



The 'Ana-Lifestyle': A Social Representations Exploration of how 'Pro-Ana' Websites shape Social Norms

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ABSTRACT

This research explores the normalisation of anorexia nervosa within pro-anorexia (pro-ana) websites; through looking at how the websites shape and adapt their own social norms. The pro-ana movement emerged in the 1990s; portraying anorexia nervosa as a lifestyle choice rather than a severe disorder (Conrad & Rondini, 2010). The emergence of pro-ana has been correlated with the worsening of anorexia symptoms, and rises in incidence rates (Rouleau & Von Ranson, 2011). This negative impact is thought to result from the normalisation of anorexia within pro-ana websites; however no research currently exists identifying how this normalisation occurs. This research bridged this gap, two websites; 'Ana Boot Camp' and 'Go-Pro: Ana Lives' were explored using a combination of thematic coding with social representations processes, to provide the best insight into these complex websites. Three themes emerged that contribute to the normalisation of anorexia within the websites: 'Differentiation' between anorexia nervosa and 'ana'; 'thinspiration'; and 'extreme dieting'. Furthermore, through the normalisation of these themes; dangerous behaviours are seen as the 'norm', and are not considered problematic. However, this is not the case, and societal awareness should be raised to warn individuals not to be taken in by the 'lifestyle' promoted on pro-ana websites.

KEY WORDS:	SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS	SOCIAL NORMS	ANOREXIA NERVOSA	PRO-ANA	THINSPIRATION
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Introduction

Anorexia Nervosa: A Fuller Picture

Anorexia Nervosa was first named and identified as a clinical diagnosis in 1874, by Sir William Gull, who gave the name 'anorexia nervosa' based on its meaning; a nervous loss of appetite (BUPA, 2010; Cardwell & Flanagan, 2005). Vandereyken (2002) noted that although anorexia was identified as a disorder in the 19th century, it was not widely recognised or understood until the middle of the 20th century.

Awareness of anorexia started brewing when the American Psychiatric Association (1980) finally included eating disorders in the DSM- III (Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders), and the severity of the disorder became known, due to deaths from the disorder being widespread news. Gilman (2008) identified that the death of Karen Carpenter (from the duo 'The Carpenters') in 1983 further brought anorexia nervosa into popular discourse, and sparked the need for an understanding of the disorder. Shortly after her death, anorexia became a household name, with media coverage rocketing, and other celebrities admitting to having the disorder (Becker, 2011). Since the later 1900s, it has been identified by the Eating Disorders Coalition (2006) that eating disorder incidence rates have doubled.

Anorexia nervosa is now widely recognised as a potentially life threatening mental health condition. The NHS (2012) characterises the eating disorder by sufferers excessively limiting their food intake as a result of unrealistic fears of weight gain, or having a distorted body image that they are already 'fat', which often results in sufferers becoming dangerously underweight. There are many symptoms of the disorder, BUPA (2010) identified the most typical symptoms as being obsessive exercising, using diet pills and laxatives, inducing vomiting, obsessively weighing and measuring the body, a lack of energy, and amenorrhea (the absence of menstrual periods). White, Duncan and Baumle (2012) identified common psychological symptoms of the disorder include depressed feelings, mood swings, control issues, poor body image, anxiety and a lack of self-esteem.

Weiten, Dunn and Hammer (2011) acknowledged the onset of anorexia is commonly in adolescence, around 14-18 years. Whilst Gropper, Smith and Groff (2008) identified that it is predominantly a female disorder; with 90-95 per cent of sufferers being female, and only 10-15 per cent of sufferers being male (ANAD, 2012). Crow *et al.* (2009) identified a mortality rate of 4 per cent in anorexia; the highest of all psychological disorders. Deaths resulting from anorexia have been recognised by Beumont (2000) as being due to cardiac arrhythmias, opportunistic infections, suicide and starvation.

Meletis and Barker (2004) recognised that like many other mental health conditions, there is not one sole cause of anorexia. Instead, there is much dispute as to whether anorexia should be explained biologically, psychologically, or socially. The biological explanation focuses on genetic contributions as a causal factor for anorexia, having been proved that genetics is of importance through twin studies (Holland *et al.*, 1984; 1988; Scott, 1986). This explanation also looks at brain chemicals as a trigger for anorexia. Previous research by Cardwell and Flanagan (2005), and Weiner and

Craighead (2010) identified that increased serotonin activity in the brain is associated with anorexic symptoms, therefore implicating the brain chemical serotonin in anorexia.

Psychological explanations of anorexia focus on the role of stress. Treasure, Schmidt and Van Furth (2003) recognised that anorexia sufferers often experience difficulties and life changes prior to onset, leading to anorexia due to inadequate coping mechanisms for the stressor. Weiner and Craighead (2010) suggested an alternate psychological explanation for anorexia is that it results from sufferers striving for perfection, which leads to the obsessive controlling of behaviours seen in anorexia.

Lastly, social explanations are concerned with the role of societal messages in the onset of anorexia. Wozniak, Reklieti and Roupá (2012) recognised individuals are bombarded with images from the mass media, showing stick-thin models as the only way to success, and portraying them as the 'ideal'. Weiner and Craighead (2010) similarly identified that society 'glorifies thinness and denigrates fatness', which influences individuals to lose weight, which can become extreme.

21st Century Anorexia: Pro-Ana

In line with the rise in anorexia incidence rates, came the rise of pro-anorexia (pro-ana) websites, which play on social explanations of anorexia to an extreme. Day and Keys (2008) and Halse, Honey and Boughtwood (2008) recognised that pro-ana websites portray anorexia as a valid life-style choice, rather than a disorder. Tierney (2006) had also looked at the idea of anorexia being a choice; identifying that the websites foster a sense of community, belonging and identity among like-minded sufferers, who believe their behaviours are a personal choice. Overbeke (2008) extended on this, stating that the popularity of pro-ana websites can be directly attributed to the sense of community created.

Pro-Ana websites first emerged in the 1990s. Conrad and Rondini (2010) stated these early websites are referred to as 'first wave pro-ana'. The first wave sites hugely rejected the medical label, instead putting forward a 'positive' view of anorexia, resulting in the hallmark of these sites; that anorexia is a 'life-style choice' (Conrad & Rondini, 2010; Lawrence, 2008). Giles (2006) and Kosut (2010) identified the first wave sites saw recovery as an undesirable outcome, and provided motivation to further encourage weight loss.

Atkins (2002) and Reaves (2001) found that individuals could access over 400 websites targeted at anorexics in 2001. However, due to the extreme and disturbing nature of the content on the websites, they caused outrage and uproar in the media, among medical professionals, recovering anorexics and the general population (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Kosut, 2010). This sparked the group ANAD (Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders) to take action, and pleaded with internet server Yahoo to take down the websites. Soon after, yahoo shut down 115 pro-anorexia websites, which led to other servers following suit (Palmgren, 2011; Reaves, 2001; Rumney, 2009).

Most websites re-emerged under different names and domains following their shut down. These second wave sites contain much of the same content (to less extreme) as the original sites. Interestingly, Conrad and Rondini (2010) observed that the second wave sites acknowledge both the medical side of anorexia, as well as the idea that it is a choice, and also noted the websites contain warnings on their homepages concerning site content. Research by Chesley *et al.* (2003) and Dias (2003) identified that the websites commonly include many other components, such as instructions for maintaining anorexia, diets, bulletin boards, forums, calorie dairies, and motivational 'creeds' and images (pictures of extremely thin woman that act as weight loss inspiration, called 'thinspiration').

'Thinspiration' ('thinspo') is an important element of pro-ana websites. A study by Norris *et al.* (2006) identified that content acting as a form of inspiration is most prevalent on the websites. Whilst Overbeke (2008) furthered this; revealing that thinspiration pages were the most common component; present on 93 per cent of sites. Thinspiration images of waif-thin individuals are often models, actresses and various other celebrities in the public eye, which act as encouragement to persevere with starvation (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Rumney, 2009). Commonly, thinspiration celebrities are Victoria Beckham, Angelina Jolie, Gwyneth Paltrow, Kate Moss and Geri Halliwell, to name a few (Alexander, 2010; Ross, 2010). Harrison and Cantor (1997) recognised that thinspiration images promote a 'thin-ideal' which fuels the drive for thinness to a disordered level. Tiggemann (2003) furthers this, identifying that such emphasis on the desirability of thinness is detrimental to young girls' self-esteem and body image.

Not only have thinspiration aspects of the websites been found to be harmful, but the entire websites in general. Bardone-Cone and Cass (2006; 2007) investigated the effect of pro-ana website exposure, and reported that participants who viewed the websites had a decrease in self-esteem and perceived attractiveness, with increased negative effects and perception of being overweight. Similarly, Jett, Laporte and Wanchisn (2010) found that after pro-ana website viewings, participants significantly reduced their calorie consumption; demonstrating these websites can result in disordered eating.

Theoretical Insights

Previous research has also focused on interactions within the pro-ana websites. Haas *et al.* (2011) found that through the online interactions, users co-construct their dangerous/negative behaviours in a positive way, bringing about new positive identities. In other words, the disorder is normalised through the use of group chat on the website forums/blogs. Other research by Boero and Pascoe (2012) again looked at interactions and rituals within the pro-anorexia websites, and identified that a common ritual among users was the regular uploading of pictures featuring their bodies so others can see they are skinny. These previous findings relating to the pro-ana websites therefore establish that the users have their own ideas and norms surrounding anorexia.

Hechter and Opp (2001, p.xi) stated 'social norms are cultural phenomena that prescribe and proscribe behaviour in specific circumstances'. Sharma and Malhotra (2007) asserted that norms are desirable behaviours, for which individuals are judged

and either approved or disapproved based on their displays of said behaviour. Social norms theory is therefore important when looking at pro-ana sites, as users of the websites conform to specific 'ana' behaviours, which are seen as desirable to them. Social norms can come about from both societal influences, and behaviours exhibited within a certain group (Barker & Kuiper, 2003).

Therefore, social representations contribute to the shaping of social norms, as social representations are the process by which we construct our social reality, through the shaping of beliefs, attitudes and opinions (Deaux & Philogene, 2001). Moscovici (1988) stated that social groups establish their identities through their shared social representations; acknowledging different groups share differentiated knowledge. Moscovici (1976; 1984) also asserted that shared social representations held by a group are what allow people to communicate effectively, and come to an agreed view about reality. Social representations therefore allow for the establishment of a reality, and social norms are part and parcel of any reality, as they govern social interactions (Young, 2007).

Social representations are both shared and individual, and so are made up of two parts; the central core and the peripheral elements. The central core is pretty consistent, and is the part which everyone in a group/culture shares. The peripheral elements are negotiated and adapted through conversations, and can change as a result of the individual's own understanding (Flament, 1989). Therefore, from this theory it seems pro-ana beliefs and ideas remain consistent, but an individual's adherence to this view can change, depending on the persons own understandings of anorexia.

Pro-ana beliefs and ideas remain consistent due to the maintenance of pro-ana social norms. Social norms are maintained through various processes. Young (2007) identified that social norms are held in place by the shared expectations relating to the social phenomena, as well as individual internalization of the norm. Others have noted that social norms are maintained due to the threat of disapproval and punishment for violation of the norms (Coleman, 1990; Sugden, 1986).

Jodelet (1991) identified that over the past half-century, changes in social representations of the 'ideal' body, and what constitutes an acceptable diet have altered. Fischler (1980) acknowledged changes such as this reflect social and economic changes. The view concerning an acceptable diet has shifted to that of a limiting and restricting diet, Cohen (2006) identified this is advertised by the media, by portraying progressively thinner representations of female bodies. These changes in social representations of the female 'ideal' will therefore influence realities; and as a result social norms will also alter to adhere to this new view of reality. This is especially the case for pro-ana users, who look up to those in the media for inspiration.

Although much research has looked at various aspects of pro-ana websites, there is currently no research that explores how these websites and the associated content shape understandings and beliefs regarding anorexia. Therefore, the main aim of this research is to explore how the pro-anorexia websites normalise anorexia. There are

several aims of this research that will contribute to this main aim; firstly this research will explore how the websites describe and portray anorexia, and what anorexia might mean to the website users. Secondly, this research will pinpoint any content on the websites that could impact on an individual, and their behaviour. And lastly, to explore how social norms within the pro-ana websites might be shaped and adapted, using the theory and processes involved in social representations.

Methodology

This research explored how pro-ana websites shape their own social norms and beliefs using a qualitative research method, due to this method providing 'a deeper insight into user experiences' (Gramatikov *et al.*, 2010, p.48). Buckley and Malcolm (1996) stated qualitative research goes beyond the measurement of observable behaviour and seeks to understand the meaning and beliefs underlying action. Whilst Wright (1996) identified qualitative methods provide answers to 'messy' problems and complex issues. Therefore, qualitative methods seemed the most appropriate, as it allowed for both a deeper understanding of the complex content within the pro-ana websites, as well as the influence such content had on pro-ana beliefs and norms.

A social representations analysis also seemed appropriate, as this method is rooted in interpretivism, which states there are multiple versions of reality (King & Horrocks, 2010). Pro-ana websites are made up of a specific subgroup of individuals within society, that share very particular beliefs relating to anorexia (that it is a lifestyle choice), which greatly differ from beliefs of the general public. As the users of the websites share a very different reality, the websites centre on content that fits in with this reality; commonly subtle messages and metaphors associated with their beliefs. Interpretivism was therefore important in this research, as there was not just one way of exploring the content and the beliefs featured within the websites; with many ways that the websites could be understood. A social representations analysis therefore allowed for a window of explanations into how the pro-ana users construct their social norms from the website content.

This social representations method allowed for an understanding into the messages and metaphors featured on the websites, which in turn permitted the establishment of how the users received this information, as social representations tie with both social constructionism and social cognition. Therefore, this social representations theory allowed for the exploration of how the pro-ana users experience and construct their social world. And the social representations processes (anchoring, personification, figuration and ontologizing) allowed for the identification of how this information and experience fits into the individuals cognitive structures.

Although a social representations analysis was fitting for this research, it is not without limitations. Abrams and Hogg (1998) argued it to be vague and imprecise, as often the specific groups being looked at are not well defined. However, the group of focus in this piece of research was clearly specified; pro-ana website users.

Sample

This social representations analysis involved the exploration of the content on pro-anorexia websites. Two websites were selected for analysis; 'Ana Boot Camp' (see appendices 1) and 'Go-Pro: Ana Lives' (see appendices 2). Whilst small sample sizes are often seen as a limitation in research, this is not always the case, as small sample sizes allow for a thick description of a particular phenomenon within its social context (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012). The websites selected for analysis appeared similar in nature, and were selected for a number of reasons. Firstly, the websites were easily accessible on entering 'pro-ana' into search engines Google and Yahoo, making them available to a huge number of potential users worldwide. Secondly, selection was based on content; both sites contained thinspiration pages, diet tip pages, home-page warnings, and various other pages that had similarities. Thirdly, the sites were selected due to their contradictory nature. As although both websites displayed warnings on their homepages (that anorexia is a severe disorder, and that users should not enter the site unless they have an eating disorder), the rest of the sites' content seemed to contradict that anorexia is a disorder for the most part. And lastly, the creators of both websites appeared to be individuals that suffered with anorexia themselves, and so the content posted on their site reflects what anorexia means to them and their reality.

Analytical Procedure

Previous research looking into pro-anorexia websites have made use of various analytical methods, such as narrative techniques (Dias, 2003); questionnaire techniques (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006); and observation techniques (Brotsky & Giles, 2007), as a few examples. This research differed, and used a thematic technique to analyse the selected websites' content. This thematic analysis technique seemed appropriate for analysis; as it is a method that allows for identifying, analysing, and reporting of themes within data, as well as going further to interpret such themes that are found (Boyatzis, 1998).

Performing a thematic analysis on the selected websites involved many stages; the first stage being familiarisation with the data; in this case that involved familiarising myself with the website content. The second stage of the thematic analysis was the initial coding of the website content; which involved working through the entirety of the data from both websites and coding (describing) what was on the websites (see appendices 4 & 5). The third stage involved interpretive coding; which involved interpreting the data based on aspects identified during the first phase of coding. And the final stage involved the development of themes; themes that represented what had been established during the first and second phases of coding (see appendices 5, 6 & 7). Smith and Firth (2011) identified that this systematic searching of the data results in the establishment of meaningful themes for the data.

The thematic analysis performed in this research took the form of a 'top down, bottom up' exploration of data (website content). A 'top down' method of coding refers to the coding of data that is driven by the researchers theoretical interests (Braun & Clarke,

2006), whilst a 'bottom up' method of coding is where the themes strongly link to the data (Patton, 1990). This analysis incorporated a mix of both 'top down' and 'bottom up' coding, as the themes identified during coding strongly linked to the website content, as well as linking to the theoretical concepts established to be important in this research; social representations. Therefore, the theoretical coding of the websites related to the processes involved in forming social representations; anchoring, personification, figuration and ontologizing.

Anchoring involves the classification and naming of unfamiliar objects or social stimuli, by comparing them with familiar contexts or models (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2006). This can be done by connecting the idea behind the social representation with a well-known social event or process (Moscovici, 1984). The unknown object can only be represented in society once it has been assigned a name, which allows for the categorisation of said object (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2006). Therefore, the theoretical coding of anchoring in this research explicitly looked at how pro-ana websites view of 'ana' compared to familiar ideas surrounding anorexia nervosa.

Personification is an objectification technique; referring to how abstract ideas are made concrete and tangible (Russell & Jarvis, 2002). Personification is the process whereby the idea is linked with a well-known individual or group (Moscovici, 1984). Therefore, the theoretical coding for personification identified the specific individuals/ groups that the pro-ana beliefs linked with, which in turn make these beliefs more concrete.

Figuration is the process whereby images and metaphors are used to represent an idea or concept (Hayes, 2000), which leads to the idea becoming concrete and part of a common sense understanding (Murray, 1990). Therefore, the theoretical coding's for figuration identified the metaphors and images used to represent ideas within the pro-ana websites, which led to interpretations of how these metaphors and images contributed to social norms being shaped.

'Ontologizing is the process whereby a verbal or conceptual construct is imbued with physical properties' (Donaghue, Walker & Augoustinos, 2006, p.41). This process gives something real being; it is introducing the object/idea into the world which results in the understanding that said object/idea is a reflection of reality (Ullan, 1995). For this piece of research, the theoretical coding for ontologizing interpreted how the ideas and beliefs within the pro-ana websites were permeated, through the identification of how ideas were given physical properties.

Ethical Considerations

A concern of this research related to the fact that users of the pro-ana websites would not have expected the websites, and the associated material to be used for the purpose of research. The BPS (2007) stated website users often consider their publically accessible internet activity to be private. The issue of informed consent for this piece of research is therefore dubious, as Peden and Flashinski (2004) identified it poses a challenge for conducting ethical research when looking at online material, as well as

issues of privacy and confidentiality (Frankel & Siang, 1999). However, the websites chosen for analysis were both in the public domain, and the data did not have a gatekeeper. The websites also did not contain forums or discussion boards, and so issues of user privacy (relating to personal comments) and confidentiality were not of concern in this particular research. For this research, gaining informed consent off website users would not have been possible, however it was still deemed suitable (by the research supervisor – see appendices 8 & 9 for ethical approval forms) to conduct this research, as the research does not involve any human participants, nor personal information from any humans.

Analysis & Discussion

As mentioned previously, the websites ‘Ana Boot Camp’ (ABC) and ‘Go Pro: Ana Lives’ (GP: AL) of interest in this research were selected due to their similarity in nature. During the analysis of these websites, even more subtle similarities became evident, which contributed to three main overarching themes. These three themes identified being differentiation; thinspiration; and extreme dieting (see appendices 5, 6 & 7).

Theme 1: Differentiation

Through the analysis process, it became evident that the websites view ‘Anorexia Nervosa’ and ‘Ana’ as distinct entities (see appendices 5). Anorexia Nervosa is referred to in medical terms; portrayed accurately as a mental illness.

“Anorexia nervosa is a serious, often chronic, and life threatening eating disorder.” (ABC)

The websites also acknowledged that it is characterised by both disordered eating and obsessive controlling behaviours, with recognition that recovery is important, due to the severity of the disorder. However, although the medical view of anorexia is recognised, the websites tend to distance from this view, and instead focus on ‘Ana’. ‘Ana’ in contrast, has been re-defined outside of the medical discourse (Fox, Ward & O’Rourke, 2005) and is instead portrayed as a lifestyle choice; a quest to achieve the ‘norm’ of extreme thinness as it is desirable. ‘Ana’ is also referred to as ‘borderline anorexia’ on one of the websites:

“There is something out there that can only be described as borderline anorexia. I would define this as having the mental state of an anorexic (hating your body, wanting to see bones, wishing you had self-control) but not looking severely underweight.” (GP: AL)

Whilst most would argue that there is no such thing as ‘borderline anorexia’, those that are part of the pro-ana movement believe that they choose to adopt the anorectic behaviours, but do not see themselves as being ‘full blown anorexic’, so do not consider it a problem.

The distinction between anorexia nervosa and 'ana' is the result of the social representations process of anchoring, which involves the classification and naming of unfamiliar stimuli, by comparison with familiar ideas (Augoustinos, Walker & Donaghue, 2006). In relation to these websites, this process will have involved comparisons between the familiar medical views of anorexia nervosa, with the unfamiliar views of 'ana' as a lifestyle choice. This research established that ideas surrounding 'ana' are hugely different to those of anorexia nervosa, therefore 'ana' does not fit with anorexia nervosa, resulting in 'ana' becoming a distinct identity. This identification of 'ana' can then be represented in society, in this case by the pro-ana movement online, which results in 'ana' becoming a social norm for individuals to adhere to.

Mulveen and Hepworth (2006) similarly identified the difference between 'ana' and anorexia nervosa within pro-ana websites. However, drawing from the social representations theory, this research allowed for the exploration of how the 'ana'/anorexia nervosa distinction occurred, whereas previous research did not identify how the distinction occurs. The pro-ana movement and 'ana' are seen by many as taboo; the idea that it is a lifestyle choice is hugely rejected by the majority. Therefore, 'ana' can only flourish on the web, where the topic is out of the public eye, avoiding further stigmatisation (Hanson, 2003; Rich, 2006). Using cyberspace to put forward the pro-ana movement provides a limitless, accessible platform for 'ana' beliefs, resulting in a worldwide representation that 'ana' is the norm. Although 'ana' as a lifestyle choice is a sinister aspect of the pro-ana movement (Giles, 2006), it provides individuals with a sense of freedom from traditional ideas of anorexia (Tierney, 2008), which makes the 'ana' norm all the more rewarding.

Not only was 'ana' normalised through the process of anchoring, but was also normalised through the process of personification; where the idea is linked with an individual. The naming of 'ana' gives the concept an identity; a female identity due to the feminine name, therefore portraying 'ana' as a girl who also chooses the ana-lifestyle.

“Ana, she is my friend, my best friend, we have a life, we do things.” (ABC)

This representation of 'ana' as a human being results in the beliefs and ideas surrounding 'ana' becoming concrete, because they are linked with 'ana' as a person. Others have also identified that 'ana' is portrayed as a person, specifically a helpful friend (Bruhlmeier, 2010; Jowett, 2012), a goddess (Chryssides, 2012; Kaufman, 2010), and a charismatic leader (Bell, 2009). This personification of 'ana' therefore further normalises the ana-lifestyle, as the lifestyle becomes more recognisable. This links with the process of ontologization also, where an idea is imbued with physical properties, which results in the idea becoming a reflection of reality. The ontologization of 'ana' therefore results in 'ana' becoming a common sense understanding, as giving 'ana' an identity gives physical properties to the idea, which results in further normalisation.

In previous literature, the issue of identity has become prominent among anorexics (Giles, 2006; Rich, 2006). That is, anorexic women often struggle to develop a sense of

identity. Through the personification of 'ana' however, it seems the 'ana' identity is internalised through the individuals adherence to the ana-lifestyle (food restrictions, excessive exercising etc.), which again results in 'ana' becoming the norm. This finding that anorexics obtain an identity through devotion to the ana-lifestyle, fits in with Antaki and Widdicombe's (1998) view that identity is embedded within social activity and is something people do, as opposed to something they are.

Theme 2: Thinspiration

A huge proportion of the websites content was found to focus around thinspiration (see appendices 6). The use of the word 'thinspiration' alone relates to the social representations process of figuration, whereby metaphors are used to represent a concept (Hayes, 2000). The metaphor 'thinspiration' represents the idea that 'thinness is desired', and is referred to throughout the websites to establish this as a common understanding.

This analysis revealed that thinspiration within the websites took three forms, celebrity thinspiration; thinspiration images; and books/song motivations. Celebrity thinspiration was found to receive the most focus on the websites, with dozens of pages dedicated to images of celebrities that act as inspiration. Common thinspiration celebrities across both websites included Twiggy, Mary-Kate Olsen, Victoria Beckham, Lindsey Lohan, Nicola Ritchie and Tara Reid (see figure 1), with various others featured but less so. The use of such celebrities for thinspiration is another process of personification, as thinness becomes associated with these well-known celebrities that are constantly in the public eye, making the need to be thin a more concrete idea. Also, because the majority of celebrities fit with the 'thin-ideal', it is then seen as the norm to be very thin, which further impacts on the thin desire.

The celebrity images featured within the pro-ana websites of interest were mostly very glamorous pictures, featuring the celebrities wearing gorgeous outfits and positioned on the red carpet (shown in figure 1). This therefore personifies the idea that being thin makes you desirable, fashionable and may lead to a better life.

Celebrity Thinspiration Images (ABC & GP: AL)



From Left: Victoria Beckham, Nicole Ritchie, Shanae Grimes, Mary-Kate Olsen & Kate Hudson

Figure 1

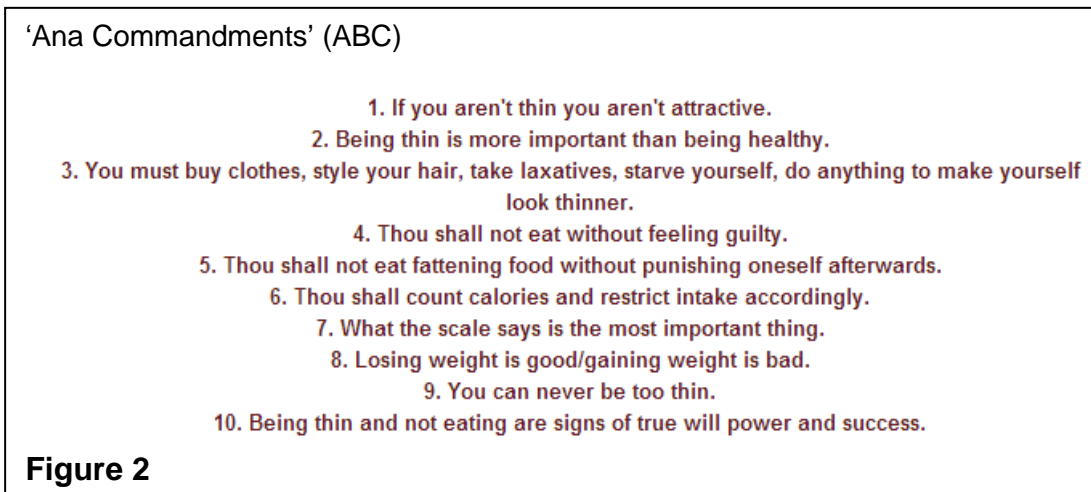
Previous research has also looked at how celebrities are portrayed. Alexander (2010) identified that celebrities are portrayed as objects of worship, therefore emphasising that they must be perfect to warrant such worship. Cohen (2006) found celebrities are portrayed as living more glamorous and fulfilling lives than other human beings, with more social rewards and economic opportunities (Maddox, 2006). Similarly, Biber *et al.* (2006, p.208) identified that ‘thinness promises women the goodies life has to offer’. Therefore, celebrities are enforcing the social norm of thinness, through personifying a better, more glamorous life (Pollack, 2003).

Over the recent decades, women in the media have been found to be getting progressively thinner, with models now more than 20% underweight (Garner *et al.*, 1980; Halliwell & Dittmar, 2004). This decrease in female celebrities’ body weight has a knock on effect for those who see them as role models, such as pro-ana users, as it results in the thinking that they must also be thinner, as celebrities are seen as the norm. Therefore, it is no surprise that there have been significant rises in eating disorders, directly related to the shrinking representations of the beauty ideal (Bradford & Petrie, 2008; Striegel-Moore & Bulik, 2007).

Another form of thinspiration established took the form of inspirational books, songs and commandments, these types of thinspiration have been acknowledged in other research also (Lukac, 2011). These motivations subtly portrayed thinness as perfection, and as the only way to beauty:

“Bones, Skin without a trace of fat. Pure Beauty.” (ABC)
 “My eyes only see my perfect slim body.” (GP: AL)

As well as explicitly stating that thinness is perfection (see figure 2):



This clearly illustrates that 'ana' is seen as the only way to be. Again, this fits in with the social norm portrayed by the media; that thinness equates beauty. These commandments also insinuate that food is the 'enemy' (see lines 4, 5 and 6 above). The use of the metaphor 'food as the enemy' was also conveyed throughout other motivational pieces:

"Hate, hate, hate, hate, hate food. And know you'll get more partners when thinner." (ABC)

"Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels." (GP: AL)

The metaphor that food is the enemy is another process of figuration, as it is representing the idea that 'ana' users should restrict their food intake drastically, to prevent from any weight gain. Therefore, the use of this metaphor on the websites analysed, results in the common sense understanding that food is bad, and that it should be avoided whenever possible. Previous literature noted that the ability to manage consumption to achieve thinness is admirable (Gresham, 2008), resulting in unhealthy relationships with food seeming desirable, rather than wrong.

Finally, through looking specifically at the different types of thinspiration within the websites, as well as considering the thinspiration concept as a whole, it became evident that thinspiration is ontologized. This process of ontologizing on the websites turns thinspiration into reality, by linking it with real people who live this thin reality. As many other beliefs and ideas link to thinspiration (regarding food restrictions, exercising etc.), these associated ideas also become part of the reality.

Theme 3: Extreme Dieting

Through the analysis of the websites, the theme 'extreme dieting' stood out (see appendices 7), due to the amount of content that was focused around various diets and techniques for dramatic weight loss. Many diets featured on both websites analysed, which all appeared extremely limiting, with many restrictions placed on certain food groups, as well as the cutting out of many food groups' altogether (shown in figure 3).

<p>Two Extreme Diets featured on the websites (ABC)</p> <p>Russian Gymnast Diet</p> <p>Breakfast: Glass of either orange or apple juice</p> <p>Lunch: Fruit Salad (made off kiwi fruit, orange, pineapple, and peeled apples) Glass of fruit juice (from one of the above fruits)</p> <p>Dinner: Glass of non carbonated water* Green apple</p> <p>Anyone on this diet for 5-7 days can loose between 4 lbs-11 lbs *non carbonated means non fizzy, so normal water.</p> <p>Figure 3</p>	<p>Mixed Carb - 400cals</p> <p>Breakfast: 1 cup fat-free, sugar-free yogurt, any flavor (120 cals) total: 120 calories, 0 gms fat</p> <p>Lunch: 2 slices reduced-calorie bread (90 cals) 1 medium apple (100 cals) total: 190 calories, 1 gm fat</p> <p>Dinner: 3 cups shredded iceberg lettuce (24 calories!) 3 tsp Wishbone Fat-Free Italian (30 cals) 8 baby carrots (40 cals) total: 94 calories, 0 gms fat</p> <p>total: 400 calories, 1 gm fat</p>
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The diets featured within the websites were again portrayed as a choice, rather than a characteristic of anorexia nervosa. These diets appeared as a challenge; challenging pro-ana users to practise their control by attempting the diets. This portrayal of the diets as a challenge will appeal to many of the pro-ana users, as the restricting of calories gives a sense of control over their lives (Laser & Nicotera, 2011), which results in the taking on of such “challenges”. The focus on diets across both websites further contribute to ‘ana’ becoming a reality, as the diets give ‘ana’ real being by demonstrating how ‘ana’ can be achieved, therefore turning ‘ana’ into a reality through this process of ontologizing.

The use of diets has been previously recognised to make weight loss a reality (Jones, 2008). However, unlike this research, no past research has explored how diets make the ‘ana-lifestyle’ a reality. Disturbingly, previous research by Colabianchi, Ievers-Landis and Borawski (2006) found that in a study of adolescent girls, the ones perceived as the most attractive were the girls most preoccupied with their weight/weight loss. These findings therefore suggest that women are considered more attractive when they are thin; furthering the ‘thin-ideal’. This widespread acceptance of the ‘thin-ideal’ impacts hugely on pro-ana users, as it further confirms that thinness equates attractiveness, emphasizing weight loss and the use of diets in the quest to achieve the ‘ideal’. Thus extreme diets become part and parcel of the ‘ana’-lifestyle; a social norm of ‘ana’.

As mentioned previously, techniques to help in the weight loss quest were featured heavily on both websites. These techniques appeared to be tried and tested strategies for further weight loss; centred on tactics such as deprivation and starvation (see below).

- “Split up a single serving into three or four separate parts and eat one part at your meal. Therefore you are only eating one serving yet it serves as three/four.”
- “Chew ice cubes if you feel hungry.”
- “Most people just want the taste of food, so chew the food you want and spit it out. Don’t swallow the food?”
- “Drink a glass of water every hour. It helps your stomach feel full.”
- “When you eat, set your fork down in between bites.”
- “Chew slowly, it takes 30 minutes for your stomach to realise its full.”
- “Lower the temperature in your house 10 degrees lower than you are used to. It will make your body burn more calories to maintain homeostasis.”
- “Eat on small plates, so it is filled with food, your mind sees a full plate.”

- “Sleep when you get a craving, when you wake up, you’ll most likely no longer crave that food.” (ABC)

Through the analysis, it emerged that the techniques provided played on trickery most of all; tricking the body into thinking it does not need food, and that it is full-up. Although previous research has noted the various tricks used by anorexics, the focus is often placed on the tricks anorexics employ to fool others, rather than on the trickery of their own bodies (Warin, 2010). However, trickery aimed at their own bodies is equally as important, as it is very prevalent, so much so that it has become a social norm of ‘ana’. This norm is a result of further ontologizing, as like the diets featured on the websites, the techniques also become a reality to achieve ‘ana’, which therefore normalises the techniques also.

Summary of Analysis

The use of the social norms and social representations theory was hugely important in this research, as the theories allowed for a detailed insight into the complex world of the pro-ana websites, as well as an understanding into the pro-ana processes. Through using these theories, this research established that pro-ana websites do not see anorexia nervosa the disorder, but instead see ‘ana’; a female who chooses to partake in extreme diets amongst other techniques to achieve extreme thinness, to fit in with the ‘thin-ideal’ portrayed in the media.

The normalisation of these views is worrying, and action should be taken to warn individuals not to be taken in by this dangerous lifestyle. As although the pro-ana users see ‘ana’ and the associated behaviours as harmless, the websites actually promote dangerous practices regarding weight-loss (Jackson & Elliot, 2004), and deter individuals from seeking much needed help and treatment (Dias, 2003; Ferreday, 2003; Jackson & Elliot, 2004; Lipczynska, 2007; Lock *et al.*, 2005). These websites do personify the dangers of anorexia for individuals who do not suffer from the disorder. As the dangers are recognised through the association of the disorder with a group (pro-ana users) that is clearly in denial about what anorexia is, and how serious it is. It is crucial though that those ‘choosing’ this detrimental pro-ana ‘lifestyle’ start accepting the seriousness of the disorder also, as not only does anorexia result in death, but the use of the pro-ana websites alone has already resulted in the suicides of two young (both aged 15) females (Henry, 2012; Sears, Ellicott & Ledwit, 2012).

Reflexive Commentary

My choice of topic for this research was influenced by my interest in the pro-ana websites, which came about after hearing of them on news websites. After researching the pro-ana websites, I was immediately shocked by the idea that anorexia could be anything other than a disorder; let alone a lifestyle choice. I now believe this shock to be a result of my educational upbringing; as I have always been taught that anorexia is a serious mental health disorder. Whilst shocked by this idea of ‘ana’ as a lifestyle, I can still see the appeal, as it strays away from the label of ‘anorexic’.

My positioning as a female in my early 20s will have further influenced my stance in this research, as I myself feel constantly bombarded and pressured by the 'thin-ideal' promoted in the media, which does impact on how I view my own body and weight. As a result this research was hard at times, as the analysis required me to spend a lot of time coding the websites, which are full of material I consider disturbing. However, it is not to say I did not enjoy this research, as I found it a valuable learning experience, which has provided me with extensive knowledge on theories of social norms and social representations.

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