



'Dying to be Thin': A Thematic Analysis of Pro-Ana Communities

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ABSTRACT

Traditional discourses of eating disorders suggest that Anorexia is an illness and pathology. However, with the emergence of the Pro-Ana movement in the 1990s and its rejection of Anorexia as a disorder, the increasing importance of feminist and sociological approaches has been noted in existing literature; instead taking into account the importance of slenderness and beauty in a patriarchal Western culture (Orbach, 1994).

As a subject of scrutiny in the media, it can be argued that popular opinion of the movement is negative and unbalanced. Drawing upon feminist and sociological theory, this research aims to study the marginalised group of Pro-Ana from a neutral position.

Using the methodology of Thematic Analysis, this research explores the appeal of Pro-Ana communities and the most significant elements in the experiences of women who are associated with them, using their narratives to give this community a voice.

With the emerging themes relating Pro-Ana communities as therapeutic retreats and religions; this research highlights the importance of the healing relationships within Pro-Ana circles as a way of gaining emotional strength. The role of media exposure on the popularity of the websites is also discussed.

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| KEY WORDS: | ANOREXIA | SANCTUARY | BODY IMAGE | RELIGION | WEBSITES |
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1. Background and Literature Review

Feminist theories of eating disorders suggest that modern societal values of female beauty are more plausible explanations than the historically accepted discourses of eating disorders as illnesses and pathologies. Icons of feminist literature regarding body image, such as Susie Orbach (1994) and Naomi Wolf (1991) argue that eating disorders are, in a significant number of cases, a direct result of the changing societal ideals of female beauty and the increasing desirability of thinness in a body conscious and patriarchal society.

This thesis will focus predominantly on the feminist and sociological theories that many eating disorders are social constructions and products of Western ideologies, and not on the more generally accepted idea that they are clinical pathologies.

Although historically, the 'plump' look has been favoured; waves of the 'waif' supermodel bodies of the 1960s and 1990s coincide with the dramatic increase of Anorexia since the 1960s (Burke, 2009). This increase leads Bruch to refer to Anorexia as a 'new disease' (1978), which is said to be directly impacted by society's changing perceptions of what beauty constitutes (MacSween, 1995). The fashion industry and celebrity culture have been critiqued for glamorising thinness, and influencing women to adopt dangerous eating habits in order to fit this new ideal,

'...both feminists and the media identified the waif body as close enough to anorexic proportions as to be offensive and potentially dangerous to young women and girls who may aspire to achieve them' (Burke, 2009: 68).

It is argued that the media has a large influence on a woman's body image, and that it creates unrealistic level of beauty and perfection which women feel inclined to adhere to. Foucauldian perspectives of body image suggest that beauty is a form of power in which women are burdened to comply with, and which undermines the confidence of women who do not fit this ideal (Bartky, 1990). In 'Contested Bodies', Ruth Holliday and John Hassard (2005) argue that this subsequently results in the hysterical concern with 'fixing' ourselves, and using any means possible to edge closer to the ideal woman which the media and Western society has created.

Furthermore, it is believed that cultural stigmas such as 'fat phobia' and 'weightism' evoke fear within many women, which may normalise unhealthy eating practises and desensitise us to the extreme thin body (Tyson, 2007).

In the late 1990s, a new online subculture of Anorexia emerged which has been a source of moral panic for its proactive position towards eating disorders; the Pro-Ana community. Rather than pathologising eating disorders as illnesses, the Pro-Ana community purposely adopt unhealthy eating regimes as part of a lifestyle choice, and as a means of portraying a sense of identity. For this reason, it is argued that Pro-Ana practises are akin to body modification, similarly to how body building and cosmetic surgery allow others to express a particular identity (Tyson, 2007). Tyson also notes that women who turn to Pro-Ana communities have a 'thirst for individuality' which can be achieved through Anorexia. Similarly, Sheila MacLeod similarly argues that 'Anorexia is fundamentally about an identity crisis (1981:19).

Whereas Pro-Ana communities began as very small groups (Dias, 2003), they have progressed to a larger community of different subgroups; marking a 470% increase in the number of Pro-Ana websites between 2006 and 2007 (Optenet, 2008). Some of these groups use political narratives to express their rights to have an eating disorder (Burke, 2009), using militant discourse to exaggerate that right, 'this is not a place for the faint-hearted, weak, hysterical, or those wanting to be rescued...this is a place for the elite...' (Project Shapeshift, n.d.). This level of endurance is typical of the Anorectic, 'one of the oddest things about the Anorexic is her ability to tolerate two deprivations in particular which others find quite intolerable, namely, cold and hunger' (Macleod, 1981:95).

Other online Pro-Ana groups use feminist ideologies and state that their eating disorders stem from female oppression in a patriarchal society (Wolf, 1990), maintaining that they are simply trying to achieve the level of perfection which society and the media has portrayed as the norm, 'we want our equal say about how to live with society's image of beauty that is forced upon us, and how we are attempting to attain that' (Go Petition, 2002).

Furthermore, it is often argued that the media promote weight obsession and thinness more strongly than the Pro-Ana community does (Halse et al, 2008), given the large coverage of diets, weight loss and size zero celebrity culture.

Despite this, Pro-Ana communities are often the topics of scrutiny in the media, creating fear and moral panic among the public that Pro-Ana communities encourage healthy women to adopt Anorexia as a 'glorified diet' (Ward, 2007). Since the emergence of Pro-Ana communities, the media have regularly portrayed the women who frequent the websites as irrational and often likening it to criminality, with some describing Pro-Ana websites as 'just as bad as child porn sites' (Bauer, cited in Chaput, 2001: 239) by enticing women to develop an eating disorder and 'brutalising' them and their bodies (Chaput, 2001:239). Adjectives that are used to describe Pro-Ana websites in tabloid newspapers often include 'sick', 'disturbed' and 'deadly' (Watkins, 2010).

However, it must also be taken into consideration that a significant number of the women who access Pro-Ana websites are victims of personal traumas, and some feel that they are not yet ready to seek professional help for their eating disorder. These women may be more inclined to use Pro-Ana sites as a therapeutic 'sanctuary' (Dias, 2003), in which they feel they can talk to like-minded people without the fear of judgement and stigma that is typically attached to eating disorders in a society in which women's bodies are constantly under scrutiny.

As a result of pressure from the public, internet providers now remove Pro-Ana websites. However, in doing this, they are destroying networks of support for young women who genuinely seek support from their online peers. Rogerian based counselling therapies highlight the importance of the human relationship and its' therapeutic value, stating that it is the 'ultimate' form of therapy (Clarkson, 1995). As members of Pro-Ana communities often form very tight bonds as a result of the disorders that they share, destroying these networks of support may lead to the alienation and isolation of many women with eating disorders.

Alternative arguments suggest that the idea of the Pro-Ana community as a sanctuary is complex, as it does not take into account the risk of relapse for those who access the websites for this reason. Furthermore, although many women access Pro-Ana websites do so for their therapeutic benefits, many women also access them simply because they 'want to be thin', and therefore are not interested in the healing properties of the communities. This leads me to argue that Dias' argument ignores the role of women seeking weight loss in the appeal of Pro-Ana communities.

This idea of Pro-Ana communities as therapeutic sanctuaries links closely to the religious imagery which can be found within many Pro-Ana websites, as many people turn to religion in times of loneliness and isolation, 'We find healing when we learn that someone else is able to identify with our pain, which makes us feel less alone' (Lelwica, 2009: 221)

Many Pro-Ana websites use religious imagery in the personification of Anorexia as mythical beings such as Goddesses and Fairies. Adapted forms of Christianity's Ten Commandments which have been modified to be specific to the Pro-Ana movement are also common, along with 'Ana Creed' and 'Ana Psalm' which are also often featured on the websites, 'Some anorexics call their disorder a religion. As with any religion, there are 'commandments' (Morris, 2002. Page 8, cited in Chaput)' Michelle Lelwica explores the religious meanings found within Pro-Ana websites,

'The ultimate promise of the religion of thinness is nothing short of salvation. We are told that by achieving the perfect body we will achieve the health, happiness, and well-being we've been looking for. And we believe that our problems will fall away with the pounds we shed.' (Lelwica, 2009: 38)

Patricia Maloney also notes that the religious connotations of Pro-Ana give practitioners emotional strength in order to maintain their eating disorder, 'that socio-religious frame becomes a functional means for the participants to solidify their Pro-Ana identity and gain emotional energy to aid in their Anorexia.' (2009: 5)

As Pro-Ana communities are so heavily featured in the media, it is argued that the communities are exposed further; essentially 'advertising' to people who previously did not previously know about them, and triggering relapses among those women who already have eating disorders. 'I would never have known Pro-Ana sites existed if I hadn't seen them featured on an episode of Boston Public...Without media coverage, sites like this would remain hidden from the public eye.' (Cerulean Butterfly, n.d.).

Although there is a wealth of literature surrounding Anorexia Nervosa as a broader subject; there is very little literature surrounding Pro-Ana communities specifically, with the exception of a small number of journal articles and short chapters within edited literature.

Existing literature of Anorexia Nervosa, such as autobiographical accounts by Kim Chernin (1983) and Sheila MacLeod (1981) and the celebrated works by Hilde Bruch (1978) offer very coherent accounts of Anorexia for the time in which they were written. However, much of this literature provides accounts of eating disorders during

the 1970s and 1980s, and much has changed in this field since. It can therefore be argued that they are quite outdated.

Furthermore, a large amount of literature surrounding Anorexia Nervosa, such as the arguments presented in Bruch's works, focus heavily on the potential underlying causes of Anorexia, namely the role of the family in the development of Anorectic; and ignore the possibility that some women simply 'want to be thin'. This leads MacSween to argue that 'this perspective leads Bruch virtually to ignore the possible role and meanings of food and the body in Anorexia' (1995:41).

This research provides a more modern account of eating disorders, by focusing on the subculture of Pro-Ana in particular. As the public's main source of information of such issues, the media portrays Pro-Ana communities negatively, resulting in a 'one-sided' and unbalanced public opinion which does not take into account the therapeutic aspect of the communities which some women crave. For this reason, this thesis aims to investigate Pro-Ana communities from a neutral standpoint. An increasing number of young women are being affected by this growing 'trend', and researching it will allow us to bridge the gap in our knowledge of this enigma.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design

The chosen approach for this research was an analysis of qualitative data, due to the level of in-depth understanding which is required for this research. Qualitative methods allow for more detailed findings, as it is concerned with the experiences of people and processes of human behaviour. As there is a lack of academic research surrounding the area of Pro-Ana communities, a qualitative approach to this research allowed for the experiences and narratives of women who are, or have been, involved in the Pro-Ana community to be heard.

It was proposed that as Pro-Ana communities are largely based online, the most appropriate data collection method was to distribute questionnaires via email to those women who have been affected by Pro-Ana websites, and also to analyse a number of significant websites. A thematic analysis of the collected data was then conducted, allowing the main themes of this phenomenon to emerge.

2.2. Participants

Participants of this study were required to complete open-ended questionnaires consisting of 11 questions regarding their experiences of Pro-Ana communities.

These participants were females who are, or have been, involved in the Pro-Ana community. This sample was chosen because firstly, it is predominantly females who access these websites (Stommel, 2009), and therefore the sample would be much simpler to obtain. Furthermore, this avoided gaining inconsistent themes in the analysis, which would have inevitably arose had the research been based on both genders, due to differing experiences and opinions.

13 females responded to the questionnaire in total, and it was clear from their answers that they were a mixture of ex users and current users of Pro-Ana websites.

It was important to have a mixture of ex and current users of Pro-Ana communities in this research, as it allows for a range of experiences and opinions to emerge. No age restrictions were applied to this study as it was not considered to be relevant with regards to the research question. However, the majority of women who responded claimed that they were between the ages of 11 and 18 when they first discovered the Pro-Ana community, which supports Bardone-Cone and Cass's claim that the predominant age range of females who view, or contribute to, Pro-Ana websites is 13-25 (2007).

2.3. Data Collection Method

Although it was initially proposed that participants would be sought from Pro-Ana discussion boards, implications of this meant that participants were instead obtained from a neutral online space, as a means of being less intrusive to this particular group of people.

The chosen space was a 'diet and fitness' discussion board, located within a popular website aimed at females (www.cosmopolitan.co.uk). A discussion board is an online social space in which like-minded individuals gather to converse. This is an ideal way in which a specific sample selection can be targeted in the most convenient way; it is simple to locate a required sample of participants as the internet has a wide geographical range (Evans et al, 2008), whereas gathering a specific sample such as this one in the 'real world' would be much more problematic.

A message was written on the discussion board asking for willing participants, and describing the planned research. This also included the researcher's email address, so that participants could retrieve a questionnaire, or ask for further details. A cover sheet was sent in an attachment along with the questionnaire to willing participants which gave a brief description of the study, and informed participants they are under no obligation to continue with the study if they wish to withdraw.

As this is a study of qualitative design, the participants were asked to answer each question in as much detail as they felt they were able to give. A limit was not placed on the number of participants who could respond, however, it was proposed that in the event of a large number of respondents, this number of questionnaires would be condensed down to a smaller number of approximately 12 based on which questionnaires contained the strongest answers; as a thematic analysis requires great familiarity with the data. However, a sufficient number of respondents meant that this was unnecessary.

In addition to requiring participants to complete questionnaires, Pro-Ana websites were also required for analysis. These were predominantly www.prettythin.com and www.project-shapeshift.net, as it was decided that the content of these websites contributed more to the analysis of this research.

2.4. Data Analysis Methods

The data analysis method which was considered most suited to the research question was a thematic analysis; a method which allows the researcher to identify themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). It was felt that this method was the most appropriate method to use as there is a lack of literature surrounding Pro-Ana

communities, and this will allow the main themes and issues of the phenomenon to emerge from first-hand narratives of women who have been involved in the community. This method of analysis requires that the researcher has great familiarity with the data, and so this was ensured prior to analysis.

The first step of analysis was to generate codes within the data. Coding is the process of categorising information in the data into meaningful sub-headings, which can then be assorted into broader sections called themes. Boyatzis explains that a code is a feature of the data which is important with regards to the research question, and is 'the most basic segment or element of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon' (1998: 63). Furthermore, Charmaz describes coding as 'the process of defining what the data are all about' (1995: 37).

The next step is to categorise those codes into broader themes. A theme is a 'patterned response of meaning within the data set', which are found to be the most important with regards to the research question, and which have a significant amount of data to support them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Once the themes have emerged, they can be incorporated into the report whilst connecting them to the research question and existing literature.

2.5. Ethical Considerations

As the subject of eating disorders is a sensitive one, it was especially important to maintain ethical considerations throughout in order to protect potentially vulnerable participants from harm. There is ongoing debate about how ethical internet research is, and the ethics surrounding access to certain areas of the internet are ambiguous (Dias, 2003). For these reasons, care was taken to remain as ethical as possible throughout the data collection, especially with regards to privacy and informed consent.

Eysenback and Till (2001) argue that it is important to consider whether research being carried out is intrusive; and whether the setting is perceived as private or public space. The perceived level of privacy can be determined if a registration or subscription is required to gain access to an area of the internet (in particular discussion boards). If this is the case, users of the discussion board are likely to regard the space as private.

As Pro-Ana discussion boards are almost always kept private, the only reason that they have been used in this study was in the attempt to gain willing participants, in which case informed consent would have been given on the basis of their acceptance. Posts and messages created by users were not used in this research as a result of the ambiguous ethics surrounding it.

To ensure confidentiality and protect the identities of participants involved in this study; any direct quotes from publicly accessible websites that are used will be slightly changed. Each participant was also given a pseudonym in which they are referred to in this research, in order to preserve anonymity.

2.6. Materials

As this research has been carried out mainly online, the only materials that were

required were copies of the completed questionnaires and websites which were printed out and used for analysis.

3. Results

Following the thematic analysis of the questionnaires and the websites, 3 main themes emerged which were seen as integral the appeal of Pro-Ana communities, and to the experiences of women who use them. The themes are as follows; i) the therapeutic advantages of Pro-Ana communities ii) exposure in the media iii) Pro-Ana as a religion. These will be discussed throughout.

3.1. The Therapeutic Advantages of Pro-Ana Communities

The majority of the women involved in this research noted the importance of the community aspect and notion of sisterhood in Pro-Ana circles. Many of the women revealed in their answers that the communities made them feel 'less alone', and acted as a form of therapy through periods of isolation in their personal lives,

Gemma: 'I had been struggling alone for a long, long time and had no one to understand me, so I was so delighted to find people who actually understood me...'

Gemma: '...the community is like a family. Everyone knows each other's name, they support them and talk to them, and a lot of the time it isn't about eating; it's about just having someone to talk to.'

Chantelle: '...it was also great to feel like I was being supported somewhere instead of being told I was sick.'

Similarly, a number of the women linked the onset of their discovery of Pro-Ana communities with the emotions they had felt at the time; namely depression and anxiety. In the questionnaire that she completed, Hannah links her discovery of Pro-Ana communities and subsequent eating disorder to the pressures she felt during university life and having just moved away from home,

Hannah: 'I began to contribute to the Livejournal community around the same time that I started university, and during a time when I was prone to massive mood swings...'

Zoe also notes the relationship between Pro-Ana communities and depression, suggesting that women may find appeal in the communities in times of personal difficulty,

Zoe: 'The communities themselves are just online forums full of aggressive and depressed teenage girls'.

Although some of the women now view the communities negatively on reflection, many ultimately remember fondly about how the support from their like-minded online peers 'helped' them throughout their eating disorders and acted as a therapeutic outlet for the personal problems they experienced at the time. Some of the women disagreed with the removal of Pro-Ana websites as a preventative

measure,

Hannah: 'They offer a lifeline for others who have a genuine disorder, and the removal of this network could be damaging to these individuals.'

Charlotte: 'Why should some people lose support because others don't understand? It's not fair.'

Some of the women added that Pro-Ana communities save lives, considering the amount of support they provide people with in times of personal trauma as Kirsty, below, explains;

Kirsty: 'I wouldn't be alive if people on Pro-Ana sites hadn't convinced me that life was worth it, and I know people who wouldn't be here if we hadn't convinced them. You can't tell me that's negative.'

Many Pro-Ana websites suggest that their users wear red 'unity bracelets' that act as a signal to other members, and to symbolise strength, unity and dedication to their community; suggesting a notion of 'sisterhood',

'This bracelet embraces the unity of our thoughts, and combines the strengths of those who wear it. It is a reflection of the strength of the community...'
(Pretty Thin, 2010)

3.2. Pro-Ana as a Religion

A significant theme within the materials studied was the significance of religion. With website titles such as 'Forgive me Ana, for I have sinned', and religious imagery on many of the Pro-Ana websites; it is apparent that these young women are turning to a new 'religion' which guides them through their eating disorder. Religious texts within a large proportion of the websites include 'The Thin Commandments', Ana Psalm and Ana Creed.

In a number of websites which were evaluated in this thesis, a significant number of them had religious or cult-like texts located in them. One website in particular, Project Shapeshift, has devised a ritual which is designed to summon the 'Goddess' of Anorexia; 'Anamadim',

'Come ANAMADIM, come enter and possess this shrine, devour this consciousness and this will freely offered to your pernicious designs! Bind thou mine appetites with band of iron and steel, and fill me with the ecstasy of emptiness; eat away the excess of my flesh and render my form as parsimonious as the known universe.' (Project Shapeshift, n.d.)

This ritual suggests the drawing of blood to signify one's dedication to the maintenance of their eating disorder, creating an impression of Pro-Ana acting as a 'cult' in some cases,

'...sign your pact in blood, or at least put a drop of blood by your signature, showing symbolically that you are willing to endure some pain to get to your

goals.’ (Project Shapeshift, n.d.)

The encouragement of Pro-Ana members to wear red unity bracelets is reminiscent of other religious groups which also promotes the wearing of red bracelets, namely the religion of Kabbalah. Furthermore, one woman involved in this research linked Pro-Ana to her Hindu roots, stating that in with Hinduism, she would use prayer beads in her times of need, and likened this to how she would visit Pro-Ana websites in times of weakness also,

Jillian: ‘I suppose because I’m Hindu and I always wear prayer beads as a necklace. If I was feeling ‘weak’ I’d pray with them, and if I thought I might eat I’d go straight to the websites.. . it was like a religion because it’s what I turned to in times of need.’

Many other examples of religious imagery in the websites were also found, such as images of angels, angel wings and goddesses; believed to be metaphors for being ‘light enough to fly’.

3.3. Exposure in the Media

A strongly reoccurring theme was that of the participants having ‘learned’ of Pro-Ana websites from high media coverage and exposure. Although the majority of media coverage of Pro-Ana communities is negative, a significant number of the women reported that they had discovered Pro-Ana websites after seeing them on news features, documentaries and in newspapers,

Amanda: ‘I first heard about them on a TV show. Fearne Cotton did a documentary about it. Honestly, I never knew anything about these websites until then. I never knew they even existed.’

Casey: ‘The media is giving these sites publicity.’

One of the women, Elizabeth, gave a particularly interesting response regarding negative media coverage of Pro-Ana communities,

Elizabeth: ‘I first used them when I was about 17 after seeing a documentary about girls suffering from various eating disorders. It was meant to put you off. Lol.’

By using the abbreviation ‘lol’, an internet slang word for ‘laugh out loud’, Elizabeth is conveying a sense of humour and irony in this statement. Although the media attempt to create deterrents in their negative coverage of Pro-Ana communities, they are also simultaneously exposing them as ‘trendy’ and rebellious, adding to the appeal of them and ultimately making them more popular.

Some of the women also expressed their anger at the ‘hypocrisy’ of the media. It is argued that the media heavily scrutinise Pro-Ana communities, but simultaneously feature and celebrate thin celebrities, and stigmatise the overweight body. One of the women stated,

Charlotte: 'The media throw celebs and their weight loss in our face every single day, and we learn from a young age that being fat is bad, and being thin makes you popular. Why is it ok for them to do that and for them to push people towards a life with a disorder, but because we have a disorder we get punished?'

Despite many women learning of Pro-Ana communities via the media, it was found that more women possess eating disorders prior to accessing them,

Charlotte: 'I've had a disorder since I was really young... The websites didn't make me do it more...'

Hannah: 'I had been prone to restricting my intake... for a few years before [accessing Pro-Ana websites].'

This suggests that whereas the media suggest that Pro-Ana communities attract healthy women into adopting eating disorders as 'glorified diets' (Ward, 2007), many women find appeal in the other aspects of Pro-Ana communities, such as the therapeutic advantages highlighted above.

3.4. Summary of findings

The results of the analysis suggest that the women involved in this research who already possessed eating disorders prior to their discovery of Pro-Ana, turned to the communities in times of personal difficulty for support from other like-minded individuals who 'understood' them. Despite the majority presently viewing Pro-Ana communities negatively, many also expressed fond memories of how the communities 'helped' them throughout difficult times in their personal lives in hindsight.

This notion was closely linked to the idea of Pro-Ana as a religion, as it became apparent in these findings that women turned to this new 'religion' for safety and security in times of difficulty.

The majority of women in this analysis did not previously know about Pro-Ana communities until they had seen them in magazines, newspapers and on television; and expressed anger at the high exposure in the media influencing young and vulnerable women to access them.

4. Discussion

The main findings of this research provide great support for the existing literature explored throughout this thesis. The themes which were heavily mentioned throughout the analysis were the therapeutic self-help advantages and the religious references attached to the communities, and the heavy exposure of the communities in the media resulting in the movement becoming increasingly popular. These themes highlighted the elements which were found to be integral to the experiences of women who frequent Pro-Ana websites; and also identified the most significant factors in the appeal of the communities, fulfilling the main objectives of this

research. This article will explore these findings with relation to existing literature acknowledged in the literature review of this thesis.

As previously mentioned, Karen Dias (2003) noted the importance of the therapeutic components comprising the Pro-Ana community. Dias's research concluded that women who frequent Pro-Ana websites do so as a way of gaining acceptance in a society, which they would otherwise find it difficult to integrate into. Furthermore, they were also found to be an outlet for women who experienced difficulties in their personal lives, 'Cyberspace can be conceptualized as an alternative space for women with eating and body issues, one that may serve as a sanctuary' (Dias, 2003).

The findings from this study provide great support for the findings of Dias's research. As it was stated in the results section of this thesis, the main theme which was found to be central to the experiences of women who access these websites was the therapeutic aspect of Pro-Ana as a 'sanctuary', and the majority of women noted the importance of this in their answers.

There is much literature which suggests that an important aspect of life is a strong, growth-promoting human relationship (Clarkson, 1995). This theory is supported by the works of Dias (2003), and also this research conducted on women's narratives and websites. One blog identified in analysis states, 'A strong support network is a basic human need. Talking about your worries just makes you feel better. It's a sense of release to have them out in the open and not pent up inside.' (Student Body, 2008)

These websites could be considered, to an extent, useful. In her argument, Dias (2003) notes that professional therapy of eating disorders is much less effective if the individual is not yet ready to accept help. The websites may therefore act as a temporary coping measure for those who do not feel ready for professional therapy, 'this could be helpful since the early stages of anorexia are usually marked by extreme isolation, secrecy, and disconnection' (2003: 31). This is supported by a number of the women involved in this research who claimed that Pro-Ana communities 'saved their lives', and also by Schickova (2009) who supports this notion,

'If we subvert the normal stigma attached to eating disorders, one could instead argue that Pro-Ana is actually a reactionary coping sub-culture, rather than a cause of this psycho-somatic illness... of which it's previously isolated sufferers and potential sufferers are finally gaining community space vital for self-help and support in the 21st century.'
(Schickova, 2009)

The media regularly demonise the Pro-Ana community, arguing that it entices healthy women to adopt an eating disorder as a 'glorified diet' (Ward, 2007). However, this research discovered that many women who access Pro-Ana websites already possess eating disorders prior to discovering the websites, suggesting that many more women access them for alternative reasons, including the therapeutic aspects.

This is a contrary notion to the typical discourses of Pro-Ana communities which suggest that women 'learn' to adopt eating disorders after their discovery of the websites, making this finding quite unexpected. It was expected prior to analysis that more women would find appeal in the promise of quick weight loss, as opposed to the appeal in emotional help, as this is what we are told by the media.

Closely linked to the notion of Pro-Ana as therapeutic communities is the idea of it as a religion, which was also found to be a major theme within this research. As stated previously in this thesis, Michelle Lelwica explored the significance of religion in seeking security and support in times of need; and the feeling of 'belonging' to a particular group, 'religion is rooted in our need and search for meaning and fulfilment' (2009: 32). Lelwica also notes how feelings of emptiness motivate these women to turn to a new religion as a form of empowerment, where others have failed them (2009). This notion is reminiscent of the findings of this research which suggest that women turn to Pro-Ana communities in times of loneliness and helplessness.

Lelwica (2009) adds that the religious aspect of Pro-Ana provides comfort and gives us the means to connect with like-minded individuals,

'Through weight loss rituals and the mythology they support we are connected to other women who share our longing for a slender body... When we join, we become a member of a community... the shared pursuit of a slender body gives us a way to feel connected.' (2009: 38)

Religious undertones were common within the analysis of Pro-Ana websites in this research. As found in Maloney's research, images and poetry regarding angels, feathers and weightlessness were common, conveying a sense of escapism within the Pro-Ana religion, 'the participants want to be emotionally and physically light enough to fly away from their problems' (Maloney, 2008).

The idea of religion adds to the appeal of Pro-Ana as a safe environment, which helps women of the Pro-Ana community gain emotional strength throughout their eating disorder. In this religion, the Anorexic 'goddess' of Anorexia, Anamadim, is worshipped just as the Gods of other religions are,

'Thanks Anamadim for her presence and her willingness to assist you in your goals... She works with you and in you to provide assistance in overcoming weak points within yourself so that you can do the work more consistently and efficiently. She also aids your success and teaches you things if you will listen.'
(Project Shapeshift, n.d.)

The final theme which emerged in analysis related to the role of the media on the popularity of Pro-Ana websites, and essentially 'learning' about Pro-Ana communities whereas they would not otherwise know about them. This is problematic, as despite many women using Pro-Ana communities for their therapeutic advantages, there are also many women who access them simply to lose weight. Furthermore, exposure in the media may 'trigger' relapses in current or recovering Anorexics (NEDA, 2004).

The majority of the media's coverage of Pro-Ana communities highlight them as dangerous, and distastefully 'trendy' (Schickova, 2009), given the popularity of them in recent years. The communities are also portrayed as exclusive 'clique-ish little clubs' (Women's Studies, 2004), which adds to the appeal among potentially impressionable young women. Ultimately, the negative media coverage of Pro-Ana communities has given the communities a sense of rebelliousness, contributing to the popularity of them in recent years

These findings are important, as typical discourses of Pro-Ana websites suggest that women are enticed into acquiring an eating disorder by these 'predatory' online communities. However, the results show that although this may be true in some cases; many women also use Pro-Ana communities as a form of self-help for existing eating disorders, and not to acquire one. This research may contribute to changing popular opinion about the communities being dangerous and predatory.

4.1. Implications

As an 'outsider' researching a typically private group, I found some elements of this research quite difficult; namely, gathering participants from Pro-Ana discussion boards. The nature of the research topic and the perceived level of privacy on the discussion boards meant that I was met with a hostile reception and a lack of respondents, meaning that I had to seek participants from elsewhere.

I understood that this may have been the case because, as a Psychology student asking for participants, they may have felt pathologised. Future research could eliminate issues such as this by applying further ethical considerations with regards to gaining participants from a perceived private space.

Further implications of this research include the small sample size and narrow scope of the study. Future research of this topic may benefit from a larger scale study with a larger sample size, as this may result in additional findings central to the experiences of the women of the Pro-Ana community; and possibly take into account gendered meanings within the movement, and other online eating disorder communities such as the 'Pro-Mia' movement.

However, a smaller scale study was considered to be the most appropriate for this thesis, given the requirement in thematic analysis to have great familiarity with data in a limited amount of time.

4.2. Conclusion

To conclude, whereas typical discourses of Pro-Ana communities suggest that they are predatory and dangerous, influencing healthy women to acquire an eating disorder; this research has found that many women access them as a form of therapeutic self-help for existing eating disorders and personal issues. The emergent themes from the analysis found these therapeutic aspects as integral to the women's' experiences of the Pro-Ana community.

4.3. Reflexive Analysis

As a person who is not a part of the Pro-Ana community, I hoped to gain some insight into this arguably misunderstood and pathologised group, and share those understandings in this thesis. Despite being aware that that as an 'outsider', it may not be possible to understand the community fully, I attempted to give this marginalised group a 'voice' and to position myself from a neutral standpoint. Having been interested in eating disorders for a number of years however, I found myself to have a predetermined high level of empathy towards the women who turn to Pro-Ana communities as a form of self-therapy.

Typical discourses of Pro-Ana communities in society and the media suggest that women involved in these practises are 'irrational' (Stommel, 1994), but I argue that for those who have not experienced being involved in the Pro-Ana community, it is difficult to judge and understand the reasonings that women have for turning to them.

As the researcher of this study, I am aware of how my own thoughts and feelings as a female may have influenced the results of this study, and my interpretations of the narratives of the women. I also realise that the questions I chose to ask the women in the questionnaires may have influenced the particular themes which arose, and that different questions may have resulted in alternative themes.

This research provided me with new understandings about Pro-Ana communities, which I hope is also true for the readers of this thesis.

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