

Virtually Anorexic – Where's the Harm? A Research Study of Pro-anorexia Websites

Aim:

The aim of the study, funded by the Nominet Trust¹, was to gain knowledge and understanding of pro-anorexia sites and online communities, and to provide a review of the risks in relation to young people's use of pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) sites. There are increasing concerns over the number and availability of pro-ana and pro-ED sites on the Internet yet little is known about why people use them, what they use them for and whether or not they are contributing to either the anorexic condition or the pro-ana phenomenon.

Key Findings:

- Pro-ana websites are hypermedia environments – they are a diverse and often eclectic mix of text, weblinks, films and images some of which are user generated and others are taken from other media and embedded in the website or Blog.
- The pro-ana community is substantial - a “phenomenon that has constructed itself by gradually increasing numbers of websites and their members into a community of practice” and there are estimated to be between 400-500 pro-ED websites available online² and thousands on individualised Blogs.
- There is an increasing accessibility and availability of pro-ED websites, online forums and blogs but the nature and content of sites varies according to type of online space. The risk in relation to these online environments varies according type of content and frequency of visits and according to vulnerability of user. Many users are seeking a disordered view of perfection and there is commonly a normalising of ultra-thin body image, as well as exposure to extreme or dangerous dieting advice or behaviours.
- Many users suffer from a low self-esteem and are lacking in self-confidence which is compounded by the competitive nature of sites. The sites nurture the belonging to and the reinforcement of an ‘out group’ and an eating disordered self-identity through the encouragement of harmful behaviours. Bullying is common and many users are isolated from family and friends offline as they defend behaviours to maintain the disorder.
- It is this protection of the self and the group identity which prevents individuals from seeking recovery. There is a paradoxical relationship between negative aspects of online content and positive aspects of online support, and of being isolated and stigmatised offline but identifying with and feeling belonging online.
- Although pro-ana sites are different from other social networking sites such as Facebook, the discussion of the corporeal body in virtual environments can potentially have distinct positive implications for well-being, peer networks and identity formation. Whilst there are risks and dangers related to pro-ED websites, it should nevertheless be noted that that these environments also offer potential benefits to people with EDs and their families that may be drawn upon and adopted in the construction of positive virtual environments by pro-recovery organizations.

1 Nominet Trust was established in January 2008 by Nominet, one of the world's largest Internet registries, which maintains the .uk register of domain names. As part of Nominet's public purpose, Nominet Trust was set up to fund internet-based projects that make a positive difference to the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable people see <http://www.nominettrust.org.uk/>

2 Giles, D. (2006: 464) Constructing identities in cyberspace: The case of eating disorders. In *British Journal of Social Psychology* vol. 45 pp. 463-477.

Policy Context

It is intended that the results of the study be utilised by organisations (such as Childnet, South West Grid for Learning, UKCCIS and CEOP) working with educators, parents and young people themselves to raise awareness of the risks surrounding pro-ED websites. Awareness raising in relation to the risks from Pro-Anorexia sites is, however, problematic. Health professionals, educators, parents, carers need to be aware of Pro-Anorexia sites and the risks they may pose, but it is important not to unnecessarily advertise their existence to children and young people. Educational strategies aimed at children and young people should emphasise the importance of critical thinking around visual images in relation to the wider context of harmful content online.

Methodology

- A total of 126 websites and blogs were considered in the research study. All the sites were non password protected and found through typing “pro-anorexia” into Google, or through a link from a site found in the original Google search. The rationale behind the sampling strategy was to find sites available through a basic search and, therefore, easily accessible to young people without requiring technical expertise.
- The research which took place between January and June 2012 gathered detailed empirical evidence using existing literature and data collected online. Both quantitative and qualitative data were analysed, including text and images gathered from selected, publically available pro-ana websites, blogs and online forums. The relationship between the users’ perceptions of risk as discussed online, self-identity and online environments was examined in order to gain knowledge and understanding of the range, uses and content of these sites.
- Due to the ethical complexities of researching online environments and reporting findings specifically in relation to EDs, only webspaces which were not password protected were included in the study.

Background

- A ‘pro-eating’ disorder is “a willingness to accept that an individual has an eating disorder without seeking to encourage that individual to find treatment, and may imply an aim to motivate or enable continuation of disordered eating behaviour”³.
- Overall the study provided a comprehensive and detailed account of online pro-ana environments that are openly accessible through a basic search engine such as Google. The data obtained from the research details the content of websites and online forums. It includes both quantitative and qualitative verbatim data and associated documents such as photographs, images and video. These were systematically analysed into categories – Perfection; Performance; Protection and Paradoxes; and discussed in relation to the range of identified risks associated with these sites and online forums.

Source www.ucs.ac.uk/virtuallyanorexic

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RH#48 has been produced by Emma Bond for the UKCCIS Evidence Group

³ Cspike, E. and Horne, O. (2007) pro-Eating Disorder Websites: Users’ Opinions. In *European Eating Disorders Review* 15 pp 196-206.