Getting to Know Ana and Mia: Evaluation of a Pro-Ana Online Community

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Abstract

The pro-ana online movement attempts to reframe anorexia away from a psychiatric diagnosis requiring treatment. Individuals with eating disorders enter a social space where their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors can be understood, supported, and encouraged by similar others. This movement has received much public criticism, and actions taken against it include banning and removing pro-ana online content and researching the effects of viewing it. Little attention has been paid to the broader causes or sources of the movement. My research evaluates one pro-ana online community's member demographics and motivations for membership. Through Bordo's theory of the body as a reproduction of femininity, I show how members have been shaped by cultural messages of femininity and the ideal female body. Utilizing Judith Halberstam's Low Theory, I examine how members have aimed to change/glorify the meaning of anorexia.

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In October 2001, "pro-ana" websites were first brought to public attention during an episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Widespread public demands for pro-anorexia censorship soon followed, and various major Internet servers removed every website they were hosting that contained any pro-anorexia material (Reaves, 2001). More recently, controversy developed around the "pro-ana" movement's prevalence on various micro-blogging, social media platforms of Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest, and efforts have been made to ban "pro-ana" content (Gregoire, 2012). Creators and active members of these websites were—and continue to be— criticized by the public as "dangerous, irresponsible villains" who brainwash their "passive victims," blamed for "both causing and promoting anorexia" (Knapton, 2013, p. 464).

Geared toward this concern and interest in the "pro-ana" movement, the movement's online communities and their members, and the effect of these websites on those who choose to participate in them, the research conducted has focused on finding out more about these communities and the negative impacts of them. Through this research, and due to the public's reaction of confusion, anger, and fear of the "pro-ana" online movement, the actions that have been taken are various Internet servers and social media platforms banning and removing "pro-ana" content. Little attention has been made to the sources or broader causes of this movement and creation of these communities in order to better explain and prevent them.

Through incorporating feminist and queer theory, I will evaluate the content produced by creators and members of a specific "pro-ana" online community. Through evaluation of this modern-day cultural artifact through the incorporation of these theories of cultural influence and acts of defiance, I will argue that this movement, these online communities, and the individuals that create and participate within them, are not as astonishing and unfathomable as society

perceives them to be. Rather, they simply exemplify and articulate aspects of our modern-day society. The specific online community I will evaluate is a cultural artifact that sheds light on various aspects of our culture, including obsession with the female body, expectations for thinness, and encouragement to achieve the thin ideal.

Review of the Literature

While "pro-ana" websites are a rather new phenomenon, numerous studies have been conducted to learn more about these sites and those who engage in them. Those who identify as "pro-ana" have been identified as "individuals with an eating disorder who focus on having an eating disorder as a lifestyle choice as opposed to a psychiatric disorder" (Juarascio, Shoaib, & Timko, 2010, p. 393). The "pro-ana" movement, therefore, has been recognized as a movement seeking "to steer anorexia away from its medicalised position and into its own social space with its own methods of communication, its own iconography and terminology" (Burke, 2012, p. 43-44). Through the creation of online communities, this movement has been able to grow and sustain, connecting individuals with similar thoughts, beliefs, and experiences revolving around a stigmatized mental illness.

Most webmasters/creators and members have been identified as young women (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006), one study finding 97.13% of members as female with the average age of 22 years old (Peebles, Wislon, Litt, Hardy, Lock, Mann, & Borzekowski, 2012). Members' motivations for engaging in these online communities—gained through evaluating the websites' content and through interviewing members themselves—have been identified as coping with the stigma surrounding eating disorders, gaining social support and understanding from similar others, and having a place for self-expression without judgment or criticism (Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2012). Other identified reasons for joining these online communities

are wanting to engage in anorexic behaviors in pursuit of weight loss and thinness, and being provided with support and advice in doing so (Rodgers, Skowron, & Chabrol, 2011; Williams & Reid, 2007).

Many have looked specifically at the negative affects that can result from viewing these websites, and have gained evidence that women that view these sites have decreased self-esteem, increased negative body image, higher levels of disordered eating, and begin using techniques on the websites to aid with food reduction (Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008; Jett, LaPorte, & Wanchisn, 2010; Juarascio, Shoaib, & Timko, 2010; Peebles et al., 2012). Due to these proposed adverse effects that can result from viewing and participating in these "pro-ana" online communities, their potential therapeutic value of social support in order to help treat individuals' eating disorders has been challenged (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Gwizdek, A., Gwizdek, K., & Koszowska, 2012).

While many studies have identified and evaluated creators and members of "pro-ana" online communities, the websites' content, and the affects that can result from them, few have looked at the larger social causes or sources of the "pro-ana" movement and online communities. Research exploring the "pro-ana" online movement through incorporation of sociological theories have explored the influence of social stigma surrounding eating disorders as a cause for joining these online communities to connect with similar others (Haas, Irr, Jennings, & Wagner, 2010; Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2012). The act of conforming to social feminine ideals of beauty and thinness through simply a less socially accepted, more extreme mode of action in doing so has also been explored as a cause for the "pro-ana" movement (Knapton, 2013; Whitehead, 2010).

I will also aim to evaluate this movement through a sociological perspective as these several articles have done, for in order to truly address and change this movement filled with the engagement in harmful behaviors, more must be done than simply criticizing individuals who participate in it and banning and removing content from certain Internet servers and social media platforms. As exemplified through my cultural artifact, online communities can be created simply on different Web domains. And the true source of the movement must be addressed—the actions of individuals can never be merely attributed to innate causes. People are socially shaped and influenced by their society and culture, and thus this movement must be connected to the modern-day society and culture to which they belong. In order to better understand and address the "pro-ana" movement, we must look at cultural influences.

Theory and Methods

My research topic is evaluation of a cultural artifact—a "pro-ana" online community—in the context of our modern-day society. As a Psychology and Sociology major, I chose this topic due to my interest in evaluating psychological diagnoses through a sociological perspective. I specifically chose the diagnosis of anorexia due to its strong connection to cultural ideologies of femininity and messages of female beauty and thinness—I can therefore draw on my own personal perspective as a woman and my knowledge and interest in Feminist Theory. Through my personal perspective as a Psychology major, I also have a unique perspective in researching this topic, for I have been continually taught psychological categorizations and diagnoses through the context of psychological and biological influences.

The three questions that guided my research and that I will answer through close analysis of a cultural artifact, as well as utilization of various secondary sources and sociological theories, revolve around the modern-day creation of pro-anorexia online communities. The first of these

questions is: who creates and participates in these online communities, and how does this specific population reflect our society? Second, what is their motivation to do so, and how does this motivation reflect our society's values and ideals of female beauty and femininity? And lastly, how do these individuals aim to glorify/change the negative meaning of anorexia?

In order to answer these questions, I will incorporate feminist theory, specifically Susan Bordo's work on connecting women's bodies to the cultural context (1986; 2003). According to Bordo (1986; 2003), the body is a medium of and metaphor for culture. Women's various body practices—such as obsessive dieting and cosmetic surgery—can be directly linked to culture, such as the reiterated ideologies of feminine beauty and representations of the female body through various media images (Bordo & Jaggar, 1986; Bordo, 2003). Furthermore, Bordo (1986; 2003) argues that eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa can't be merely psychologically and medically defined, but must be viewed from within a cultural context—as multifaceted manifestations of culture.

Through incorporating Bordo's theory of manipulated female bodies (including psychologically-defined eating disorders) as a cultural representation, the pro-anorexia online communities can be therefore understood as an extended depiction of culture due to their creators and users. Those who create or engage in those online communities are individuals who have been impacted by cultural norms, ideologies, and expectations—therefore, the ideas, words, and images within these websites reflect their culture.

Another theory that can assist in answering my research questions is Judith Halberstam's Low Theory (2011). This theory analyzes "failure" as not debilitating, but rather an avenue for creativity and beauty, for it challenges society's views of normalcy, sensibility, and success (Halberstam, 2011). Pro-anorexia online communities offer a sense of connection and

community between individuals who support and encourage behaviors that encompass a stigmatized psychological diagnosis. Through forming a community of similar individuals, as well as posting various pictures and words, the creators and members of these communities have worked towards altering their "failure" as something to be not only unashamed of, but also to retain and encourage.

To go about answering my research questions, I evaluated a modern cultural artifact—a "pro-ana" website. The website I chose is *My Pro Ana* (Forum and Community, n.d.)*,* which includes a variety of features, including discussion forums, blogs, and posted images. I chose this website due to its continuous activity and large community, as well as its various formats of information (e.g., personal blogs, interactive communication forums, images and words). Through observation of its members, their posted words and images, and the site's various thematic elements, I assessed this online community through connecting it to our present-day society and drawing on various sociological theories. I will now proceed to present my findings accumulated from *My Pro Ana*, connecting these findings to the broader cultural context to which they belong.

Findings

My Pro Ana is a well-frequented online community, which has over 124,000 members that continually grows and increased by at least 7,000 individuals throughout the three-month long course of my research. The disclaimer on the homepage states:

> "MPA is a forum and community to offer support and recovery for those afflicted with an eating disorder. It is not a place to encourage people to further their eating disorder. Please be cognizant of this and make MPA the support community it needs to be" (Forum and Community, n.d.).

The "pro-ana" community includes various formats of ways for members to express themselves and to communicate with other members, including personal blogs, community forums with specific topics of discussion, and galleries for posting images.

The findings I found through evaluating this online community revolve around my three previously stated research questions. I will first discuss who the members of the community are, evaluating various overarching identity characteristics including age and gender. I will connect these demographics to the broader social context, looking at how the members exemplify values and messages within our society. I will then discuss the members' motivations to join this "pro-ana" online community, evaluating how these various motivations reflect the values and ideals instilled within our culture of beauty and femininity. Lastly, I will identify the ways in which these individuals aim to glorify/change the negative meaning of anorexia, connecting these actions to the ideas of Low Theory (Halberstam, 2011).

The Members

While *My Pro Ana* is an English-speaking "pro-ana" online community, members come from around the world. However, I observed that most of its members are from the United States and the United Kingdom, and regarding racial demographics, most members appear to be Caucasian. Members of MPA, whether they have stated they are diagnosed or undiagnosed, identify as having an eating disorder, such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia, eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS), or binge eating disorder. However, all identify as "pro-ana," believing in, striving towards, and/or encouraging others to engage in anorexic behaviors (e.g., fasting, exercising, goals to become thinner). Also, while the statistics of MPA members' demographics are unable to be conclusively drawn, the majority of posts created are by young women. This correlates with other more extensive studies that have been conducted, which have

found this drastic imbalance of gender and age group within "pro-ana" online communities

(Norris et al., 2006; Peebles et al., 2012).

Given societal values and expectations for women to achieve the thin ideal, the majority

female member demographic of *My Pro Ana* should not be viewed as overwhelmingly

surprising. Furthermore, the nature of MPA—where anorexic thoughts and behaviors are

expressed, supported, and encouraged—is also understandable due to these social ideals of

weight loss and the thin female body type as being preferred and desirable. As argued by Susan

Bordo (1986), "in anorexia, the disorder presents itself as a virtual, though tragic, parody of

twentieth-century constructions of femininity" (p. 170). Those with anorexia, and therefore

members of "pro-ana" online communities like MPA, are consequently predominantly female. In

addition to the large female demographic, members' motivations for joining MPA—which will

now be discussed—can also be directly tied to culture, mirroring social values, beliefs, and

messages of femininity.

Motivations

Motivations for joining *My Pro Ana* are typically mentioned in the forum entitled

"Community Introductions." When introducing themselves, members often describe what their

current situation is and the specific goals that they have, usually mentioning wanting to seek

support or encouragement to reach these goals. Their goals almost always revolve around losing

weight, listing their "CW" (current weight), "GW" (goal weight; typically more than one), and

"UGW" (ultimate goal weight) in descending order.

> "I am 140lb at 5'11. My aim in signing back up to this site is that hopefully I can
> get some support in either aiding my ability to lose some weight but stay in the
> right frame of mind, feel supported and like I am welcome again, and really just
> can't keep away from here" (Psygodin, October 25, 2014).

"I am 5'2 and a half, and currently I weigh around 115lbs. BMI 21.7 and body fat of 23.5%...GW: 110lbs…GW: 105lbs…UGW: 110lbs…Current measurements: 36-26-36…Goal waist of under ~24 inches" (Cyber-tooth-tiger, October 25, 2014).

"Hello! After stalking this forum for the last week I decided to join. I've been on countless websites trying to ask for weight loss help, but everyone says I'm at a "healthy weight." I'm 5'6 130 lbs. and am aiming to be 110. My lowest ever was 97 lbs. and felt wonderful, but was forced to gain weight. I need to lose this much before Christmas! Is it possible?" (Broken_frames, November 20, 2014).

Along with this motivation to lose weight, an overarching theme I noted throughout the *My Pro Ana* community—whether through posted words or images—is what they wish to achieve through losing weight and becoming thin. Thin is how they will become pretty, closer achieve perfection, attain happiness, and gain confidence. As mentioned when introducing herself, a member expressed, "I need help with motivation to get me to lose weight. Not much of course, but enough to make me feel pretty" (Anaslittleloser, October 24, 2014). While various motivations commonly associated with those who have eating disorders are also commonly mentioned, such as having control over one's body, becoming thin is nevertheless always associated with the previously mentioned outcomes. Motivations like control may be frequently part of members' thoughts and behaviors, but the motivation and outcome of thinness and what thinness means to them is never absent.

The motivation of achieving a goal weight, which members have for engaging in behaviors associated with anorexia and for joining the *My Pro Ana* community, ironically aligns with the motivations of many women within our society to engage in various weight loss regimes. Furthermore, members' beliefs of what rewards come with thinness can also be directly linked to cultural messages sent to women of feminine beauty and worth. Members' motivations

of gaining support and encouragement for losing weight, as well as the ideas and rewards they associate with reaching their goal weight, are very tied to culture.

Bordo (1986; 2003) argues how culture does indeed shape women's body practices through their desire to achieve what society has encouraged them to strive towards. Therefore, culture should be viewed as shaping women to work towards the "ideal" female body, and consequently influencing members of MPA's motivations to engage in weight loss behaviors as well. The motivation to get a slimmer figure and the reasons for doing so correlate between the MPA community and women who do not identify as "pro-ana." Whether through purchasing exercise videos, trying a new diet, or having surgery to get rid of unwanted fat, achieving a slimmer figure is the way we are taught that not only will we be more "fit" and healthier, but we will be happier, gain more confidence, and become more attractive to others.

These messages—while I do not refute that they are sent to all individuals within our society—are most deeply engrained in the thoughts and feelings of women, for they are so closely attached to women's perceived beauty and worth. Therefore, since members of *My Pro Ana* have been socialized into our culture with these messages of femininity and thinness, they have therefore been shaped and affected by them. The motivations that members of MPA have to lose weight, and the rewards they believe they will gain from becoming thinner, have been shaped by their culture.

While their desire to lose weight and their reasons for doing so are widely shared thoughts and behaviors, the reason many express joining this online community is ironically due to others' lack of understanding. With others close to them within their in-person environment, they are unable to fully express their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors—and through joining this community, they hope to connect with similar others and feel free to fully express themselves

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without judgment or attempts to discourage or stop their actions. As we will examine next, it is when individuals with similar problems or experiences come together that movements can happen.

Changing Anorexia to Pro-Ana

As discussed thus far, members of the *My Pro Ana* online community have been shaped by cultural ideals and values of thinness and femininity, and this is reflected through those who are members and what their motivations are for joining the "pro-ana" community. The next aspect that will be discussed is how the movement appears to have grown and is maintained through these online communities. Drawing on the ideas of Low Theory (Halberstam, 2011), I will note the various ways the MPA online community appears to change the meaning of anorexia and allow the "pro-ana" movement to grow within this web-based setting.

By becoming members of the *My Pro Ana* online community, individuals are able to connect with similar others who are not only accepting of their various thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that they are experiencing, but they are engaging in them as well. Through online communities, individuals are able to disclose this personal information more easily and privately, connecting with others from across the country and around the world. While media and some of the existing literature has portrayed members of the "pro-ana" online movement as promoting and encouraging anorexia, it must be noted that people who join these communities are already affected by cultural influences that encourage and value thinness—through joining a "pro-ana" online community, they are able to connect with similar others who have also been just as affected by these messages. Personal problems become realized as widespread issues and experiences, and this phenomenon can then be exhibited through large "pro-ana" online communities like *My Pro Ana*.

In addition to connecting with similar others within this online environment, members of the "pro-ana" movement have also found ways to change the meaning of anorexia, as well as creating a more exclusive environment in which "wanna-rexics" are ostracized and shunned. One way they have done so is by creating their own unique language and way of presenting themselves. Rather than using names of stigmatized psychiatric diagnoses, members use personified names—"Ana" instead of Anorexia Nervosa, and "Mia" rather than Bulimia. They also present or introduce themselves by listing their "stats," which are typically their age, height, BMI, current weight, goal weight(s), and ultimate goal weight.

The way in which they present themselves, why they joined the community, and what goals they have are very important. When posting in "Community Introductions," a new member could be embraced and welcomed, or could instead be accused of being a "wanna-rexic," and confusing "pro-ana" and eating disorders with dieting. In merely a matter of an initial personal statement, an individual can be "accepted" into the MPA community, or criticized, "othered," and told to leave:

> "Hello everyone!! All I want is to be able to control my body. I'm 19, 5'3", and 125. I used to be a collegiate athlete but because of injury I had to quit and since then my body has gone to the gutters. My goal is to be around 100-110. I've done a decent amount of intermittent fasting in the past but I've been unsuccessful at losing weight. I'm happy to be here!!" (Guest_Maybe.im.crazy_*, October 25, 2014)

Replies from members to this specific introduction were unwelcoming, including "eating disorders are not diets," "you could try myfitnesspal.com," and "Seriously? I'm DYING of an eating disorder and you're here to use it as your diet plan?" This specific individual was identified as joining the community for simply dietary purposes, and was therefore determined as not rightfully belonging to the "pro-ana" community.

The exclusive nature of this "pro-ana" community can be better understood by evaluating how these individuals have been separated themselves from society's definition of normalcy. While the members' thoughts and behaviors seem to largely reflect those deemed psychiatrically "normal," the extremity of their thoughts and behaviors has been defined as a mental illness that must be treated. Through joining MPA, members have found a place to be with similar others who they can feel comfortable expressing their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, and receive encouragement to maintain those in order to embrace who they are—they are able to enter a community separated from their "present" lives where they are labeled with a stigmatized psychiatric diagnosis. When individuals attempt to become part of their community whom members believe are not and have not experienced the same issues that they have, they consequently deny inclusion.

Although there initially appears to be a definitive distinction between those who are and are not accepted into the MPA community, the line is blurred due to the nature of the "pro-ana" movement. Introductions posted by members who are welcomed into the community appear very similar to those who are not, including similar motivations of weight loss through joining the MPA community:

> "I'm 15 from Australia, I am 5'8.5 (174cm) and I weigh 123-125lbs (56-57kg) although I'm not quite sure because I feel like my scales are stuffed up or lying or something. I created an account on mpa because I basically have no self control and I feel like I need support from people going through the same thing to reach my goal weight (first is 54kg /119 and maybe progress to 50kg/110lbs)" (Matilda1208, December 1, 2014).

Although this post appears to be incredibly similar to the previous example of a member's post that received negative feedback, current members' comments to this new member's post included words of welcome.

As shown through comparison of two introductory posts that received opposite reactions from current members, the exclusive environment created within the MPA community aims to actively reject those who merely engage in dieting, while embracing individuals who also want to achieve their weight loss goals. Although those considered to be "wanna-rexics" are defined as those simply joining the community as a means for dieting, the "pro-ana" movement has nevertheless moved to define the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of anorexia as a lifestyle rather than a psychiatric diagnoses requiring treatment. By making behaviors such as fasting and excessive preoccupation with weight and the body as something to not be ashamed of, but to rather embrace and strive towards, "dieting" in a more extreme and prolonged form becomes a prime component of "pro-ana" websites. Through encouragement by others to meet their weight goals and praise their progress, as well as sharing of diet and exercise tips and images of "Thinspiration," members of MPA have moved to embrace and encourage behaviors that align with our society's obsession with and investment in weight loss regimes and becoming thinner.

The way in which members of MPA have created their own way of being within this online space greatly connects with Judith Halberstam's Low Theory (2011). This theory explores the idea of "failure" as a mode of creativity and expression, explaining that, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (pp. 2-3). Furthermore, Halberstam's theory (2011) states, "Failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development" (p. 3).

Individuals within the *My Pro Ana* community almost always identify themselves as having an eating disorder diagnosis, and if they aren't officially diagnosed, they nevertheless engage in thoughts and behaviors that are viewed by our society as belonging to those considered

mentally ill. Through the creation of "pro-ana" online communities like MPA, these individuals are able to not only connect with similar others, but are able to create their own unique space for self-expression, verification, and even glorification of those thoughts and behaviors associated with stigmatized diagnoses. Through joining together with similar others, creating their own unique language, and through shifting eating disorders away from medicalization to lifestyles to not treat or be ashamed of, but to rather encourage and support, members of MPA have moved to alter their socially designated "failure" as a way of being that should not be discouraged or put to shame.

Their "failure," however, is incredibly ironic in consideration of the social acceptability of what they wish to accomplish, why they want to do so, and the means by which they want to reach those goals. Rather than their "failure" being merely derived from holding a marginalized identity characteristic by social definition, their "failure" has been largely molded by socially constructed values, beliefs, and messages of femininity and beauty. However, it is the extremity and specifically defined way in which they think, feel, and behave that has made this specific facet of who they are considered "failure." Through joining "pro-ana" online communities like MPA, these individuals are able to outwardly challenge and redefine their socially shaped ideas and behaviors in a less socially acceptable way.

Conclusion

My Pro Ana is one of the many "pro-ana" online communities currently active, and it is far-reaching, largely populated, and continues to grow. While the "pro-ana" online movement has and continues to be studied and criticized for its members' actions and effects on individuals who view or join, focus must be moved toward a primary source for why it began to occur and has sustained and grown. Only then can true intervention and prevention of this movement and

these online communities happen. As discussed within my findings, the majority of members are young women, and their motivations for joining the community revolve around achieving the thin ideal—including seeking others' understanding and encouragement of their weight goals, and wanting to become pretty, happy, and closer to perfection through reaching their weight loss goals. This specific member demographic and motivations for engaging in the "pro-ana" movement are not and should not be seen as merely coincidental. The effects of values, expectations, and messages received by women about thinness equating with female beauty has clearly played a large part in shaping these members and allowing this movement to happen.

While I am not disregarding other factors that also play a role in members developing eating disorders and joining "pro-ana" online communities (e.g., familial influences, personal characteristics, biological influences), the overwhelming number of women in the movement and their motivations and beliefs of achieving thinness cannot be viewed as not being tied to and having been shaped by culture. In our society where the thin female body is defined as beautiful and desirable, and where dieting, exercise, and cosmetic surgery are integral aspects of everyday life and our consumerist behaviors, the creation of the "pro-ana" movement should not be viewed as such a surprising phenomenon. This movement through the creation of online communities—like other movements—should be seen as many people with already existing issues and commonalities coming together so that they can make connections and engage in self-expression more openly.

Throughout this process, I found myself being personally affected by frequently viewing *My Pro Ana,* and would have to take breaks from visiting the website. Specifically by looking at images and words of "Thinspiration," I would find myself begin to criticize and pay more attention to my body and the food I would consume on a daily basis. However, while I was

definitely affected by frequently viewing this website, the focus should still not be on how "pro-ana" online communities like MPA affect those who view them and become members. I would not have been so easily and deeply affected by the content of this site if it would not have been for my social location as a woman, along with the mirroring messages of thinness equating with female beauty that I have received throughout my entire life. The words and images merely reiterated these messages in a more obvious, deliberate way.

Rather than presented through subtle messages like when a magazine cover has a thin female celebrity whose body has been further photoshopped, or when young girls' Barbies have an impossibly achievable thin body type, they were presented through individuals' personal thoughts and emotions that have been deeply affected by these messages, values, and ideals. Messages I've received—as well as my consequent thoughts and feelings that I often take action in suppressing—of thinness being the ideal body type for me to have, and criticalities for having any other kind of body, were blatantly stated for me to see and read so that my own thoughts could fully surface.

Too often within many facets of our society, blame is placed on individuals. Additionally, familial and other environmental factors are also too frequently targeted as causes for an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Focus and attention is often not on the broader cultural, social, and systemic influences that are often the root cause of the issue and how it manages to sustain. Therefore, without addressing these broader influences, truly addressing and preventing various issues is unable to happen.

The creation and growth of "pro-ana" online communities cannot be blamed on those who are members, nor can it be merely attributed to individually-based factors such as members' personal characteristics and familial influences. Without social expectations and encouragement

of the thin ideal as a means for feminine beauty and worth, the creation, maintenance, and continuous growth of the "pro-ana" movement through online communities would not be an issue. As explained by Susan Bordo (1986; 2003), women's obsessive body practices can be directly tied to cultural messages and beliefs of thinness, beauty, and femininity. The overwhelmingly female demographic, along with members' motivations and ideas of thinness that mirror cultural values and beliefs of feminine beauty, cannot be seen as merely coincidental—they are clearly tied to cultural influences. Therefore, attention and criticism must move away from targeting members of "pro-ana" online communities and how their actions affect others who view or join them. In order to truly understand the movement and take measures to address it, we must look at the ways in which these members have been shaped by their culture, and how these cultural messages and ideas need to change.

Due to the broad nature of this topic and the short amount of time available, there were definite limitations of my research. Since my method involved evaluating one single "pro-ana" online community, I did not look at the many other "pro-ana" communities—including ones found within various social media platforms. I also did not interact directly with members of *My Pro Ana* or conduct ethnographic research in which I became a temporary member myself, nor did I conduct interviews with those who have/have had an eating disorder. My methodology was purely exploring and evaluating one "pro-ana" online community. However, while involving those methodologies could be utilized for future research, I believe the findings and implications I gained from surveying and assessing MPA are nevertheless important and supplemental in substantiating the claims I have made. Furthermore, through reading previous literature that involved evaluating multiple communities and utilizing various methodologies, I was able to

verify the commonalities and overarching themes that overlap among the members and throughout various "pro-ana" online communities.

For this research, I primarily focused on assessing a "pro-ana" online community by evaluating how its members have been shaped by their culture, and how their shared thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are able to be expressed within this web-based setting—therefore influencing the creation and growth of the "pro-ana" movement. Considering the public reaction to the "pro-ana" online movement and actions that have been taken against it, I believe that assessing this movement within the cultural context is incredibly important in order to direct criticism and blame away from members and towards cultural messages and influences. Further research comparing the "pro-ana" online movement to other movements, particularly those involving de-medicalization, would be a valuable next step to assess and better understand how individuals with stigmatized diagnoses come together and take action in redefining their socially constructed labels.

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