Collaborative Starvation and the Invisible Podium: 
Using Twitter as a “How To” Guide to Spread Eating Disorders

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“Who wants to join the fast?” asks @Annaforlife55 on Twitter. This very notion of “joining” indicates the collaborative nature of the eating disorder conversation on this popular social networking site. Essentially acting as a support group, these anonymous users enable, assist, encourage, and critique each other’s successes and failures, but perhaps not in the way most people may believe. Rather than commiserating with each other about their struggles in recovery from these deadly diseases, many appear to be using the appeal of anonymity in social media platforms to encourage each other to become better at living a life of anorexia or bulimia. Where can I go to learn to become a “true” anorexic? How can I hide my binging and purging from my friends and family? How can I get approval and encouragement for not eating today? Where can I post my “fat” pictures to get more reinforcement and assurance that my anorexic lifestyle will eventually lead me to that perfect body I see in my head? Twitter. And with 20 million American
women and 10 million American men suffering from some form of clinically significant eating disorder at some time in their lives, such a readily available how-to online guide can have deadly consequences (Wade, Keski-Rahkonen, & Hudson, 2011). Indeed, a meta-analysis of 50 years of research on anorexia nervosa demonstrated the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric disorder (Arcelus, Mitchell, Wales & Nielsen, 2011).

Using Social Media to Build a Community

Limiting its users to 140 characters, the Twitter microblogging platform allows very few words per posting, but these words can be quite powerful. Currently hosting over 243 million worldwide users per month, Twitter enables people to create anonymous profiles if they choose, and freely interact with other users around the globe (Smith, 2014). In 2011, partnering with Photobucket allowed the social media platform to add capability for all users to attach images/photos to tweets, rather than limiting them to text (Parr, 2011). And now images can be as influential, or perhaps even more so, as the words in a tweet.

Searching through such images and text has become a new ritual of entertainment. Indeed, Godly (2012) reported 88% of participants in his survey considered visiting and posting on social media networking sites a form of entertainment. Applying uses and gratifications typologies to the Twitter platform, research has demonstrated that in addition to searching for information, a means of escapism, and an opportunity for socialization, users also report “entertainment” as a motivation for use of social media sites (Cheung & Lee, 2009; James, Wotring, & Forrest, 1995; Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Mendes & Tan, 2009; Papacharissi, 2002). In Liu, Cheung, and Lee’s (2010) research on the uses and gratifications of Twitter specifically, participants reported using the site for self-documentation, information sharing, social interaction, and entertainment. They term this type of use “process gratification” whereby users
receive gratification more from being involved in the process of behavior, rather than from message content itself (p. 933).

In addition to providing entertainment, recent scholars have established that Twitter essentially functions as a community (Boyd, Golder, & Lotan, 2010; Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011; Honeycutt & Herring, 2009). Gruzd et al. (2011) explained that whereas Twitter was not originally imagined as a tool to support online community development, it evolved from a broadcasting platform for diffusing information into a site for collaboration and conversation. What is unique about this platform, however, is that unlike other social media, “Twitter is asymmetric: If you follow us, we do not have to follow you… this means that these networks of followers of a person and those whom a person is following… have less dependence on in-person contact or local proximity” (p.1296). Perhaps some users know each other personally or live in the same town, but it is not a requirement.

As proximity of its users is not a necessity, some refer to Twitter and its social media brethren as “Imagined Communities” (Anderson, 1983). Anderson (1983) coined the term in reference to physical societies attempting to forge a new social identity by emphasizing common traits, but it is his notion that the affiliates of such societies will never meet their fellow members in person yet “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” that makes this definition particularly suited to social media (p. 6). Specifically in reference to Twitter, Gruzd et al. (2011) also noted, “users could never know everyone on Twitter, but they are certainly aware of other users’ presence, especially in their ‘neighborhood’ of sources” (p. 1298). And combined with Anderson’s (1983) argument that a key element of community formation is a common language, the mere fact that groups on Twitter have created “Twitterspeak,” or a “set of linguistic conventions constructed by Twitter participants” (Gruzd et al., 2011, p. 1301), typically in the
form of hashtags, lends further support for the application of this definition of community to Twitter.

Still others refer to this notion of an online community as a “Virtual Settlement” (Jones, 1997) and focus on what constitutes a “sense of community” (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Jones’ (1997) “virtual settlement” required four conditions: interactivity, more than two communicators, a common or public place where members can meet or interact, and sustained membership over time. Twitter appears to meet all four conditions, but, as Gruzd et al. (2011) noted, this does not guarantee that people feel as if they actually belong to a community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argued people only felt a true sense of community if they not only believe they belonged to the community, but also that they can make a difference to the community, provide support and are supported by others in the community, and share history and similar experiences with others in the community (i.e., an emotional connection). As Haesly (2005) noted, McMillan and Chavis (1986) focused on both “social and psychological mechanisms that serve to link individuals to their community – even if that community is an imagined community” (p. 9). This added psychological dimension to “community” is particularly well suited to the present analysis.

Using the Internet to Promote Eating Disorders

Online communities are a great place to turn for support; unfortunately, many times users are supporting each other’s unhealthy habits. Long before the advent of Twitter, a variety of “pro-eating disorder” websites began to proliferate on the Internet. As Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, and Peebles (2010) explained, “unlike web sites that encourage healthy weights, moderate exercise, and recognized nutrition and diets, many pro-eating disorder sites recommend that their users try intense practices, such as vomiting and fasting, with an emphasis on achieving extremely thin or skeletal appearances” (p. 1526). Many of these 500+ websites are “pro-ana”
(i.e., sites that take a positive/encouraging attitude toward anorexia-nervosa) or “pro-mia” (i.e., pro-bulimia) and “explicitly encourage extreme thinness and advocate [eating disorders] as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness” (Borzekowski et al., 2010, p. 537).

With names like Proana Perfection and Underground Grotto, most sites have similar appearances (Chesley, Alberts, Klein, & Kreipe, 2003; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006). Typical features on these sites include pictures of both weight extremes (i.e., “bone pics” of emaciated women as well as morbidly obese women), a “tips and tricks” section with suggestions for engaging in eating disorders and how to hide it from others (e.g., “Purge in the shower! It covers up the sound, smell, & washes out the evidence”), pages of inspirational quotes, a forum page to connect with others, and some version of the “Ana Creed” and the “Thin Commandments” (Borzekowski et al., 2010) (see Figure 1). Young girls and women commonly develop such websites, and the typical users are females between ages 13 and 25 (Fox, Ward, & O’Rourke, 2005; Jackson & Elliott, 2004; Uдович, 2002). As Bardone-Cone and Kass (2007) explained, these websites are viewed as safe havens where the eating disordered can connect with empathic others without judgment.

Whitehead (2010) argued that “Pro-ED” (i.e., pro-eating disorder) website members are able to continually maintain self-destructive, “safe” eating-disordered lifestyles, even amid widespread disapproval of their activities, by focusing on their collective identity. As she noted, typical collective identity mobilization seeks to produce liberation for its members (i.e., LGBT groups, self-help groups, etc.), but in the case of Pro-ED websites, we see the “destructive yet significant possibilities that can exist in community contexts” (p. 599). Rather than relying on models of collective behavior that stress the idea that movement participants make active, rational choices with respect to their group’s strategic actions, Whitehead (2010) argued that in
choosing tactics that reflect “who they are” (e.g., posting thinspiration text and images), the use of collective identity as a movement strategy by members of the Pro-ED community reflects 

*expressive* motivations rather than rational calculations.

Whereas her argument was that the cultural impetus behind these expressive motivations is a gender-driven collective identity organization (i.e., that gender is the lens through which Pro-ED women cultivate a collective identity), the authors believe this principle can be more widely applied. Returning to McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) “sense of community,” if members believe they belong to an exclusive club of sorts, and that through their online activity they can make others into “real anas,” provide tips and tricks (as unhealthy as they may be), and share a collective history and similar experiences, they are engaging in collective identity mobilization. And as they mobilize, they recruit others to join their cause.

**Eating Disorders as a Contagious Disease**

With such a strong community affiliation and collective identity, the authors argue that eating disorders can be easily infectious or communicable, particularly in the digital age. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) defined “communicable disease” thusly: “An illness caused by an infectious agent or its toxins that occurs through the direct or indirect transmission of the infectious agent or its products from an infected individual or via an animal, vector or the inanimate environment to a susceptible animal or human host” (n.p.). We are not arguing that the spread of eating disorders is akin to the spread of a disease such as tuberculosis per se, but the very notion of “indirect transmission of the infectious agent” speaks directly to the power of media platforms to affect behavior change.

 Cultivation theory helps to illustrate this process of “contagion.” According to Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli (1994), the consumption of entertainment and media messages
can change people’s attitudes and, in turn, their behavior. This cultivation process is gradual and cumulative, indicating that the longer one spends with media messages the more powerful the effect. This theory is typically applied to entertainment media such as television or film, as these platforms tend to present a skewed view of social reality. For example, a person who habitually watches entertainment television will gradually become cultivated into the “television view” of social reality and, when asked, will give “television answers” to questions about actual reality.

As Gerbner et al. (1994) explained, “The repetitive ‘lessons’ we learn from television, beginning in infancy, are likely to become the basis for a broader world view, making television a significant source of general values, ideologies, and perspectives as well as specific assumptions, beliefs, and images” (p. 17). We believe this same idea can be applied to online media platforms.

When one is constantly bombarded by repeated exposure to the same types of media messages, regardless of platform, the cultivation of these messages results in attitude change. In the case of eating disorders, the constant exposure to thin-ideal messages featuring unhealthy or unattainable female bodies, in conjunction with regular participation online with users who are promoting an eating-disordered lifestyle, can have devastating consequences (Harrison & Hefner, 2011).

And there is evidence that self-reported body dissatisfaction and eating disorders can proliferate after the introduction of media, particularly for young girls. Groesz, Levine, and Murnen’s (2002) meta-analysis of 25 experiments testing the effects of exposure to ideal-body media imagery on various indices of body image found a modest but significant drop in body satisfaction, and the effect size was greater for those under age 19. And Hargreaves and Tiggemann (2004) found that girls 13-15 who viewed 20 television commercials containing “idealized images” reported significant body dissatisfaction, but the same was not true for boys.
However, Agliata and Tantleff-Dunn (2004) found that men aged 17-27 reported increases in depression and muscle dissatisfaction after viewing ads featuring an idealized male body. More telling, however, is research by Harrison (2001) that found adolescents who viewed televised portrayals of thinness being rewarded felt dejected, and those who viewed a portrayal of fatness felt agitated. Harrison (2001) argued that dejection and agitation are antecedents to eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia; continued exposure to thin-ideal media messages, therefore, could lead to bulimic and anorexic patterns of eating.

And even print media is a culprit. Stice, Spangler, and Agras’ (2001) experiment determined that bulimic symptoms increased for girls with low peer/parent support who received a subscription to Seventeen Magazine for 15 months. Harrison, Taylor, and Marske (2006) found that same-sex ideal-body pictures altered the way college students ate in from of same-sex peers. Stice, Shupak-Neuberg, Shaw, and Stein (1994) demonstrated that media exposure predicts disordered eating via a chain of variables such as gender-role endorsement, ideal-body stereotype internalization, and body dissatisfaction. And Harrison and Heffner (2006) found in a longitudinal study that girls aged 7-12 who viewed high levels of television for a year scored higher on a measure of disordered eating one year later than girls who did not watch as much television. Clearly there is a relationship between media exposure and propensity toward disordered eating.

Norris et al. (2006) were the first to systematically examine pro-eating disorder websites, and their textual analysis of 12 pro-ana sites highlighted the themes of control, success, perfection, isolation, sacrifice, transformation, coping, deceit, solidarity, and revolution. Building upon this work, Bardone-Cone and Cass (2007) conducted the first experiment examining the immediate effects of viewing such websites. After college-aged women viewed pro-eating
disorder websites, they were more likely to score higher on “likelihood to diet” and “compared self to images during website” and lower on “academic self-esteem” and “appearance self-efficacy” than peers who viewed either a fashion website or home décor website. Whereas these effects were found immediately after viewing websites, cultivation theory predicts that exposure over time can lead to a gradual and permanent change in attitude and behavior. Frequent viewers of such websites could easily begin a lifestyle of disordered eating, particularly when paired with membership in an online community that perpetuates these ideals. The message spreads, and with it, eating disorders flourish.

Research Question

So given the previous research on the building and maintenance of online communities, the use of the Internet to spread pro-eating disorder messages, and the effects of traditional media on disordered eating, can we definitively say there is evidence that eating disorders are a contagious disease? Answering this question required an in-depth examination of a typical pro-eating disorder Twitter account. Thus, this project focused on an eight-month analysis of an anonymous pro-ana tweeter: @Anaforlife55.

Methodology

As Agar (1996) noted, “We need a way to argue what we know based on the process by which we came to know it” (p. 13). To accomplish this task, we used an applied thematic analysis (ATA) approach to the data. ATA is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a qualitative analytic method for “identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p. 79). Themes capture “something important about the data in relation to the research question” and represent some
level of “patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). The ATA analysis methodology differs from the grounded theory approach in that it does not preclude theoretical development per se, but the resulting output is most likely not a theoretical model; rather, its primary goal is to “describe and understand how people feel, think, and behave within a particular context relative to a specific research question” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011, p.13).

Procedure

The analytic approach of ATA is systematic. Braun and Clarke’s (2006) guide to the six phases of conducting ATA included:

1. Become familiar with the data
2. Generate initial codes
3. Search for themes
4. Review themes
5. Define and name themes
6. Produce the report

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) approach provided the necessary structure for this ATA. Of course, as Guest et al. (2011) noted, the codebook itself is never finalized until the coder has finished with the last of the text; revisions of initial interpretations continuously occurred, even throughout phases five and six.

Given the research question guiding this ATA, the initial sample selection involved searching Twitter in August 2013 for several hashtagged terms: #ana, #mia, and #ed (i.e., eating disorders). From this list, the authors searched for tweets and profiles of users who employed these hashtags who had public profiles, tweeted regularly, and had dynamic and interesting
profiles, tweets, and/or pictures. Many of these users’ tweets appeared to be information that had already been explored in other research (i.e., general self-loathing, obsessive calorie counting, idolizing thin models and celebrities, etc.), so the authors focused on users who responded to and interacted with each other regularly, offering new insights. After visiting many of these user profiles, the authors discovered a user who interacted regularly with many of the others: @Anaforlife55. The authors decided to focus exclusively on @Anaforlife55’s tweets, and monitored her story arc from August 2013 to March 2014, at which time we determined we had reached a point of data saturation. Tweets were monitored several times per day during the authors’ free time. Interestingly, @Anaforlife55 entered an eating disorder rehabilitation facility on September 18 2013, and returned home on December 11, 2013. During this time, the authors monitored the twitter feeds of her followers, some of whom were still corresponding with @Anaforlife55 while she was in rehab.

@Anaforlife55’s tweets were captured in screenshots for this ATA. Screen captures that appeared relevant to previous research, or appeared unique or interesting, were printed to aid in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) step three: the search for themes. The themes that emerged from the data are discussed at length below. Whereas the author was familiar with Twitter hashtags such as “#ana” (anorexia) and “#mia” (bulimia), of note was the necessity of having to “decode” some of the Twitter language used by @Anaforlife55 and her followers in order to assign tweets to various categories of themes. Examples are featured below.

Analysis

After the analysis was complete, the elements that emerged could be categorized in three overarching themes: Use of Language, Visual Elements, and Relationships. Each of these themes is discussed at length below.
Language

"I take these pills to make me thin. I dye my hair and cut my skin." "I want skinny, I want skinny, I want skinny hey hey hey hey."

Recall that Anderson (1983) argued that a key element of “community” formation is a common language. This analysis uncovered that the eating disordered world adheres to a strict, almost underground, vernacular as part of community membership. Words that cannot be found in Webster’s dictionary are tweeted throughout this world, regardless of age, gender, location, or socioeconomic status. Unlike dialects that are specific to a region, the words, phrases, and, in this case, commonly hashtagged units are universal. Although the Twitter accounts reviewed during this study were anonymous, various clues about the users’ whereabouts were dropped sporadically enough that with a little patience, the average reader could figure out the state or country of the tweeter. If the Twitter user attended a specific concert on a specific date, mentioned local news, or used linguistics popular in a specific region, it was easier to pinpoint their general location.

Whereas the anonymous Tweeters have rarely interacted in real life, their universal understanding of the eating disorder lexicon unites them as a community. Community members are even more connected via their hashtagged terms, because they can see every hashtagged tweet on that particular topic. Thus, Twitter has enhanced the spread of eating disorder slang and has given researchers easier ways to explore their world. Popular examples included:

- #ED = Eating disorder. Users use this to identify their tweet or account has something to do with eating disorders.
- #Ana = #Ana is the nickname for anorexia and for the anorectic. #Ana is personified as the user's best friend or worst enemy, hopes and dreams, or
fears and doubts. Within the eating disorder hierarchy, #Anas often fall highest because the act of not eating, the refusal of all food and even beverages, shows the most control. An example tweet is: “Slowly but surely making everyone hate me. Well, Ana is. I knew this was part of it, just thought I could control it a little better.”

• #Mia = #Mia is bulimia's name; her characterization is almost identical to #Ana's. #Mia is a seen less often, however. While the occasional binge or purge does not make one a bulimic, the uncontrollable and constant need to consume and expel food is viewed as weakness, for it shows a lack of control. One great pride of #Mias is that not everyone is able to force themselves to purge.

• #EDNOS = Eating disorder not otherwise specified. This is the personalized eating disorder package. This is possibly the most common eating disorder, yet it receives the least recognition. When a user self-identifies with EDNOS, he or she is proclaiming that they write their own rules. Within the eating disorder hierarchy, it is more difficult to critique EDNOSes or measure other's against them. While they are accepted amongst their peers, they lack the kinship that anorexia and bulimia provides.

• #BMI = Body mass index. This number is one of several numbers (weight, size, height) that the eating disordered focus on. Numbers provide a definitive, accepted scaling system used to lift or lower the eating disordered on the Twitter or patient hierarchy.

• #SW= Starting weight
• #CW = Current weight.
• #LW = Lowest weight.
• #UGW = Ultimate goal weight.
• #Wannarexic = Those who wish to have an eating disorder, specifically anorectics. This is the equivalent of a slur within the eating disorder community. It is important to note that wannarexics are classified through their intensive study of eating disorder discourse. An example tweet is: “My bmi is humiliating. I am such a wannarexic.”
• #Laxattack = When laxatives previously ingested cause the person to make long and frequent bathroom visits at an unexpected time (see Figure 2).
• #Picslip = When anonymous Twitter users briefly post photos of themselves, usually showing their faces, to their Twitter feed. #Picslip encourages followers to closely monitor tweets in order to see the elusive and mysterious account holder's face. This is particularly daring for those #picslipping, because they might have a follower or a random Internet user find their page and learn the extremity of their eating disorder(s).
• #Thinspo = #Thinspo is short for thinspiration, which is motivation to be thin. #Thinspo is difficult to sift through because the anonymous “fitness” Twitter accounts also use this terminology. More recently, fitness accounts have the coined the term "fitspo" and are slowly distancing themselves from their eating disorder-obsessed counterparts (see Figure 3).
• #Reversethinspo = Short for reverse thinspiration, #Anas, Mias, and #EDNOSes take photographs of themselves in revealing clothing to showcase
what they view as their “fat.” The use of #reversethinspo is a way to fat-shaming the self into adhering to exercise schedules and meal plans, or lack thereof. An example tweet is: “who wants a #picslip of my fatass legs?! P.s. It might burn your eyes but it can also be #reversethinspo.”

• #Thighgapthursday = #Thighgapthursday, or #TGT, is another form of thinspiration. Every Thursday, eating disorder-based anonymous accounts scour the Internet looking for pictures of anyone with a sizeable thigh gap between their legs. To be featured in a #Thighgapthursday mention appears to be the virtual equivalent of winning a Noble Prize on Twitter, according to this community.

• #ABCDiet = the Ana Boot Camp Diet is a limiting, scheduled diet that constrains the users to consume no more than 500 calories per day. This diet lasts for 50 days and is highly dangerous.

These hashtags combined with the dark, deep, and romanticized tweets being posted throughout the Twitterverse makes it easy for the innocent reader to be lured into this community, once he or she has decoded the terminology, as Anderson (1983) noted. Once the language is learned, the reader can actively interpret and participate in the discussion. The novice subconsciously begins to decode and encode the text he/she encounters, be it language or visual elements.

Visual Elements

Community members are using visual elements strategically in their tweets, sometimes to shock, sometimes to inspire, sometimes to vent, sometimes to reflect on their journey. This use of visual elements also maintains the sense of community; although these images cannot necessarily be hashtagged, they are often retweeted. Certain images within the eating disorder community
are adored and almost worshipped. Others are obscure, but still powerful—perhaps more akin to an artist selling his or her work on the street. The analysis uncovered four categories of visual elements found on @Anaforlife55 and her followers’ accounts: shocking images, inspirational images, images used to “vent” feelings, and self-reflective images. Each is discussed below via an example.

The first type of image is the shocking image; in this case, the image is artistically gruesome (see Figure 3). The delicate lingerie, the painted nails, the lace detailing draws the viewer in. Not only do the fingers grab the miniscule amount of flesh between the subject's ribs and hips, but also they hold the viewers’ gaze. She looks as if she could easily snap and, therefore, must be handled with extreme care. The most romanticized, favorite bones for those with eating disorders are, in no particular order: collarbones, ribcages, wrists, hipbones, and knees. This image flaunts the subject's ribcage, concave stomach, and thigh gap. Based on her pose and her figure, it is understood that, although not shown, the subject also boasts the rest of the glamorized bones. This image is intended to shock other users with the thinness of the subject and awe them with her elegance.

Next there are the inspirational images, of which Figure 4 is an example. In yet another black and white photograph, the viewer sees a dainty woman holding a thin, possibly chiffon dress between her fingers. Again, she is petite, and although the image is not in color, the viewer can still appreciate the cleanliness and sparseness of the scene. Across her thigh gap and knees: "Skip the dinner, Wake up thinner." This image presents such a simple solution, a baby step towards the impossible standards of bona-fide beauty that anorexia creates. Skipping dinner does not sound that difficult; it is just one meal. This image is educational and inspirational for any level anorectic.
The third type of image functions more like a venting session to anyone who is willing to look. The example in Figure 2 uses one of @Anaforlife55's personal images: a photo of her plans for the day, with the caption "Do not judge me." In the image she clumsily captured with her camera phone followers see a pack of cigarettes, Ex-Lax, a pack of BudLight Lime-A-Ritas, and grape flavored Magnesium Citrate. Everything pictured is an addiction: nicotine, alcohol, and laxatives (which contributes to @Anaforlife55's eating disorder). The image needs no explanation, her followers understand and some even participate in the bad habit.

The final typical image found is one of self-reflection (see Figure 5). Usually these are the lesser-known images because they are, for lack of a better term, homemade. In the painting in Figure 5, @anonorexic (one of @Anaforlife55's followers) draws a woman being sliced open by a demon as she grips onto an apple. The words behind the characters plead for help. The viewer can only assume that this painting is a self-portrait. True to the cliché, each image appears to contains a piece of the artist's heart.

Relationships

The third theme that emerged from the analysis was that of “Relationships.” Members of this online community bonded over lifestyle choices, gave consistent and unconditional support to one another (regardless of their “ana” status) and in some instances, were compelled to meet in real life. The obvious closeness of these community members was most evident in the relationship between @Anaforlife55 and @anonorexic. The communication between the two served as an ideal illustration of the powerful connections made in this virtual community. Thus, their relationship is featured prominently in this portion of the analysis.

This community was built on shared experiences. Tweets predominately featured musings and conversations that might be categorized as empathetic but instructional. These users appeared
to privilege their common practices, such as coffee drinking and cigarette smoking in place of eating, the use of laxatives to lose weight, and not eating like a “normal person,” and bond over them. They talked about shopping, and the types of clothes they would buy once they were “thin.” Some members exercised religiously, and bonded with others about calorie burns. They talked about how proud they were of their self-control, and posted their “stats.” This type of empathy and encouragement cannot be expected from “non-anas;” community members are needed for this type of support.

But support was also given when users stumbled. This was a place for users to ask for assistance and give advice to others who were struggling with the lifestyle. Users were not necessarily concerned with helping each other with the lifestyle per se, but rather they were concerned with understanding each other’s struggles and making sure other community members did not feel alone. Posts ranged from musings about family members and spouses and their responses to the ana lifestyle (i.e., @anonorexic tweeted: “You guys, I’m so lonely. My husband is never home. I know he loves me, but I never see him and I feel no emotional connection. I’m alone.”) to methods members found to help them in their quest for thinness (i.e., @Anaforlife55 tweeted to @foreverfasting: “That’s a great goal! I’m going to try and sleep my day away so I don’t eat all my calories before noon haha.”). This was a safe space to talk to like-minded peers about everything from slip-ups with food to more serious issues such as suicidal thoughts and actions. Cutting behavior is featured prominently in this community, and members posted both verbiage and photos alluding to this practice. Again, there was no judgment from other members, simply a supportive response. For example, in response to @collarbone’s tweet of “I’m so sorry ladies but I ended up cutting :(,” @anonorexic replied “its ok, love. I understand. It’s sometimes just too hard to ignore the urges *huggles*.”
This unconditional support even extended to members who entered rehabilitation facilities, either willingly or unwillingly. An outsider might think that members would be shunned for choosing to abandon the ana lifestyle, but interestingly this analysis found quite the opposite. The bonds of friendship between members were ostensibly so strong that rather than condemning those who “quit,” responses were more along the lines of “whatever makes you happy; we’re here for you.” A vivid example of this support comes from the day @Anaforlife55 left for rehab and tweeted: “As I write this, I am sad. But in order to recover, I must say goodbye to this Twitter. You all have a piece of my heart.” @Ana_Kim replied “oh really. Wow. Good luck! Proud of you” and @Anaforlife55 replied, “thanks girl. Please get help one day and do this too” and @Ana_Kim answered, “I will. Have a new intake at a new place beginning of next year. Hope it helps this time.”

What was perhaps most unexpected was the finding that many of these anonymous relationships among members culminated in physical friendships, i.e., meeting in person and sustaining a supportive, friendly relationship. For example @Anaforlife55 comforted @anonorexic when she was in rehab, as evidenced by the tweet: “Counting on @Anaforlife55 to bring me smokes and diet cokes while I’m locked up in treatment! ;-).” And @anonorexic was clearly upset that she couldn’t see @Anaforlife55 the day she left for her own rehab: “@Anaforlife55 hey gorgeous. I’m gonna miss you. Sorry I missed your send off – I was stuck in the psych unit :( I’ll try to write.” And clearly they sustained their relationship, since 9 weeks later she tweeted “@Anaforlife55 is back and we have a coffee date tomorrow!” When they meet in person it goes beyond an imaginary friendship; it takes the relationship from Jones’ (1997) virtual settlement to a physical, tangible community member meeting.
Conclusions

@Anaforlife55’s Twitter account proved most helpful in providing better insight into the pro-eating disorder community and the question of whether eating disorders can be classified as contagious diseases. This project uncovered three overarching themes during the eight-month analysis: language development, the use of visual elements, and relationship building. We initially questioned whether, via the use of online and social media to spread the “message” about eating disorders, they could be considered a contagious disease. After such an in-depth observation and analysis of this phenomenon in action on Twitter, we are more than comfortable characterizing it as such. Whereas it was not necessarily our intent to interrogate the notion of “community” where these participants are concerned, the strong bond forged between these users on Twitter illustrated precisely why eating disorders are contagious, infectious, or communicable: this is a tightly-knit, dedicated community. This community has its own rules, its own language, its own priorities.

But the casual observer beware: if you are a good enough acolyte, you too can be initiated into this club, and you may be drawn into the lifestyle without even realizing it. If you want to move from “wannarexic” to a “real ana,” this community can show you how. They will support you, teach you their language, model what types of pictures to take of yourself, give you “thinspiration,” tips, and tricks, and unending support. As Martin (2007) cautioned, we are living in an era where women often pick and choose different aspects of eating disorders to fit their “do anything-and-everything” lifestyles. When asked, these women often state, “I don’t have an eating disorder, but…” It seems fair to say that these are the very women at risk of “catching the disease.”
We argue that not only is this a contagious disease, but it should also be treated as a national public health threat. As more users turn to Twitter and other social media sites as a form of entertainment (Godley, 2012), often supplementing more traditional entertainment experiences that reinforce the “thin is in” message, the numbers of users engaging in this dangerous behavior could drastically increase. As Grey (2011) explained:

Unlike most mental illnesses, eating disorders are widely believed to be contracted by transmission, not unlike a virus, from either from one sufferer to another or from elements of popular culture. Today, the most resonant of contemporary feminist observations about eating disorders targets the beauty industry's marketing strategies, particularly the argument that overly thin models constitute a source of contagion through which these conditions are spread (n.p.).

Although the intent of this project was not to focus on the traditional mass media, they are, as Grey (2011) noted, at the root of the problem. As long as the message remains “thin is in” in Hollywood entertainment, advertisers, bloggers, and tweeters will follow suit. And more and more people will succumb to eating disordered lifestyles.

So what is to be done about the spread of the disease? This is not a new issue; in fact the image-heavy blog-hosting site Tumblr went as far as banning all personal blogs that promote “eating disorders; self-harm; or suicide” in 2012 (Horn, 2012). They also began to include public service warnings when people searched for trigger words such as “ana.” Regardless of its intent, this ban resulted in many negative reactions. Some reactions focused on the notion that banning content is tantamount to censorship, whereas others lamented, “where will I find my thinspo now?” (International Business Times, 2012, n.p.). Clearly, the ban did little to stop the pro-ana community’s obsessions. Thus, our recommendation is education-based: media literacy
may be the best chance to educate people about the dangers of falling into these online traps, and education about eating disorders and their deadly consequences can perhaps dissuade those considering such lifestyle choices.

For those already suffering, recent research indicates that there are therapies that can be successful long-term. As mentioned in the analysis above, much of what bonds the eating disordered online community together is their need for control over their food and their bodies. Sufferers often describe a feeling of a split personality resulting from their disease, but a new form of emotion-focused therapy (EFT) may offer some relief (Williams & Reid, 2012). EFT helps develop the patient’s sense of self beyond their relationship and inner conflict with their disease. This therapy may quiet the voice of “ana” and put one’s control and identity back in their own hands.

But unfortunately, and not surprisingly, therapy and rehabilitation are not being promoted online in the pro-eating disorder community. Rather than endorse healthy habits, members merely tolerate those who choose to abandon the lifestyle. But the community can only be sustained by perpetuating the disease and welcoming its spread. The community relies on the collective identity of the eating disorder culture (Whitehead, 2010). These members talk the talk and walk the walk—and have the #thinspo pictures to prove it. Until there is a way to disrupt the collaborative aspect of starvation and disordered eating, the disease will continue to spread, both online and off.
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Figure 1

Examples of an “Ana Creed” and “Thin Commandments”

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 in 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 should as unbreakable laws to determine my daily behavior. 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 memorize 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.

Anonymous

The 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, take laxatives, 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 afterward.
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.

Source: Borzekowski et al. (2010)
Figure 2

Example of a #laxattack image from @Anaforlife55’s Twitter page
Figure 3

Example of a #thinspo image from @Anaforlife55’s Twitter feed
Figure 4

Example of an “Inspirational” image on Twitter

Skip the dinner, Wake up thinner.
Figure 5

Example of a "Self-Reflective" image from @anorexic's Twitter page