

**Imagining Anorexia:
An Analysis of the
Pro-Ana-Nation**

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Contents

1. Introduction.....	p.3
2. Theoretical perspectives on anorexia.....	p.8
3. Methodology.....	p.13
4. Analysing the pro-ana-nation.....	p.16
4.1 Anti-recovery rhetoric.....	p.17
4.1.a Thinspiration	
4.1.b Tips and tricks	
4.1.c Anorexia as mental illness	
4.2 Policing the pro-ana-nation.....	p.32
4.2.a Rejection of mainstream society	
4.2.b Membership codes	
4.3 Pseudo-religiosity.....	p.38
5. Concluding comments.....	p.44
Appendix.....	p.47
Bibliography.....	p.50

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1. Introduction

Hunger hurts but starving works
(Fiona Apple, *Paper Bag*, 1999)

Western popular culture appears obsessed with body image. In the UK, celebrity magazines such as *Heat*, *Closer* and *New!* are filled with images of celebrity bodies that are pored over by the nation, dissected, compared and criticised. Such publications chastise (almost exclusively female) public figures for putting on weight, then venerate them for their successful dieting plans in multi-page spreads detailing their weekly food and exercise regimes. The pendulum lurches violently back again, however, when stories appear of dieting having gone too far, criticising the “skeletal” and “gaunt”¹ bodies of celebrities like Victoria Beckham; yet turn the page, and the slim and waif-like are once again exalted. The female body is thus articulated as a site of contradiction and ambivalence, alternately admired as a ‘Diet Goddess’ – the symbol of health, control and perseverance, and demonised as a ‘Food Failure’ – the icon of over-indulgence and gluttony. Women’s bodies become objects of control, praise, criticism and remoulding in the harsh glare of the contemporary media spotlight.

Against this backdrop, statistics on body image in the UK and USA demonstrate the consequences of such intense problematisation of the corporeal form. For example, according to ‘disordered-eating.co.uk’ (a site offering information on eating disorders²), between 0.6% and 4.5% of the US population, i.e. between 1.8 million and 13.6 million people, will suffer from an eating disorder at some point in their lives. The term ‘eating disorder’ encompasses many different conditions, including

¹ For example, *Closer*: 24-30 Oct, 2009

² <http://tiny.cc/0ftew>

anorexia nervosa in which sufferers have an extreme fear of gaining weight and regularly starve themselves to dangerously low body weights (Kring et al., 2009: 254). *Bulimia nervosa* also involves an ‘above average’ concern with body weight and shape, but entails recurrent episodes of binge eating and purging rather than starvation (Buckroyd, 1996: 21). *Over-eating* is a condition in which the amount of food consumed far exceeds what is needed (or desired) by the individual, while *EDNOS* (Eating Disorder Not Otherwise Specified) combines some or all of the above disorders³. Although the medical term *anorexia nervosa* was coined in 1872 by William Gull (Bell, 1985: 6), it was not until the 1980s, when the fashion for thinness became more pronounced, that the term anorexia became widely used in popular culture. Karen Carpenter, an American singer, is often cited as the first high profile celebrity case of anorexia, whose death from complications related to her disorder in 1983 brought the disease to public attention.



In the UK, it is estimated that around 1.1 million or nearly 2% of the population are currently diagnosed with some form of eating disorder, while in a 2007 APMS survey conducted by the NHS, 20.3% of women aged 16-24 were deemed ‘at risk’ of future disordered eating⁴. Moreover, NHS data⁵ for England suggest that both anorexia and obesity have risen in recent years, with 24% of adults and 16% of children classified

³ <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/opadjan08>

⁴ <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/webfiles/publications/mental%20health/other%20mental%20health%20publications/Adult%20psychiatric%20morbidity%2007/APMS%2007%20%28FINAL%29%20Standard.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/opadjan08>

as obese in 2008 (an increase from respectively 15% and 11% in 1993). Equally cases of anorexia have risen from 419 p.a. in 1996-7 to 620 p.a. in 2005-6. It is unclear, however, whether such figures illustrate a recent rise in eating disorders or merely reflect more effective techniques of diagnosis. Women and girls aged between 12 and 25 make up 90% of anorexia cases in the US, and are ten times more likely to suffer from this condition than men or boys in the UK.

Various feminist counter-discourses have attempted to rescue women's bodies from the cultural onslaught of criticism, analysis and modification. Classic feminist texts such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women's Collective (1973) and Susie Orbach's *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (1978) undertook to reclaim the female form, accusing patriarchal society of defining beauty in ways that are often unattainable for 'ordinary women'. Orbach encourages women to accept their bodies as they are, in the hope that they feel "valued for all the beauty they possess in the variety of their minds and the variety of their bodies" (1998: vii). While *Our Bodies, Ourselves* argued more generally that women should re-take ownership over their bodies, resisting what the authors perceived as disciplinary medical and cultural practices, these early feminist 'anti-diet' books from the 1970s preceded the current popular pre-occupation with anorexia and consequently did not thematise this disorder as such.

In more recent years, a new type of discourse has emerged, associated with the pro-ana-nation, which adopts much of the feminist rhetoric of 'my body is my own' and yet offers an example of 'resistance' which is profoundly disturbing. The 'pro-ana-nation' refers generally to a subculture that portrays anorexia as a legitimate lifestyle choice rather than a mental disorder. The Internet has proven to be a particularly

useful mobilising tool for the pro-ana-nation, resulting in the proliferation of pro-ana websites since the late 1990s (Bell, 2009: 151). The resulting on-line pro-ana community attempts to reclaim the anorexic body from society and more specifically from the doctors who try to cure it, asserting that it is their right to starve if they wish. Critics such as Maloney (2008: 4) fear that these sites promote anorexia as a normative lifestyle. The community rose to media prominence in October 2001, when the Oprah Winfrey Show hosted a special on pro-ana websites and ensuing public outrage forced service providers to shut down many pro-ana websites. Today, most sites post disclaimers warning of disturbing content and are hosted on obscure service providers with web addresses that partly conceal their pro-ana content.

This study proposes to analyse the key features of the pro-ana-nation, more precisely, to explore the language and imagery that is employed in these websites and examine the pro-ana conception of the self that they articulate. Although it is important to note that male anorexia does exist and is in fact on the rise (Langley, 2006), the vast majority of cases of anorexia involve women and I have found the pro-ana-nation to be an implicitly feminine community. Thus the ‘anorectic’ in my study will be referred to as female. My underlying research aim is to explore the ways in which the discourses produced by pro-ana users re-imagine anorexia, and the ways in which they are both constrained by and embedded in the culture of the mainstream society that they claim to reject.

The pro-ana-nation is a particularly fruitful research object, I would argue, as it draws together various central themes of sociological research. For example, in recent years, the embodied subject has become a key area of current analyses which attempt to overcome Cartesian dualism and understand human emotions in relation to

purposeful, bodily activity (Turner, 1992: 163). As Turner (1992: 168) points out, within this context, anorexia is not just an ‘extreme case’ of embodiment, but a site where the relationships between “cultural change, social structure, personal identity and body-transformations” are played out. Moreover, this process is inherently gendered and rooted in normative constructions of femininity, as I shall demonstrate. The pro-ana-nation can also be approached from the angle of computer-mediated interaction (CMC) and identity formation on the Internet which examines how the self is constructed through on-line presentation and interaction (Calhoun, 1998; Doring, 2002). Research on the formation of female identity through CMC has noted how self-representations on the Internet are at least in part tied to the notion of the self in the non-virtual sphere (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Miller & Mather, 1998). This dissertation similarly focuses on how on-line representation of the pro-ana self is fundamentally rooted in the discursive constructions and practices of the off-line world, and yet challenges these by rearticulating off-line norms within pro-ana rhetoric. My research will thus conceptualise the pro-ana self as formed through the merging of on- and off-line discourses, and show how experiences in either domain come to affect the way language and imagery are presented in both the virtual and non-virtual world.

In order to explore these research aims, my dissertation will be structured as follows: section two will examine currently influential theories of anorexia, and situate my own approach with respect to these theoretical frameworks; section three will present my methodological framework for carrying out this internet-based research; in section four, I will present my data analysis of the pro-ana websites that I have studied; and finally, in section five, I will draw out further questions regarding the pro-ana-nation as raised by my small study.

2. Theoretical perspectives on anorexia

Look in the pages of tabloids/magazines...quick to report who's been gaining weight as well as who's "too skinny". Do you smell the hypocrisy (sic)?
(Disappearing Act, 29/01/10)

Current diagnosis of anorexia requires meeting at least three of the four criteria in the DSM-IV-TR (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) scale. These include, firstly, a refusal to maintain 'normal' body weight, defined as less than 85% of 'average' weight. Secondly, an intense fear of being fat, which does not decrease with actual weight loss. Thirdly, a distorted body image, which results in the individual seeing themselves as 'too fat', despite their increasing emaciation. Fourthly, for women, loss of menstrual periods (see Kring et al., 2009: 254).

The diagnosis of anorexia is in itself strikingly uncontroversial, despite the fact that the frames for understanding the causes of this disorder are so divergent. Research on anorexia can be loosely grouped into four main perspectives, which I will refer to as the medical, psychological, cultural and feminist perspectives. The medical understanding of anorexia is primarily concerned with its biological and genetic roots (Urwin et al. 2002). It views anorectics as suffering from a pathology that needs to be corrected in order to restore a 'normal' body shape and relation to food (Luck et al., 2002; Patton et al., 1999). This framework suggests that the anorectic is particularly affected by idealisation of the slim body in the media and is incapable of separating these representations of ideal beauty from their own beliefs about their bodies (Abraham & Llewelyn-Jones, 1997: 11). It emphasises returning the patient's body weight to normal levels and correcting their 'erroneous' views of food, while paying little attention to the manifold social, cultural or psychological issues surrounding the disorder.

Medical perspectives, with their focus on ‘health’ and ‘normal’ versus ‘abnormal’ behaviour patterns have been criticised by social scientists for neglecting the socially constructed nature of such terms. As Chesler’s (1974) research into women and madness for example highlights, the notion of ‘health’ is often defined simply as behaving in a socially acceptable manner, while natural conditions of the female body like menstruation and menopause tend to be depicted in terms of ‘disease’ within Western medical discourse (McNay, 1992). Bio-medical models, it is argued, are overly concerned with treatment of the individual and her ‘faulty’ body. They assume the empirical existence of ‘healthy’ versus ‘non-healthy’ bodies, without recognising the highly gendered nature of this debate.

In contrast, psychological research has tended to see anorexic behaviour as stemming from difficulty in dealing with sudden sexualisation at puberty (Crisp, 1980; Maine, 2004); the result of the inability to control a life that feels increasingly unmanageable (Slade, 1984); or a reaction to troubled parent-child relationships (Bruch, 1970, 1974, 1980; Goodstitt, 1977; Maine, 2004; Orbach, 1986). While psychological perspectives may help explain anorexia and suggest effective methods of treatment, they shed little light on how anorexics see themselves, or on why they ‘chose’ an anorexic lifestyle.

Cultural perspectives on anorexia highlight the promotion of slim body type by current cultural norms. Recent evidence suggests that in the West, obesity has come to be viewed as a moral failure of fat people, who are stereotyped as less intelligent, lonely and greedy for affection (DeJong & Kleck, 1986). In recent years, norms regarding female beauty have emphasised increasing thinness, a trend which has intensified through the 1980s and 1990s. As Garner et al.’s (1980) study of *Playboy*

centrefolds from 1959 to 1979 points out, there was a significant decrease in body weight amongst models already over this period. Owen & Laurel-Seller (2000) studied centrefolds from the same publication but in the period from 1985 to 1997, observing that the normalised body weight for models had dropped even further. As they noted, all but one of the centrefolds in this period had a BMI (body mass index) below 20, which is considered to be low weight, and almost half had a BMI of less than 18, which is considered underweight; many meeting the weight criteria for anorexia.

However, I would caution against overplaying the ‘Westernisation’ of eating disorders since instances of anorexia have also been observed in China, South Africa, Ethiopia, Iran and Malaysia (Keel et al., 2003). Moreover, emphasis on recent trends towards female thinness obscure the importance of wider Judeo-Christian associations between food and sexuality which have been in play for thousands of years. As Stone (2005: 27) points out, it is through the temptation of food that humankind was driven from its chaste existence in Paradise. Moreover, St. Augustine’s (354-430 AD) reading of the fall of mankind as a result of sexual intercourse constitutes consumption of the ‘forbidden fruit’ as a metaphor for succumbing to carnal desire (Mottier, 2008: 19). This intertwining of food, sex and damnation resulted in early Christian authors such as Tertullian suggesting that the genitals are close to the stomach because lust and gluttony are “so united” (Tertullian, 1999 [ANF IV: 102]). Thus, fasting has long been associated with moral purification and the attempt to transcend worldly existence. As Bell’s (1985) study of fasting among medieval female saints also suggests, food restriction in the pursuit of perfection and social control played out as bodily control are thus not merely symptoms of the modern era.

Feminist perspectives have particularly emphasised the social control of women's bodies and how cultural norms of femininity play themselves out at the individual level through food restriction practices. I would argue that the notion of 'bodily control as social control' can be fruitfully conceptualised through Foucault's concept of 'bio-power', which sees the body as a particularly dense site of power relations in contemporary society (1975; 1990: 138). Feminist readings of Foucault have since argued that, while Foucault neglects the gendered nature of bio-power, female bodies are policed most intensively, reflecting disciplinary regimes of femininity (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 1988; McNay, 1992). Thus, feminist accounts of anorexia highlight the particularly high levels of eating disorders among adolescent girls, pointing to the disciplinarianisation of the female body within patriarchal society as the main cause. Authors such as Orbach (1993) argue that the anorexic body reflects the contradictory meanings of womanhood produced in patriarchal society, which require women to be both passive and active; mother as well as object of sexual desire (McKinley, 1999: 100). The anorexic body comes to represent these tensions, Orbach (1993) argues, by being simultaneously feminine – small, fragile, vulnerable, and masculine – lacking breasts and hips. Conversely, for MacSween (1993) and Bordo (1993), the anorexic body constitutes a site of protest against gendered power relations which devalue femininity. The anorexic body, they argue, is a closed fortress that refuses to be invaded by patriarchal society either through the vagina or the mouth. As MacSween points out (1993), the discursively constructed heterosexual female body is penetrated by the male and thus always *acted upon*. In a patriarchal society, the woman is thus always an object and anorexia, from this perspective, represents an attempt to actively achieve subjective personhood in resistance to patriarchal society's construction of women as passive objects.

While these four perspectives on anorexia all usefully highlight different features, they pay little attention to the subjective ways in which anorectics themselves make sense of this condition. Against this backdrop, the central aim of this essay is not to provide additional explanations of anorexia, nor to ascertain which of the four theoretical frameworks is most accurate or useful. Instead, I am interested in exploring the meanings that anorectics themselves produce with specific focus on the newly emerging phenomenon of the on-line self-declared pro-ana-nation. Examining the internal logic of pro-ana discourses, I aim to uncover the normative models and practices of the self that the pro-ana-nation promotes.

3. Methodology

You probably all know the dangers of Anorexia...I'm not going to go on about the health risks or mental issues, I'm going to show you what I know you really want
(Princess Ana, 26/01/10)

I propose to analyse both the language and the visual imagery employed in pro-ana websites using a critical discourse-analytic methodology (Fairclough, 1989; 1992; 1995; Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), in other words, a method which both explores the construction of meanings and examines their social and political consequences. As a self-declared community ('nation') that builds itself explicitly in opposition to a 'mainstream' society that attempts to 'cure' its members, the language and images contained on pro-ana websites not only construct a particular version of reality as seen by its members; they also act as a source of ideological power through which dominant socio-cultural views on 'healthy' eating habits are resisted. Critical discourse analysis will allow me to position pro-ana constructions of meaning within the wider context of contemporary society (Bryman, 2008: 508), and to uncover relations of power that have brought them into being (Reed, 2000). Imagery is particularly important to my analysis, both because, as Rose (2007: 2) points out, "the visual is central to the cultural construction of social life in contemporary Western societies" in general; but also more specifically because the websites that I analyse are saturated with images of the female form which are mobilised in the construction of pro-ana identity. I will examine not only the content of the images themselves, but also the ways in which they are used within the on-line pro-ana community, as well as embedded in wider popular culture.

Discourse-analytical research into media images has a long history (see for example Cook, 1992; Gamson et al., 1999; Hall, 1980; Messaris, 1998; Mitchell, 1986), expanding more recently into analyses of computer-mediated interaction (CMC) and

the Internet (Herring, 2003). Much of this more recent research has undertaken to dispel initially upbeat views that argued that CMC offered new opportunities for democratic, genderless communication, free from latent power relations (see Herring, 2001; Miller & Arnold, 2003). Instead, it is emphasised that language on the Internet is as socially formed and socially constituted as language in non-mediated interaction, as Fairclough (1995) points out.

For my data analysis, I selected only pro-ana sites that were freely available on the Internet and required no registration on entry. This is because I felt that deceptively joining an Internet community that its users intended to be relatively 'safe' from outside intrusion would be ethically questionable. In contrast, other pro-ana websites post disclaimers on their opening pages, some of which explicitly ask non-anorectics not to enter the community, but do not put up any actual barriers against entry. This second type of websites could be accessed with relative ease through search engines. Therefore, I decided that it would be ethically acceptable to enter these sites, as long as I acted merely as a passive viewer and did not actively participate in on-line interactions.

More precisely, I selected six English-language websites that self-define as pro-ana and have been set up by girls and young women in countries ranging from the United States to Norway. Through preliminary research I found that pro-ana sites are by no means homogenous and that they reflect a vast range of attitudes and reactions to anorexia. I observed, however, three key features which ran through all of the pro-ana websites I encountered, which my analysis will consequently centre on. These key features were, firstly, anti-recovery rhetoric, in other words the presence of advice, information and motivational devices against recovery from anorexia; secondly,

hostility to ‘outgroup’ members defined as those who are not members of the pro-ana-nation; and thirdly, pseudo-religiosity, that is, the use of pseudo-religious symbols to represent the pro-ana self. The prominence of these features differed from website to website. Therefore I constructed a sample which represented the most moderate to the most extreme views, while also including the various shades in between. Below I have listed the web addresses of the selected sites, and indicated in bold print the names with which I refer to them in the remainder of this essay.

1. http://www.freewebs.com/ana_mybestfriend/: **Ana my best friend**
2. <http://home.graffiti.net/disappearingact:graffiti.net/>: **Disappearing act**
3. <http://www.freewebs.com/free-the-bfly/>: **Free the butterfly**
4. <http://princess-ana.webs.com>: **Princess ana**
5. <http://www.pro-ana-nation.com>: **Pro ana nation** – (for differentiation, I will refer to the wider community of anorexia supporters, and not this specific website, as pro-ana-nation)
6. <http://www.freewebs.com/xxxskeletonqueenxxx/>: **Skeleton queen**

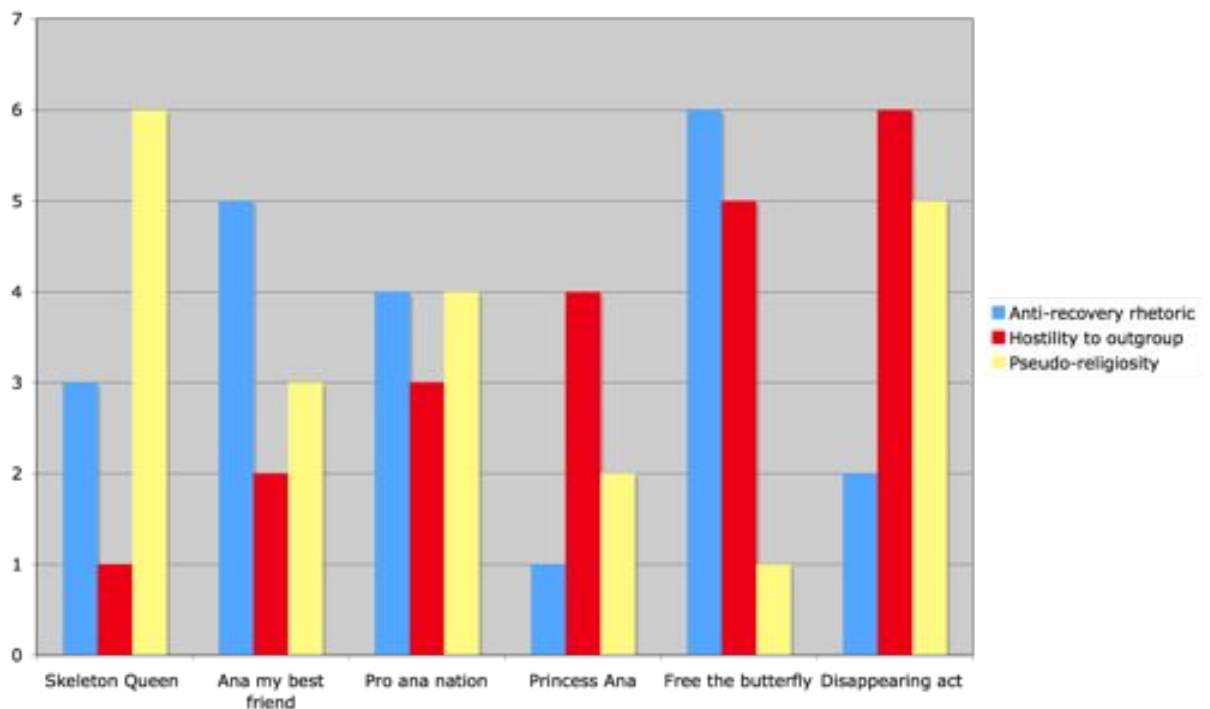
4. Analysing the pro-ana-nation

Perfection is reached, not when there is no longer anything to add, but when there is no longer anything to take away.

(Skeleton Queen 19/01/10)

The pro-ana-nation articulates itself around three main themes that I have highlighted as anti-recovery rhetoric, hostility to ‘outgroup’ members and pseudo-religiosity. Against this backdrop, my analysis will focus on the ways in which these three major themes and their subthemes are produced in the websites and the meanings that are constructed around them. I will particularly examine the ways in which pro-ana constructions of meaning are embedded within the discourses that the community is explicitly trying to challenge; and the type of pro-ana self which is ‘imagined’ through this mechanism. Figure 1 represents the extent to which each of the three pro-ana themes is present in these websites, with six representing the website displaying the highest levels of this type of activity, and one representing the lowest.

Figure 1: Presentation of Three Key Pro-Ana Themes



4.1 Anti-recovery rhetoric

What would Mary-Kate do? Starbucks, sunglasses, boho chic, fuck food!
(Free the Butterfly, 26/01/10)

4.1.a Thinspiration

‘Thinspiration’ is the term used by pro-ana websites to describe any symbolic object that encourages anorexic eating practices. These can take the form of pictures, songs, poems or films, although pictures are currently the most prevalent form. ‘Thinspo’ images can be of models and celebrities as well as of ‘real girls’, normally users of the website who anonymously upload pictures of themselves. 100% of the thinspo pictures on the six sites I have analysed (as well as on other pro-ana sites I have come across in the exploratory research phase) are images of females, almost all of them are thin.

A common feature of the celebrity thinspiration images is their high degree of sexualisation. Indeed, a substantial number of images feature women in erotic poses, as illustrated below:



Model Daria Werbowy (Ana my best friend 29/01/10)



Model Milla Jovovich (Disappearing Act 29/01/10)



Model Kate Moss (Princess Ana 29/01/10)



Model Gisele Bündchen (Ana my best friend 29/01/10)



Model Hana Soukupova (Ana my best friend 29/01/10)

Sexualisation is also common in ‘real girl’ images although these photos tend to have a much darker tone than those of celebrities. They reproduce the norms of female beauty represented in images of ‘famous’ women, echoing the aesthetics of images featured in magazines:

‘Real girl’ images (29/01/10)



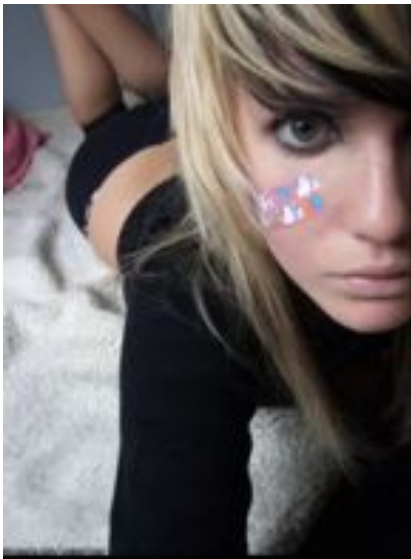
Princess Ana



Princess Ana



Ana my best friend



Ana my best friend



Princess Ana



Ana my best friend

However, 'real girl' images are also intensely sad, appearing to depict the deep emotional turmoil and loneliness of those with an eating disorder.



Princess Ana (31/03/10)



Skeleton queen (31/03/10)



Free the butterfly (1/04/10)

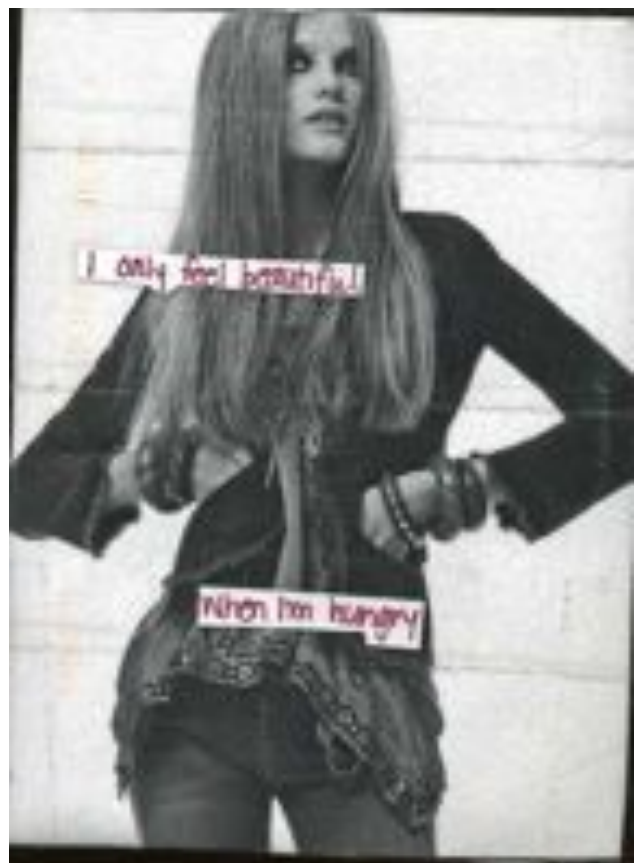


Princess Ana (31/03/10)

Through thinspiration, pro-ana followers reproduce normative models of feminine beauty which articulate the female body as thin and sexually available. Yet, by

positioning images of ‘real girls’ that clearly depict the lonely and harrowing aspects of anorexia alongside more sexualised pictures of pro-ana users and celebrities, pain and suffering comes to be aestheticised and ultimately presented as the *only* means of achieving true bodily perfection and beauty. This is, perhaps, not a counter-discourse so much as a grim parody of a popular culture which normalises female thinness to such an extent that it is deemed uncomplicated and natural. Drawing on Butler (1999), I would refer to this practice as parodic re-articulation of dominant models of female beauty. This is most explicit, I would argue, when fashion images are covered with pro-ana slogans on the websites. Here pro-ana affirms its own conception of beauty while subverting mainstream fashion images to make them fit pro-ana bodily aesthetics. Interestingly, all of the images featured here (and in fact the vast majority on pro-ana websites) are of white female bodies. Thus, pro-ana images also articulate normative symbolic representations of the sexualised body as ‘not Other’.

Examples of pro-ana imagery (Free the butterfly 31/03/10)





What exactly are you waiting for.....? You say, "Okay- TOMORROW I will diet. I SWORE." Then the next day, it repeats all over again. Well, let me tell you, babe. There's only so many "tomorrows" before you end up... Well, OBESE. But don't worry- you can save yourself RIGHT NOW. Just put down the damn fork. Stop stuffing your mouth and take a look around- all your skinny friends who wear tiny, tiny bikinis during summer and have hot boyfriends- do you think THEY eat like pigs, stuffing all the crap they see into their mouths? I don't think so. They have control. They're better than you are at controlling themselves. Do you really want to be a fat lady with jiggling rolls who stuffs her fat fingers into the doughnut bag, and ALWAYS helps herself to seconds, thirds, and fourths of every meal? Do you want to be someone else's reverse trigger? Or do you want to be their inspiration? Think about THAT before you break a diet just to try some of grandma's new recipes. Is one moment of femininess worth being a fat, hairy lady? Wouldn't you rather be able to look good in any outfit, fit into any jeans, and be able to say, "Could I try on a size, small?" or "Do they make that in a smaller size?" The choice is yours, but think about THAT before you decide to eat "fries with that milkshake" or that you want thirds with that apple pie. Remember- you can get a partner by sitting on your behind (especially if it's fat and hairy!) You don't lose weight by stuffing your face. -Ana-



Sacrifice
is giving Up
something good
for something
better



Nothing tastes as good as thin fails

Not eating light
makes your clothes too tight

Hunger pangs
are fat leaving
the body

"Every time you say
"No Thank you", You say
"Yes Please" to Sin

If you dream it you can do it

Tell yourself this is forever. I will do whatever it takes. I want to be thin more than anything

The difference between
want and need is
SELF-CONTROL

You only fail if you stop trying

Don't eat. If you want to see food,
look in the mirror at your thighs

The thinner is the winner

Nobody ever got ahead by
sitting on their behind.

"The greasy fry, it does not lie,
The truth is written on your thigh."

*This is what I want
I want you stop me in my
Don't let perfection
You think you know but
you better know what
This is the Journal of
the recent loss*

This is forever. I will do whatever it takes.
I want to be thin more than anything, even food

How do you know those who say a lifetime are
wrong? Not, most they?

If it tastes good, it's trying to kill you

This has a face all its own

A pleasure to the lips adds pounds to the hips

An imperfect body reflects an
imperfect person.

I'm not there yet, but I am closer than I was yesterday.

Food is temptation,
once you over
come temptation,
You can do
anything...

You cannot hate perfection, you can feel it

It is always better to fork over the
silliness than to have a
cheeseburger cling your intestine

I don't care if it hurts,
I want to have control,
I want a perfect body,
I want a perfect soul

perfect 100

These ‘thinspo’ images are constructed so that the depicted models seem to be proclaiming the accompanying pro-ana slogans directly to the viewer. Thus, model Kate Moss is made to declare: “I’m a teenage drama queen, I starve myself...for self-esteem” (image on page 21), while model Gisele Bündchen says “I don’t care if it hurts, I want to have control, I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul” (image on page 23). The implicit suggestion is that these famously thin and officially beautiful women are anorexic too, suffering the same feelings that pro-ana members express in images of themselves. Here, the pro-ana-nation reformulates the wider cultural model of the unproblematically slender (white) woman to fit the pro-ana cause by suggesting that all beautiful, thin women are anorexic and therefore that disordered eating is the only route to the current cultural standard of feminine perfection. At the same time, this encourages the pro-ana user to build a sense of self through interaction with these images. Since all beautiful, slim women are portrayed as sharing the same battles with eating and body image, thinspiration is both a depiction of the ultimate anorexic ideal, and a representation of the anorexic self; a self that is based on the aestheticisation of pain and linking of beauty with suffering.

While highly sexualised and glamorous staged pictures of celebrities abound in the pro-ana-nation, as we have seen, there are also many images of famous women ‘snapped’ by paparazzi as they are going about their daily lives. In these images, famous women look more ‘normal’ and thus more similar to the girls who are encouraged to emulate their slim bodies. Probably the most prevalent and admired celebrity thinspiration is Mary-Kate Olsen, a former child star whose long-term struggle with anorexia has been well-documented in the media. Olsen’s pictures dominate the pro-ana-nation.



Mary-Kate Olsen (Ana my Best Friend 01/02/10)

Everyday images of celebrities tend to be deemed more ‘helpful’ in sustaining anorexic behaviour by pro-ana users. *Disappearing act’s* thinspiration section on the model Milla Jovovich is thus introduced by the comment: “She kicks ass! I like ‘thinspiration pics’ best when they’re people that are the same height as me: 5’8” (Disappearing Act, 26/01/10). Here again, thinspiration acts as a representation of the anorexic self as the pro-ana users explicitly establish links between themselves and the thinspiration images they consume in their on-line interactions. Moreover, the more everyday pictures of a known celebrity anorectic like Olsen suggest implicitly that many ‘normal’ looking women and girls are also secretly battling with eating disorders. Thus, through thinspiration the pro-ana-nation aestheticises pain as a particularly *private* experience that its members endure even though they may look relatively ‘ordinary’ to the outside world. This is exemplified by images and quotes that emphasise the extent to which ‘non-ana’s’ are oblivious to the suffering endured by pro-ana members.



Mary-Kate Olsen (left and centre) and actress Mischa Barton (right) (Free the butterfly, 30/04/10)

No, it's not a real smile. But you would never guess
(Free the butterfly, 30/04/10)

4.1.b Tips and tricks

All of the six websites in my sample display a 'tips and tricks' section featuring advice to aid weight loss, a large proportion of which involves ways to distract yourself from food. In 'distraction' sections, anorexics are encouraged to educate themselves about their disorder:

Unsure about a piece of information regarding weight loss / metabolic rate...Do an on-line research to make sure your information is as accurate as possible.
(Princess Ana, 26/01/10)

This suggested learning process uses scores of charts and calculations related to food and metabolism as what Giddens (1991) terms 'reflexive devices', defined as the resources that people draw upon when they construct narratives of the self. Such devices are featured prominently on the websites, including BMI (an indication of bodily proportions that is used to classify people as over or underweight), BMR (base metabolic rate: the number of calories your body burns while resting), the calorie and fat content of long lists of foods, and the rate of calories burnt per hour for various

types of exercise. The individual's effectiveness at the performance of pro-ana identity is measured according to their ability to fulfill these various numerical goals, as an extreme illustration of Meadow and Weiss's (1994: 15) more general argument that for modern woman, through her constant scrutinizing of clothing sizes, scales and calories, happiness is measured in numbers.

The tips sections show that pro-ana communities have acquired extensive and in-depth expertise on food and metabolism. I would argue that this contradicts the medical perspective on anorexia, which postulates that anorectics have 'insufficient' knowledge on food matters. While anorectics arguably apply such knowledge in physically damaging ways, pro-ana sites continually re-appropriate expert knowledge both on food and on anorexia itself. As the following quotes illustrate, pro-ana members draw on expert discourses to sustain anorexic eating patterns and find new ways of losing weight:

Avoid alcohol! A shot of liquor has 100-120 calories, a glass of wine has 80 calories, a lite beer has 110-120 calories... (Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10).

Eat lots of fiber. It makes you feel full and takes fat with it out of your body (Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10).

Get Ketostrips from any local pharmacy... These will measure the amount of ketones in your urine...your body expels ketones when it is burning fat instead of food. It's important to know when you are in Ketosis because it will help you to know what diet is working for you (Ana my Best Friend, 26/01/10).

Thus, the pro-ana-nation encourages its followers to use expert knowledge in order to be the true masters of their body and its processes. This promotes a sense of independence and self-determination over the anorexic body, as reflected in affirmative ana quotes such as "My body, my life, my choice" (Free the butterfly, 26/01/10) or "It's not deprivation, it's liberation" (Free the butterfly, 26/01/10). I

would like to point out that pro-ana rhetoric in this respect ironically echoes the earlier feminist rhetoric asserting a woman's right to self-determination over her own body. However, within the pro-ana-nation, 'body ownership' is rearticulated radically differently with respect to gender power relations. Indeed, second wave feminism encouraged women to take care of their bodies for their own benefit, in explicit rejection of pressures to please others, particularly men. As Orbach reminisces (1984: 8): "we were used to rejecting male ideals of how we should look in advertisements and movies. We were ostensibly happy in our blue jeans and work shirts". In contrast, pro-ana sites value thinness not only as a personal goal, but also as a way of making women more attractive. This is implicitly conceptualised within a heterosexual frame, such that pro-ana constructs 'attractiveness' as pleasing men through quotes such as the following:

If I were thin, he would love me
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

It should be noted, however, that such explicit references to attractiveness *vis-à-vis* the opposite sex are few and that there are far more references to 'beauty' and 'perfection' in an abstract sense, without the explicit aim of attracting a male partner. And yet, references to food are frequently sexualized in pro-ana sites:

Good girls don't swallow, Better girls don't even put it in their mouth
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

On the one hand, the pro-ana-nation thus deploys the feminist rhetoric of bodily self-determination that attempts to emancipate the female form. And yet, on the other hand, it venerates sexualised images of women and subscribes to a conception of attractiveness implicitly based on projected male desire that, from a feminist

perspective, constitutes the very source of female subjugation. While second wave feminism, echoed in more recent works such as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1990), promotes female emancipation from objectifying, patriarchal culture, for pro-anas, emancipation aims to free the female body from the control of doctors who attempt to 'cure' their anorexic body. The 'enemy' is thus redefined not as the sexist culture which positions women as the objects of male desire, but rather as the expert discourses that construct anorexic 'practices of the self' (Foucault 1984) as deviant and pathological. This allows for the construction of a pro-ana self that is both active and emancipatory: through an anorexic lifestyle women can free themselves from the constraints of expert discourses and achieve true bodily self-determination. This self-determination, as we have seen, is primarily (and problematically) conceptualised as the freedom to be an anorectic, and to restrict food intake to life-threateningly low levels.

4.1.c Anorexia as mental illness

And yet, despite their generally overt hostility towards medicalising frames of anorexia, pro-ana discourses at the same time also draw on medicalising frames themselves. In particular, I have observed frequent portrayal of anorexia through disease frames, e.g. as a dangerous mental or physical illness, as illustrated by quotes such as these:

Anorexia is a terrible mental illness and will slowly ruin you life
(Princess Ana, 26/01/10)

PLEASE, if you don't have an eating disorder already, DON'T start now...
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

Anorexia Nervosa is not a lifestyle choice, but a serious mental disorder
(Pro Ana Nation, 26/01/10)

Pro-ana-nation rhetoric is therefore neither internally coherent, nor homogenous, as the co-presence of competing emancipatory and disease frames suggests. The failure to acknowledge such discursive ambiguities and contradictions has led academics such as Maloney (2008: 4) to argue that the pro-ana movement wants to be seen as 'normal', or that it portrays the anorexic lifestyle as a legitimate choice rather than a disease (Bell, 2009: 152); views which, in the light of the occasional borrowing of disease frames on these sites which I have observed, I believe to be too sweeping.

Some pro-ana segments locate the source of 'anorexia as mental illness' not in inherent 'sickness', but in disturbing early experiences. Thus, on *Free the butterfly*, individual users make explicit links between trauma in early childhood and the onset of disordered eating, in harrowing accounts of their lives.

I have been sexually abused in the past...I wanted to reverse the changes happening in my body. I didn't want hips or breasts or extra weight. I wanted to stay young, a child...
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

See my dad had anorexia...he and his wife both told me I was starting to get a stomach and I needed to get out of the house...because no one was going to want to see me in a bikini with a fat belly hanging out.
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

That waz...the first(out of many incidences)when I was raped! :*(thats the "trigger" that started all of my ed like behavior!
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

Here, psychological frames of anorexia are drawn upon by members of the pro-ana-nation as reflexive devices that help them to make sense of their personal experiences. And yet, despite the fact that many pro-anas thus frame anorexia in negative terms, it is important to emphasise that the defining characteristic of pro-anas is that they do

not *want* to be cured. Psychological frames are drawn upon in pro-ana rhetoric in ways which rearticulate the ‘sick role’ as a positive source of identity. This forms the anorectic into an ‘important’ person, worthy of expert attention due to the fact that they are ‘very ill’. The personal accounts of abuse and trauma noted above suggest that pro-ana users have often experienced great suffering in their lives, so this is not to accuse them of romanticising their misery. Rather, my argument is that suffering and mental trauma are central building blocks in the discursive construction of pro-ana identity (and, as noted before, in the pro-ana conception of beauty). Consequently, narratives of pain and despair feature prominently in pro-ana rhetoric.

4.2 Policing the pro-ana-nation

Nothing is wrong. And asking is against the rules. Crying is against the rules. Your (sic) strong, don't let them break you. They're trying to destroy you
(Free the butterfly, 30/04/10)

4.2.a Rejection of mainstream society

Pro-ana websites tend to be openly hostile to site visitors who they deem 'outgroup members' – those who are not entitled to membership of the pro-ana-nation since they are not an anorectic. Interestingly, the use of the term 'nation' echoes the separatist strategy of groups such as the 'Lesbian nation' in the 1970s and 1980s (Mottier, 2008: 65-66). The use of nation-rhetoric thus conveys the discursive construction of political boundaries between a subversive group and the mainstream society that they reject. More specifically, the pro-ana *moral* identity is built in opposition to a society whose relationship to food is portrayed as excessive and sinful. Current high rates of obesity in the UK, US and other Western nations are thus often disapprovingly quoted to legitimize the pro-ana-nation.

I do eat normally: only what is needful for survival. I can't help it that we live in a piggish society where gluttony is the norm, and everyone else is constantly stuffing themselves.
(Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10).

If you eat then you'll look like those disgusting, fat, ghetto and trailer-trash hookers on Jerry Springer.
(Ana My Best Friend, 26/01/10).

Overeating or being overweight is thus discursively constructed as a moral failure of the individual, reflecting wider Western cultural attitudes towards fat people as morally flawed failures in life (DeJong & Kleck, 1986). At the same time, and somewhat ironically given their part-rejection of medicalising frames of anorexia, the pro-ana-nation mobilizes a medical frame of overeating, suggesting that being 'fat'

will not only make you unhappy and ugly, but will damage your health as well, as illustrated in various ‘reasons to be thin’ sections:

Too many people in the world are obese
People who eat are selfish and unrealistic
(Ana my best friend, 26/01/10)

They say I could die if I get to thin and I tell them I Could die getting to (sic) fat also
(Skeleton queen, 26/01/10)

You have a choice to make, do you want to be "Normal" and overweight like the rest of the world, Or do you want to be unique and be that girl every overweight person wants to be?
(Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10)

Pro-ana sites thus routinely reproduce the medical argument that being overweight is a serious danger to general health. However, doctors and pro-anas do not tend to share the same view of what being overweight actually means. When medical professionals talk of being unhealthily overweight, they refer generally to obesity, defined as having a BMI of over 30. Pro-anas, in contrast, define as fat any weight above their personal goal of emaciation. The following quote is a good example of the pro-ana conception of what being overweight actually means:

Make up cannot hide obesity
Starvation can hide fat
Choose control over your body
Or look at obesity in the mirror forever
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

Not only does the pro-ana-nation depict (any) ‘fat’ as a loose synonym of ‘obesity’; it also suggests that not eating is the only way to avoid getting fat. Medical frames on obesity and healthy eating are thus discursively rearticulated to promote the core pro-ana goal of extreme thinness resulting from self-starvation, in a way which would horrify most health professionals. For example, ‘tips and tricks’ sections regularly

include information on how to deceive potentially worried loved ones by strategically mobilising a discourse of health and medicine:

Invent an affliction that will be both invisible and "chronic"...and would make a good excuse for not eating...
(Ana my best friend, 26/01/10)

Gain a new perspective on animal rights, or organic foods, or anything else that would limit your intake
...People will think you are merely very health conscious
(Ana my best friend, 26/01/10)

Tell people you're on a diet, you became a vegetarian, your doctor has you eating only certain things, whatever. Often people will be very helpful in keeping you from eating if they think there's a socially acceptable reason for it.
(Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10)

'Healthy eating' frames are thus subverted to fit the pro-ana cause as also evidenced by this usage of a food pyramid on *Ana my best friend* (29/01/10):



The pro-ana-nation exhibits high levels of hostility towards expert discourses. More specifically, references to doctors suggest that they be viewed with suspicion:

My name, or as I am called by so-called "doctors" is Anorexia...but you may call me Ana
(Free the Butterfly, 26/01/10).

By, on the one hand, drawing on medical frames on healthy eating and obesity, while, on the other hand, rejecting the ‘interference’ of doctors, health professionals or expert discourses on anorexia in their own lives, pro-ana discourse constructs anorexia as a ‘technique of the self’ (Foucault, 1984) – an aesthetic and ascetic exercise in shaping and caring for the body. Pro-ana thus becomes a practice of self-formation in which members are encouraged to build a sense of embodied subjectivity based on their ability to continue starvation, adopting the pro-ana lifestyle as a body project, I would argue. This echoes wider mainstream discourses on caring for the corporeal form that, as Maine (2004: xii) highlights, suggest that “the body is the project and the project is endless”.

4.2.b Membership codes

However, the pro-ana-nation is not open to anyone. One of the key ways in which the boundaries of the nation are policed is through the use of particular terminology and codes. As Bloch (1989) has pointed out, the formalisation of language restricts what can be said in a given domain and also excludes those not versed in these codes. Interestingly, as research into gay and lesbian slang suggests, the use of coded language seems to be a more general feature of groups that see themselves as stigmatised by wider society (Beaver, 1981; Chesebro, 1981; Kulick, 2000; Ringer, 1994). For example, homosexuals have in recent history used the code ‘friends of Dorothy’ (drawing on the film *The Wizard of Oz*) to refer to and potentially recognise other gay men.

The pro-ana-nation assumes shared knowledge of terms such as ana (anorexia), mia (bulimia), ED (eating disorder), thinspo (thinspiration), or pro-ana itself. Those not

versed in the codified terms of pro-ana would find it difficult to decipher a typical statement from the webmistress of *Free the butterfly* such as this:

ED's are not glamorous. ED's are not fun. Even though I'm pro-ana, doesn't mean this is a fabulous life...
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10).

Referring to eating disorders as “ED’s” is an act of recodification by the pro-ana-nation that draws on medicalised terminology of anorexia. At the same, this re-coding allows pro-ana members to refer to themselves and other pro-anas as members of a specific group. Thus, to refer to anorexia as an ‘ED’ rather than an ‘eating disorder’ implicitly suggests an individual’s membership of pro-ana and belief in pro-ana ‘values’. Similarly, on *Skeleton queen* the webmistress reveals her weight:

HW: 260 pounds
CW: 205 pounds
LW: 166 pounds
GW: 120 pounds
(Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10)

For an accomplished user, it is obvious that this shorthand refers to ‘highest weight’, ‘current weight’, ‘lowest weight’ and ‘goal weight’. Membership of the pro-ana-nation thus requires mastery of the codes used to describe pro-ana practices of the self regarding food intake, while knowledge of this code enables the conferring of group membership.

Codified language is not the only method used to police pro-ana group membership. Most sites now also carry disclaimers absolving the site creators of any responsibility for harm caused to users:

Do not enter this site if you don't have an eating disorder. You enter this at your own risk. I am not responsible for any decisions you make based on this site's content.
(Disappearing Act, 26/01/10)

This may be largely due to the recent media backlash against the pro-ana-nation and the risk of sites being shut down due to their distressing content. At the same time, as *Disappearing Act's* disclaimer makes clear, individuals who do not suffer from eating disorders are not welcome in the community. The pro-ana-nation affirms itself in territorial separation from the wider Internet community, warning that individuals who are merely browsing will not be tolerated. The next page of the website reads as follows:

If you're here you should have an ED, no exceptions...If you think having an eating disorder is just about losing weight, then EDUCATE YOURSELF before you sound like a moron...
(Disappearing Act, 26/01/10)

As this passage suggests, the claim that the pro-ana community's central goal is to try to convert 'healthy' girls to the anorexic way of life, as researchers such as Dias (2003), Doward and Reilly (2003) and Jackson and Elliott (2004) have argued, is flawed (or perhaps outdated through recent developments). Rather, the pro-ana-nation nowadays tends to present itself as a community whose borders are closed.

4.3 Pseudo-religiosity

I am your butter and your bread. The voice that's in your head. I'll take you in and fill you up with a lack of being fed –Ana
(Princess Ana 19/01/10)

The pro-ana-nation constructs its central aim of thinness as a mission of great moral and practical superiority to the everyday dieting behaviour of much of the Western world. Many of the affirmative pro-ana statements thus present the pro-ana lifestyle as a struggle that can be undertaken only by a dedicated few:

When you coast without eating ... you begin to scoff at those fools who believe they must eat to live.
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10).

Think higher of yourself, your (sic) too good to put that in your body.
Giving in to food shows weakness, be strong and you will be better than everyone else.
(Skeleton queen, 26/01/10).

The depiction of pro-anas as the 'chosen few' individuals capable of carrying out this punishing and ultimately life-threatening lifestyle involves both moral and religious undertones, echoing wider cultural, especially Christian, associations between gluttony and sin, physical self-denial and moral purity, I would argue.

Anorexia is not a disease. Anorexia is not a game. Anorexia is a skill, perfected only by a few. The chosen, the pure, the flawless.
(Skeleton queen, 26/01/10)

Interestingly, the non-white self and body, which is generally invisible within Christian discourse, is also largely absent from pro-ana as has been observed in celebrity thinspiration images.

Four out of the six websites that I have analysed (*Ana my best friend*, *Free the butterfly*, *Princess ana* and *Skeleton queen*) in fact go much further than drawing on

implicitly religious reflexive devices, presenting pro-ana itself as a pseudo-religion. Drawing particularly on Judeo-Christian elements, they thus include features such as an 'Ana creed', 'Ana psalm' and 'Ana/Thin commandments' which re-appear in several of the sites.

Ana Creed

I believe in Control, the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world.
I believe that I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on this planet, and
that I am totally unworthy of anyone's time and attention.
I believe that other people who tell me differently must be idiots. If they could see how I really am,
then they would hate me almost as much as I do.
I believe in oughts, musts and shoulds as unbreakable laws to determine my daily behaviour.
I believe in perfection and strive to attain it.
I believe in salvation through trying just a bit harder than I did yesterday.
I believe in calorie counters as the inspired word of god, and memorise them accordingly.
I believe in bathroom scales as an indicator of my daily successes and failures
I believe in hell, because I sometimes think that I'm living in it.
I believe in a wholly black and white world, the losing of weight, recrimination for sins, the abnegation
of the body and a life ever fasting
(Ana my best friend, 26/01/10)

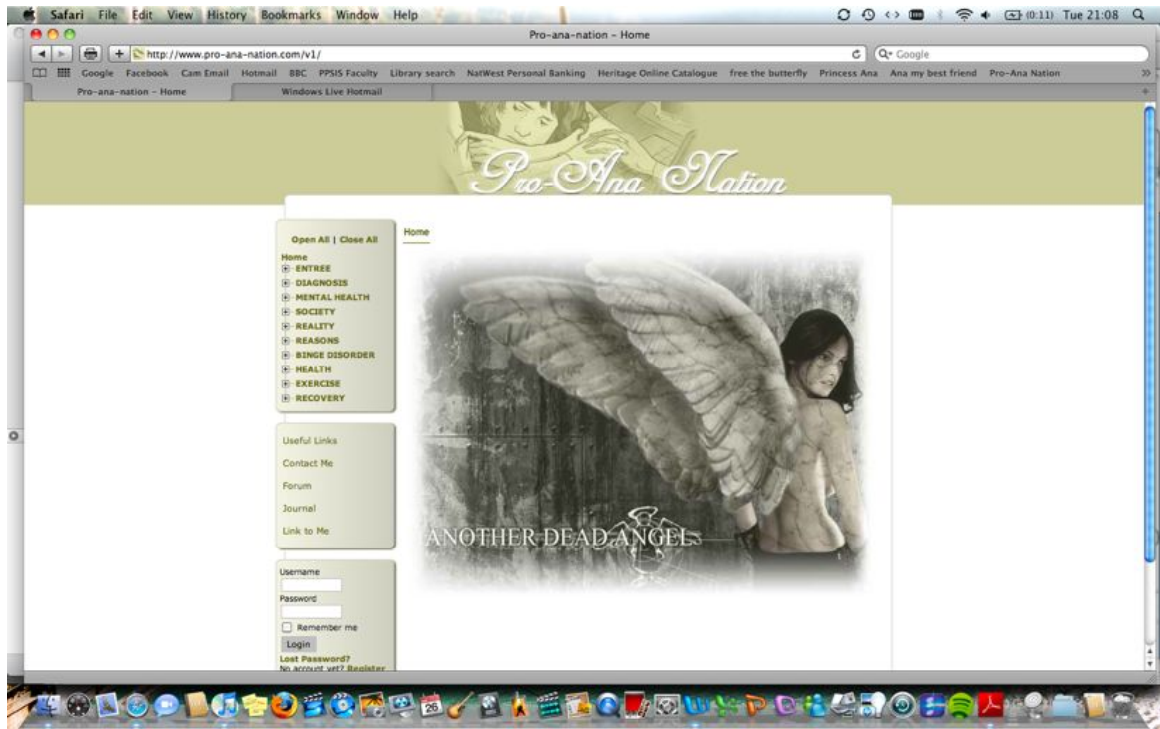
Ana Psalm

Strict is my diet. I must not want. It maketh me lie down at night hungry. It leadeth me past the confectioners. It trieth my willpower. It leadeth me in the paths of alteration for my body's sake. Yea, though I walk through the aisles of the pastry department, I will buy no sweet rolls for they are fattening. The cakes and the pies, they tempt me. Before me is a table set with green beans and lettuce. I filleth my stomach with liquids. My day's quota runneth over. Surely calorie and weight charts will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the fear of the scales forever.
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

Thin Commandments

1. If you aren't thin you aren't attractive.
 2. Being thin is more important than being healthy.
 3. You must buy clothes, cut your hair, starve yourself, do anything to make yourself look thinner.
 4. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.
 5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.
 6. Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.
 7. What the scale says is the most important thing.
 8. Losing weight is good/ gaining weight is bad.
 9. You can never be too thin.
 10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.
- (Free the Butterfly, 26/01/10)

This depiction of pro-ana in terms of a religious calling is also echoed in many visual images featured on these sites. Even *Pro ana nation*, which generally displays the lowest levels of pseudo-religiosity, uses angel imagery to refer to the pro-ana self:



Homepage (Pro ana nation 26/01/10)

The above screenshot refers to the users of the site as 'angels'. The image is meant as a collective memorial to the latest pro-ana follower who died as a result of her unwavering commitment to self-starvation. Equally, a similar image (featured below) is accompanied by an affirmative ana slogan that confers pro-ana group membership and encourages solidarity amongst its followers.



(Free the butterfly 26/01/10)

Similarly, the image below uses angelic, flying imagery to represent Mary-Kate Olsen, a worshipped celebrity in the pro-ana-nation as we have seen earlier.



(Ana my best friend 26/01/10)

Extensive scholarly research has been devoted to the wider cultural links between fasting and holiness (Banks, 1992; Bynum, 1987: 33; Hill, 1971; Lupton, 1996; Spencer, 1994: 118; Stone, 2005). Authors such as Bell (1985), Nash (2006) and Reineke (1990) have, for example, drawn parallels between the ascetic practices of female medieval saints and the experience of the anorectic in the 21st century. Against this backdrop, it is certainly striking that on the sites I have analysed, strong linkages between starvation, asceticism and spiritual purification could be observed:

Perfection is the resistance to temptation
(Free the butterfly, 26/01/10)

Empty is pure, starving is the cure.
Feed the soul; let the body fast
(Skeleton queen, 26/01/10)

God gave us control. Some of us know how to use it, others don't..
(Princess Ana, 26/01/10)

However, anorexia (and especially the pro-ana-nation) today should be located in relation to contemporary society and not reduced to a simple extension of a long history of female asceticism, I would argue (see also Brumberg, 1988). As Maloney (2008: 9) points out, the wealth of religious symbolism on pro-ana websites allows the community to “tap into the functional force of religion in providing emotional energy and social ties.” At the same time, this serves as a means of re-affirming pro-ana self-identity as based on differentiation from the flawed morals and practices of the perceived ‘outside’, ‘non-virtual’, ‘non pro-ana’ world. These attempts to differentiate pro-ana invariably rely on rearticulating the mainstream discourses which they are trying to oppose, as we have seen. This is also true for the mobilisation of religious frames. Thus, in the examples given above, the pro-ana-nation draws on the culturally powerful discourse of asceticism, which, as Turner notes (1992: 165), has become increasingly secularised in contemporary Western society. However, pro-ana explicitly positions its ascetic practices and reflexive devices within a rhetoric of religious calling. In this way, I would argue, they seem to challenge secularising mainstream culture and locate themselves in a more spiritual opposite position to it.

While not all of the sites in my sample contain *both* Judeo-Christian incantations *and* angel/flying imagery, they do all anthropomorphise anorexia into the female goddess ‘Ana’. References to ‘Ana’ appear in pro-ana poetry, writings, quotes and affirmations and, most explicitly, in a ‘letter from Ana’ written to her followers. In this letter (anonymously written since no site claims to have written it or suggests

where it originally came from), ‘Ana’ sets out her high expectations for her followers, telling them that they are ugly, disgusting and in need of the pro-ana lifestyle to purify them. The implicit suggestion of the letter is that ‘Ana’ is not human but a bodiless deity who is with her followers at all times and constantly scrutinises their behaviour:

I am there when you figure out the plan for the day...I am the one figuring this out, because by now my thoughts and your thoughts are blurred together as one. I follow you throughout the day...
(Skeleton Queen, 26/01/10)

One of the six sites which constitute my sample, as well as some of the other pro-ana websites I encountered during my research, include information on the ritual to summon the goddess ‘Anamadim’ who is presented as a more ritualised version of ‘Ana’. The rite involves incantations and offerings of food and diet pills along with a contract not to eat, signed in the participant’s blood (Free the Butterfly, 26/01/10). During this ritual, ‘Anamadim’ is summoned by the individual who seeks guidance or support in their continuing battle with food.

Anamadim speaks sparingly, but directly; quietly, yet powerfully. She may have something to say to you. You may “hear” her speak, “sense” her voice as a train of thought running parallel to your thoughts or woven within them.
(Free the Butterfly, 26/01/10)

Here, ‘Ana’ inhabits the mind of the anorectic as a spiritual force, giving her guidance and encouraging her continued refusal of food. Through this process, the pro-ana nation further declares itself morally superior to the ‘ordinary’ dieting community, since the goddess ‘Ana’ speaks *only* to them. The anorexic struggle is thus constructed as far more than just a diet; it is an ascetic mission and reflexive device that sees the individual form her identity both through a denial of food and an attempt at similarity and communication with Ana.

5. Concluding comments

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, the pro-ana-nation draws on many of the discourses that surround anorexia and reconstructs or subverts them to fit pro-ana rhetoric. More specifically, they draw on discourses of normative female beauty based on the thin, sexually available and implicitly white female, but re-present this image of beauty through the aestheticisation of pain and despair. The celebrity thinspiration images on pro-ana – where a smiling façade is thought to conceal a depth of pain below – therefore comes to stand as a representation of the pro-ana self. Pro-ana also draws on feminist discourses of ‘body ownership’, but re-packages ‘our bodies, ourselves’ as ‘my body, my right to starve’. They adopt expert discourses on food, healthy eating and mental illness, reformulating these as reasons to be ‘ana’. And yet, health frames are rearticulated such that the ‘interference’ of medical professionals is rejected. Anorexia is thus constructed as an active and emancipatory technique of the self that fights against the disciplinary frames on anorexia produced by mainstream society. As we have seen, the cultural repertoires of religious imagery as well as asceticism are drawn on to inscribe the pro-ana experience with moral superiority over secular dieting practices, presenting the pro-ana self as built through interaction with the bodiless deity ‘Ana’. These constructions of meaning differentiate the pro-ana ‘lifestyle’ from normalised secular dieting practices. The process of adopting, challenging and rearticulating normative discourses encourages members to construct an embodied subjectivity based fundamentally on their pro-ana membership.

My critical discourse analysis has shown that the language and imagery of the pro-ana-nation construct a version of reality that acts as a source of ideological power for its followers and encourages them to resist discourses that attempt to ‘cure’ or condemn their eating practices. However, there are a number of limitations to this

small study that point to avenues for future research. Due to my decision not to interact with members of the websites for ethical considerations, I was unable to examine the ways in which pro-ana is consumed by its members other than by observing their on-line interactions. Internet users are of course not simply passive consumers of the information they receive, so it would be impossible, and inadvisable, to draw sweeping conclusions from my data as to how individual anorectics respond to pro-ana rhetoric. Moreover, it is eminently possible that on-line users may not be 'real' anorectics but either faking their disorder or using the websites for research purposes as I have done myself. The issue of the reception of pro-ana discourse by its followers would therefore need to be explored in greater depth through different methodologies, in particular through interviewing pro-ana users. Interestingly, the message boards and chat rooms on these websites suggest that dissenting opinions are only rarely expressed, while I also observed that comments deemed 'offensive', for example, suggesting that anorectics are 'crazy', are regularly deleted from the forum along with the members who post them. The boundaries of the pro-ana-nation are thus actively policed, ensuring relative homogeneity of views within the sites.

As I have argued, the pro-ana-nation can be viewed as a counter-culture that subverts and rearticulates normative discourses to fit their troubling and ultimately fatal cause. However, the pro-ana challenge to mainstream Western culture is both limited and internally inconsistent. The pro-ana-nation does not fundamentally challenge mainstream normative discourses which construct female beauty as white, sexually available and thin. Rather, this community dangerously radicalises mainstream society's idealisation of slimness, promoting emaciation as the feminine ideal. Thus, I would argue that while pro-ana explicitly rejects many aspects of Western culture, its

discursive constructions are, ultimately, deeply embedded in mainstream society. This is reflected in the aesthetic contents of these sites: many of the pro-ana quotes that cover these websites are taken from songs by popular artists documenting their own struggles with eating disorders or body image. Equally, all celebrity thinspiration images are lifted from the Internet or magazines that are consumed on a daily basis by the 'non-ana' public. Thus, while pro-ana explicitly rejects mainstream society, the nation is, at the same time, inextricably tied to it. Against this backdrop, I would caution against shrugging off the pro-ana-nation as merely a community of deranged teenage girls. The pro-ana-nation is a grim parodic rearticulation of normative femininity formed out of both the culture that it rejects and the discourses it subverts. Thus, contemporary Western culture's dangerous relationship with the body is, I would argue, laid out in the pages of pro-ana where some of the most extreme symbolic examples of our society's obsession with body image are collected and magnified.

Appendix: Screenshots of Sample Websites

Ana my best friend



Ana's Angel
www.anasangel.com

NAVIGATION
Home
Real Thoughts
Ana Stuff
Tips And Tricks
Models
Lorely MK
Beauty Models
Quotes
Celebs
Cute pics
Icons
The Links

"Anorexia may be a harmful activity. I do not encourage this activity. Should you feel that you have a problem, feel unhealthy, or need help, please talk to someone that can help you through this!"

I claim no responsibility whatsoever for any outcomes after looking at this site. You enter this site knowing full well that it is pro ana and mia. I strongly recommend that if you are either not ana or mia or have any other eating disorder that you do not enter. The same goes if you are recovering from an eating disorder.

That said, anas and mias should find this site very useful and supportive.

Enjoy!

Get this from Camdean Butterfly

Are you looking for ways to "become" anorexic or bulimic? Before you continue on this road, and consider "getting" an ed, ask yourself some questions:

- Do you want to wake up every day for the rest of your life hating yourself and wishing that you didn't exist?
- Do you want to cry, every time you step on the scale, because it's never enough, even when you're losing?
- Do you want to stand in front of a mirror, vainly trying to see what other people see, and not see it, and cry, because you don't know what's happened to you anymore?
- Do you want to feel like you're killing yourself, but feel powerless to stop it?
- Do you want to reach the point where you know you're killing yourself, and don't care anymore?
- Do you want to throw up blood, stare at it, and keep throwing up, even though blood is a bad sign, because you simply don't care anymore?
- Do you want to sit on the toilet in the billions of your home, because you know you didn't eat anything in, even though all you're tested for the rest of hell here is stomach pain?

Disappearing Act



PLEASE READ THE FOLLOWING BEFORE ENTERING:

Do not enter this site if you don't have an eating disorder. You enter this at your own risk. I am not responsible for any decisions you make based on the site's content. Click the pic to enter...



Free the butterfly

~ free the butterfly within ~

Home

Home
Links
Business
Discussion
More Discussion
Exam Wares Discussion
Exam EHLK exam photos
The weight loss journey
Exercise
Life with ED
Medical Issues
Treat Ana (Research)
Ana Pills
Pics
Supportive, Builders
Recovery
Relapse
Guestbook

Anorexia may be a harmful activity. We do not encourage this activity. Should you feel that you have a problem with unhealthy, or need help, please talk to someone that can help you through this.

WARNING: THIS IS A PRO-ANA SITE. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, LEAVE.

Stay Strong ♥

IF YOU WISH TO USE THINGS OFF MY SITE, CONTACT ME 1ST! AND ALWAYS PUT THAT YOU GOT IT FROM HERE.

Princess Ana

Princess Ana
Nobody said it would be easy, but they promised it would be worth it.

Home What is an ED? The Worship of Ana Quotes Distractions Exercise BMI Thinspo
Pics Complete the form Guestbook Blog

Welcome to Princess Ana!
A website, community and forum for people that have Ana/Mia.

Welcome to my site. This is a pro-anorexia site, if you are currently in recovery or are looking to get an eating disorder then please leave now. Anorexia is a terrible mental illness and will slowly ruin you life. Respect people on this site, offensive comments are not welcome and you will be reported to the website owner. This site is to support those who already have an ED and see it as something they need rather than something they want rid of. Hope you enjoy your stay. 'Life wouldn't be worth it if you didn't do exactly what you want to do'. Love Char

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Pro Ana Nation



Skeleton Queen



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