friends "Pearl Girl" and "Jazzsimpleez" who run a small on-line forum. Jazz tells me that " yas kno we dnt let ne1in, bt cuz Rune huz sed u made ur bones, u wana cum c?" I feel "honoured to be given an email address and a password. Pretty soon I am chatting to 4 other users and a whole new world opens up before my eyes... (Edited field diary extract)

We were not surprised by this cascade effect. Digital identities are played out in very public ways across a range of different spaces (Livingstone, 2009). Virtual arenas are '... fluid, temporary and negotiable [where users] imbue places with different meanings and use [the] space in different ways' (Smith & Barker, 2000, p. 330). They also form a continuous narrative of everyday life; a wider, more complex system of social interaction in which users dip in and out of a range of communication – including digital technologies (Holloway & Valentine, 2003). What is noteworthy here, however, is that our 'credibility' in one arena (Jazz's reference to 'making your bones') implied equal trust in another quite different space. 'Making your bones' is a popular phrase in the game 'Runescape', signifying an expression of trust, that the person being referred to was 'righteous' and vouched for. We suggest that this porosity is often ignored in academic scrutiny of Ana/ Mia spaces.

Morrow (2005) wryly observes that in many cases research is something done *to* young people rather than *with* them. With this in mind, our research requires us to 'actively engage with people in online spaces in order to write the story of their situated context, informed by social interaction' (Crichton & Kinash, 2003, p. 2). This presents specific difficulties in controversial spaces such as Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia forums. Most researchers acknowledge that when studying vulnerable groups, data collection methods should be tailored to both the sensitivity of the research topic and the vulnerability of participants (Goffman, 1963). It might have been tempting to simply 'lurk and scrape' data. 'Lurking' is a term for individuals who do not take part in Internet forums but simply observe – often not declaring their presence. 'Scraping' is net slang for the process by which forum and blog postings are transposed into other pieces without the express permission of the original poster. The argument commonly used to validate both activities is that postings online are already in the public domain rather than the sole 'property' of individual authors (Hine, 2000). In our work, we acknowledge Merskey's (2005) argument that if individuals are to claim identities in this public realm, then it is reasonable for researchers to assume that they are also prepared to engage in public debate around such issues. But we also accept that whether a space is public or private is always relative to the definitions of those who occupy it (Goffman, 1971). As we have already recognised, the 'everyday' world of the Ana Girls is both secretive and protective. Yet, this 'closedness' is in tension with the open and public manner in which Pro-Ana/-Mia identities are enacted online:

> No I don't want my 'parents noing wot I am doing, but you need to also get out to other ANA girls out there. They are your sisters. This is the point of ANA, that is the point of these sites... to tell others, to help others, to spread the WORD! You know what I am saying is True. That's what ANA is about. That is why we Move around. We are ANA and ANA LIVES 4EVA and we won't be stopped. (CoLeYSkiN)

As CoLeYSkiN reminds us here, Ana girls are 'social actors who are active agents in the constitution of the place' (Smith & Barker, 2000, pp. 315–316) and it is their words that

bring meaning to the spaces they occupy. Somewhat surprisingly, academic scrutiny of Pro-Ana/-Mia has tended to concentrate on what participants *do* in such places rather than offering them a *voice* in research. We argue that the strength of this study is that our participants spoke freely about their views and feelings towards their Pro-Ana activities. The data presented here are best left to tell its own story in all its splendid complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

'Making' Ana

As a self-declared community (Burke, 2009), Pro-Ana maintains a discourse that actively resists the dominant cultural norms regarding 'healthy' eating. The term anorexia nervosa originates from the Greek *an* (the prefix denoting negation) and *orexis* (appetite) thus signifying a lack of desire to eat (Moot & Lumsden, 1994) and highlighting the dieting behaviours that are usually considered to characterise the 'condition' (Dias, 2003), as one young person explains:

> Being ana is about being thin and looking pretty. Like any athlete we control our food and this helps us sculpt our body to be the shape that we want. Beautiful! (Runic Heart)

Perhaps surprisingly there is some commonality in how both health professionals and anorexia/bulimia practitioners regard 'being Ana'. Professionals have tended to see anorexic behaviours as a coping or control mechanism (Costin, 1999), a desire to step outside of the 'normal' cultural institutions and practices. Similarly, on Pro-Ana forums, 'Ana The Protector' validates activities that appear to facilitate a sense of agency within a life that is felt to be increasingly regulated and futile (Abraham & Llewellyn-Jones, 1987). Set against a clinical discourse that portrays anorexia as a problematic and deviant 'condition', Pro-Ana/-Mia spaces offer young people an arena in which to exercise control over how their bodies (and associated narratives) are represented.

As we have argued elsewhere (Crowe & Watts, 2012), bodies – whether virtual or material – are not neutral objects. They are central reference points through which identities and social meanings are created. As such, they are important, and sometimes contested, sites of social and cultural significance. However, as in any system, some readings are afforded legitimacy and some are not. For example, note how Runic Heart conceptualises her actions within a discourse of 'health'. Her description of herself as an 'athlete' and her choice of the word 'sculpt' suggest a rational and informed act. By adopting the language and imagery of the health 'expert' she is able to rearticulate these as justification for being Ana. In this respect, being Pro-Ana represents an active liberation from the negative connotations that society brings to anorexia (as an 'illness' that needs to be 'cured'). Rather than portraying herself as a 'victim' or a 'sufferer', Runic Heart re-appropriates this legitimate reading of the anorexic body to offer an alternative – almost polar opposite – representation of what it means to be 'Ana'. Her friend, Jazzsimpleez, makes a similar point:

> You ever seen that 'how to look good naked' on TV? This fashion designer Gok Wan finds these really fat women and helps them get comfortable with their bodies. These are seriously fat women, that's not healthy either, but no one mentions that, so when he does it it's somehow ok. Well we're just like Gok, but in reverse. We help people feel good about being thin, but we get crucified for it.

The comparison with Gok Wan is interesting. Here, the tension between legitimate and illegitimate reading(s) of the body is highlighted. Whilst the notion of 'health' remains a constant in their discussions of what they see as equally 'illegitimate' bodies (the reference

to 'seriously fat women'), what it *means* to be 'healthy' is heavily contested here. Jazzsimpleez and Runic Heart object not only to the social stigma that is attached to 'being Ana' but also to what they see as the inconsistencies in how representations of the body are afforded legitimacy. Clearly Gok – presumably by virtue of his celebrity status – is able to exercise a degree of control and authority that is beyond their sphere of influence. Jazzsimpleez's assertion that 'we're just like Gok, but in reverse' represents an attempt to regain control by establishing an equally legitimate position. Since Pro-Ana narratives push at the boundaries of what is unsayable and untellable in particular contexts (Chase, 1995), it is not surprising that the girls attempt to re-appropriate culturally acceptable mechanisms of legitimacy. It is through such re-appropriation that 'being Ana' transcends the boundary of clinical discourse and establishes itself as something both powerful and desirable (Burke, 2009).

Pro-Ana sites act as an arena through which transgressive body narratives can be explored and legitimised. They also act as a resource in the creation of the Ana body. Most sites contain a 'tips and tricks' section in which important information – calorie content of foods, the rates that different forms of exercise burn food, reducing the health effects of binging, etc – is highlighted and made available. What is interesting here is that in much the same way that Runic Heart used the language of sport and health, this area often subverts the clinical position that has sought to define Ana as problematic. Far from being ignorant of health matters, Pro-Ana has amassed a wealth of clinical information that supports its activities:

> People say being pro-ana means we don't know anything about food. I know a lot about food – I just don't want to eat it. (Pear Girl)

> You don't just get an ana body, it needs crafting. You have to know what you are doing. (Hunger Hurts)

Hunger Hurts makes an important point. Since Pro-Ana is attempting to establish alternative expressions of the body, it requires that users engage in mainstream body discourse – in this case, the use of expert knowledge that permits mastery of one's body and its processes.

Fantasying Ana

But if scientific knowledge helps to define how the Ana body can be created, fantasy has an important role to play in the way that Pro-Ana establishes its legitimacy. 'Thinspiration' (symbolic objects that encourage anorexic behaviours) is an important aspect of most Pro-Ana spaces. These objects usually take the form of photographic images, although on some websites they may also include poems, stories or pieces of music. Celebrity images are by far the most popular. At a mundane level, these (often posed) images function in much the same way that Jazzsimpleez used Gok Wan; they legitimise the anorexic form. However, a more sophisticated mode of re-articulation is often deployed which differs from the rather passive reinforcement offered by simply uploading images of thin celebrities. On many sites, these images are accompanied by Pro-Ana slogans or text, creating the illusion that these represent the words or feelings of the celebrity depicted. For example, Mila Jovovich has the words 'waking up thin, is worth going to bed hungry' scrawled across her stomach. This is a homage to the famous Kate Moss T-shirt, 'Nothing Tastes as Good as Skinny Feels', an image that was itself appropriated by Pro-Ana. The images are thus re-appropriated to better fit the Pro-Ana agenda. Hunger Hurts explains the process:

> Of course these images on my boards are not real, we all know that. But they are meant to help my sisters when they are feeling low. That's why we call it 'thinspiration' – to inspire you. I don't know what Mila [Jovovich] would say. I can't ask her . . . so I make up a kind of story. Imagine what she might say if she was talking to us. It's a fantasy, a story about their beauty, but it helps us make it real, so it makes our beauty real.

This notion of fantasy is significant. Transgressive fictive space is an important element in helping young people to demark order from disorder (Bakhtin, 1941). Dark Fantasy provides an effective tool to explore a range of moral positions (Bettelheim, 1976) and opportunities to challenge aspects of the adult world (Morié & Pearce, 2008). The implicit suggestion in the narratives created by Hunger Hurts is that these famously thin women (whose 'beauty' has already been culturally validated) share similar feelings, and have overcome identical problems to her Pro-Ana readership. Since these women (by virtue of their beauty and status) represent an unproblematic standard of perfection, the fantasy offers an opportunity to re-formulate this cultural model to suggest that pro-anorexic behaviour provides a legitimate (and validated) means to reach this 'perfection'.

Hunger Hurts enhances her fantasy further by juxtaposing thinspirational celebrities with 'real girl' images – herself, friends and members of the community. In contrast to the glossy (and sometimes sexualised) images of the celebrities, these have a darker tone. Often accompanied by similar Pro-Ana texts, the images range from simple snapshots to more intricate and sophisticated poses (praying by a fridge, smashing a scale). Again, these can be read at the mundane – inspiration images of the Pro-Ana aesthetic, 'I am just like you and you can be thin like me' (SkinGyn) – but as Hunger Hurts explains, these construct another level of fantasy,

> Being ana is hard. It takes a lot of dedication and life is a daily struggle with food and with people who don't understand us. My photos are trying to show this. When I look at my sisters photos, I can see the struggle, I know what they have accomplished – if you are not ana, you can't appreciate this.

So, real girl photos attempt to capture the realities of being Ana. By juxtaposing images of life's 'daily struggle' with those that depict the ultimate Ana aesthetic, Hunger Hurt suggests that the two are intrinsically linked. Perfection is only obtained through struggle. Members are encouraged to engage with this fantasy (and arguably the legitimising processes we discussed earlier) to help build a sense of Pro-Ana identity. It is this that helps to set them apart from 'not Anas' who remain ignorant of the pain of the initiated.

We also see in the thinspiration narrative how pain and suffering are incorporated into a Pro-Ana aesthetic of beauty. This is supported further by the religious sub-text that we noted earlier. Many members whom we spoke to were keen to point out that, 'being pro-ana is not about not eating, we are so much more than that' (Pearl Girl). The narrative establishes itself beyond that of a normal dieter and represents Ana as more significant (perhaps superior) process:

> being ana is not for the faint hearted. We will not tolerate noobs, only the most dedicated are welcome here. (PrincessdiANA)

The path to beauty is a hard and painful process that is clearly not for everyone. Only the most dedicated will prove themselves worthy. This narrative draws directly on wider religious discourse and many of the sites we visited carried some degree of religious imagery, for example, the Ana Creed and the Thin Commandments. As we noted earlier, 'Ana' is often seen as a 'protector' figure, akin to a Buddhist Tara or Christian Virgin, or as a (guardian angel) confident with whom one can share one's burdens. Images of Angels often appear

amongst the 'thinspirational' images and alongside photos of members with 'photo-shoped' angel wings. In this guise, she is 'protecting' against the slide into temptation:

> The difference between want and need is self control. Most people have no control IMHO. They walk around eating shit and getting fat. No one needs to do that. Have some respect for yourself. Shit! I hate it! You know, when I feel hungry I think of Ana, she is always there to guide me along the right path. Then everything is alright and I feel pure. (Ana Dream)

Of course, many religions have stressed the role of fasting on the path to perfection, so perhaps there should be little surprise that it has been incorporated into a narrative articulating a harsh journey to physical salvation. As Maloney (2008) acknowledges, religious symbols offer Pro-Ana the opportunity to 'tap into the functional force of religion in providing emotional energy and social ties' (p. 9). Yet, Ana Dreams also shows us how a religious sub-text helps to endorse her Pro-Ana credentials beyond the dubious morals and practices of the 'non-Ana' world.

Concluding Ana

The young people we discuss here have varied responses to the issues we raise. Their extracts and quotes form just one small-scale element of a broader body of work, research that has highlighted contextual differences in reflections among such respondents. While we were investigating the nature of their experiences, we became increasingly interested in these accounts of non-conformity, adolescent rebellion, their transgressive behaviour. The cohort of interviewees is small, and the context of the interviews is quite subscribed, and so the outcomes can only be limited in scope.

That said, from our discussion, Pro-Ana websites can be seen as identity-granting communities that give a sense of belonging, provide recognition, provide a sense of empowerment and, in general, combat Bahktin's (1981) 'authoritative voice'. Participation in Pro-Ana grants dignified identities to those within the boundaries of the group, giving a positive sense of valued selfhood. The pre-eminent psychologist in this arena, Carl Rogers, argued that everyone strives to become more like an 'ideal self': the closer one is to an ideal self, the happier one will be. Rogers also claimed that one factor in a person's happiness is unconditional positive regard from others. This often occurs in close or familial relationships, and involves a consistent level of affection and acceptance regardless of the recipient's actions.

In this piece, we have also considered some of the ways that a trangressive digital movement has struggled to create and maintain its own identity and presence. It is perhaps possible to read Pro-Ana assertions as acts of resistance, not in any heroic way, but simply as young people marking out their sense of agency. This is of course a crucial dimension in the lives of young people and is deeply structured into any conceptualisation of youth culture (Massey, 2005). In this way, Pro-Ana can be seen as a subculture that valorises resistance expressed through the transgressive. It promotes a culture of resistance, an expression of agency in which the body itself has become a medium through which marginal identities can be articulated and enhanced. An oft-repeated phrase from participants was the desire to 'just be left alone to live my life how I wanna lead it, and do what I wanna do' (Princess diANA). Yet, at the same time, many of the girls recognised a sense of communion with like-minded 'practitioners' and, as we have demonstrated, many acknowledged the political dimensions of their online lives,

> See, Nic, really being Ana . . . being true, isn't just about saying 'I don't eat, look how cool I am' there are plenty of noobs who do that. But my site is about spreading the word, letting people know what we believe in and protecting what we want to do. We believe that thin is

beautiful, and no one has the right to tell us otherwise. Who will protect my sisters if I am not here?. (Hunger-Hurts)

I am tired of everyone telling us that we shouldn't be like this. I am saying that we are here, we are thin, and that's ok, its normal, its beautiful. (Bones are my beauty)

It is perhaps problematic to conceptualise Pro-Ana discourse outside of a wider network of gender analysis, particularly that of young women. Whilst the cultural implication of anorexia has been the subject of much debate, particularly amongst feminists (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998; McSween, 1993), Pro-Ana is arguably the first example of these debates extending to and being expressed collectively by the practitioners themselves (Burke, 2009). The Pro-Ana websites therefore offer opportunities to observe the ways that young women make sense of their own transgressive experiences.

We observed at the start of this piece that the Pro-Ana presence is both secretive and transient. As the moral anxiety regarding their potential danger to vulnerable young women has increased, the Pro-Ana sites have been subjected to ever-increasing public surveillance. Many are removed or blocked from search engines making it increasingly difficult to locate. Of the four original sites that formed the basis of this study, none are still active. Yet, the movement has responded by developing fail-safe mechanisms to ensure that their digital presence remains live. Members are primed that when the site is 'froze out' they are to collect in other digital spaces usually chat rooms or game servers (which is where we first encountered them). Ana 'buddies' text and message each other directing members to the new web address. As Dias (2003) observes, 'just as the body is a site of struggle (and resistance), so too there are struggles over where and how {young} women's stories of their body can be told' (p. 31).

Note

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Notes on contributors

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Mike Watts has a special interest in enhancing learning and teaching, and enjoys 'naturalistic' research projects in both formal and informal educational settings, evaluating the effects of policy and curriculum innovations on learning outcomes. In 2004, he was elected a fellow of the Institute of Physics and a fellow of the Higher Education Academy. His recent work looks at how learner's own questions can be used as a basis for enquiry-based teaching, the ways in which feelings and emotions shape learning and the ways in which classroom technologies can be used to enhance learning processes.

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