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Feminism and Social Media: The Dilemma of Pro-Ana Websites

Saskia Talay

I. INTRODUCTION

My project evolved a lot over this semester—from the start, I knew I wanted to talk about cyberfeminism in the 1990s and how the reality of online feminist communities today has both differed and followed in the path of those women. Researching online female-run communities brought me to the troubling topic of pro-ana groups (roughly standing for pro-anorexia), which soon became my main focus. I looked at different communities run by women online—both feminist and otherwise, and examined the elements that structure them.

Because I focus on pro-ana groups online, discussion of eating disorders clearly factors in to my work. It is therefore important for me to acknowledge that while eating disorders affect both men and women, my discussion will focus on women's response through the mostly women-run sites and the women who visit these sites.

Briefly, here are some important terms that arise in this paper. *Cyberfeminism* is a facet of feminism that focuses on women's issues in a modern context, often centered on the virtual reality of the online space. *Social Media sites* are web based virtual communities driven by virtual interaction, while *user-generated sites* are sites like YouTube and Tumblr, which are made up entirely of content created by the users themselves. *Pro-ana sites* are sites and blogs sometimes found on those user-generated sites, which advocate for anorexia as a "lifestyle," and at its core, celebrate eating disorders and are run by women who do not intend to fight their disorders. I do not have a solution to the problematic pro-ana community—but what I do provide is a layer of understanding about how and why we cannot vilify the adolescent and teenage women who create and join these sites

based on the factors that push them and the history of feminism online that precede them.

II. HISTORY AND REVIEW OF CYBERFEMINISM

FEMINISM AND THE ONLINE SPHERE

Cyberfeminism, much like the wider concept of feminism, is difficult to summarize and define. Cyberfeminism is a facet of feminism that focuses on women's issues in a modern context, often centered on the virtual reality of the online space. As Susan Luckman notes:

cyberfeminist activity is frequently utopian in its outlook; draws heavily on postmodernism and psychoanalysis, and is commonly technologically determinist, uncritically supporting the contention that technology can save the world. (Luckman 1999)

Technology sits at the core of cyberfeminism, whose main question becomes: *How can feminists use our modern technologies, which are now available, as a way to rework and improve community building and activism?* Cyberfeminism uses technology to exemplify the type of communication specific to modern feminist practice:

... the language of the Internet and the metaphorical geographies employed to describe it make possible technologic rhetorics of the type of networking Third Wave feminists engage in. (Garrison 2000)

In other words, the Internet allows for a type of communication especially relevant to Third Wave

feminist communities and the activism they engage in.

The cyberfeminists of the 90s were then, on the whole, rather optimistic about the implications of the Internet for feminism in a new age:

an optimistic—almost utopian—vision of the electronic community as foreshadowing the ‘good society’ is ...characteristic of cyberfeminism. (Wajcman 63)

Many of these hopes hinged on something as simple as access. Some saw the Internet as a place of infinite possibility, where women who ordinarily would have very little contact with feminism or even access to supportive groups of women focused on women’s issues could find such things virtually. Online, no matter where women are physically, they “can share their experiences and knowledge, reinforce their common beliefs or collective identities, and ultimately implement their transformative actions,” thereby creating and reinforcing a feminist community (Chen and Vogt 371). One of the early ways this was accomplished in the 90s was through hypertext listserv emails, in which many saw great potential as a tool to create community (Engel and Fisher 1998). Greater and easier communication provides the basis of many early cyberfeminist predictions, and feminist listserv emails provided the necessary process by which women could introduce and discuss issues, thus building community and creating spaces for women online. There was a strong belief that “electronic networks [...] create new forms of sociability that will result in enhanced communities and greater world harmony,” and that women would be the ones to harness this power of creation (Wajcman 59). This key aspect of the cyberspace “has the potential to be egalitarian, to bring everyone into a network arrangement. It has the capacity to create community; to provide untold opportunities” (Luckman 1999).

This capacity, as well as its easy access, is precisely why online spaces continue to be so important to an evolving feminism for new generations.

Though optimism runs throughout early cyberfeminist literature, many writers didn’t ignore the potential pitfalls—and, more precisely, that various forms

of communication, in and of themselves, are not value neutral—and sexism can’t automatically be transcended by technology. Although it is seemingly gender neutral, men control the Internet, and access and acceptance of women is limited. The Internet was acknowledged as an environment,

traditionally hostile to feminist viewpoints and [cyberfeminist actions] respond to the male domination of information technologies. Computer-mediated communication, where male users traditionally outnumber women, facilitates forms of sexism and misogyny which can be far more prevalent online than in the physical world. (Luckman 1999)

Early feminist communities had to find a way to navigate and rework an online space to move from the traditionally patriarchal setting to one that can be used to facilitate feminist change. In fact, some argued, the cyberfeminist critique and use of the Internet then becomes a critical *responsibility* because the Internet is a gendered, male dominated space that might push women out of important advances and information of the modern age (Luckman 1999).

At their most optimistic, cyberfeminists believed that the Internet would become a blank space within which the roles and stereotypes could fall away, the ultimate feminist space for learning and communication. As Susan Luckman notes, many early cyberfeminists hoped that the online space would become one where gender could be shed, and all users would exist within the Internet unhindered by the dichotomous nature of gender (1999). However, as evidenced by the harassment women often experience online, this has not come to be. Although users may choose not to disclose their gender and do not always know the genders of others, the patriarchal values and ideas their physical bodies exist within translates into and affects the virtual world regardless:

“the cyber-body retains, for example, characteristics of race and gender *because* both are a social configuration. The body circulating through cyberspace does not obviate the body at the keyboard”. (Gillis 190)

The historical and cultural context of the world that created the Internet is not separate from the online sphere; indeed, in recent years, we have seen that:

hyper-technology is the modern manifestation of an intermingling of science, technology, capital and power. Its historical location dictates its authority and reflects the sexist, racist, homophobic environment in which it was 'bred' and many interactions online reflect this. (McNutt 2003)

Technology does not exist outside of the context, conditions, and individuals that created it, and the power that informed the Internet's beginning continues to dictate its existence today. Recent cyberfeminism, however, has focused on feminism's ability to claim and change online space, to have:

an emphasis on the contingency and heterogeneity of technological change [that] helps to locate its possibilities in wider social networks. Such an analysis introduces space for women's agency in transforming technologies. (Wajcman 7)

Online culture has steadily and significantly evolved since the cyberfeminist writings in the 90s, and feminist online culture has expanded with it. The Internet itself has expanded, as have the number and types of users. Most notably, online culture has seeped into the culture of the real world, until the two are continuously intertwined in the daily life of many in the Western world. Indeed, this complete immersion in technology was predicted by cyberfeminists: ten years ago, Ednie Kaeh Garrison wrote,

the feminist praxis we comprehend increasingly references technological rhetorics as well. I find this to be especially true among younger folks who have grown up in the webs of computers and the Internet. (Garrison 2000)

Feminism and online culture, much like general society and the Internet, have become critically entangled and mutually involved with one another.

As early cyberfeminists predicted, communication became key to online feminism, although the earliest tactics, like listserv emails, gave way mainly to blogs

and their commenting sections. Blog moderators write posts that introduce topics and provide information with commentary, while members of online communities further discussions via comments. The communication potential and importance on the Internet, then, hasn't changed, but rather been re-worked and updated. This aspect of feminist blogs is vital to a furthering of feminism that has been traditionally entrenched in discussion and interaction between women. Interaction, too, becomes significant in the makeup of pro-ana blogs, which I will discuss in my examination of the foundation of the sites later on.

Today, feminist communities are centered in feminist blogs, which create community through the communication long deemed vital by cyberfeminists. The blogs themselves differ from traditional scholarly feminist work in that those who can easily access them might not be familiar with scholarly language, but are now able to contribute and further discussions from perspectives scholarly feminist work might otherwise lack. The belief that technology would bring feminism to those who ordinarily wouldn't have exposure to it has also remained strong. Danielle Maestretti writes,

Most young people will have their first experiences with feminism online, and when they do, it won't be difficult for them to find those perspectives that are often overlooked in the women's studies classroom: those of people of color, people with disabilities, people who are not heterosexual. (Maestretti 2008)

Indeed, feminism of every variety can easily be found online, and blogs are focused on many different "minifeminisms," making it easy for a user's first experience with feminism to be tailored to their interests (Maestretti 2008).

III. THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE FEMINIST ACTIVISM

As early cyberfeminists predicted, the Internet and its use has become incredibly important in modern feminism. The ways in which online spaces—and, specifically, feminist online spaces—has both remained true to and strayed from the expectations of

cyberfeminists can be seen in the way feminist activism has changed with the use of online resources. Feminist blogs make it easier for people to interact with feminism; people who never would have otherwise had firsthand connection with feminist thought. However, the Internet has not only changed how people experience and come into contact with feminism, but it also has changed how feminist activism is done today. The Internet allows information to be spread much more quickly than ever before, an important element necessary for organizing people, and it also maintains a “relatively low expense to the user and to the groups disseminating large volumes of information (compared to faxes or mail),” and so becoming an activist no longer requires large amounts of capital, key to the accessibility the internet allows feminist activism (Vogt and Chen 2001). If, as I have discussed above, communication is key to building an effective feminist community, then the Internet is the perfect tool for feminist activism—it’s a quick, cheap form of communication that has a potentially unlimited reach. With this development have come targeted acts of protest and activism that are begun and spread online, rather than through word of mouth in the physical world. These acts tend to focus on particular issues, and as a result, today “there is no single type of feminist or feminism, and this shows in the plethora of websites hosted over the Internet,” allowing feminist activists to focus on the issues they find pressing (Vogt and Chen 2011). In this way, online users may come to feminism through the certain issue they are interested in, and feminism may seem more accessible to those who might otherwise feel daunted by rhetoric or subjects they do not yet know or understand.

Often, online resources are used by feminist activists to bring attention to a troubling issue and to consolidate voices with the goal of achieving the notice of corporations or government—an online protest. While this strategy is obviously not new, the creative and pervasive use of online resources to achieve the goal certainly is. Attaining reproductive rights is a very old and important fight in feminist circles, and with new online resources, new processes to fight for reproductive rights have emerged. For example, when the Susan G. Komen foundation briefly removed their monetary support of Planned Parenthood in February of 2012, the on-

line backlash spurred by feminist activists worked to change Komen’s decision, and the activists quickly succeeded. Pro-choice advocates and feminists went online in droves, using Facebook, Twitter, and blogs to speak out against the decision, and not only did they get the foundation to reverse their decision, but they raised \$3 million in donations for Planned Parenthood over the short time the Susan G. Komen foundation pulled support (Kelley 2012).

Similarly, feminist groups mobilize online to get certain products removed from stores—again a common goal, but with new tools to achieve it. For example, in 2011, Abercrombie Kids began selling a padded push up bikini top for young girls (figure 1). Sites like Sociological Images brought the issue to the attention of their readers, who mobilized through social media avenues, eventually resulting in Abercrombie re-categorizing the swimsuit and issuing a short apology (Wade and Sharp 2012). While many of the issues online feminist activists work with are certainly not new to feminism, the Internet has created new processes by which to protest, organize, and act—new, effective ways to be an activist in a modern world.

IV. FEMINISM AND ANOREXIA

Just as over-sexualization of young girls and funding for groups like Planned Parenthood are not new to receiving feminist attention, neither is the subject of eating disorders and anorexia’s relationship to how women are treated culturally. There is no question that anorexia and other eating disorders have become frighteningly prevalent in the modern age. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, the lifetime prevalence of anorexia is 0.6% of the adult population in the United States. The numbers differ from men to women; 0.3% of adult men will suffer from anorexia, while 0.9% of women will experience the same (nimh.nih.gov).

Worryingly, the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders report that only 1 in 10 men and women with eating disorders receive treatment (anad.org). With so few people receiving official treatment, it is probable that some turn to other resources, such as the ones found online, for help or support, making the prevalence of both on-

line support options and pro-ana groups important to consider.

Problems associated with body image are not limited to adults. Collins found that 42% of 1st to 3rd grade girls wanted to be thinner (Collins 1991). Considering this rising trend of body perception issues among adolescents, groups found by preteens and teens online can have a major influence on body image. Especially in the trying years during puberty when young women are trying to understand the changes to their bodies, the sites they find online can greatly shape their self-image.

Feminist views of anorexia and other eating disorders are linked to how society paints the roles of men and women, and how media representation of women affects how women see themselves. Susan Bordo looks at the issue of anorexia through social theories, and connects the issue with the desire to control one's body and deal with the dualistic way the body is seen in culture—as at once separate and a part of the self. For women, Bordo insists, this dualism means being constantly connected to that which society sexualizes and blames—the female form (1993). Bordo writes that anorexia nervosa:

can be seen at least in part a defense against the 'femaleness' of the body and a punishment of its desires. These desires [...] have frequently been culturally represented through the metaphor of female appetite. The extremes to which the anorectic takes the denial of appetite. (that is, to the point of starvation) suggest the dualistic nature of her construction of reality: either she transcends body totally, becoming pure 'male' will, *or* she capitulates utterly to the degraded female body and its disgusting hungers. She sees no other possibilities, no middle ground. (Bordo 8)

Anorexia in today's patriarchy is a result then, of a society that devalues both the female body and the female spirit. It is this that we will see the pro-ana users fighting against. Later, citing Susie Orbach, Bordo writes,

"anorexia represents one extreme on a continuum on which all women today

find themselves, insofar as they are vulnerable, to one degree or another, to the requirements of the cultural construction of femininity," further addressing the way in which women are forced onto the strict boundaries of femininity and how they are expected to act in society. (Bordo 47)

Thus, women are not given agency or leniency over their own bodies, and exist, as Bordo writes, on a continuum over which they have little to no control.

Feminists also stress the link between the mainstream media's representation of women and anorexia. Women in advertisements and magazines that women of all ages are exposed to every day provide an unattainable ideal of beauty that is based on unrealistic thinness that is enhanced—even exaggerated—through digital tools. This constant barrage of idealized thinness sends the message to women that the thinner your body is, the more you will be valued. This not only sets an unreachable and dangerous beauty goal, but it further perpetuates the idea that a woman's worth is tied entirely to her body. Eating disorders occur much more frequently in men than before, and are now impacting women at younger ages, and media influence is a major factor (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006). Indeed, this influence gives rise to the increasing influences of industries ranging from the exercise to the cosmetic surgery industry, all of which perpetuate the "cult of thinness" ideal forced upon women (Hesse-Biber et al. 2006).

In this light, the "solution" to the culture that creates eating disorders is obvious—extremely difficult, yes, but clear. If we attack that culture, if we continue to challenge beauty norms and expectations, encourage women to seek help, and make sure affordable treatment options exist and are easily available, we can work to fight the culture that supports disordered eating. But now we must consider how adding online communities and social media changes the modes of attack and how effective they might be. This brings us to the pro-ana sites and blogs themselves.

V. INTERNET: FREE OR REGULATED?

SITE POLICIES

In nearly all of the studies used in this paper, the pro-ana sites that were observed were shut down by the time the study was published. The sites tend to have a very quick turnover because of Internet site hosting companies' policies against harmful content (Dias 2003). Pro-ana sites get placed under this umbrella term—the content posted on these blogs is seen as examples of and promoting self harm.

In publicly announced policy changes, user-generated sites Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest prohibit content that creates a risk of harm to the poster or to another person, under which they say pro-ana content falls, and Tumblr explicitly no longer allows content that promotes eating disorders or self harm (Gregoire 2012). However, often the blogs and content fall through the cracks, and it is not difficult to find “thinspiration” on any of the sites. The number of blogs on sites like Tumblr are so vast, and the regulation so weak, often thinspirational content is left up. When searching the tag ‘thinspiration’ on Tumblr, a disclaimer saying the following comes up

If you or someone you know is dealing with an eating disorder, self harm issues, or suicidal thoughts, please visit our Counseling & Prevention Resources page for a list of services that may be able to help.

This disclaimer might be helpful to struggling Tumblr users—after all, it places an obstacle between the viewer and the content—but the posts tagged ‘thinspiration’ still come up, millimeters below the easily ignored disclaimer—which has an option for users to take it away. With the move of pro-ana communities from their own sites to user-generated sites like these, the policies of sites like Facebook, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram are key, as they seem to control at least one aspect of the visibility of pro-ana sites.

There is significant disagreement as to whether sites or bloggers have the right to promote or say whatever they want without fear of being shut down, with some saying that shutting down the sites restricts users' First Amendment right to free speech or pres-

ures them to further isolate themselves from possible help. The argument that the sites are harmful, however, are much more pervasive both by feminists and by mainstream media, which has taken a very strong (and slightly morally panicked) stance against the pro-ana community. Those who argue that pro-ana sites should be protected by the First Amendment seem to be only made up of those involved in the communities themselves and a few unrelated outliers. The strength of anorexia and eating disorder awareness groups and their stance against the sites wipe out most other critics against their shut-down.

VI. PRO-ANA SITES

I. WHAT THEY LOOK LIKE

On User-generated sites, ‘thinspiration’ and more explicitly pro-ana blogs often post and repost photos of extremely thin women, diary entries of the bloggers (mostly featured on Tumblr), and quotes (figure 4) to motivate them to lose weight, while the standalone sites that are pro-ana themselves, heavily feature forums and weight loss tips and tips to stave off hunger. Users of both types of sites also include multiple personal stats, such as their starting and current weight, their highest or lowest weight and their ultimate goal weight (Boero and Pascoe 2009). This presentation of personal weights works to promote solidarity between users, and as a motivator for the user him/herself to attain their goal weight, to achieve personal “perfection.” Rather than creating the disembodied spaces cyberfeminists in the 90s hoped for, this reiteration of the physical body of online users creates a contradiction “that online spaces are fundamentally disembodied ones” and further ties the user’s worth to her body (Boero and Pascoe 2009).

Because the main focus of the pro-ana “lifestyle” is the physical body, Natalie Boero and C.J. Pascoe point out that users must work to reproduce their bodies online to maintain this focus (Boero and Pascoe 2009). Users post photos of themselves in forums and on personal blogs, participate in group weight loss “boot camps” together, and keep one another updated on their weight goals; these actions can be seen as ways of “performing embodiment”

(Boero and Pascoe 2009). The participants in pro-ana communities “are not going online to avoid corporeality but rather to engage with others about their bodies via text and image in ways that make them feel in control of those bodies” (Daniels 113). In this way, the pro-ana groups actively work against the ideal disembodied online space that cyberfeminists aspired to, by creating activity that purposefully brings the body into the online sphere. Because these activities form the basis of the pro-ana community, the very foundation of the groups lies in creating the body online.

Another important element that different pro-ana sites and blogs share is a common language. “Pro-ana” and ‘thinspiration’ (or the related ‘thinspo’) being the most used examples, the creation of a community is partly based on an understood set of created words that mark users as members of the community, and work to shut out those who might not understand them. More obscure are words like “wannarexics” or simply “wanas,” people who try to join the community who are seen as lying about their eating disorders and do not correctly follow the “lifestyle” of pro-ana: “The wannarexic treats anorexia as a fad, something that can be adopted and discarded at will” (Boero and Pascoe 2009). Though these terms are not universally prevalent, one standalone site heavily relied on this term to keep the community guarded and separate from outsiders (proanaonline.com, wana.orana.us). The latter site, one that publicizes comments of “wanas,” often gives the label to people on social networking sites like Twitter who tell pro-ana users that their content is harmful. Keeping others out creates a stronger community feel for those who are allowed in. Much like the purposeful exclusion of bisexual individuals by a gay and lesbian activist group to reinforce the definition of being queer, policing the boundaries of the pro-ana groups helps to define and affirm what the group is about to begin with. While this allows the women involved to create stronger support systems, it seems to be support in the wrong direction. Even if the support *was* helpful, despite the possible harm, keeping those who read out separate works to isolate and “other” certain people, is problematic, as well as promotes harmful behavior.

Thinspiration content relies on the fetishization and dehumanization of women’s bodies. Mostly involv-

ing pictures of extremely skinny women and quotes designed to discourage eating, the pictures themselves often cut women off at the neck, deleting the women’s personality and personhood, focusing only on their bodies (figures 2 and 3). Since the pictures are being shown without their heads, the women accessing these sites find even more evidence that their only worth is in their bodies, not in their personalities or minds—the women they are told to idolize are literally reduced only to what is below the neck.

The values of the content seen in thinspiration posts are clearly internalized by pro-ana users. In an email to a reporter, one blogger on Tumblr wrote,

I like images that show skinny, happy girls. They look so confident and we can see their bones through their skin. It’s the most beautiful thing ever. (Gregoire 2012)

This imagery is common among thinspo blogs, and the women in the photos are upheld by members of the community as the pinnacle of beauty, ignoring the possible threat that attempting to look like them poses.

On the user-generated sites, pro-ana communities often see overlap with their ‘thinspo’ and fitness blogs’ ‘fitspo,’ and thus serve as a reminder that pro-ana groups aren’t exceptional or pathological but merely part of the continuum of body policing done to all women. The photos seen on fitness blogs can be extremely similar to those on pro-ana blogs; women in skimpy clothing and with their heads cropped out. Though the women in thinspo photos are often much skinnier and less muscular, the similarity is worth noting. Both feature the elements that reduce women to just what their bodies look like—perhaps fitspo might not be as directly harmful as thinspo, but the social ramifications are extremely important.

Interestingly, at the same time that the sites and blogs rebel against the labels they are given by others—whether anonymously online or by their doctors—they reinforce the gender norms of what it means to be and act like a woman. They post photos that embrace the ‘beauty’ of the ideal thin female body, reinforcing the idea that women who are not the ideal level of skinny are worth less than those

who are. This effectively hurts all women—the unattainable ideal body pushes against the sense of self and body for women of all shapes and sizes, as examined by Bordo’s work—both within and outside of the pro-ana communities (Bordo 1993). At the same time, they are reclaiming their bodies from those who would define them, and turn their disease into a source of power—if the women were talking about a different disease, such speech would be celebrated. They express themselves with powerful prose like:

If we ever completely tapped that potential in our midst, and applied it to other areas outside eating habits and body sculpting, the fact is, we could change the world. Completely. Maybe even rule it” and “A true ‘pro-ana’ is not a ‘victim’ in any sense. Some of us may be ‘survivors’ of various traumas and unpleasantnesses in our lives, from which our endurance and survival have contributed to finding our way to this path. Beyond this, however, we are more than mere ‘survivors.’ We are ‘thrivers!’ We thrive upon challenge, upon competition, upon the raw stimulation of life, keenness of our senses, strength and artistry in our bodies, alertness and clarity in our minds. (Roberts Strife and Rickard 215)

To the women who wrote these statements, being pro-ana is a source and focus of a power they find within themselves and the community, which is very different from the traditional meek feminine ideal.

Ultimately however, though the sites become a source of control and power for the users, they do not have total control, as evidenced by the frequent shutdown of pro-ana groups’ sites (Dias 2003). Indeed, though the users promote their own control, that control is problematic when it is used just as strictly over the self as the control others had that they rebel against:

the themes of self-control, self-discipline and self-surveillance, often in line with culturally dominant ideals of femininity [...] and patriarchal constructions of female bodies and desires as requiring control. (Day 201, 245)

The powerful prose that would be so strong if discussing living with breast cancer is overtly allowing and encouraging self-harm, and this cannot be ignored.

The users are not ignorant of the harm they might be doing to themselves or others, however, as one Tumblr blogger says,

Most days I feel like what I’m doing could be way too much. I know that if I stay on a very dangerous path, that it could kill me within a year easily, if not sooner. But at the same time, I feel like if I set a goal, I have to reach it. I’m pretty torn about it most days, but I’ve never really felt bad enough that I wanted to stop. (Gregoire 2012)

In addition to this attitude, many of the blogs—both on sites like Tumblr and on separate sites of their own—have disclaimers acknowledging the potential harm that the content they post might have. If the users know of the harm involved with the pro-ana “lifestyle” and intentionally ignore it, we must consider why they are willing to put themselves and others in this position; what are they getting in return from pro-ana groups that is so worth the danger? Are these women so isolated in their experience living with anorexia that they are willing to risk their lives promoting the disease just to talk to others who understand without doctors who they say demean them or to get some control over their lives themselves? We cannot ignore what their knowledge of the risks means—how it tells us about what they need and for what they risk their well-being.

II. MOVE TO USER GENERATED

Though the pro-ana community primarily began on sites specifically dedicated to and created by these women, there has been a large resurgence of late bringing the communities to user-generated sites like Tumblr, YouTube and Instagram. Perhaps because of the separate sites often being closed down, these sites are often much harder to regulate despite the hosting user-generated sites having policies dealing with pro-ana content. “Thinspiration” content seems to be the most common on these sites, and blogs that have this kind of content are very image heavy,

focusing on the bodies of thin women. While self-hosted sites still exist, blogs on user-generated sites are much easier to find and open to outside eyes. Tumblr, for example, creates an anonymous space that allows people to be heard in ways they might not otherwise be brave enough to try to do, and so these blogs are:

ideal for giving expression to both inspirational and aspirational content [...] Tumblr-based thinspo blogs are a sort of pro-ana 2.0, forgoing chat rooms and message boards in favor of eerily elegant images, sophisticated design, pop-culture references, private messaging, and street-style sensibility. (Gregoire 2012)

The pro-ana community seems to have created a new generation of blogs that post content that used to be on other sites, which were at times barred with restrictive access, content that is now promoted in a style tailor-made for a new generation of users who grew up in the time of Facebook. Its relatively recent character means that there is little scholarly research done on these types of blogs in particular, and so I have been focusing on them in my research.

III. PROBLEMS WITH RESEARCH WITHOUT UNDERSTANDING

Though, predictably, participants in these communities are likely to:

view their bodies more negatively, and have lower body self esteem than those who do not visit them [...] the link between these sites and increased levels of eating disorders is not inevitable", overall, the idea that these sites might "turn" healthy young girls into anorexics is rooted in moral panic, incited by media that vilifies the users. (Pollack 2003)

Indeed, as seen by the term "wannarexic," some groups actively try to avoid and keep out those who do not already prescribe to the "lifestyle choice" of pro-ana (Boero and Pascoe 2009). However, some studies have suggested that viewing the content on pro-ana sites can negatively affect women's caloric intake, at times even without them realizing it (Jett,

et al. 2010). Despite this possibility, vilifying the creators and participants of these sites is certainly not the solution to the problem of pro-ana sites. One pro-ana contributor to a blog writes:

We can't go ask for safe advice from non-EDs without a risk of being hospitalized or shunned. Pro-ED to me means understanding that there's no shame in how we are, and acceptance that this is how we will continue to be for an indefinite period of time. (Dias 38)

Their concerns and rejection of the labels associated with disordered eating that are thrust upon them reveal a problem with the way the medical system and society itself handles people suffering with eating disorders. Of course, there exist many good treatment programs and psychologists that deal with eating disorders. However these young women are simply a symptom of something deeply wrong in our culture—in them, we can see the effects of our expectations of women and beauty.

It is also important to note that there is considerable variation throughout various pro-ana groups. Some promote the medical definition of anorexia, and tend to be a part of pro-ana groups in order to be a part of a community of people also dealing with anorexia, and do not seek recovery because they see the lack of success as inevitable (Roberts Strife and Rickard 2011). Others, more prominent on user-generated sites, see anorexia as a "lifestyle," and tend to not seek treatment because of the power they find in the community and the disorder.

Many of those who struggled with eating disorders also struggle with feelings of loneliness in their experience with the disease. Claire Mysko, who works with the National Eating Disorders Association, has said that they are:

generally plagued with insecurity and feeling very isolated, so this world of pro-ana provides a community and a sense of belonging, and validates their experiences. (Gregoire 2012)

One user wrote:

It's actually nice to read. It makes me feel like I'm not alone, like other people are

going through these things and people understand. (McColl 2013)

The pro-ana community offers these young people a kind of support they often find nowhere else, as well as support from people who experience the same loneliness and feelings that they themselves do. The Internet has allowed young people struggling with anorexia and other eating disorders to meet and connect with others their age also struggling with the same problems, whereas before they would only meet others in treatment programs (Boero and Pascoe 2009). However, with this sense of belonging in a community that supports behavior comes also the danger that it can at times threaten the lives of those they support—and even those providing the support. When considering why the users participate it is important to remember that,

because identity construction is vital to feminist action, and it is important that we as feminist scholars and researchers discuss these multiple site positions that foreground the experiences of many young women. (Dower et al. 88-89)

When dealing with these communities, it is important to consider the reasons young people turn to them for support, rather than to their friends, family, or doctors—it is clear that the pro-ana groups offer a type of support they have found nowhere else. Unfortunately, this connection is fueled by shame or hatred of participant's bodies, and can lead to further harm that the girls would have done themselves without the community.

IV. CYBERFEMINISM, FEMINIST ONLINE COMMUNITIES, AND PRO-ANA

Cyberfeminists saw the possibility of the Internet to become a space away from the hegemonic patriarchy within which women could build their own realities and communities. In a way, pro-ana groups are the direct result of such a wish. Judged by others whom they perceive as not understanding their experience, young women dealing with anorexia can retreat to these online communities where they can talk to other women with similar experiences and find support. Karen Dias writes,

Since the public realm is regulated by banishing from sight behaviors that are considered abnormal, repugnant or deviant, cyberspace can provide a space to escape the scrutiny of others. (though perhaps not self-scrutiny), as well as the opportunity to interact with others struggling with eating disorders. This could be helpful since the early stages of anorexia are usually marked by extreme isolation. (31)

Stripping away content and ultimate messages, pro-ana groups, feminist blogs and sites can be viewed as having essentially the same foundation—at their core, both are women talking to and supporting one another in a safe space, a community in which they can discuss issues uniquely important to them.

Jessie Daniels writes that,

foregrounding women and girls' engagement with Internet technologies suggests that there is something innately feminist in such practices. Wilding and other cyberfeminists [...] have warned that the valorization of women's cyber practices without an accompanying feminist critique is problematic,

which forms the center of the difference between feminist online communities and pro-ana groups—even if the two share a foundation, pro-ana groups do not maintain a feminist critique of their own actions and the actions of those they turn away (Daniels 112). Though pro-ana groups purportedly have the same core as feminist groups, their problematic message and values cannot be seen as feminist, and the potential for harm cannot be ignored.

VII. CONCLUSION

Vilifying the creators and participants of these sites is obviously not the solution to the pro-ana problematic. If we try to alienate rather than understand why the women involved in the pro-ana community think the way they do, we will only be working to further isolate them from potential help, as many of those who struggle with eating disorders also strug-

gle with feelings of loneliness in their experience with the disease.

So what should feminists focus on and what can we do to help the women involved in these communities? The blogs are obviously harmful and negative, but what they represent is something innately harmful and negative in the patriarchy that we didn't recognize—the refusal to recognize the autonomy and power of young women and girls, and the lack of spaces for young women to support one another and use their power to connect with each other. The women in pro-ana communities resulted from this lack of space—they recognized a need, and created their own. Unfortunately, they did so in a way that promotes harmful behavior. But, as I have said, they have a solid foundation that, much like feminist online communities, leads to a strong support group. If we gave adolescent and teen female anorexics a chance to promote and strengthen their own power and support one another in a goal online, this community shows that they can be strong and self-regulated—but we need to give them the trust and resources to channel their own power into recovery—allow them to celebrate their strength *without* anorexia.

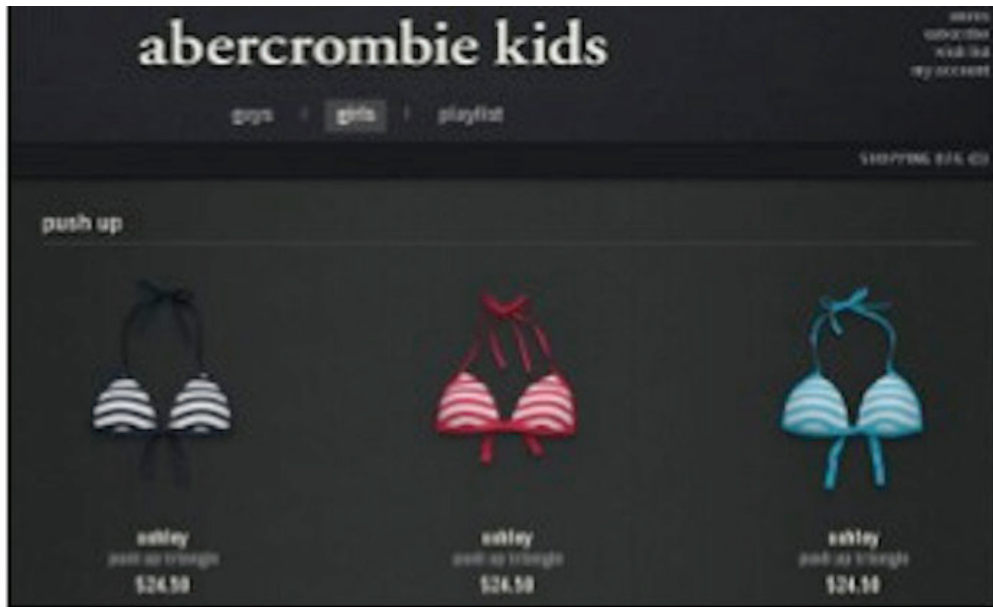


Figure 1: Abercrombie Kids Padded Bikinis



Figures 2 & 3: Typical 'thinspiration' photos



Figure 4: An example of a quote intended to encourage weight loss, combined with a “thin-spirational” photo

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