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Anas, Mias and Wannas: Authenticity and Embodiment in Pro-Anorexia Discussion Groups

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Abstract: This paper details the making of community and bodies in online environments, specifically the online pro-anorexia community. Building community among members of these groups is particularly fraught because tensions over claims to authenticity permeate these groups. Because these are embodied practices and online spaces are presumably disembodied, participants constantly grapple with authenticity, largely through the threat of the "wannarexic." This paper documents the way in which tensions around authenticity and embodied practices are managed through treatment of the wannarexic, participating in group rituals, and deployment of individual tools. Participants grapple with these tensions through engaging in offline bodily rituals that attempt to make the body evident online.

## Introduction

k, so theres<sup>1</sup> lots of people here now, lets start doin' some posts!!

Lol, how bout we start some stats.

H -5'6''/ cw – 105 / hw-160 (pregnant)/lw-85/34'/22'35'

So opens a popular “pro-ana” discussion group on the social network site MySpace by a member calling herself Death for Beauty<sup>2</sup>. On this site and countless others, women separated by geography, age and lifestyle log in to share their struggles, goals, triumphs and failures in living a pro-ana lifestyle. Death for Beauty is engaging in a fairly common pro-ana ritual in which a member verifies her<sup>3</sup> authenticity as pro-ana by posting, among other things, her current weight, her highest weight and her goal weight. This posting of one's weight is one of the several rituals central to the iteration and reiteration of identity and embodiment in the online world of pro-anorexia websites. These online discussion groups are organized around body size and bodily practices and, as a result, are fraught with the contradiction that online spaces are fundamentally disembodied ones. This paper investigates how members of pro-ana online communities grapple with this contradiction and face issues of authenticity and embodiment in online spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> The grammar and spelling are as the members posted them.

<sup>2</sup> The names of the group members and the groups themselves have been changed.

<sup>3</sup> While there are members who identify as men on these sites, the vast majority identify as women, thus our use of the female pronoun

With increasing access to new media, those with (or claiming to have) eating disorders<sup>4</sup> have congregated outside of hospitals and clinics, crafting a thriving pro-eating disorder community on the internet. While some of those with eating disorders seek and develop recovery oriented spaces online, others specifically cultivate pro-ana communities. A pro-ana discussion group is one that is, in general, non-recovery oriented, where members go for weight loss tips, support, and a non-judgmental community that does not take a negative attitude toward eating disorders (Giles 2006, Shade 2003). Pro-ana online communities, and specifically these discussion groups are a way for people to find each other, develop a common language and set of symbols, provide and receive support and craft, what they call, a pro-ana lifestyle. Participants offer and ask for "thinspiration" or "thinspo"; pictures of exceedingly thin women to inspire participants to continue on their quest for thinness. They share weight loss tips. Participants are both supportive and incredibly aggressive with one another. They police who is allowed on the sites, guarding against people they call "wannarexics." What is most unique about these spaces is that they challenge clinical notions of the isolated anorexic and offer a view into a world of anorexia built on interaction and indeed, community.

Given their focus on living a lifestyle centered on weight loss and the maintenance of a specific body, online pro-ana communities are founded around embodied practices and body size. Because of the disembodied nature of the internet these women need to find and develop

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<sup>4</sup> Though most of these groups have members identifying themselves as having a number of eating disorders including anorexia, bulimia, compulsive overeating and eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS) the participants generally classify themselves and the groups as "pro-ana." Thus we focus mainly on anorexia and members who identify as anorexic. We do this for two main reasons. First, most of the group members identify with anorexia or a "pro-ana" lifestyle whether or not that is their actual disorder and second, we focus on anorexia because in the hierarchy of eating disorders that emerges in these groups, anorexia is at the top and those who can achieve authenticity as anorexics have a cache and credibility others seem to strive to achieve or at least respect (Giles 2006).

ways to make their bodies apparent online. Authenticity is a fraught subject in these pro-ana groups because their topics revolve around off-line bodily practices. Thus participants have developed several processes, inexact as they may be, of verification through which they seek to identify those who are truly "ana." This paper addresses the quandary of authenticity in the pro-ana online community and the processes by which members make the body evident online.

The process of online embodiment in pro-ana discussion groups is an interactional achievement. Given this, we argue that the presence of the online anorexic supersedes questions about the importance of the materiality of the body. That is, the online anorexic is a symbol or a person that is real in its effects and one's offline body size or even practices need not line up with one's online discourse and practices such that the pro-anorexic is discursively and interactionally created in these online spaces, regardless of offline practices or body size. Thus, the existence of the online pro-anorexic introduces a new way of thinking about embodiment. That is, people "do" embodiment. Embodiment online is performative, it doesn't simply exist for others to read as an offline body might. In other words, much like the way individuals "do gender," (West and Zimmerman 1991) these group members "do embodiment" relationally.

In this paper we argue that participants claim an authentic pro-ana identity by bringing the body online. They do this both as a group and as individuals. As a group, participants do embodiment on these sites is through a series of group rituals. These rituals include weigh-ins, posting photographs, food reports and other group activities. By participating in these rituals group members develop tools of authenticity through which they can "do embodiment" individually and lay claim to a pro-ana identity while (and through) depriving others of it, usually through labeling them a wannarexic. These tools include, knowledge, aggression and

examples of experience. Through these tools participants gain authority in a given group and thus help to police group boundaries and norms.

### **Bodies and New Media**

The internet has allowed for the proliferation of "extreme communities," such as pro-anorexia and pro-suicide groups where stigmatized individuals may find like-minded others and support (Adler and Adler 2007, Bell 2007). Internet discussion groups allow members anonymity, the opportunity for members to experiment with their identities and allow members to find other normally marginalized individuals (Gavin et al. 2008). In other words, the internet has facilitated the ability for once isolated and marginalized individuals to come together with others like them. In fact, before the widespread nature of digital communication most anorexics would only meet with others like themselves while in treatment programs (ironically rendering those the places where they learned to be "more" anorexic). Now it seems that a substantial number of young people who are admitted for treatment find themselves on pro-anorexia websites before their admission (Wilson et al. 2006).

The medical and mental health fields have been most interested in pro-anorexia sites in terms of their ability to cause or intensify eating disorders. After viewing these sites women are likely to view their bodies more negatively (Bardone-Cone and Cass 2007) and women who visit these sites have lower body self esteem than those who do not visit them (Harper et al. 2008). In part because pro-anorexics describe their identity more positively than non-pro-anorexic anorexics and are more resistant to recovery (Lyons et al. 2006) visiting these sites correlates with a delay in seeking treatment (Gavin et al. 2007). However, the link between these sites and increased levels of eating disorders is not inevitable (Davis 2008, Lyons et al. 2006, Mulveen and Hepworth 2006).). Thus, many mental health professionals and academics are invested in

recommending solutions to these sites as a "problem" (Bardone-Cone and Cass 2006, Bell 2007 Clemens et al. 2008, Pollack 2003, Shade 2003).

Much of what has been written in the popular press and from the medical perspective about pro-eating disorder websites and groups has tended to fan the flames of moral panic about these sites' ability to "recruit" young girls into having eating disorders and to provide a space for those who already have eating disorders with tools to avoid having their disorders discovered. However, here and in our larger project we separate ourselves from this perspective and offer an analysis of these sites that goes deeper than popular analyses to uncover and explore the nuance, contradictions and ambivalence on these sites in order to arrive at a more dynamic analysis that avoids the pitfalls of more cursory and sensationalistic studies. In doing, so we draw on the few studies that have analyzed these sites from a sociological perspective.

Instead of making recommendations about these sites as a social problem, social scientists have investigated the content and form of these sites. Qualitative research and online ethnography documents that a pro-ana online community is sustained by the development of an 'ana-language' and the formalization and legitimation of specific rituals (Day 2007). These sites both replicate norms of femininity as well as provide a place to rebel against hegemonic depictions of women who self-starve (Day and Keys 2008). Indeed, these sites have the potential to disrupt the medical model of eating disorders (Ferreday 2003, Richardson and Cherry 2006, Shade 2003, Tierney 2008), though they can also draw on those very models (Brotsky and Giles 2007). The discussions on these sites challenge the medical model of anorexia and create sites that are pro-anorectic, not necessarily pro-anorexia in nature (Fox and O'Rourke 2005). Medical and mental health researchers, eager to label these sites as problematic, have conflated anorexia with pro-anorexia, when in reality, members of these

groups take pains to differentiate a “pro-ana” lifestyle from anorexia (Brotsky and Giles 2007, Giles 2006, Mulveen and Hepworth 2006). These women form supportive communities (Tierney 2008, Tierney 2006) where they reject facile characterizations of anorexia as a disease, and instead engage in complex discussions of anorexia as a lifestyle choice (Richardson and Cherry 2006, Shade 2003).

What has yet to be addressed is how pro-anorexics make the body present in a fundamentally disembodied space. Though, as Walstrom (2000) indicates these websites are bodiless, these pro-ana sites seem to contradict this assumption occupying an interstitial place debates surrounding the materiality of the body and perhaps rendering essentialist versus constructionist debates over the body irrelevant (Turner 1997). So then, how does one police the boundaries of one's community, differentiating the pro-anorexic from the mere dieter or, even worse, wannarexic? In this paper we take on that problem documenting that members claim that sort of authority through "doing embodiment" through a variety of rituals and then using authenticity tools to claim the authority to police group boundaries.

## **Method**

This paper is part of a larger project that uses pro-anorexia (ana), pro-bulimia (mia), pro-eating-disorder-not-otherwise-specified (ednos) discussion groups to look at the construction of online eating disorder communities. This research is based on observations of and analysis of pictures on 14 most populous publicly accessible pro-ana online discussion groups found on the social network site, MySpace. We found the pro-eating disorder groups for this study by searching for key words "ana," "mia" and "ednos." The membership of these 14 groups range from 70-608 member profiles, for a total of 52,161 profiles, about 500 of which posted at least one comment. We followed each site from its inception (anywhere from September 2005 until



September 2006) until November 2006. In the final phase of this project we will be interviewing 20 group members. The breadth of this study - 14 groups, one year in duration and over 52,161 profiles dwarfs all other studies of pro-ana communities to date, most of which focus on postings over a number of days or smaller numbers of groups for an unspecified time frame. None of these 14 groups is still in existence as they violate MySpace policy.

### **The Pro-anorexic and the Wannarexic**

Though traditional and clinical analyses of eating disordered people have painted a picture of isolation and secrecy, in the online discussion groups we studied, relationality was central to the construction of a pro-anorexic identity and nowhere was this relative identity construction more evident than in understanding the role of the “wannarexic” in the pro-ana community. Though we don’t wish to reify a monolithic picture of *the* anorexic, the members of the groups we study share certain characteristics which offer an image of an anorexic significantly different from the image given to us by current medical, psychological or feminist models. The pro-ana anorexic does not seek to hide her body or her disorder, often acts aggressively, actively searches out membership in a pro-ana community, and shows ambivalence about both anorexia and recovery.

As David Giles (2006) asserts, the identity of a pro-ana anorexic is not only a relational identity but a defensive identity. Community members must not only defend themselves from “haters” or those who see the community as dangerous and unhealthy but more significantly, they must defend the community from wannarexics - people who want to take part in the community but whose credibility as eating disordered is in doubt. The specter of the wannarexic looms large in efforts to assert one's own authenticity as an anorexic and to challenge the authenticity claims of others. This is the ultimate insult, which denotes that ones doesn't belong, one lacks knowledge of the pro-ana community, one fails at her weight loss goals and one does

not possess the strength and dedication central to a pro-ana identity. The wannarexic treats anorexia as a fad, something that can be adopted and discarded at will. The following posting entitled "How to be Thin" by AnaAimee illustrates the quandary of online embodiment and the role of the wannarexic in this quandary:

Step One: Go find your favorite thinspiration picture. / Step Two: Post it on your site. / Step Three: Tell everyone that it's you. / Step Four: Call anyone who claims it's not you a fat wannarexic. / Congratulations! You've just become thin, no dieting or exercise necessary.

This quote points to the fact that it is difficult to verify people's body size and practices online as well as the power of insulting someone by calling them a wannarexic. Through these sorts of interchanges, participants on these sites continually engage in boundary work where they attempt to define who is and who isn't a true member of the pro-ana community and establish the realness of anorexia, given their presumed bodily practices and sizes.

Participants on these sites accuse others of being wannarexic when those others lack knowledge about the pro-ana lifestyle, fail at their weight loss goals or seek to go on a diet rather than make a lifestyle choice. Posters on the pro-ana websites also see themselves as more committed, more in control, and more dedicated to thinness than dieters who may go on and off diets or who are just looking to lose a few pounds. The following post from Mena illustrates this well, "all these 'anorexics' that you're talking to are a bunch of stupid young girls who think their crash diet is an eating disorder. They stop when they fit into their prom dress, they stop when summer is over. You're getting your info from a bunch of wanna's who pray to the aNa GoDdEsS!!!" In other words, wannarexics are no better than dieters.

The insult of wannarexia is also intimately tied to body size and one's willpower. Those who fail at their weight loss goals might fear being labeled as a wannarexic as this poster indicates, "But the truth is that I don't even think I have one. I think I'm too fat to have one. / I'm

convinced that I'm just a 'wannarexic.'" Not losing weight indicates that one does not possess the willpower or strength, so lauded by members of this community, to be a pro-anorexic.

To be pro-anorexic, group members also need to demonstrate that they are familiar with typical eating disorder strategies for weight loss. When one reveals a gap in that knowledge she is often subject to harassment. Group members identify and "call out" wannarexics for their lack of knowledge around weight loss strategies. Members tease or responded to them with sarcasm and false information, a sort of "wanna-baiting" in which "real" members can lead-on wannas and then expose them as wannas when they have "taken the bait." In the following post, a "wanna" is teased for asking advice on purging by tongue-in-cheek responses about eating soap to induce vomiting.

DawnMarie: what is the best way to purge?

Acid: eat soap, that shit works EVERYTIME. / and get the good smelling kind, so you think you're eating something yummy.

ED Slave: how does eating soap help u purge?

ED Slave: i know what u mean it's damn annoying. i still don't get the soap thing tho. I do the old fashion way i guess, didn't know there were that many tricks to purge. But i'll stick with the fingers.

Acid: WOW

Acid: IT DOESN'T

Mena: You NEVER heard of eating soap? / Ummmmmm / You must not really have bulimia, then. / that's the oldest trick in the book. / The "dove" pink bar gets the best upchuck..... / I still can't believe you all have never eaten soap. / wow.

Acid: MMMM, watermelon scented SOFT SOAP... / a few swigs of this and UP it comes!! / you can even smell the watermelon scent AFTER you throw up your double meat burrito.... / Definitely my fav!!

Mena: OMG / IVE USED THE WATERMELON ONE!! / so smooth!!! / have you tried the jergens almond soap? / Literally tastes and smells like marzipan going down AND coming up.... / ESPECIALLY after you do the "butter fast".... / sometimes I just

like to shave a bar soap with a cheese grater onto my dessert / so it kind of doesn't taste as harsh. / jeebus- / I can't believe these gals have never heard about soap. / ha. / when I was in the hospital they used to supervise my shower to make sure I didn't eat the soap.

Acid: I unwrap my Irish Springs just like a Hershey's chocolate bar.....

Mena: OH MY GOD! / ME TOO! / have you tried the new yellow bar??? / its outstanding

Jennifer. The yellow bar is my BITCH! :)

I'm Different: Never heard of eating soap... / I'll try it. / I heard hydrogen peroxide works too. they used it on dogs, so its safe for humans also.

Betty: If you wish to kill yourself (or your dog) ... in extremely low concentrations some people drink it but if it causes purging it is dangerous. It is caustic. / <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/07/060730134156.htm>

Ms. Metal: do people actually honestly eat soap?

Fake Love: Quoted- Never heard of eating soap... / I'll try it. / I heard hydrogen peroxide works too. they used it on dogs, so its safe for humans also.-Quoted Do you have the immune system of a dog you stupid fuck?

In this discussion Acid, Mena, Jennifer, and Fake Love "wanna-bait" DawnMarie and ED Slave.

After the initial post, Acid posts a ridiculous claim about eating soap that Mena, Jennifer, and Fake Love quickly pick up on and run with, moving the discussion into evermore extreme territory. I'm Different and Ms. Metal seem to take the bait and ask for clarification or verification of soap as a method of purging. Eventually, Fake Love aggressively ends the discussion by "outing" the wannarexic exposing the ridiculousness of soap-eating as a method of purging. In doing so she reinforces the insider status of Acid, Mena, Jennifer and Fake Love as well as the realness of some members and the "wanna" status of others.

In order to avoid the label of wannarexic group members participate in authenticity rituals to make the body apparent online. In doing so they gain the authority to police group boundaries as do Acid, Mena and Jennifer.

## **Authenticity Rituals: Pictures, Check-ins and Group Activities**

Because the online world is a disembodied environment participants on these sites have developed a variety of rituals to bring their offline bodily practices online. Because the question of authenticity and the specter of the wannarexic are never settled, these rituals are a central technique for managing anxiety about "realness" as well as continually reiterating group values and enforcing boundaries. We observed three general categories of rituals: posting pictures, checking in (statistics and food reports) and group activities (fasts and surveys).

Perhaps the most obvious way that members make authenticity claims is by posting pictures of themselves. As AnaAmees discussion about who gets labeled as a wannarexic indicates, pictures are key to establishing oneself as anorexic. For instance, a member named Fasting Fireflies posts: "You can always pick the wannabes, the ones with only skinny celebs in their pictures and a whole ton of pro-ana crap on their Myspace. I bet if you asked them why they don't have any pictures it would be because they 'just like started being ana like 5 weeks ago.'" If a poster doesn't have any pictures of herself on her own website, she is already calling into question the authenticity of her bodily practices. Thus, one needs to maintain the pictures of oneself on one's own site and post pictures of oneself on the discussion group.

Participants post pictures of themselves to show to others that they are actually thin and thus anorexic. Group members will post pictures of themselves, often reflected by a mirror, asking others if they have lost weight, how much others think they weigh or how much others think they should lose. For example, Wiggling Out posts a picture of her legs, collarbones, and waist to get others' opinions on her apparent weight. She claims that the scale reads 130, but that she looks like she weighs 110 writing, "Most ppl say I look thinner than 130. What do you think? I say I look about 110." In their responses to these images of her body, others confirm her status

as anorexic given her body size. ADHD-ana wrote “i'd say you look about 95. / i'm loving your triangle!” Mena follows up with, “I say 90.” Apparently inspired by these two comments Wiggling Out asks, “Wow I have a 90, can i get an 85?????????” However, Mena, attempting to keep the body size conversation authentic writes, “Well, I'm gonna be realistic and stick with 90. / we have to be HONEST with you so you remain faithful to Ana.” Posting pictures, presumably of oneself, is a way to line up one's offline practices with one's online discourse. However, even if, as AnaAimee suggests, people post and maintain pictures of themselves online, embodiment still remains unsettled as people can and do accuse each other of posting fake, outdated or photo-shopped pictures. Thus, additional rituals become a necessary and continuing piece of the authenticity projects of these groups.

Another way that these participants make their bodies evident online is through "check-ins" where they report to other group members what their current statistics are and post lists of what they have eaten. Members engage in "check-in" rituals in which a group member will ask everyone "how much have you eaten today?" or ask everyone for their "stats." Group members post the requested information, once again making the body present online to affirm authenticity and ward off accusations of wannarexia. In a fairly typical check-in ritual, a member will ask other members what they have eaten in a given time period and members will respond in varying degrees of detail and analysis. Perhaps the most common check in ritual are the “stats” check ins, where participants all call on each other to post their current “stats.” This usually includes some version of a listing of their highest weight, their current weight, their lowest weight and their goal weight. This paper opened with such a ritual in which the moderator asserts "how bout we start some stats." Posters responded with posts like the following:

Sick with Feeling: Name: Katt / Age: Almost 16 / CW: 95 / LW: 92 / HW: 120-125 / Height: 5'3".5-5'4" / ED: Anorexia Nervosa / GW1: 90 / GW2: 85 / GW3: 80 (It just keeps getting lower...) / Fun Fact: I recently dyed my hair bleach-ish blonde ^\_^ / Katt.

Too Skinny and Sad: Age: 19 / Height: 5'4" / CW: 108 / HW: 130(\*gags\* / LW: 100(before first hospitalization) / GW: 100 / GW2:95 / LTGW:90

Looking for Perfection: Name: Marissa / Age: just turned 21 / CW: 120 / LW: 110 / HW: 155 / Height: 5'8" / ED: Anorexia Nervosa but have had mia tendencies off and on / GW1: 110 / GW2: 105 / GW3: 100 / Diagnosed: Yes...have been for 6 years now and i am in therapy, group work, and seeing a psychiatrist...my life sucks / <3 marissa

In this way participants paint a discursive picture of themselves by sharing their struggles to be thin, listing what their goal are and how far away they are from those goals. As Sick with Feeling's post indicates, the final goal is ever changing, because it can never really be attained. However, it's not the goal that is important, but doing embodiment by providing a discursive image, history and future for their bodies. They can also demonstrate legitimacy by expanding the information they include in the check-in beyond just statistics, such as Too Skinny and Sad's inclusion of her hospitalization and Looking for Perfection's assertion that she has been diagnosed for 6 years now. Through including their experience and the length of time they have been "sick" these members avoid being labeled wannarexic by being too "new" or not really sick.

Finally, the participants in these groups engage in group activities (often offline) that they organize online. These group activities consist of fasts, taking surveys or agreeing to wear a particular bracelet color (usually red) to indicate their membership in a pro-anorexic group. These activities are a way for participants to demonstrate a serious commitment to an anorexic lifestyle and show that they are not just looking for a "quick fix" as are the wannarexics. Fasts are a frequent way that group members engage in their eating disorders together. On the group Ana, Edna and Me, Wiggling Out posted a thread asking, "Who wants to fast with me? I am starting at 12 midnight tonight. I have a ? tho, I am going for like a week and we have to flip the

clocks for DST. Well so do I count it as an extra hour?" Participants immediately responded excitedly:

Hyper: ugh just fast for an extra hour. it's not that difficult. / i'll fast with you!

Wigging Out: oh gosh, ok. Hey and thanks IM SO EXCITED!

HYper: ME TOO!!! / call me crazy, but i love my joints aching and being all sore and getting muscle atrophy..i finally feel like i'm doing something right

Fasts are activities that bring the groups together and helps the individuals participating, apparently, stick to their goals. But again, whether members are actively participating or not, they are discursively participating.

Together, these three processes form a constellation of authentication practices that manage but fail to resolve anxieties about making the body present online by doing embodiment. These rituals serve to encircle the contours of the pro-ana community by providing an almost constant stream of activity with the implicit or explicit goal of maintaining and defending the group, but individuals must also engage in practices to make their own bodies present and believable online. For this, members go beyond these community rituals and attempt to manage and resolve anxieties surrounding online embodiment through the use of individual tools. These tools then work in concert with community rituals to manage but, as we will show, never quite quell the anxieties of verifying the online body.

### **Tools: Aggression, Experience and Knowledge**

In addition to the group rituals described above, members of the communities we studied used a variety of tools to assert their individual authenticity as eating disordered as well as to lay claim to their rightful membership in the pro-ana community. The tools can be used in the process of group rituals, but they remain individual tools. We have identified three primary tools- aggression, experience, and knowledge- that are routinely employed and deployed by



members in attempts to define and reinforce the boundaries of the pro-ana community and establish and maintain individual legitimacy as “real” anorexics. Thus, these tools are also part and parcel of establishing the body of the individual and the community on-line.

Counter to the image of the passive and wilting anorexic, the members of the pro-ana community use aggression as a tool to enforce the boundaries of the community, to assert and re-assert their own authenticity and as a way to respond to those who critique the pro-ana community, “haters.” While aggression in general is common on these sites (Dey and Keys 2008), four types of aggression stand out as central to the assertion of community membership and identity: self-aggression, aggression as motivation, aggression against “haters,” and aggression against wannarexics.

Self-aggression usually manifests as a member insulting herself, talking about how fat and/or ugly she is and asserting her desire to take action based on this self-critique.. A typical example of this self-aggression is seen in Famous's post entitled, “someone fucking call me fat before i eat again:”

holy shit people..... / it's like i fucking have food ducktaped to my hand !! / i can't stop eating.....then i purge ...then....i don't feel like i've got it all out... / so in turn the punishment doesn't fit the crime / is anyone following me?? / I need some people who understand to either call me a fat ass....or gimmie some hardcore advice..... / ew. i'm gross.....

Self-aggression not only appears to be a tool to motivate oneself to be more dedicated or stringent in food restriction, exercise, or whichever eating disordered practices a person engages in. Self-aggression is also a tool used to signal to other members one’s dedication and status as a true anorexic, not a wannarexic or someone trying to lose a few pounds for vanity’s sake.

Related to self-aggression is what we call “motivating aggression” through which members use insults to inspire each other to succeed in meeting their goals as when one member thanks

Ellie for her motivating insults:

Jessie: oioi fatties. yeh u all better be fasting. cos ur all fat as fuck and need to!!!! / so put that piece of cake down and go run, and i dont want u back til ur legs are guna fall off and ur 10 pounds lighter. / haha i feels so mean for writing things like that. but u all know i dont mean it. just a continuation from the other ur fat thread / xxxx

I know more than You: see, that's the sort of motivation i need lol like constantly1 keep going keep going keep going

One sign that a person is not familiar with the expectations and interaction rules of the community is the misinterpretation of these insults as truly mean-spirited or malicious. When this happens, members often point out that such aggressive posts are meant to motivate or to chide, rather than being real reflections of members relationships with each other.

Finally, as we documented above, in the discussion about eating soap, aggression is directed toward wannarexics. The presence of wannarexics in these communities serves to both strengthen and threaten the authenticity claims of “real” members and thus aggression towards these people serves to protect the pro-ana community from being diluted by fake anorexics. Indeed, in their article on pro-ana communities, Brotsky and Giles (2007) found that wannarexics can blur the lines between authentic and inauthentic and thus require an aggressive response.

The second tool we identified is “experience.” Experience is wielded as a way to both illustrate one’s history with eating disorders and to invalidate the authenticity claims of others. Claims to experience most often come through sharing “horror stories” and “recovery tales.” Horror stories are most often stories about the side effects- physical, emotional and social- of anorexia and other eating disorders. Members share stories of side effects ranging from tooth

decay as a result of bulimia to dizziness and the development of lanugo (lanugo is fine hair that can appear on the bodies of long-term anorexics and it is often stated as a goal by members). These “horror stories” are often dramatic and chronicle the very real physical side-effects of sustained disordered eating, a strategy employed by members seeking to establish authenticity through experience is to appear blasé, unconcerned or even happy (though not too happy as that may indicate wannarexia) about these effects. A common example is sharing about experiencing anorexia-related amenorrhea- loss of one’s menstrual period. Experienced members are not alarmed by losing their period but, rather see it as a badge of honor and a sign of their “realness” and commitment to an anorexic lifestyle. The sharing of side-effects and “horror stories” is a tool for making the body evident online as it allows for the iteration of embodied experience and allows a member to develop credibility as an anorexic. Members also use experience as a tool in detailing their experience in recovery programs. Members with detailed knowledge about the ins and outs of recovery programs use this knowledge to assert authenticity and to offer advice to other members on how to go through recovery program without actually recovering.

Finally, knowledge is used as a tool to establish authenticity. Though members often eschew psychological and clinical analyses of anorexia and eating disorders, the ability to cite and understand clinical definitions and knowledge about eating disorders ironically is a way to establish one’s own authenticity and challenge that of others. Frequently these challenges happen through citing current clinical guidelines for the diagnosis of anorexia, bulimia and EDNOS. For instance, responding to someone she perceives to be a wannarexic Mena reiterates the clinical guidelines of anorexia and relegates the poster she is responding to as being EDNOS at best, EDNOS being a less prestigious eating disorder:

Mena: Actually, / Sorry to break it to you.... / but unless your BMI IS BELOW 17.5 / and you no longer get your period / YOU ARE NOT ANOREXIC. / That's FACT. / You

would be EDNOS if ANYTHING. / So- / ya, / If your BMI is above 17.5 / I guess you are faking it. This was just information for everybody to know / about the clinical criteria for anorexia...

Real or perceived knowledge of how to sustain a “healthy” existence as an anorexic and knowledge of nutrition are also frequently used to establish experience and legitimacy. Indeed, new members will often ask for advice on eating and health and veteran members will often use these requests as an opportunity to showcase their nutritional and medical knowledge (if they don’t simply discredit the request for information as a sign of wannarexia.)

Together, aggression, experience and knowledge form a collection of tools used by members of pro-ana discussion boards to assert their own identity and embodiment as authentically eating disordered and to police the boundaries of a community made tenuous by the realities of trying to establish “realness” in an online world.

## **Conclusion**

In tracing the contours of a digital community built on bodily, eating and representational practices we have also shown the negotiations and practices surrounding the inexact process of trying to make bodies real in online worlds. What our data indicates is that the presence and practices of these online communities challenge traditional characterizations of anorectics derived largely from clinical populations as isolated, passive and in search of invisibility. If rituals about doing embodiment are employed as community-building and sustaining strategies and tools are used to bolster individual claims to authenticity then the project of online embodiment is happening at two intersecting and co-constitutive levels. In using rituals and tools members are building and maintaining a community as well as individual identities; rather than focusing either on the individual or the community we are looking at how members create,

sustain and defend the contours of the pro-ana world and the identities of members of it. Central to this is the ongoing quest to make the body present online, the individual and the social body.

We can draw two preliminary conclusions about the nature of online embodiment in the pro-ana world. First, embodiment, online and offline is a relational project. Our data show that far from being isolated, participants in these communities seek out spaces in which to be overt about their eating disordered practices and identities and to build rapport with others they feel to be kindred spirits. However, what our data has also shown is that this relational project is as built on enforcing the boundaries of the community as it is on bringing new people in, indeed, even more so. Aggression towards wannarexics reveals a dynamic of bolstering the identity claims of "insiders" by highlighting the illegitimacy and inauthenticity of outsiders.

Closely tied to this relationality is our observation that boundary work in these communities is also embodiment work. By engaging in rituals and using tools that not only enforce the boundaries of community but make the realness of bodies central to the definition of community, members of pro-ana groups create their own bodies while at the same time creating a new social body in the pro-ana community. Rituals like photo posting and tools like aggression and knowledge allow members to do embodiment well as confirming or challenging the veracity of the embodiment claims of others.

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