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Watch Me Disappear: Gendered Bodies, Pro-Anorexia, and Self-Injury in Virtual Communities

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WATCH ME DISAPPEAR:
GENDERED BODIES, PRO-ANOREXIA, AND SELF-INJURY
IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

This project examines the relationship between gendered identities, virtual communities, and material bodies, with an emphasis on eating disorders and self-injury practices. The use of the internet to represent and foster particular categories of material bodies, such as the anorexic, the fitness buff, and the self-injurer, has gained substantial visibility due in part to the proliferation of visual imagery presented through social networks. I analyze written and visual texts within specific social networks to assess their function and potential impact on individuals and larger communities.

Drawing from Donna Haraway's cyborg theory, N. Kathryn Hayles' posthuman, Judith Butler's performativity, feminist poststructural analysis, and the notion of augmented reality, this project explores how individuals rely on social networks, images, and technologies to provide supportive environments for, as well as modify and maintain, specific gendered bodies. Applying feminist interpretations of Foucault's concepts of discipline and "docile bodies," primarily the research and critiques of Susan Bordo, Anne Balsamo, and Armando Favazza (among others), I examine how image sharing and interactions via social networks and communities affect material bodies and function as forms of social control, normalizing and encouraging ultra-thin bodies and dangerous behaviors, including eating disorders, overexercise, and cutting.

I also explore subversive strategies of resistance enacted both within and beyond pro-ana and self-injury communities to counter negative messages and promote positive body image in girls and women.

I dedicate this dissertation to my fierce and passionate baby girl, Phoenix Olivia.

May you always know your beauty flows from the inside out and

love, love, love yourself no matter how much culture tells you not to.

You are everything.

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From the time we were too young to know what we wanted to do, our mother told my sister and me that we could accomplish anything we set our minds to; this project is one example of how her words resonated. I hope to establish the same attitude in my daughter. Thank you, mama. My father is one of my greatest supporters and I am lucky to have a fan club in my own family. My sister, who is also my best friend, allowed me to vent on countless occasions and provided support beyond articulation throughout my entire PhD process (and life), along with my brother-in-law James and niece Morgan. My husband's love and understanding were instrumental, as I probably spent more time on the computer throughout our marriage than anywhere else. To my in-laws, Toni, Jim, Becky, Chrissy, and Jessi, thank you for the countless

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GENDERED BODIES IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

"One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman."
--Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex

Project Introduction and Overview

Anorexia, self-injury, and cutting have been subjects of psychological and sociological

research for decades but the convergence of self-injury and social networks has only recently

garnered (and warranted) significant attention. Similarly, pro-anorexia websites have been

subjects of research since the 1990s but their expansion, along with the development of social

networks and their shifting formats, necessitate new forms of inquiry regarding the effects of

technology and interpersonal relationships on body image. Pro-anorexia communities function to

provide support for anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than a disease, often including images

and messages to help individuals succeed as anorexics or, in other cases, to provide resources

and "inspiration" for individuals attempting to lose weight. Since social networks are dynamic

and trend-driven, their formats may change but the role of virtual communities in our lives is

likely permanent, making an examination of the influence and role of virtual relationships on

material bodies increasingly relevant, especially where young women are concerned. The images

and written content shared in pro-ana and self-injury based virtual communities function to

encourage and sustain behaviors that were once dependent on isolation—behaviors that are now

finding new life and purpose via virtual communities and social networks.

As we continue to integrate social networks into our everyday lives, the line between

virtual reality and "real life" is increasingly blurred. We detail our daily activities on Facebook,

virtually "check in" so our online friends know our physical locations, edit our photos to present our bettered selves on Instagram, and use publicly shared tools to document pounds lost, miles run, and calories consumed. Time spent with friends includes tracking our activities on our phones and it is more socially acceptable than ever to take photos of dinner *during* dinner to share online. Virtual communities are part of our social lives on and offline and our identities are both informed by and reflected through social networks and virtual communities. Online role-play can help clarify our identities but it can also impede our satisfaction with self since one must eventually return to "real life" (or RL, as referenced in cyber communities) (Turkle 13). The conflation of virtual worlds with our "real" worlds can exacerbate a sense of fragmentation and loss of (or tension around) identity as the lines between human and machine, fantasy and reality, become less clear. Virtual communities are contemporary embodiments of the social, as our bodies traverse the physical and virtual in our everyday interactions.

Virtual communities tend to serve shared interests, whether as support or educational networks and take many forms, from blogs for new mothers to forums for gun enthusiasts. The freedom and possible anonymity of the internet allow individuals to explore information about anything, including practices or desires they may be ashamed of or embarrassed about. This makes virtual media especially useful for forming communities around behaviors that have largely been private or insular, such as eating disorders or self-harming behaviors. Just as people use exercise or weight loss applications to track changes in their physical bodies, others seeking similar, as well as more dramatic, outcomes find or form communities that support goals around behaviors such as self-starvation. Communities that support "non-mainstream" desires or ideals are referred to as "counterpublics" by scholar Michael Warner, who focuses on the role of "the

public" to private practices and identities in his text *Publics and Counterpublics*. While he does not specifically focus on virtual communities, his work applies to the communities I focus on in my work. Analyzing specific texts from pro-anorexia, fitness-based, and self-injury based virtual communities, I demonstrate how these virtual communities reinforce, normalize, and even encourage eating disorders, overexercise, and cutting, ultimately creating public spaces that foster (and in some cases, actively resist) body-based practices that often cannot be effectively sustained in non-virtual or more private environments.

While forming communities around shared interests has the potential for positive outcomes such as resource-sharing and emotional support, the promotion and further normalization of dangerous behaviors within virtual self-injury communities can be more deadly than such conditions as they exist in private (Haas; Thoits; Bell). Warner deems publics a "kind of fiction that has taken on life, and a very potent life at that" (8), possibly enhancing desires that may still seem "abnormal" in private. As Sharlene Hesse-Biber notes in *The Cult of Thinness,* "…cyberspace is often a respite for those women and girls who struggle with their disorder and want to get away from the surveillance and regulatory mechanisms of control in the public sphere" (144). Communities constructed around self-injury at once provide support and enable isolation in that individuals receive only virtual support and thus can still sustain their behaviors without exposing themselves to the critique of those in "real life" (Bell). Scrutiny and concern from family, friends, teachers, co-workers, and others who witness dramatic weight loss or physical cuts and scars are often the only hope for survival for self-injurers and/or anorexics (Adler and Adler). As a disease connected to (though not solely prompted by) visual media,

anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any mental illness (Renfrew Center; Harrison; Higgins), making the potential danger of such sites more pronounced (Hesse-Biber).

In this chapter, I provide an overview of my argument, including definitions and discussion of pro-anorexia, fitness (as healthy and/or harmful), and self-injury, especially as they exist in virtual communities. I also provide a brief explanation of key concepts and theorists who guide my argument (Balsamo; Bordo; Burnett; Butler; Foucault; Haraway; Hayles; McLuhan; Warner; Wegenstein) which I elaborate on in future chapters. I address gender as a social construct and explore how the role of technology in our lives affects our conception of our bodies as changeable. I also explore the tension between the possibilities and perils of digital and virtual technologies in relation to gendered bodies in order to establish a relationship between technology and the increase in eating disorders and self-injury behaviors, especially as articulated publicly.

Visual Media and the Gendered Body

The impact of advertising and visual media on body image has been a focus of feminist work for decades but the intentional use of these images via social networks for the purpose of body modification has not yet garnered as much attention. In her assessment of the role of photography on our lives, Susan Sontag observes, "We consume images at an ever faster rate," and the more we do, the more "images consume reality" (179). The rapidly expanding role of visual imagery in our daily lives contributes to a distorted sense of self that relies on products and practices to change our bodies because the media tells us to, a concept widely understood in feminist, cultural, and body theories (Bordo; Brumberg; Coleman; Gimlin; Kilbourne). Social

networks and virtual communities typically rely on image sharing as well as written communication and information exchange. In the specific communities I focus on, image sharing is the primary mode of communication; images are tools for inspiration, encouragement, and even "peer pressure" or social control. Images shared tend to include those of individual participants, as well as professionally-created, Photoshopped images, and largely represent bodies considered "ideal" by normative (or at least popular media) standards, encouraging community participants to enact physical changes on their bodies through extreme dieting, starvation, and other dangerous behaviors.

The importance of images in virtual communities reflects the role of images in almost every facet of contemporary life. In *How Images Think,* Ron Burnett uses the term "image-worlds" to describe the omnipresence of images in our lives. He claims that the continual presence of media is part of our new mediated environment as one both "natural and constructed," asserting that media is not simply a reflection of our world but *is* our world: "These are not simulated worlds. They are the world" (5). Burnett demonstrates the influence images have on our perception of reality when he claims that people cannot even look at stars or trees without seeing them through the mediated versions of stars and trees to which they have been exposed. The same can be said for how we see ourselves. Objective self-perception is elusive when we are immersed in layers of media representations of "ideal" bodies, most of which are ultra-thin.

Social constructions of gender deem specific body types as more desirable than others, which is reflected and supported through media and images in particular. Being steeped in specific visual representations impairs one's ability to view oneself beyond a socially-

constructed idea of what one *should* look like, fostering a culture that equates thinner with better and builds multibillion dollar industries around such ideals (Burnett; Bordo; Kilbourne), providing a foundation for communities based around anorexia and extreme fitness which rely on images as their key mode of communication (Harper). Even those of us who do not explicitly seek to change our bodies through technology see ourselves through these images whether or not we realize it. All reality is augmented, as we do not (or cannot) typically exist outside of images or technology.

N. Katherine Hayles' work, specifically her notion of feedback loops, or the "interplay between the body as a cultural construct and the experiences of embodiment that individual people with a culture feel and articulate" (*How We Became Posthuman* 193), applies to my work as virtual images and rhetoric (including tips, encouragement, diet and exercise plans, and resources) are key texts that promote desire(s) for a particular body and, ultimately, the creation of (or failure to achieve) that body. In pro-ana and/or fitspo communities, the texts/images themselves function as the virtual feedback that encourages behaviors affecting material bodies; those material bodies, whether "perfect" or "imperfect" by standards maintained in pro-ana and/or fitspo communities become part of the rhetoric reflected through imagery, reiterating (or, at best, resisting) those images as valid representations of reality.

Gender constructs provide cues for how to *be* a female or male body based on well-established ideas of what counts as a "girl" or "woman" and the appearance and behaviors associated with such. Simone de Beauvoir distinguishes between sex and gender in *The Second Sex* when she writes, "One is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman," setting the stage for more developed theories, such as Judith Butler's concept of performativity. In "Performative Acts and

Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," Butler postulates that

gender is real only to the extent to which it is performed (528).Hayles articulates this in terms of

"incorporation" and "inscription," elaborating that, "Incorporating practices perform the bodily

content; inscribing practices correct and modulate the performance. Thus incorporating and

inscribing practices work together to create cultural constructs" (200). Relying on gender as a

key example, she explains how sex-based identities are produced and maintained through

rhetoric, culture, and disciplinary practices that demand bodies perform to reflect their "complex

significations […] that constitute gender within a given culture"(200).

As Hayles attempts to explain the complex motivations behind gender identification and

maintenance, Butler introduces the concept of "performativity" to demonstrate how we play out

gendered identities through our actions and appearances. Performativity is useful to understand

how or why individuals accept and embody beauty ideals, since gender is so embedded in

Western culture that we often do not even question it. Appearance is a crucial piece of this

embodiment, and may explain how or why women so readily and often uncritically accept and

act on social cues that tell them how to look, which often dictates what to eat (or not eat)**.** Hayles

iterates that, "Embodiment cannot exist without a material structure that always deviates in some

measure from its abstract representation; an incorporating practice cannot exist without an

embodied creature to in enact it, a creature who always deviates in some measure from the

norms" (*How We Became Posthuman* 199). The concepts of performance (i.e. wearing makeup

and heels to denote femaleness) and Butler's "performativity" are related but distinct and the

distinction illuminates the insidiousness of gender (and sex, as Butler suggests) and the activities

that sustain it for individuals and broader social contexts. Butler collapses the sex/gender distinction, arguing that there is no sex that is not already gendered (524).

Sara Salih unpacks Butler's sex/gender theory in "On Judith Butler and Performativity," assessing that, according to Butler, "All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence (and there is no existence that is not social), which means that there is no 'natural body' that pre-exists in cultural inscription" (55). Like Burnett's "image-world" demonstrates how our existence is mediated through imagery, Butler argues that we only exist through social constructs of gender. We do not simply "do it"; we can't *not* do it because gender is entrenched in our cultural condition or, as Salih indicates, the script is already written, it is "always already determined within this regulatory frame, and the subject has a limited number of 'costumes' from which to make a constrained choice of gender style" (56).

Performance is doing and performativity is a sense of *being*; Butler challenges the notion that one simply "does" gender, choosing the makeup or heels, insisting that it is much more entrenched than choice. She writes that, "the very formation of subjects, the very formation of persons, *presupposes* gender in a certain way—[…] gender is not to be chosen. […]. Performativity has to do with repetition, very often the repetition of oppressive and painful gender norms" (qtd. in Kotz 85). Beauty ideals are a corollary of gender, a crucial component of the script, reiterated through images, ideologies, and social institutions. Hayles asserts that, "Experiences of embodiment, far from existing apart from culture, are always already imbricated within it" (197). Related to Hayles claim(s), Butler refers to gender as a "*corporeal style*," an act or sequence of acts, a "strategy" which has cultural survival as its end, since those who do not "do" their gender correctly are punished by society (521; emphasis in original).

Women's participation in beauty practices as an iteration of gender norms and, ultimately, a form of oppression or socially-impelled self-mutilation, is most notably taken up by Andrea Dworkin, Susan Bordo, Sheila Jeffreys, Kathy Davis, and Katherine Morgan, and speaks to the tension between beauty and self-mutilation, as beauty practices can be considered forms of self-injury compelled by culture, especially in their most extreme forms. Cutting is not considered a beauty practice but its (perhaps loose but notable) relationship to cosmetic surgery is also worth exploring. Cutting functions more as a form of resistance to beauty norms than an attempt to achieve them, even if only theoretically. Individuals' use of visual and digital media—the very mediums charged with promoting eating disorders and self-harm—to support and display such practices is an intriguing conflation of beauty ideals with their most detrimental outcomes. Visibly injuring the body in a way that is not socially acceptable (unlike weight loss, which is praised even when taken to extremes) is at once a form of resistance and acquiescence to pressures placed on women and girls to conform to beauty and body ideals.

The fusion of the virtual with the real that takes place through virtual relationships and communities displaces conventional notions of what it means to be a (gendered) body. One's physical body exists "as is" on the margins of virtual spaces we inhabit but the filters and selective sharing that technology permits enable us to inhabit imagined or desired bodies more readily within virtual spaces. However, the "real" physical body still exists in all its fleshiness as we interact with our computers or mobile phones, creating what Burnett refers to as a "middle space": the merging of virtual and real (xx). This middle space is particularly relevant to my work in that pro-ana virtual communities depend on visual cues to shape material bodies in unique ways, blurring the line between virtual and "real" bodies. Hayles clarifies the line

between virtual and real while still acknowledging their interconnectedness, distinguishing that, "Human being is first of all embodied being, and the complexities of this embodiment mean that human awareness unfolds in ways very different from those of intelligence embodied in cybernetic machines" (*How We Became Posthuman* 284). So the bodies that reflect often unattainable or extreme desires in pro-ana and fitspo communities are at once visual representations and material bodies that have physical limitations. Particularly in cases where body/beauty goals cannot be achieved, embodiment of ideals within a material human reality is uniquely distinguishable from a cybernetic machine, an avatar, or a being that can be created without limitations, such as a robot, photoshopped model, or superhero.

The question of "what counts as real" runs through texts and theories that speak to the embodied subjects in virtual or visual mediums (Burnett; Hayles; Turkle). As Hayles summarizes: "The body produces culture at the same time culture produces the body" (200). This is the ubiquitous chicken/egg question—do our desires for bodies come from "culture" and media or shape it? Because after all, as early media theorist Marshall McLuhan and others assert, culture is not a nebulous construct but is created by individuals who participate in, support, and buy into it, sustaining media and beauty industries through consumerist practices based on largely agreed-upon ideals about what constitutes "beauty." This middle space between the constructed, virtual, and real is also referred to as the "human-computer interface" by Hayles in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary*, addressed as "human-machine interactions" by Lev Manovich in *The Language of New Media*, and referred to as a "cycling" between the virtual and real by Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, among other references and conceptions.

Augmented reality speaks to the intimate relationship between our on- and offline selves and how one affects the other. Nathan Jurgenson explores the concept of augmented reality in "Towards Theorizing an Augmented Reality," in which he claims that we can no longer think of online or offline worlds but, rather, "we need to think with a paradigm that centers on the implosion of the worlds of bits and atoms into the augmented reality that has seemingly become ascendant." While our online identities are general reflections of our offline selves, they are mediated through technology, whether Instagram filters or selective sharing, and one very often informs the other. Though the term is relatively new, augmented reality effectively describe how our virtual and material worlds co-construct each other (Jurgenson), demonstrated in part by the images that inform our realities and specifically our conceptions of self. These images reflect gendered beauty ideals normalized to the extent that we believe they exist in "real life" and can be achieved if one tries hard enough. Butler refers to such attempts (and gender in general) as an "impersonation," writing that, "becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits" (qtd. in Kotz 85).

Technology promotes gendered bodies through visual media, as well as through the belief that women have the tools available to maintain such ideals so they should. While technology offers promise for individuals to change things about themselves they may not like, technology, specifically visual images, creates the very notion of such preferences. Gender existed before visual media but has become more pervasive through the prevalence of visual scripts that surround us, even as individuals increasingly challenge gender definitions by claiming transgender and queer identities (an issue beyond the scope of this project). Social networks articulate and disseminate cultural ideas about what women's bodies should look like and

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function as avenues to convey and enforce these messages through often-explicit means. Regarding how the internalization of media plays out in online social spaces, Joanna Zylinska writes, "Social networking sites […] provide an experiential space for actively taking on rather than merely acting out the trace of technology in the human self" (93). The lines between technology and embodied practices are becoming more difficult to discern as they are increasingly conflated through cosmetic surgery, the use of technologically enhanced beauty products, and, as I emphasize, the use of virtual technologies to realize physical changes. In "Women and the Knife," Kathryn Pauly Morgan argues that "part of what is especially characteristic of modern technology […] is that the relationship of means and ends is no longer unilinear but circular, so that 'new technologies may suggest, create, even impose new ends, never before conceived, simply by offering their feasibility… […] technology thus adds to the very objectives of human desires, including objectives for technology itself'" (30). We are at once technological subject and object, harnessing technology's "promise" to achieve goals we could not even conceive of without it, augmenting our physical realities with technology.

Linking the embodied self to the virtual self by using one to affect the other exploits boundaries that are otherwise rifts. The very media (digital images) that promote eating disorders are utilized to enable such behaviors on users' own terms, demonstrating Bernadette Wegenstein's flattening of body into media, where media shapes the body and the body shapes media. She argues that in a postmodern environment, bodies continually enter flat screens and subjects invest deeply in surfaces and "body and medium reemerge as one *flesh*" (Cosmetic 148; emphasis in original). She conflates the material with the virtual body, providing specificity to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's declaration that "the medium that signifies the body, its

representation, no longer is any different from the 'raw material' of the body itself" (qtd. in

Wegenstein, *Getting* 32). In the case of pro-ana and self-injurious communities, the merging of

virtual bodies with other virtual bodies extends to physical bodies in unique and dangerous ways.

Cyborgs and Technological Bodies

A cyborg is a human whose body capabilities extend beyond typical biological

limitations by the application of technology or machines. McLuhan presented this idea early on

in his 1967 book, *The Medium is the Massage*, in which he both criticizes and praises mass

media's influence over human beings. He acknowledges the far-reaching impact of media and

technology over our human capabilities and relationships with one another, writing, "All media

work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic,

psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched,

unaffected, unaltered" (26). Recognizing the implications of new technologies (which for him

did not yet include the internet or virtual realities), he focuses on how media radically change the

way we interact with the world and those around us. He does not refer to humans interacting with

machines as cyborgs but notes how our use of technology extends our abilities and claims that

we adapt to our environments through a changing ratio of our senses, viewing every medium as

an extension of some human faculty ("McLuhan"): "The wheel...is an extension of the foot. The

book is an extension of the eye... Clothing, an extension of the skin...Electric circuitry, an

extension of the central nervous system" (McLuhan 26). To place his argument in a more

contemporary context, the internet and the proliferation of visual media change our identity, as

we are increasingly exposed to images and ideas of who we should and can be, illuminating the

power of the internet to dramatically affect identity. The cyborg is most notably elaborated on in "A Cyborg Manifesto," often cited by feminists and technology theorists regarding the relationship between biology and modern technology. As an embodiment of augmented reality, Donna Haraway's cyborg represents a postmodern, post-gender identity defined through its relationship with technology. Neither human nor machine, Haraway's cyborg resides on a border between human and technology, organic but situated in a heavily technological context. The cyborg provides a framework for thinking about how virtual and material realities shape one another via virtual communities and the implications of such. The use of technologies to change our appearance, in concert with the role of digital media in changing our self-perception, makes us two-fold cyborgs: beings whose conceptions of self are informed by technology who then utilize technology to alter their bodies so the two correlate more closely. Haraway seeks to destabilize identity constructs and bodily constraints through her cyborg, "a condensed image of both imagination and material reality" (150).

Cyborgs resist categorization—the terms "human" and "machine" are interchangeable. As humans intertwine with machines, the distinction between our technologies and ourselves is blurred, especially online where we can disengage with our "real life" identities and *become* someone or something else, step outside of our perceived flaws and into whatever we can imagine (Turkle). One problem with the promise of the cyborg, however, is that "whatever we can imagine" is often already determined for us by cultural ideals disseminated via media and technology. Like the construct of "woman" in Western culture (and gender constructs in general), the beauty ideal is a myth perpetuated by various avenues of "state apparatus," including media and consumer culture (Bordo; Dworkin; Foucault; Wolf). As Anne Balsamo

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demonstrates in *Technologies of the Gendered Body,* cyborgs are increasingly (unfortunately) invested in materiality and utilize technology to amplify rather than challenge gender norms and distinctions, a key point in the communities I analyze.

In the spirit of Haraway, Balsamo examines how the "natural" body has been refashioned through the application of technologies of corporeality, reading the body as a mediated cultural text (4). Reading the body as a text reveals how we embody cultural values and transcribe media-based messages onto our bodies and selves. Balsamo analyzes popular culture, medical literature, and technological practices to argue that technology itself is gendered and that its uses reinforce gendered ideals. She asserts that technologies are shaped by and perpetuate particular ideologies and cultural norms and that such practices render the material body more important than ever as a site of analysis and transformation. Balsamo writes, "The body […] is the site at which women, consciously or not, accept the meanings that circulate in popular culture about ideal beauty and, in comparison, devalue the material body. In other words, the female body comes to serve as a site of inscription, a billboard for […] dominant cultural meanings…" (79). Comparing one's own material body to representations in popular culture should illuminate the lack of reality in those images. But more commonly, these images incite dissatisfaction with oneself, resulting in behaviors that make the material body (in)congruent with the culturally constructed body, such as eating disorders and/or damaging the body that cannot meet such ideals through practices such as cutting.

Balsamo specifically explores how technologies such as cosmetic surgery and weight machines change the physical body, describing, "a contemporary cultural conjuncture in which the body and technology are conjoined in a literal sense, where machines assume organic

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functions and the body is materially redesigned through the application of newly designed technologies" (3). She looks at how technology functions as a form of gendered inscription, operating "on the flesh of human bodies" (3). Wegenstein takes up a similar argument in *The Cosmetic Gaze,* where she argues the attainability of the beauty ideal as established by culture (which she refers to as "the cosmetic gaze," discussed further in Chapter Two) is accessible only via the action of cutting, with old-fashioned scalpels or the less invasive ways enabled by digital technology" (ix).

Where Balsamo and Haraway examine how technologies such as machines change the physical body, I am interested in how virtual technologies accomplish the same task, affecting the appearance and condition of material bodies through a less direct but just as profound influence, and in how we use virtual technologies to change our bodies through encouragement, display, and constructing communities through desired bodies. Balsamo reads the body changed by technology as a cyborg in the literal sense but even our less direct uses of technology function similarly by encouraging physical change through virtual interactions. One does not need to physically apply technology to the body (in the form of makeup, surgery, or weight lifting) but rather can be influenced visually to enact changes in one's life resulting in specific material results (through withholding food, for example). In this sense, technology is applied to the body as a distinct form of inscription via social control and influence.

Hayles distinguishes her "posthuman" from the "cyborg," as she specifically refers to the body as it interacts with information technology and cyberspaces. The distinction between posthumanism and the cyborg is a fine but important one, as the posthuman privileges technology or "information pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment as a substrate

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is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (*How We Became Posthuman* 2). The cyborg is about technology affecting the body whereas the posthuman is, as it sounds, about how technology potentially undermines (or overtakes) the pesky material reality of being human through such interaction. The posthuman affects technology as technology affects the posthuman whereas the cyborg is more about the embodiment of technology. As Turkle notes, "Our new technologically enmeshed relationships oblige us to ask to what extent we ourselves have become cyborgs, transgressive mixtures of biology, technology, and code" (21). The cyborg complicates the relationship between biology and technology while the posthuman attempts to subsume biology with technology, or at least compromise it. Hayles' concern is that our increasing dependence on and interdependence with digital technologies will undermine the material realities of physical bodies, especially for women, whose material realities are perhaps suspended but never erased regardless of the spaces within which we participate. She calls attention to the relationship (or feedback loop) between bodies and technology but users often do not. My concern is that digital technologies reinforce the material realities of our physical bodies, applying digitally constructed standards that are increasingly impossible to maintain, a concern relevant to both cyborg and posthuman theories.

<center>Pro-Anorexia and Self-Injury Networks</center>

While pro-anorexia (also known as "pro-ana") websites first gained underground popularity in the 1990s, they have evolved as image-based social network formats such as Tumblr, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest gain (and subsequently wane in) popularity. Pro-ana sites, predominately created and maintained by girls and young women between the ages of 13

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and 25, function as support systems for those with anorexia and related eating disorders but are not self-help sites in the mainstream understanding of the term (Bardone-Cone). Rather, they are spaces and/or communities that enable and sometimes encourage anorexia as a way of life or a lifestyle "choice" tied to notions of self-ownership. Pro-ana sites are purportedly free of judgment and rife with weight-loss tips and inspiration, known in pro-ana circles as "thinspirations." Thinspirations include images of shockingly thin women, lists of foods with zero or negative calories, and tips on how to trick a scale for weigh-ins. Pro-ana sites are a prime if disturbing example of the convergence of material and virtual bodies, as users utilize digital images to enact concrete and specific changes on physical bodies (figure 1).
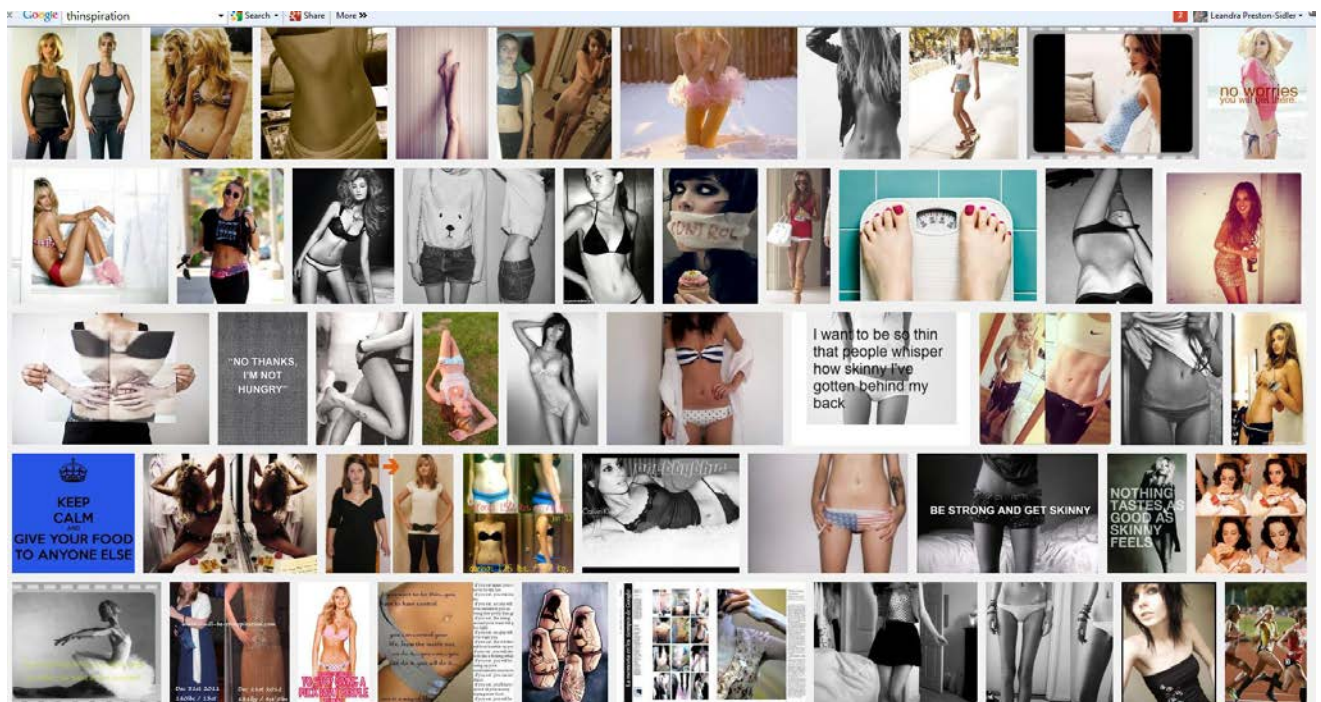
"Thinspiration" Search Results. Digital image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 30 Mar. 2012.

Figure 1 "Thinspiration" Google Image Search Screenshot

Similarly, virtual communities constructed around self-harming behaviors (cutting as a prime example) provide support and reinforcement for individuals who engage in and identify with forms of self-harm beyond self-starvation. Self-harm, which I most commonly refer to as "self-injury" throughout my work, refers to behaviors that cause intentional harm to oneself and can include explicit and immediate self-harming behavior such as punching, burning, and cutting the skin, as well as more long-term harmful behaviors including eating disorders (self-starvation/ anorexia and bulimia). Like pro-ana communities, self-injury communities are constructed around behaviors considered deviant by mainstream culture, but unlike pro-ana, the outcome of self-injury does not align with socially accepted beauty ideals. While there are many forms and motivations for self-injury and cutting in particular, I focus on the active display of such behavior and the communities within which publicly displaying such behavior is not only socially acceptable, but also encouraged, specifically in pro-ana contexts. These communities are at once public and clandestine entities; they are publicly accessible but involve deeply personal divulgement(s). Additionally, they are still peripheral enough that many folks do not even know they exist. As Warner notes, public spaces can be transformed into intimate ones through shared struggles and their relationship to mainstream culture, noting that, "…some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public [and] maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status" (56). Self-injury communities are most often consciously formed in response to the rejection of environments (whether familial, institutional, or social) that view participants as deviant, sick, disturbed, and in need of "help."

Cutting the body and putting it on display can be interpreted as a shocking statement against beauty norms and a potential response to failed efforts to attain beauty ideals, as the

relationship between eating disorders and cutting has been well established (Adler and Adler; Conterio; Lader; Favazza; Strong). In *Self-Harm Behavior and Eating Disorders,* John Levitt notes that, "The boundary between the aesthetic and ascetic, the normal and abnormal, the palatable and grotesque, the sacred and profane, has become increasingly blurred" (25). The intersection of eating disorders with other forms of self-injury is an example of the blurred line between self-beautification and self-mutilation. Through my research, I identify relationships and tensions among beauty practices, eating disorders, and other forms of self-injury, particularly as displayed and supported via virtual communities and social networks. I also demonstrate the power in treading a line between the beautiful and grotesque as a form of commentary on and resistance to the danger of beauty ideals in a culture increasingly invested in them.

New articulations of pro-ana and self-injury based communities include those on Tumblr and Instagram, social networks that rely on images and blurbs of text rather than the well-developed diary formats of LiveJournal or blogs. Tumblr uses "tags" a term typically used as an abbreviation of "hashtag" or a word preceded by a pound (#) sign to aid in online community searches and/or to identify and aggregate related posts. A form of metadata, or data denoting data, a tag is a keyword used to identify a piece of information such as digital imagery, a conversation or thread about a particular topic, a computer file or an internet bookmark in order to allow users to locate it through an internet search ("Tag: Metadata"). Common pro-ana tags include "thinspo," "ana," and "mia" (for bulimia). The use of tags to form communities around shared ideologies is a compelling strategy, especially considering that self-injury practices are typically not communal at all, but isolated, private, and individual (Adler; Favazza; Levitt; Strong). Young people, particularly girls and women, post videos that capture them cutting

themselves on YouTube, and images of cut bodies are rampant on Tumblr and Instagram despite

policies forbidding the glorification of self-injury (figure 2).
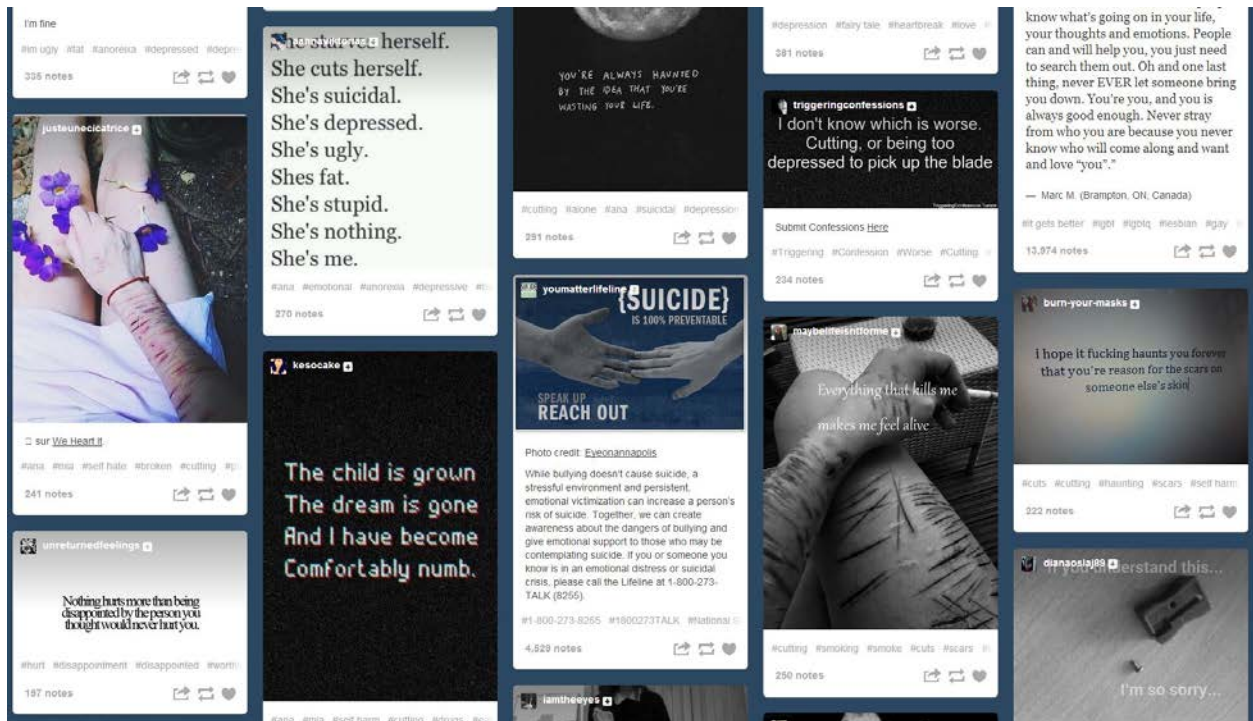
"Cutting" Search Results Screenshot. Digital Image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc. n.d. Web. 29 June 2014.

Figure 2 "Cutting" Screenshot from Tumblr

As moderators and owners of social networks become more attuned to their use by self-

injury based communities to promote such behaviors, some have established specific policies to

temper activities that encourage or glorify self-injury (whether anorexia or cutting). In February

2012, Tumblr was the first to issue an explicit statement against the use of their forum to

promote self-injury, threatening to "take down" profiles/pages which function for such purposes

and even provided a "grace period" to allow users to modify their pages before shutting them

down once the policy was implemented. Tumblr acknowledges users' right to "free speech" but

attempts to limit the use of their particular forum to those who do not actively promote these

specific practices. Instagram forbids certain search terms and takes down images tagged

"thinspo," for example, and includes specific warnings and guidelines related to self-injury and

pro-ana behavior (which I elaborate on in Chapter Two).

Other sites, such as Pinterest, followed suit in less specific terms. Their "Acceptable Use

Policy" originally included a general warning against content which "creates a risk of harm, loss,

physical or mental injury, emotional distress, death, disability, disfigurement, or physical or

mental illness to yourself, to any other person…" but has since been modified to include a

warning against activity that "promotes self-harm, eating disorders or hard drug abuse"

("Acceptable Use Policy"). The adaptation of their policies indicates their awareness of the

potential harm of such content; however, users are savvy enough to find ways around such

policies, including modifying tags from explicit terms such as "pro-ana" to "ED" (eating

disorder), "thin" or "fat," and even a search for "pro-ana" still produces a myriad of images

which change daily, though fewer than before Tumblr and Pinterest implemented new policies

(figure 3).
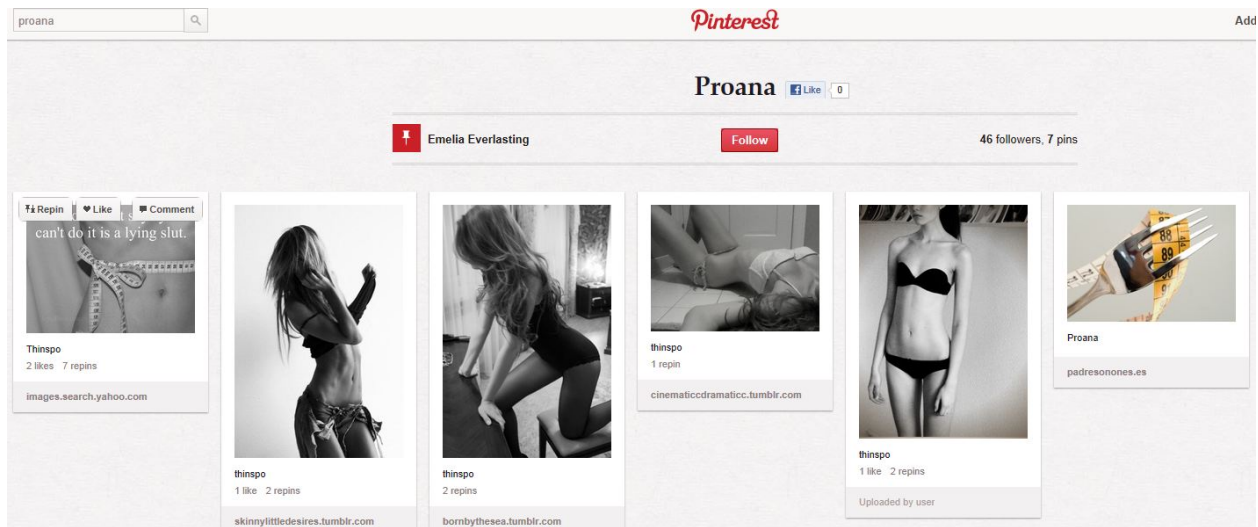
Emilia Everlasting. "Proana" Screenshot. *Pinterest.* Pinterest. n.d. Web. 14 Feb. 2013.

Figure 3 Proana Screenshot from Pinterest

Subversive tactics to undermine moderators and social network policies include the

evolution of pro-ana images and messages to those shrouded in health and fitness rhetoric,

including tags such as "fitspo" rather than "thinspo" that promote similarly unattainable and

often unhealthy bodies. While health and fitness are positive goals in themselves, more extreme

forms of fitspiration encourage self-starvation and overexercise much like thinspo. Fitspo largely

operates under the guise of fitness and health ("healthy is the new skinny") but in practice is

often no more than what Charlotte Kite calls "thinspo in a sports bra" in her blog article, "Is

'Fitspiration' Really Any Better than 'Thinspiration'?" Some fitspo images are somewhat

innocuous, such as a pair of sneakers or a mountain with an inspirational message about

motivation, but more common are images of ultra- thin women paired with messages about

exercise and eating habits that mimic pro-anorexia rhetoric. I refer to these forms of fitspo as

"extreme fitspo." Such images often promote the idea that if one is not achieving these ideals,

one is not trying hard enough or does not want it badly enough. The "average person" does not

identify with pro-anorexia imagery, perceiving it as "fringe" or too extreme and, thus, draining it of some power. However, fitness and health is something that everyone is supposed to desire and benefit from and thus to reject it is a sign of laziness or not caring about oneself, making fitspo potentially more harmful than pro-anorexia in its mainstream reach.

The majority of pro-anorexia and extreme fitspo images and communities are created and maintained by young women who impose body and beauty ideals on themselves and, even if indirectly, on one another. The function and tone of pro-ana communities tends to be more prescriptive than supportive, evident in the proliferation of images with messages discouraging food consumption and/or "laziness." Some participants in these communities feel empowered rather than oppressed by their practices and I acknowledge an inherent sense of agency in body modification. However, individuals who participate in pro-ana and extreme fitspo communities often represent what Michel Foucault terms "docile bodies," which speaks to ways disempowered groups participate in their own oppression by engaging in activities that maintain (self-)discipline without the direct or explicit participation of dominant forces. Pro-ana communities reflect and even depend upon notions of docility, as users explicitly seek physical outcomes such as weight loss using pro-ana communities as tools or sources of support, demonstrating a tension between agency and dependence.

In *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault presents an example of a prison panopticon within which soldiers maintain subservience even when guards are not visible due to the understanding or possibility that they are being watched to demonstrate the power of surveillance in controlling others' behaviors in subtle but powerful ways (137). Feminist interpretations of Foucault recognize how systems that attempt to regulate individuals particularly and uniquely affect

gendered bodies, which Foucault fails to acknowledge throughout his work. Susan Bordo takes Foucault's "neutral body" to task but like many feminist theorists finds a revision of his concepts useful when specifically applied to female bodies. In "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," she argues that the time women spend on themselves to fit the "beauty ideal" takes away from potentially more valuable or important activities:

> Through the pursuit of an ever-changing, homogenizing, elusive ideal of femininity—a pursuit without a terminus, requiring that women constantly attend to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion—female bodies become docile bodies—bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, "improvement." Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, makeup, and dress—central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women—we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripically focused on self-modification. Through these disciplines, we continue to memorize on our bodies the feel and conviction of lack, or insufficiency, of never being good enough. (166)

The time and energy required to maintain beauty ideals are implicitly undermined in pro-anorexia spaces but the preoccupation with bodies and weight (and the time devoted to participation in such communities) is clear, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two. Bordo's recognition of the implications of docile bodies is particularly useful to my work, as she acknowledges that such practices result in not only a siphoning of one's time and energy but, in its most dramatic form, death, a devastating outcome of anorexia and other forms of self-injury.

"At the farthest extremes, the practices of femininity may lead us to utter demoralization, debilitation, and death" (166).

Hayles also presents a notable critique of Foucault's argument, acknowledging its strength in the applicability of his panopticon to the various modes of discipline dispersed throughout society, but also expressing concerns that it, "diverts attention away from how actual bodies, in their cultural and physical specificities, impose, incorporate, and resist incorporation of the material practices he describes" (*How We Became Posthuman* 194). While the concept of implied surveillance is easily applied to visually-based cultures with clear ideals and demands for women particularly (though men are certainly not exempt), Foucault seems to undermine the role of power differentials within a given culture and how that impacts responses to such surveillance or, as Hayles articulates, Foucault's proposition essentially erases the "contextual enactments embodiment always entails" (194). Alluding to the role of gender-based power in patriarchal cultures, Hayles continues:

> Foucault delineates the transformations that occurred when corporeal punishment gave way to surveillance, but the engine driving these changes remains obscure. Focusing on embodiment would help to clarify the mechanisms of change, for it links a changing technological landscape with the instantiated enactments that create feedback loops between materiality and discourse. (194)

The tension between the gendered, material body, the potential body represented in the texts I analyze, and the predominance of women participating in my communities of focus, are essential considerations.

While disconcerting, pro-ana sites and the use of various social networks to achieve desired bodies are resourceful, given that women's social capital tends to emphasize their bodies over their minds. With roots in Rene Descartes mind/body dualism, Western culture tends to define women as and through their bodies, reserving the mind as male domain, so the role of the body is more crucial to women's identities and power because, even if women recognize they are more than bodies, the cultural emphasis remains on the physical. Understanding this, it makes sense for women to seek empowerment through attaining beauty ideals and to construct communities around such desires (Descartes xxxvi). In *Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture,* Debra Gimlin argues, "women are not dupes of culture, they are negotiators of culture." Women understand the context within which they exist and modify their behaviors to tap into their resources most effectively (17). To reject desire for thinness or, worse, a desire for "fitness," is the ultimate transgression within social networks and communities that promote it. Critiques of women's beauty practices often fail to view their relationship to power, commonly perceiving anorexics as disordered or diseased rather than individuals actively utilizing their bodies as resources.

Those who cut or disfigure their bodies for display are also typically perceived as victims of disorders, since those who do not self-injure may have difficulty making sense of why anyone would choose to hurt herself, especially so overtly. Inscription (distinct from but related to Hayles' use of the term), or the notion of vocalizing pain or resistance through marking the body, is a common thread in literature focused on cutting (Adler & Adler; Ahmed; Blood), which indicates that self-injury is not simply (or necessarily) a disorder but a conscious act of resistance or form of expression. I contend that cutting may function as a form of self-inscription in order to

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reclaim ownership of bodies already inscribed by gender and cultural standards (Adler and

Adler; Balsamo; Favazza). Elizabeth Grosz argues that the "female (or male) body can no longer

be regarded as a fixed, concrete substance, a pre-cultural given. It has a determinate form only by

being socially inscribed" (2). Sheila Jeffreys argues that women's beauty practices are

increasingly violent and invasive and reflect the dramatic oppression of women, even when

presented or interpreted as "empowering" (2). Butler articulates, "There is no recourse to a body

that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings" (8). The body cannot exist

outside of a social constitution and is indistinguishable from its cultural inscription (Brush).

Whether conveyed through magazines, television, social media, or peer groups, what counts as

an "ideal" body is relatively fixed and typically out of reach for the average person, with or

without excessive measures. As Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey acknowledge, despite cultural

standards that demand "perfect" skin, "skin surfaces will always fail to be smooth, whether that

failure is dependent upon the deliberate markings [or injuring] of skin or upon the impossible

desires produced by consumer culture" (2). Cutting can be read as a response to the tension

between the ideal "desired" body and the unattainability of that ideal for most girls and women.

In *Unbearable Weight,* Bordo explores eating disorders and other forms of beauty-related

self-injury as "obsessive body practices of contemporary culture" and claims that her aim "is not

to portray these obsessions as bizarre or anomalous, but, rather, as the logical (if extreme)

manifestations of anxieties and fantasies fostered by our culture" (20). Practices such as

obsessive dieting and exercise represent, for Bordo, how cultural "representations homogenize"

and how "these homogenized images normalize" (21). Bordo also traces the connection between

culture and female disorders, emphasizing the fact that disorders such as anorexia nervosa and

bulimia cannot simply be defined from medical and psychological standpoints but must be viewed within a cultural context, as "complex crystallizations of culture" (1). The prevalence of eating disorders and self-injury and the relationship between the two practices reflect the devastating effects of culture as it intersects with physiological pathologies.

However agentic the possibilities of such spaces may promise to be, whether pro-ana or "health" oriented, they ultimately promote the subjugation of women and girls to patriarchally constructed beauty ideals. Both pro-ana and pro-fitness/health participants celebrate self-discipline and put it on display to inspire others to do the same. Wegenstein refers to the public exploitation of self via technology as "self-ploitation" (Cosmetic 148). Social networks are not just about connecting with others; they are about promoting the self. Pro-ana participants exploit the self victimized by the very media necessary to sustain her in a tragically cyclical approach. Such practices may be an attempt to claim power and assert an identity in the face of an oppressive reality or may be a subversive act, taking norms to the extreme to illuminate what is wrong with them.

The use of technology to reify and enhance gendered bodies based on socially constructed ideals undermines the potential of the cyborg to transgress gender boundaries as Haraway claims. How can we reclaim the cyborg as a feminist possibility when technology functions to reify and maintain gendered bodies? How can we encourage individuals to privilege minds over bodies in virtual spaces when they are inundated with images of traditionally (and even more dramatic) material ideals? Moreover, how can we revise these spaces to function as sites of resistance against strict gender norms that promote unhealthy, even dangerous, bodies?

Methodology

Using feminist poststructural discourse analysis, I deconstruct images and messages deployed through social networks to examine their relationship to cultural ideas about and representations of eating disorders, fitness, and self-injurious behavior. As a theoretical approach that emphasizes the role of power in constructions of gender and social relations, as well as the subjective nature of human experience, feminist poststructuralism is an important methodological lens for my work. Rooted in feminist theory (Bordo; Butler; Haraway; Hayles; Jeffreys; Wegenstein), feminist poststructuralism has extended its reach from gender to the intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, ability, and, as I argue, physical appearance and body image. A feminist post-structural framework enables an examination of language, values, practices and relationships, all of which contribute to the social construction of women's bodies, particularly in relation to weight and appearance.

Reading the body as a text reveals how we represent cultural values and transcribe media-based messages onto our material selves. Throughout my analysis of social networks fostering embodied practices, I examine bodies as texts and view texts (visual and written, especially as they operate together) as directives compelling individuals to engage in practices to promote physical changes. However, I also recognize that bodies are much more than texts, but embodied realities, and that we cannot disengage our bodies from our embodiment (Balsamo; Haraway; Hayles). It is important to note this, as poststructuralism often risks insufficiently acknowledging the material reality of being a body. Sensitive to the fact that our material bodies have a real impact on our quality of life, I tread the line between viewing bodies as texts and recognizing that our bodies *do* matter in more than theoretical terms.

The bulk of my textual analysis involves compiling and analyzing images and texts in the form of screenshots from various virtual communities to determine the uses and function of particular communities, focusing on Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and Google Image searches. As my research indicates, Tumblr is currently the most heavily utilized social network in terms of pro-anorexia and cutting imagery but patterns and popularity of particular social networks rapidly change. The dynamics of virtual communities and shifting accessibility to websites and images deemed "inappropriate" or against specific social network guidelines prompted me to save content that might be moderated and/or intercepted through screenshots. I also saved images and web links to Evernote, a cloud-based workspace that enables the use of tags, notes, screenshots, and other tools to provide stability to internet sources such as the images I compiled. My research focused on visual and written texts shared on Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and YouTube. Preliminary research also included Google Images and Facebook but my findings led me to concentrate on those with the most active pro-ana communities and rapidly cycling content. These sites may be obsolete in the future, joining social network relics such as MySpace, so my general discussion of pro-ana communities is applicable to any virtual community though I base my findings on specific social networks.

My analysis varies from chapter to chapter, as the communities I examine require different strategies to objectively evaluate their imagery, communication, and function(s). Due to overlaps among pro-ana and fitspo imagery, as well as mainstream and/or popular imagery (such as that which appears in fashion magazines, advertising, and media in general), I established criteria, a barometer, to distinguish pro-ana imagery from general "thin" or "fit" bodies. Over a period of months, I classified hundreds of images tagged "pro-ana" (along with other related

terms noted here) based on particular features, such as pronounced thigh gaps or visible ribcages. I also evaluated how participants use texts within virtual communities, including the written texts that accompany images (for example, expressions of desires for thinness or willpower around fasting). Evaluating texts in the contexts within which they appear(ed) also demands different strategies such as YouTube videos versus reblogged and frequently shared images within image-based communities such as Tumblr and Pinterest. In Chapter Two, I establish distinctions between pro-ana and fitspo or health-based texts, while in Chapter Three I identify common tropes within fitspo texts and asses those that emphasize physical appearance (rather than health, attitude, or positive body image despite size or appearance). In Chapter Four, I identify and assess relationships between cutting/self-injury and pro-ana texts, and connections between cutting and eating disorders or desires for particular bodies (such as images that feature the word "fat" inscribed onto bodies).

The following search terms guided my online research (not a comprehensive list): pro-ana, ana, thinspiration, thinspo, thin, fitspiration, fitspo, self-injury, self-harm, and cutting. By plugging specific search terms into each social network search engine, I assessed the role, function, and level of support versus hostility of each individual community in relation to self-harm behaviors and identified those that foster these communities most explicitly. I also compared and contrasted these with larger sociocultural values to identify parallels and/or distinctions; do these sites reflect or challenge broader cultural ideals (or both)? I evaluated each community based on the prevalence and nature of images fostering self-injury behavior and the presence of images that seek to disrupt such behaviors, including those that provide "help" and/or resources. Establishing standards through which to evaluate virtual communities in

relation to search terms and results was challenging but I had to establish objective criteria in order to identify what particular texts represented, including the use of tags and common features in the imagery resulting from specific tag searches. My methodology was refined through hundreds of searches to identify the most effective approach to assess and arrive at conclusions about who the communities serve, how texts were/are used, and their potential impact on viewers.

Preliminary research and analysis of images and texts that resulted from these search terms indicate that Tumblr is heavily utilized for pro-anorexia and self-injury behaviors whereas Pinterest tends to be more hostile to (or at least less supportive of) pro-anorexia and cutting. Tumblr returned thousands of results when searching "pro-ana," "thinspo," "thin," "self-injury," and "cutting," whereas Pinterest returned few results or results that provided resources for help or sought to discourage eating disorders and cutting. While the terms "fitspo" and "fitspiration" garnered results through a Pinterest search, the bodies and texts represented tended to be more health-related, or at least less extreme in terms of skeletal imagery. A search for "cutting" on Pinterest brought up more sewing and crafting images than self-injury images, a phenomenon I examine further in Chapter Four. Pinterest searches for "thinspo" resulted in more images of resistance than Tumblr though Pinterest was rife with "fitspo" imagery (further examined in Chapter Three). Instagram returned ample results of thinspo and fitspo imagery but due to limitations moderators set on search terms, searches require terms such as "thin" versus "thinspo" or "pro-ana." YouTube was/is increasingly populated with videos raising awareness about self-injury even as videos of individuals actually cutting themselves proliferated. Analyzing how users employ tags to promote or disrupt ideals and behaviors was an important

part of my research. These observations supported my hypothesis that pro-ana and self-injury spaces on social networks and in virtual communities reinforce docile bodies but ultimately also have the potential to disrupt such attitudes and behaviors, as well as to provide community for those in need.

While I provide examples of visual images throughout this text, many more are available on a Wordpress blog I created to compile examples and examine patterns of imagery related to specific behaviors. Due to the potential for internet imagery to change and/or result in "dead links," integrating visual examples rather than hyperlinks was more appropriate for the requirements of this project. Because I collected far more examples than the limitations of this paper permitted me to share, the website enables viewers to see more; my blog site can be located at http://bodytechnologies.wordpress.com.

<div align="center">Outline of Chapters</div>

<div align="center">Chapter Two: Watch Me Disappear: Pro-Anorexia in Social Networks</div>

Chapter Two focuses on pro-anorexia as a movement and the evolution of pro-ana from medically related communities to websites to social networks. I analyze samples of written and visual texts deployed through these communities, especially as a means to normalize and encourage extreme bodies. I discuss the benefits and dangers of such communities to participants and the influence of the images they proliferate on "innocent bystanders" exposed to such images without seeking them. I also explore the possibilities of pro-ana networks to serve as sources of support and community to those suffering from eating disorders.

Chapter Three: Fitspiration: Pro-Ana in Sneakers or Healthy Alternative?

In Chapter Three, I examine the appropriation of health and fitness rhetoric by pro-anorexia communities to undermine attempts to censor and control their associated visual texts in virtual spaces. I analyze samples of written and visual texts deployed through these communities, especially as a means to normalize and encourage a specific type of body. I also analyze overlaps between fitspo and thinspo, asking whether (and how) fitspo can promote healthy behaviors without an association with unhealthy beauty ideals or exceeding moderation in exercise and eating habits, discussing and defining the concept of "feminist fitness" as an alternative to more oppressive or harmful fitness practices.

Chapter Four: Self-Injury/Cutting: Private Shame or Public Spectacle?

Chapter Four explores self-injury in pro-ana contexts, with an emphasis on cutting, and the construction of communities around behaviors that have been traditionally shamed into isolation and silence. I analyze samples of written and visual texts deployed through these communities, especially as a means to normalize and encourage such behaviors. I also explore the possibility that cutting is a strategy of resistance against gender norms rather than pathology and examine the relationship between cutting and eating disorders as expressed through images and texts that articulate these overlaps.

Chapter Five: "Riot Don't Diet": Subversion through Cyber Resistance

Finally, in Chapter Five, I highlight ways that individuals intercept and undermine negative messages promoted through self-injury-based communities, including the subversive use of "tags," as well as provide examples of recovery and positive outcomes from virtual communities. I analyze the role and prevalence of messages that seek to counter pro-anorexia and self-injury in virtual communities. I also touch on fat activism, the promotion of "normal-sized" bodies through social networks, body-positive sites and strategies, and the role of recovery networks on such behaviors, especially as directed toward younger girls.

Conclusion

Overall, the research and examples provided in Chapters Two through Four are bleak since the impact of media imagery on girls and women and the medical and psychological realities of eating disorders are potentially detrimental. However, Chapter Five provides hope for change through concrete examples so girls and women may realize that the expectations presented through media are typically unrealistic and will ideally enable them to view diversity in body types as not only acceptable but desirable. The homogenization and narrow conceptions of beauty ideals as thin, white, and increasingly extreme demand interrogation and this project attempts to accomplish that. What propels girls and women to follow ideals dictated by a culture that pressures women to look a particular way, while the beauty industry benefits financially from low self-esteem, self-loathing, and often-tragic outcomes? Why does our culture posit women's power through physical beauty more than knowledge and strength? And what can we

do to challenge these standards in an increasingly technological society where physical

appearance should potentially be deemphasized rather than elevated?

CHAPTER TWO:
WATCH ME DISAPPEAR: PRO-ANOREXIA IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

"It is ironic how the nothing I consume
Consumes me wholly" --Tumblr image

Introduction

The terminology "pro-anorexia" (also known as "pro-ana," the term I will use

throughout) is disturbing and confusing to most. Who is "pro" anorexia and why? Unless one

identifies with pro-anorexia culture, such as individuals with eating disorders, it may be difficult

to understand why there is a need for such communities and/or not be confounded by the term

itself. Anorexics or others who struggle with eating disorders may be aware of pro-anorexia

culture, whether or not they support or participate in it. Individuals with little or no experience

with eating disorders have likely never heard of pro-ana culture and/or may be perplexed by

what it represents. In this chapter, I focus on pro-anorexia as a movement and the evolution of

pro-ana websites, particularly as they exist in virtual and social network based communities. I

provide a brief overview of the history of online pro-ana communities, assess the benefits and

dangers of such communities, and examine the visual imagery exchanged and displayed within

pro-ana spaces. I also wrestle with the question of whether pro-anorexia spaces foster complicity

to beauty ideals or represent agency on the part of participants. The role of pro-ana communities

in relation to eating disorders is more complicated than a simple choice or desire to perpetuate

particular conditions or ideologies so I flesh out the possibilities these virtual spaces provide for

material bodies. Pro-ana communities function as sources of support for those who have eating

disorders, but they also promote, normalize, and even encourage behaviors to create bodies

considered ideal by both mainstream and pro-ana culture, even when such bodies are extreme by normative standards. Pro-ana communities are a compelling site to examine the role and function of virtual spaces and of the complicated, overlapping identities of women who struggle with the meaning and realities of material bodies, as they expose highly personal narratives of body struggles in public spaces.

In pro-ana communities, a key mode of communication is through "thinspirations," which include images of extremely thin or emaciated bodies, tips on how to lose weight or fight hunger, exercise recommendations, shaming mechanisms (for those who overeat or fail to achieve the "ideal" anorexic body), and before and after images of individuals who have lost weight. Thinspirations feature celebrities or images of anorexic individuals as well as images of participants themselves. Other content of pro-anorexia sites include charts and calculators to determine body mass index and calorie consumption, definitions of and distinctions among various eating disorders, lists of risks of eating disorders, invitations for more personal connections (private email addresses, for example), and resources for weight loss or recovery. Dialogue typically takes place through imagery and short snippets of written text with clear messages that often connect starvation with strength ("Be Strong and Get Skinny"; "Stay Strong, Starve On") and food with failure ("I hate myself for eating so much") and depict the struggle users face in trying to maintain goals around (non)consumption and achieve their versions of "perfection."

The debate around whether anorexia and other eating disorders, such as bulimia, are pathological mental illnesses or socially constructed disorders sufferers "choose," whether implicitly or explicitly, is only further complicated by the articulation of these disorders online

and in the media (Brumberg 6; Stice et al. 836). Increased visibility of private suffering via the media and online communities stimulates mainstream discussions among non-experts about causes and motivations of eating disorders. Feminist arguments frequently highlight the role of media imagery on women's negative body image, along with increased imperatives for women to embody increasingly extreme ideals, citing anorexia as a socially constructed disease reinforced by media (Bordo; Hesse-Biber). Psychologists and the medical community tend to acknowledge the role of media in precipitating such disorders but also emphasize the physiological pathology required to transform expressions of poor body image into something as dangerous as anorexia or bulimia (Blows 42; Gabriel174). Eating disorders are more complicated than an either/or debate and in *Fasting Girls: A History of Anorexia Nervosa,* Joan Jacobs Brumberg invites readers to think about anorexia as not having one root cause but to recognize "the reciprocity of biology and culture" (9). Women's bodies are a distinct example of the convergence of biology and culture, as women and their bodies are not neutral physiological organisms but heavily socialized, situated in cultural contexts with specific expectations imposed upon them about how to look and behave.

<p style="text-align:center">Anorexia as Pathology</p>

The "birth" of anorexia is indicative of the role of culture in all things, including disease, as it was "named and identified in the 1870s" by male medical professionals in England, France, and the United States, almost simultaneously (Brumberg 6). Brumberg writes that "the 'birth' of the disease was related to not only the new authority of medicine but also to changes in the larger society that had consequences for young women" (6). However, according to "Richard Morton:

Origins of Anorexia," by JM Pearce, Morton is generally credited as being the first to describe anorexia as a medical condition in 1689, indicating that it was defined as a "condition" before the rise of the European medical community in the late 1800s (191). Other examples of self-starvation appeared in the Hellenistic era related to religion and were associated with possession by evil spirits (Pearce 191). Anorexic behavior increased during the Renaissance, as women deemed "holy anorexics" "abused their bodies, rejected marriage, and sought religious asylum—where many perished and became saints," starving themselves as a route to God (191). Brumberg spends a significant portion of her text on starvation related to sainthood, as well. While a comprehensive history of anorexia nervosa is beyond the scope of my work, as such historical accounts indicate, eating disorders preceded the body image imperatives typically associated with more contemporary ideals and mass media. "A historical perspective shows that anorexia nervosa existed before there was a mass cultural preoccupation with dieting and a slim female body" (Brumberg 6). This complicates assertions about anorexia as a media-based disorder, but the rise of eating disorders and the concurrent increase in visual media are indicative of a correlation that should not be overlooked or simplified.

Instead of insisting that eating disorders are an absolutely consistent psychological experience, Brumberg suggests that we place this specific syndrome on a "wide and multifaceted continuum" representative of human, particularly female, eating and exercise behaviors (7). Refusal of food was once associated with sainthood, then gradually became associated with patienthood as it was increasingly pathologized through medical models; today it is associated with a socially acceptable (and even expected) preoccupation with dieting and "health" lauded in popular culture through advertisements, magazines, billboards, and via social networks and

virtual communities. However, as John Levitt notes and I demonstrate through examples (particularly that of anorexic model Isabelle Caro), the line between the beautiful and grotesque is a fine one.

The increasing role of visual and popular media in the 1980s brought anorexia into a renewed light, as the highly publicized death of Karen Carpenter from anorexia in 1983 increased public awareness about eating disorders. Women's magazines featured articles about anorexia and in some cases inadvertently worked as "how-to" guides, much like pro-ana sites function today (Brumberg 248). This may not be the intended purpose of articles or websites devoted to anorexia but similar to warnings posted in pro-ana sites that prepare viewers for the images or "triggers" they will see, such articles are possible invitations into a world that may have been unknown without such exposure. In contemporary contexts such as online pro-ana communities, refusal of food and the resulting anorexic body are often associated with social network or virtual heroes. To *become* a thinspiration (an image of oneself as a model of an ideal anorexic body) shared by others rather than simply relying on such imagery to achieve a thin body might be considered the contemporary version of the sainthood that Brumberg references in her history of anorexia (figure 4).

My goal is to be skinny enough
to become someone else's
thinspo.
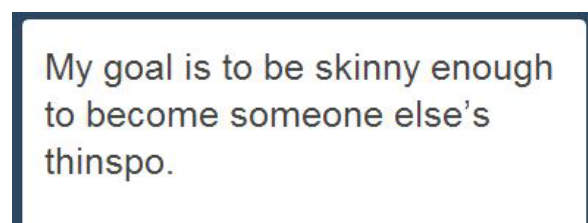
Fcxked-up. "Thinspo" Search Result. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 5 June 2014.

Figure 4 Tumblr Text Example Featuring Desire to Become a Thinspiration

<u>History of the Pro-Anorexia Movement</u>

Pro-anorexia spaces were originally created by anorexics seeking alternative treatment strategies in response to a medical model that did not sufficiently meet their needs and that imposed labels on those who did not respond to or who rejected conventional treatment. Since anorexia is a disease traditionally dependent on isolation to support its goals, anorexics were increasingly isolated as individuals. The simultaneous anonymity and connection that the internet enables created an opportunity for those suffering alone to reach out to others for both community and support. In its earliest stages during the late 1990s, the online pro-anorexia movement existed in the form of listservs made up of individuals in recovery from anorexia ("Understanding [t]he ProAna Movement II"). The focus of pro-ana websites was on providing a space in which the experience and challenges of anorexia could be shared and openly discussed among sufferers (Burke 63).

Many of these listservs were owned and monitored by treatment programs that began to attempt to control language used by participants in fear of "triggering" anorexic behavior. This led to a stifling of individual expression within the listservs, prompting participants to move to more "private" online spaces, creating websites or non-treatment-based listservs where they could more freely communicate without fear of censorship or silencing ("Understanding [t]he ProAna Movement II"). As the internet expanded, so did pro-ana communities, moving from listservs to privately-owned websites or groups (AOL hometown groups and Yahoo Groups) which could more closely control who participated and determine what was and was not welcome or permitted. Since participants in pro-anorexia communities include those seeking to maintain anorexia and those seeking recovery (or a balance between both), defining the function

of particular spaces was important to serve the needs of the specific communities for which pro-ana spaces were created. If a community was made up of those in recovery, "tips" for how to trick a weigh in were less welcome than they would be in a community of individuals seeking to maintain anorexic behaviors. Initially, pro-anorexia groups were typically made up of those already suffering from eating disorders and had not reached the mainstream—yet. ("Understanding [t]he ProAna Movement II"). As Warner notes, such communities, or counterpublics, are "formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion" (63). Those from the medical community did not sufficiently understand or serve the needs of those in eating disordered communities and, thus, implicitly demanded that "insiders" create their own spaces. Early creators of pro-ana spaces were not interested in recruitment or participation of individuals seeking weight loss strategies but rather sought to serve those already diagnosed with anorexia in order to provide and maintain spaces for individuals seeking support to maintain anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness in need of repair.

Early pro-anorexia websites used warnings to make their purpose(s) clear and to prevent non-anorexics from participating. One of the earliest pro-anorexia sites, "My Goddess Ana," included the warning:

> This is a PRO-ANOREXIC site. The information in the following pages contains pro-anorexic material. For this reason, it should NOT be viewed by anyone who is in recovery or who is considering recovery. […] Please, if you do not already have an eating disorder, turn back now. If you are in recovery, turn back now. Anorexia is a deadly disease. It is not to be taken lightly. (Reaves)

Most pro-anorexia sites included such warnings, perhaps for a dual purpose—to warn those who genuinely did not understand the type of site they were visiting and to keep "outsiders" from infiltrating their precious space(s). Such warnings also served as a form of protection from those seeking to censor their community as proof that they were not trying to pollute the masses—both valid concerns when private spaces operate in public places.

On July 26, 2001, the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), aware of the proliferation of pro-anorexia communities online, specifically on Yahoo servers, asked Terry Semel, the portal's CEO at the time, to remove pro-anorexia content from its servers. He complied, removing an estimated 115 sites in less than a week (Reaves; Polack 247). In July 2001, *Time* magazine published "Anorexia Goes High Tech," exposing online pro-anorexia communities to the mainstream (Reaves). In October of 2001, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* hosted a special on anorexia and brought increased attention to "pro-anorexia," pushing the issue further into the mainstream (Polak 89). This led to increased calls for censorship and more servers began removing pro-anorexia listservs and websites, forcing pro-anorexia communities to move to private servers in order to sustain themselves without interference; in some cases, communities were shut down as fast as they could form. Increased visibility and access to pro-anorexia sites compromised the function of those spaces for those who originally created them, as individuals who were merely curious or seeking moderate weight loss strategies began to locate and access pro-anorexia communities.

The shift from listservs and websites to social networks marked a significant transformation for pro-anorexia communities, as participants became increasingly mixed among those who suffered from eating disorders and those who did not have a disease but were trying to

maintain a certain body ideal as upheld in mainstream media. The latter were (and still are)

referred to as "wanarexics" within the pro-ana community. -0AnaGirl Empath, a long-time

anorexic and participant in pro-ana communities (whom I will spend more time discussing later)

uses the term "volitional anorexic," defined as:

> [O]ne who walks Ana's Path in the absence of obsessive, negative and self-
>
> destructive pathology; also referred to as "wanarexics" or individuals who co-opt
>
> anorexic strategies for their own weight loss without suffering the challenge or
>
> danger of an actual eating disorder, not associated with a pathological impetus
>
> and […] therefore tolerated to a significant extent by society at large. (*Project*
>
> *Shapeshift*)

These participants made it more important for those in recovery or anorexics choosing to

maintain their own anorexia to protect themselves and create spaces that did not function to help

individuals practice or "acquire" eating disorders or provide triggers to otherwise "healthy"

people.

Wanarexia, or what Hilde Bruch, an international authority on eating disorders, refers to

as "me too anorexia," demonstrates the potential for peer influence to precipitate or even prompt

mental disorders (or at least disordered eating) (Brumberg 17). Bruch introduces the notion of

"me too anorexia" in *The Golden Cage: The Enigma of Anorexia Nervosa,* noting the shift from

isolation to communal sharing about eating disorders. She writes, "The illness used to be the

accomplishment of an isolated girl who felt she had found her own way to salvation. Now it is

more a group reaction" (qtd. in Brumberg 17). The media-created wanarexia phenomenon has

led many pro-ana site owners to be more discerning about membership candidates and to restrict

membership or privatize their communities to protect eating disorder sufferers and those who do not yet have eating disorders ("Understanding [t]he ProAna Movement II").

From Pro-Anorexia to Anorexia Acceptance: Project Shapeshift

As social networks are now ubiquitous, so are pro-anorexia communities and their key visual texts, thinspirations. In May 2014, a Google search of "pro-ana" returned almost 57 million results. A search of "thinspiration" returned more than 14 million results. Results within specific social networks, particularly Tumblr and Instagram, are equally overwhelming. I discuss specific findings later in the chapter, but it is telling that even despite attempts to censor content, so many sites are readily available. Social networks have made pro-anorexia communities more accessible to those suffering from anorexia but have also opened the floodgates for others, such as wanarexics. The increased accessibility of pro-ana communities to those who do not have anorexia has pushed anorexics seeking community back to more "private" online spaces, such as websites or virtual communities that limit access or membership. One of the more notable online communities of this type is "Project Shapeshift." Project Shapeshift originated in the late 1990s and operated on a private Yahoo server but has since shifted its members to a "private" Facebook group to increase confidentiality and privacy (*Project Shapeshift*). Private Facebook groups can only be accessed by approval of a moderator and content within is only seen and shared among members.

Currently owned and moderated by AnaGirl Empath, Project Shapeshift refers to itself as "The Birthplace of ProActive ProAna" with a subtext that reads, "Supporting those with restrictive EDs for over a decade *sans judgment*" (*Project Shapeshift;* emphasis in original).

Project Shapeshift, like many pro-ana communities, distinguishes what types of eating disorders they serve. "Restrictive EDs" are those concerned with food intake restriction or inability or lack of desire to eat, such as anorexia. AnaGirl Empath notes that the pro-anorexia movement has two subgroups: one which lauds anorexia and eating disorders as a diet strategy or "glamorous, cool, chic endeavor" and the other which "acknowledges that AN [anorexia nervosa] and related EDs [eating disorders] are very much serious illnesses and embrace the term 'Pro-Ana' in the contexts of being proactive in anorexia" (*Project Shapeshift*). Project Shapeshift explicitly clarifies whom the group is for, posting numerous warnings and guidelines throughout their site. The site's philosophies are often contradictory, as some areas deem anorexia an illness while other areas reject the term "illness" and emphasize anorexia as a "choice." This is not to say the terms are mutually exclusive but to highlight the vacillation and/or controversy regarding whether or not eating disorders are a choice or illness, even within pro-anorexia communities. The introduction to the site reads:

> This is a pro-ana website. That means this is a place where anorexia is regarded as a lifestyle and a choice, not an illness or disorder. There are no victims here. If you regard anorexia exclusively as a disease, see yourself as the "victim" of an "eating disorder" in need of "recovery," or are seeking "recovery," it is strongly suggested that you leave this site immediately. IF you choose to ignore this warning, you WILL be triggered by the content of this site and I will NOT be responsible for YOUR decision…

Self-ownership and responsibility is a recurring theme throughout the site, as eating disorders are posited as an active choice. Project Shapeshift views restrictive eating disorders such as anorexia

as an exercise of power rather than a pathology or lack of control. Their definition of pro-ana distinctly relates to control and agency:

> "Pro-ana" [is] short for proactive, volitional anorexia. It refers to actively embracing the concept of anorexia as a lifestyle choice rather than an illness. By the word "choice" we indicate the active agency of volition, the seat of government in the human mind, the power of decision-making or of will. […] The core praxis of anorexia involves control over oneself: denial of appetite, restriction of food intake, discipline in exercise, etc. and we recognize it would be a joke to suggest mastering these skills could be the product of anything other than the continual, diligent execution of volition.

The rhetoric around anorexia articulated by Project Shapeshift is about self-discipline rather than lack of control, indicating that anorexia is a lifestyle that supersedes the norm—requiring discipline beyond that of the "average" individual who depends on food for survival.

In a concerted effort to distinguish between the promotion of anorexia and the lauding of those who have "mastered" the control required to attain the label of "anorexic," Project Shapeshift changed the language through which they define their movement on more than one occasion. A change in terminology to distinguish between those with eating disorders and those co-opting them denotes important shifts within the pro-ana movement, at least in the context of Project Shapeshift. Project Shapeshift rejects the term pro-anorexia in preference for the term "anorexia acceptance" to make clear their mission is not to promote anorexia but rather to provide support for those already suffering with the disease (whether or not they identify it as a "disease" or a "choice"). Possibly related to the "Fat Acceptance" movement (discussed further

in Chapter Five), also a response to the normative imagery reflected in popular culture, "anorexia acceptance" represents the rights of individuals to control their own desires for whatever body they may choose (or not choose, based on a variety of factors). A change in terminology also potentially enables a "fresh start" for a movement that has been mischaracterized and wrongly represented via media sources (*Project Shapeshift*).

In addition to coining the term "anorexia acceptance" and further conflating the overlap of choice with illness, in August 2014 Project Shapeshift added another new term, "ED-anorexia," where pro-ana is purely based on choice while "ED-anorexia" is considered a disease or pathology. The site reads:

> In contrast to the description of proactive, volitional anorexia as a lifestyle encompassed by the term pro-ana, [we are] coining a new phrase: ED-anorexia. ED-anorexia, obviously, refers to anorexia as a disease or disorder, specifically an eating disorder (ED). The ED-anorexic, or ED-anorectic, is one who perceives herself to be suffering from an affliction which causes compulsive thoughts and behaviors to which she must succumb or suffer. The difference should be obvious here. The pro-ana has made a choice, and retains control of her life and choices. The ED-anorectic perceives her life to be spinning out of control, as her "choices" have little to do with volition and mainly to do with bowing to internal oppressions.

The influx of individuals drawn to pro-ana sites for the "wrong reasons" and a distortion of general conceptualization of what pro-ana is about have led some pro-anorexia communities such as Project Shapeshift to seek and create new terminology to provide more specific

50

descriptions of the purpose(s) they serve and distinctions between approaches to and philosophies around eating disorders as illness, pathology, choice, or a combination of factors. While potentially confusing, such varied terminology makes clear that those within the pro-ana movement are seeking control over how they are identified, in addition to maintaining a sense of community around a specific idea of what constitutes pro-ana as a movement.

In addition to moderating Project Shapeshift, AnaGirl Empath hosts a series of compelling YouTube videos based on her personal experience(s) and credible research. In these videos, she is pale with a gaunt face and thin hair, and appears to be in various stages of visible "illness," wearing an oxygen tube under her nose. As much as one may not want to draw conclusions about her appearance, the content of her videos makes it difficult not to. She demonstrates the more notable signs of a woman suffering from an eating disorder, though does not actually ever show her full physique. She consciously wears hooded sweatshirts in most of her videos to cover her body (figure 5).

ProAna Empath. Screenshot of ProAna Empath from "Appeal to ProAna Site Owners/Administrators..." Digital image. *YouTube*. YouTube, LLC, 24 Mar. 2011. Web. 29 May 2014.

Figure 5 Image of ProAna Empath Wearing Hooded Sweatshirt, Her Typical Attire

In the rare video in which she wears a tank top, she includes "trigger warnings" to viewers because her collarbones are exposed, and collarbones are an important feature of anorexia within pro-ana communities (as demonstrated later in the chapter). She makes a concerted attempt to avoid glamorizing her eating disorder by refusing to "show off" her thin frame, a notable departure from more typical imagery shared in pro-ana communities (figure 6).
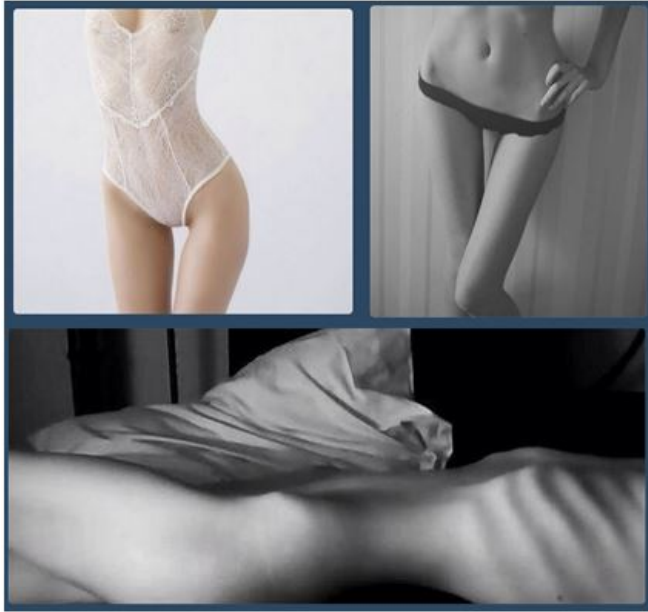
Compilation of Pro-Ana Imagery from Tumblr. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 29 May 2014. Web.

Figure 6 Compilation of Typical Pro-Ana Imagery Featuring Exposed Bodies

AnaGirl Empath is open about her experiences with anorexia and is empathetic to those who comment, often responding directly and offering support and information. She welcomes questions at the end of each YouTube video, inviting open dialogue and understanding about anorexia acceptance. In her self-introduction on the Project Shapeshift website, she describes her mission as "[fostering] unity, love, support, compassion and Optimal Wellness on Ana's Path" (*Project Shapeshift*).

AnaGirl Empath argues that individuals with eating disorders have a right to community without worrying about others who may try to co-opt their spaces or benefit negatively from them, which is why there are often clear guidelines about the sites' intended audiences. Her community does not support volitional anorexia and is explicit regarding who is and is not welcome among their ranks. She believes that the pro-ana movement has "saved lives, promoted

healing and balance along the journey, enabled those seeking optimal wellness to unite and

develop strategies to avoid the pitfalls, risks and complications associated with restrictive ED

behavior." In her YouTube videos, ProAna Empath argues that pro-ana sites do not want to make

others "sick" or "steal everyone's children" but rather exist for those truly suffering from eating

disorders seeking community and support through them ("Understanding [t]he ProAna

Movement II").

Through their rise via social networks, pro-ana communities are no longer exclusive to

those with eating disorders, and communities like Project Shapeshift are the minority where pro-

ana communities are concerned. Pro-ana is typically more explicitly "pro-anorexia" than

"anorexia acceptance" based on the images and messages shared within these communities. By

filming herself in hooded sweatshirts, ProAna Empath exhibits somewhat typical dress for one

suffering with an eating disorder—hiding her body from others rather than flaunting it. Even

though she actively does so to avoid triggering others, this is also a feature of anorexia:

"[wearing] baggy clothes, sometimes in layers, to hide fat, hide emaciation, and stay warm"

("Eating Disorders Warning Signs"). Pro-ana imagery tends to be the opposite—skin and bones,

literally—featuring barely clothed bodies with visibly protruding bones, women in bras and

panties or bikinis, or unclothed body parts that highlight an absence of fat.

My Friend, My Monster: Personifying Eating Disorders

The personification of anorexia and other eating disorders is an important feature within

pro-ana communities where the use of "ana" to describe anorexia and as a tag or search term is

fundamental. Names used to reference eating disorders include "ed" or "edna" (for eating

disorder) and "mia" (for bulimia), but "ana" is the most frequently referenced in the communities I analyze, particularly because anorexia is the focus. The personification of anorexia makes dialogue around the disorder unique among those who identify with eating disorders, particularly via social networks where the most common tag associated with thinspiration imagery is "ana." The original creator of the Shapeshift community, Narscissa (distinct from Pro-Ana Empath who has since taken over the site), is noted by Project Shapeshift as the first to write about "Ana" as an entity in her own right, which she originally referred to as "Anamadim." According to their website, "Due to the commonness of EDs experienced as the presence of an Entity within, separate from self, Narscissa's unique perspective found acceptance among many." Across pro-anorexia communities, anorexia is ubiquitously referred to as "Ana" and individuals indicate that they wrestle with, long for, hate, love, and experience a myriad of other emotions around "Ana."

Those in active recovery often claim to miss "her" or refer to her as an old friend or enemy. One example of the personification of Ana on a Tumblr "ana" tagged post reads:

I'm so hungry. It comes from the deep, black evil inside of me.

But with Ana I can win a fight against my evil. I CAN FIGHT YOU MONSTER!

The monster is hunger and the "hero" of this particular individual's struggle is Ana. Another Tumblr post features a thin woman with overlaid text that reads, "Starve, Ana said. So she did" (figure 7).

jayraymartinez (Reblogger). "Starve, Ana Said So She Did." Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 8 July 2014.

Figure 7 Tumblr Image Featuring Personification of Anorexia

Ana is the voice that dictates the behavior of those wrestling with dueling desires to eat and to be thin. One Tumblr user posted specific "rules of anorexia," including one that reads, "Ana must be the center of your life." Another plea reads, "Ana please kill me." Giving anorexia a concrete identity serves various potential functions for pro-ana participants and those in recovery from eating disorders. On her blog devoted to the personification of eating disorders, Natalie, a therapist and anorexic in recovery, writes about the functions of such personification:

> [O]bjectifying or personifying [anorexia] belies the fact that it is an "illness," and
>
> therefore, personifying it may be a form of denial, or a reason not to receive
>
> needed treatment; and/or attributing the ED to something external may be seen as
>
> a means of absolving responsibility for the consequences of the problem, or for
>
> change. (Natalie, "Reclaiming")

However, the use of Ana personified seems to undermine anorexia as a choice, since it grants an

outside force control over individual behavior. The conundrum is that, despite individuals

viewing Ana as an external force, the choice to eat or starve is wholly dependent on oneself.

Externalization of the eating disorder does not change the fact that it is an internal struggle and

that the behaviors required to "succeed" in achieving one's goals are anything but external.

The personification of anorexia is not limited to naming it, as community participants

also articulate it as a visual representation. On a website devoted to discussions about eating

disorders, "WhyEat.net," one user initiated a thread asking participants to share their ideas about

what anorexia would look like if represented as a figure ("If I HAD To Personify Anorexia").

Rainbow Eyes replied, "I guess if I had to personify anorexia, 'she' would be 'the other mother'

from the movie Coraline." She shares an image of the character that discussion participants agree

is both terrifying and accurate (figure 8).

If I HAD to Personify Anorexia She'd Look Like This. Digital image. *WhyEat.net*. Stealth Central, 19 Mar. 2011. Web. 28 Aug. 2014.

Figure 8 Image of the "Other Mother" from *Coraline*

XSJeans replies, "Omg this. When I first saw that movie, that character scared the shit out of me because I knew that if anorexia had an 'appearance' it would look like that, to me." Other descriptions of what anorexia "looks like" include that from barely_there, which reads, "My anorexia is my own voice. So when I picture it, I have this unrealistic version of me. My anorexia is a way hotter, way thinner, and aesthetically perfect version of me. (Trust me, I'm far from perfect)." Various users agree that they view anorexia as themselves at their thinnest or as children before weight was a concern. War_With_Life connects her childhood sexual abuse to her representation of her eating disorder, posting, "It's the child snatcher from [C]hitty [C]hitty [B]ang [B]ang, I see anorexia as some evil man who stole my childhood, I think this is because a lot of my problems are due to childhood sexual abuse" ("If I HAD To Personify Anorexia). In

her article, "Rhetoric of Anorexia: Eating as a Metaphor for Living," Amanda Marshall explains the need and/or tendency to personify anorexia as a lived metaphor. She writes, "Anorexic behavior is itself a type of figurative language. It manifests the natural human tendency to understand or cope with a complex concept by representing it in a simpler, more concrete form" (77). To externalize or turn personal behaviors into metaphors may make them easier to cope with or even conquer, absolving sufferers from the personal responsibility that their choices (or lack of choice for those who view eating disorders as illnesses or pathologies) entail (Natalie).

Analyzing Pro-Ana in Specific Virtual Communities

Texts and communication in pro-ana communities can be categorized as those focused on control, shame, self-loathing, support, information sharing, self-representation (or as Bernadette Wegenstein refers to it, selfploitation), and those that precipitate action. Control (and lack thereof) is frequently represented where starvation and exercise denotes control and eating is associated with failure or weakness. Shame is related to control and is often expressed when users have failed attempts to fast or in cases of being ashamed of bodies they perceive as fat. Photos of stomach fat or thighs that touch tend to be associated with feelings of shame in pro-ana texts. Self-loathing is also associated with being "fat," generally expressed through simple assertions such as "I hate my legs" or "I am disgusting." Support and information sharing are another integral component of pro-ana communities, where users provide tips and share food plans or diet strategies and offer invitations for private modes of communication (such as email

addresses or offers for one-on-one support). Requests for "ana buddies" are common (figure 9).
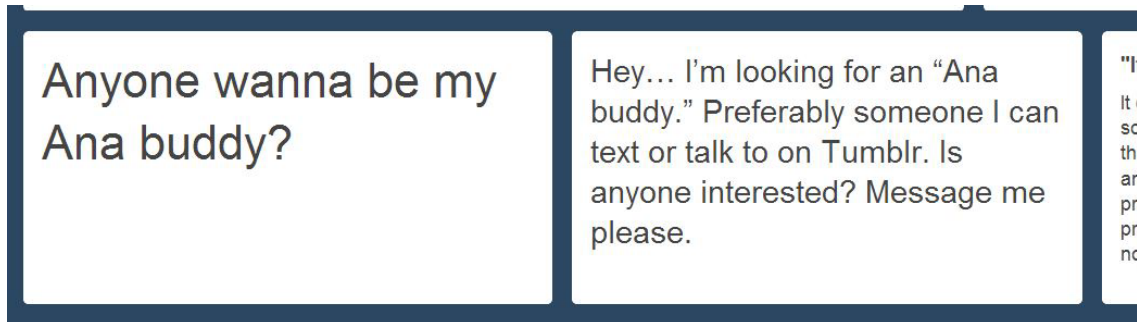
Ana Buddy Request Screenshot. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 29 May 2014.

Figure 9 Ana Buddy Requests on Tumblr

Self-representation is enacted through "selfies" or images of one's self, before and after photos, sharing stories about one's successes ("My mom bought me a Subway sub today and I threw it away") or failures ("I was supposed to fast today and couldn't even make it past noon"). Posts that precipitate action include those that encourage viewers to "like" photos to command users to act (One Like=One Hour of Fasting) (figure 10).
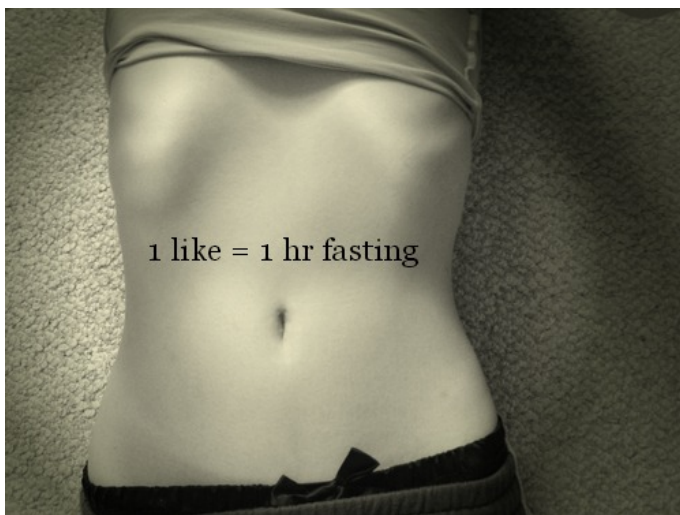
1 Like = 1 Hr Fasting. Digital image. *Instagram*. Instagram, 7 Aug. 2014. Web. 7 Aug. 2014.

Figure 10 Image Inviting Viewer Participation

Posts that precipitate action are particularly interesting in the dynamic they create between the individual and the group, inviting a community made up of millions to collude in one individual's idea of success or progress, which could potentially result in sickness or death.

On ten separate occasions between February and May 2014 I reviewed the first 100 results based on the following search terms on Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, and Google Images: "ana" and "pro-ana" (with or without dash). On Instagram, I searched "ana" and "thin" because the site does not permit hashtags that include the words "pro-ana," "thinspo," or "thinspiration." My searches ranged from ten days to one-month apart (refreshing results several times on the same day). My first examination functioned to create a list of the recurrent imagery represented by these terms to establish a guideline for what constitutes pro-ana imagery (versus "fitspiration" or "healthy body" imagery discussed in Chapter Three)

Expressions of desire for a thigh gap, thin legs, visible ribs or collarbones, and/or a flat stomach in pro-ana communities are indicative of the ideal body as represented in pro-ana culture(s). To distinguish, more objectively identify, and classify pro-ana texts, I organized imagery that most frequently appears into the following categories:

- Thigh gap: Imagery focused on the visible space or gap between typically very thin thighs (I discuss this category further since it is the most shared thinspiration and a phenomenon increasingly acknowledged by news sources beginning in January 2013).

- Thin legs: Full or partial leg imagery featuring extremely thin or emaciated legs, often with a hand wrapped around a thigh to emphasize its size; related to the

thigh gap, the thin leg category tends to include full legs rather than solely the thigh gap.

- Flat stomach: Images that emphasize abdominal areas without any visible fat, usually flat or concave, featuring women either standing in a front-facing position or lying on their backs.

- Skeletal Imagery: Emphasizes the visibility of bones and includes the following categories

  o Ribcage: Imagery featuring full or partially exposed rib cages, from front, side, or back view.

  o Hipbones: Images of visible hipbones, usually jutting out from a front or side view, whether on a woman in standing position or lying on her back.

  o Collarbones: Collarbone imagery generally shows only the collarbone, and commonly features a women's hand on or near the collarbone to emphasize the prominence of the collarbone. Individuals frequently express desire for a visible collarbone as part of pro-ana rhetoric.

  o Tiny wrists: Small wrists, often with hands wrapped around them to demonstrate their size, are indicative of small bone structure and though they do not necessarily denote thinness, they are a common image in pro-ana communities.

  o Visible spine: Images of women bent over with visible spinal columns are another regularly shared thinspo image and symbol of anorexia (Figure 11).
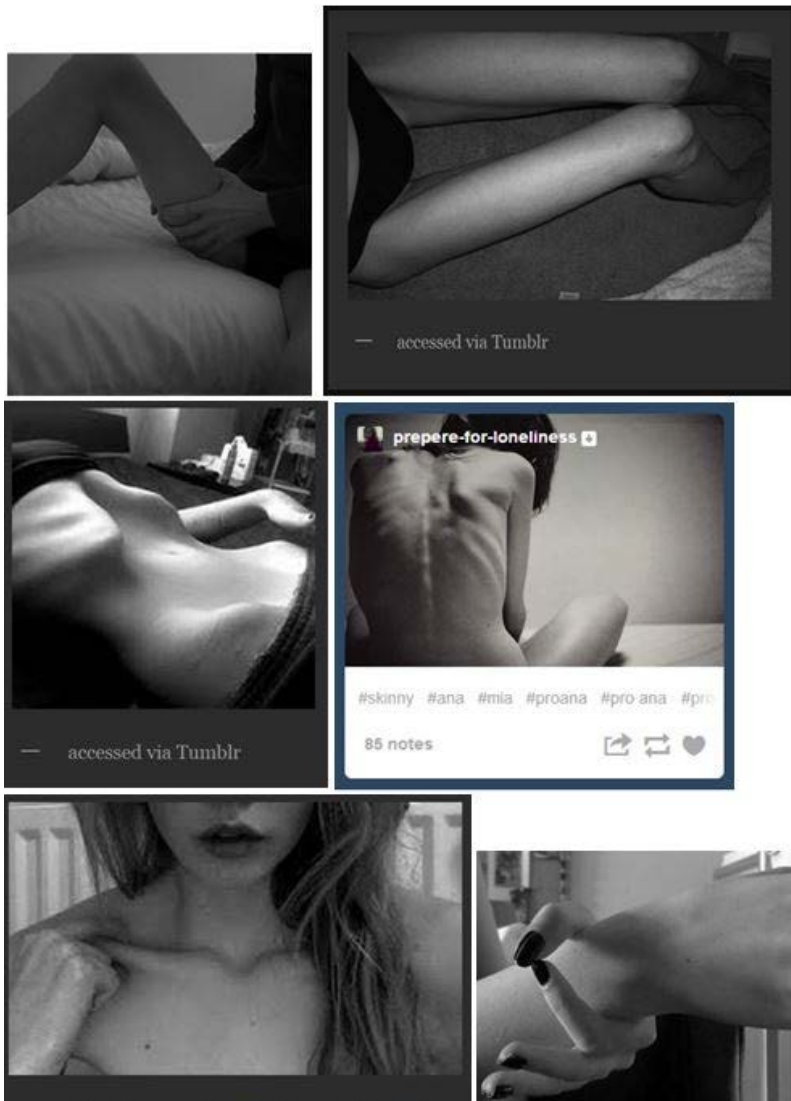
Compilation of Pro-Ana Imagery from Tumblr. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.

Figure 11 Compilation of Skeletal Imagery from Tumblr

Tumblr and Instagram image results included (in order of frequency) thigh gap, thin legs, ribcage, flat stomach, hipbones, and collarbones. Of the first 100 images on Tumblr, the average occurrence of thigh gap imagery constituted 24 out of 100 images; thin legs and flat stomach imagery constituted 13 each; rib cage, hipbones, collarbones, tiny wrists, and visible spines

(lumped into "skeletal imagery") constituted 32. This was consistent throughout my Tumblr

searches and did not vary much between "ana" or "pro-ana" (figure 12).

**Tumblr "Pro-Ana" Image Results
(based on first 100 images in each search)**

- thigh gap
- thin legs
- flat stomach
- skeletal imagery
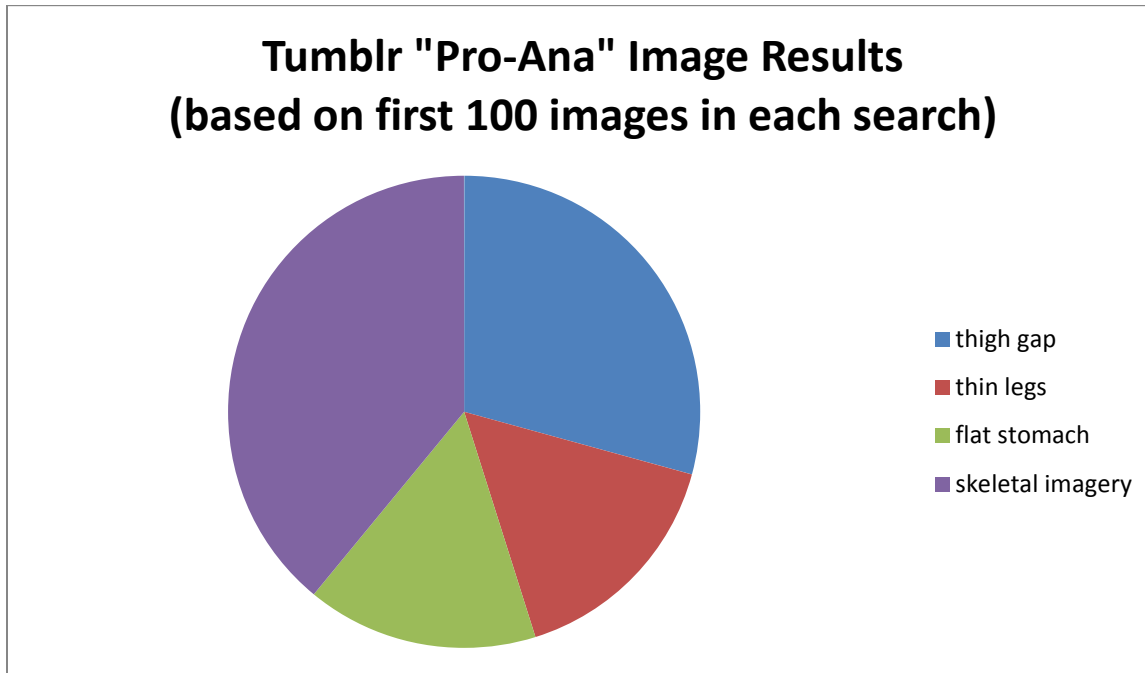
Preston-Sidler, Leandra. Tumblr "Pro-Ana" Image Search Results. Graph. Microsoft Word, 18 Nov. 2014.

Figure 12 Table Documenting Tumblr "Pro-Ana" Search Results

Other frequently shared imagery and/or written texts included tips or "thinspirations" that

function to aid in self-starvation, imagery of fat bodies (often of oneself) accompanied by

shaming or disgusted language, thin celebrities or models, scales, before and after imagery,

measuring tapes, food (particularly with little to no calories or fattening foods equated with

fatness or failure), eating as failure, expressions of desires to be thin or not to eat, and/or tensions

between the desire to eat and desire to be thin. Instagram findings were similar to Tumblr with

less repetition of the same images though a consistent presence of pro-ana imagery. Google

Image and YouTube searches of "ana" mostly resulted in images or videos of celebrities or

individuals named "Ana" so "pro-ana" was more fruitful to identify and assess the role of pro-ana communities on YouTube. Searching "ana" on Pinterest resulted in no pro-ana images but a "pro-ana" search returned thinspo imagery though typically more "mainstream" thin bodies or health-related texts rather than the emaciated bodies or skeletal imagery found in other pro-ana communities.

YouTube is a bit different in configuration so required a varied approach to categorization. Rather than basing findings on images, I examined videos and comments. Because of time constraints, as some videos are quite long, I identified how many videos among the first one hundred dealt with anorexia vs. other "Anas" and examined those. Only two of the first hundred specifically focused on anorexia: one a short documentary and one a self-made video documenting a young woman's experience with (and recovery from) anorexia; what's notable about YouTube is that regardless of the fact that there are two hits for "ana," each result brings up hundreds of suggested videos on the sidebar based on anorexia. Thus, if one is looking for pro-ana results based on a search of "ana," s/he will not find them in initial results but can identify pro-ana videos based on YouTube recommendations. There are also "topic" sections that assist users in identifying videos emphasizing particular topics, such as pro-ana (figure 13).
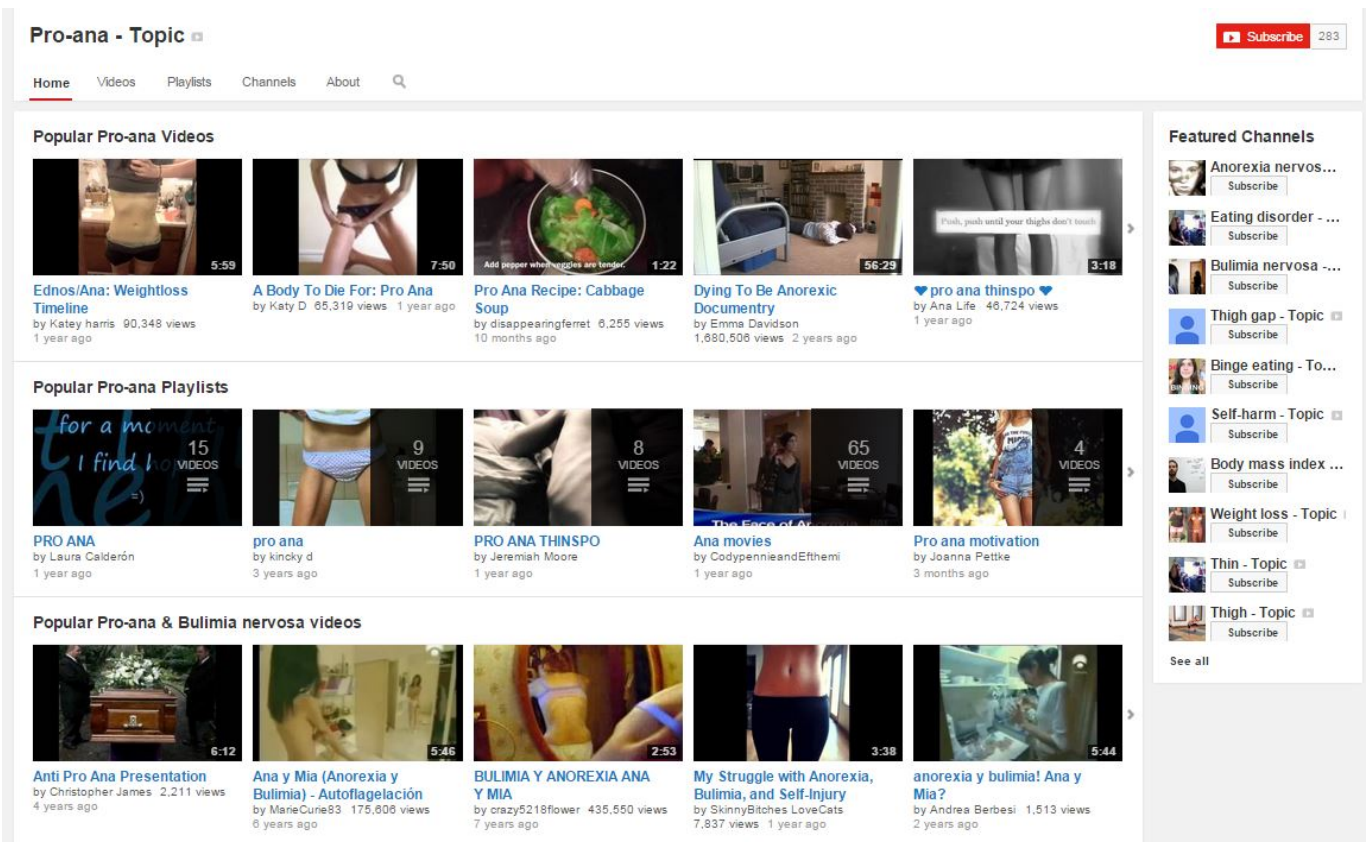
"Pro-Ana: Topic." *YouTube*. YouTube, LLC, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

Figure 13 YouTube "Topic" Section Presenting and Categorizing Pro-Ana Videos

In each virtual community I examined, "pro-ana" searches were fruitful though Pinterest was the

least productive regarding the proliferation of "pro-ana" imagery.

After conducting my research and analysis, I expected to arrive at an easy assessment or

conclusion (i.e. that Instagram is a hotbed for pro-ana while Pinterest does not foster such

communities); unfortunately my findings were more complicated because of the different

construction of each site, the varied communities that populate each network, the moderation

strategies employed by each, and the "messy" nature of some of these communities (consisting

of millions of users, for example). Essentially, pro-ana communities are prevalent and active

across the sites I examined but I concluded that Tumblr is the most active and Pinterest is the

least, most likely due to the demographic and focus of each ("Tumblr Demographics by

Quantcast"). I based my criteria for establishing a site as more or less active in relation to pro-

ana on the number of posts tagged "pro-ana" and how frequently they appear when refreshing

pages. Tumblr caters to a younger community interested in a range of topics while Pinterest

caters most commonly to users interested in arts, crafts, cooking, and fashion. Though "About

Pinterest" invites users to, "Discover ideas for any project or interest, hand-picked by people like

you" ("About Pinterest"), perusing Pinterest without entering any search terms indicates its

emphasis on "projects" based around home, cuisine, fashion, and party planning (figure 14).
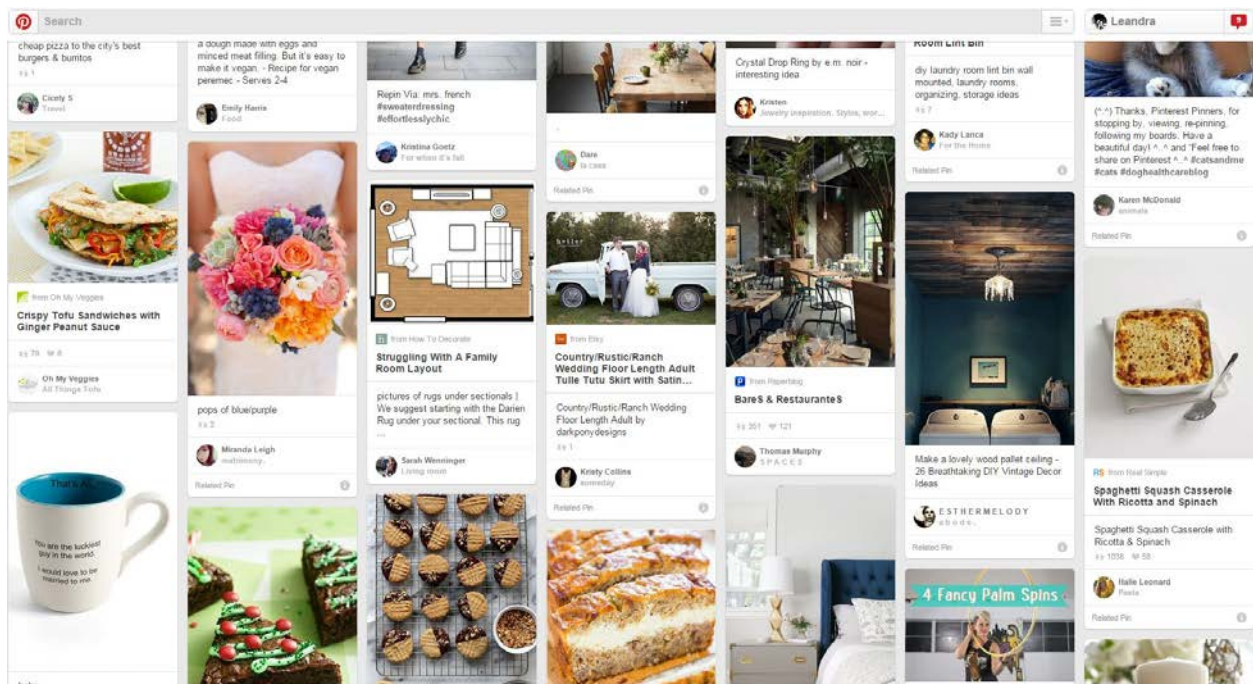
"Pinterest." *Pinterest*. Pinterest, 19 Nov. 2014. Web. 19 Nov. 2014.

Figure 14 Pinterest Screenshot of Results with No Search Term Entered

While both Tumblr and Pinterest host a broad range of users and topics, it is clear through my

research (and any basic search on each site) that these differ most explicitly in terms of support

versus hostility to pro-ana communities. As demonstrated, Pinterest includes pro-ana and fitspo imagery but not to the same extent as Tumblr, Instagram, or YouTube. YouTube and Instagram pro-ana communities are quite active, while Google Images simply compile imagery from all social networks so is more neutral regarding pro-ana imagery.

<div align="center">The Thigh Gap and Other Body Parts</div>

A phenomenon born out of pro-ana virtual communities is a mass preoccupation with "the thigh gap." While desiring thin legs or a thigh gap is not a novel concept, pro-ana culture ignited it with new force and the obsession with thigh gaps has spread throughout cyberspace. A Google search of "thigh gap" returned 16.5 million results on May 30, 2014, with the first hit being a Wikipedia page devoted to the thigh gap followed by a list of current news articles about thigh gaps. The second was "How to Get a Thigh Gap in 26 Steps." As the most common image represented as thinspirations in pro-ana communities, the thigh gap is more than a preoccupation—it is the ultimate symbol of the body ideal reflected in both mainstream and pro-ana communities. It is a particularly troubling representation because it is physically impossible for some individuals to achieve a thigh gap regardless of how thin they become, as it is a feature tied to genetic bone structure ("Thigh Gap is Nothing to Strive For"). Since a thigh gap is even more unattainable than some of the other features shared through thinspirations, it is potentially more dangerous to desire for those willing to go to extremes to achieve particular features.

"Thigh gap" as a term has achieved such notoriety in relation to pro-anorexia that it generates a warning on Tumblr and Pinterest. Users across social networks have adopted usernames that integrate the term, such as "thighgapdream," "thighgaploverr," and "thigh-

<div align="center">68</div>

_gap_please"; both Tumblr and Instagram feature hundreds of related usernames. Even Pinterest, which tends to be more hostile to pro-ana communities, is rife with thigh gap imagery, with user pages devoted to both images of thigh gaps and suggestions on how to achieve them; "Operation Thigh Gap," "How To Get a Thigh Gap," and "Inner Thigh Gaps" are three of many examples. A Tumblr search for "thigh gap" results in thousands (perhaps even millions) of images of thin thighs and thigh gaps, most featuring only thigh gaps without faces or whole bodies attached.

The thigh gap is one prominent example of how women's bodies are cut into pieces and objectified through imagery in popular culture. Bodies are typically presented as parts rather than whole in thinspirations but, beyond representations, pro-ana participants actually integrate their own body parts into the equation, as in the case of a thinspo image that features various body parts and invites viewers to message the poster words such as "abs," "legs," and/or "quads" associated with particular activities: "Message me abs and I'll do 20 situps" or "Message me legs and I'll do 20 jumping jacks" (figure 15).

Message Me Abs... Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 9 Aug. 2014. Web. 30 May 2014.

Figure 15 Image Requesting User Participation and Featuring Bodies in Parts

In this case, the relationship between viewers and viewed is anything but passive even if the

bodies themselves are objectified (and/or self-objectified). Other texts in pro-ana communities

feature thighs without thigh gaps or considered too large, such as users' own thighs accompanied

by expressions about hating one's thighs or desire for a thigh gap. Often it is a simple written

expression without an image tagged "thighgap," such as "I want skinny legs" or "I wish my

thighs didn't touch." The thigh gap has become part of pro-ana rhetoric so much that it has

joined the ranks of "thinspo" and "proana" as censored tags and is not even searchable on

Instagram (figure 16).

wannabethin_3 (Reblogger). Collar Bones, Hip Bones, Thigh Gap. Digital image. *Instagram.* Instagram, 29 May 2014. Web. 6 Jun. 2014.

Figure 16 Image of Thigh Gap in Rank with Common Pro-Ana Features

Censorship and Moderation of Social Networks and Virtual Communities

Perhaps the most interesting development among social networks regarding pro-ana content are warnings that accompany particular searches. When one searches for pro-ana imagery (using "proana," "ana," or "thinspo" tags) on Tumbler, the following warning appears on the screen before allowing results to be viewed:

Everything okay?

If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, NEDA is here

to help: call 1–800–931–2237 or chat with them online.

If you are experiencing any other type of crisis, consider talking confidentially

with a volunteer trained in crisis intervention at www.imalive.org, or

anonymously with a trained active listener from 7 Cups of Tea.

And, if you could use some inspiration and comfort in your dashboard, go ahead

and follow NEDA on Tumblr. ("Everything Okay?")

Once the warning is viewed, users can choose to steer away from content or continue to results.

This warning has changed several times throughout my research. For example, the suggestion to

"follow NEDA on Tumblr" appeared more recently in my research (late 2014), perhaps because

NEDA created a Tumblr account in response to pro-ana activity. Instagram posts a similar

warning when searching for pro-ana material:

Please be advised: These images may contain graphic content.

For information and support with eating disorders,

visit nationaleatingdisorders.org. ("Please Be Advised")

Instagram also provides the option to leave the content or proceed. Instagram has taken the extra

measure of removing content with hashtags such as "thinspo" or "proana," where Tumblr has

not, despite claims that Tumblr has banned pro-ana content from its site. Conscious of these

warnings, users in pro-ana communities often discuss them, as k8thinegr8 posts, "You know it's

getting bad when all your searches on Tumblr have that self-help warning pop-up."

Banning content seems to contradict Tumblr's mission. The description of "What Tumblr

is For" on Tumblr's "Community Guidelines" page reads, "Tumblr celebrates creativity. We

want you to express yourself freely and use Tumblr to reflect who you are, and what you love,

think, and stand for" ("Community Guidelines"). However, In February 2012, Tumblr published

an update to its staff blog indicating that, while it is a space for free expression, they will not condone self-harm behaviors: "Our Content Policy has not, until now, prohibited blogs that actively promote self-harm. These typically take the form of blogs that glorify or promote anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders; self-mutilation; or suicide. These are messages and points of view that we strongly oppose, and don't want to be hosting." On their guidelines for using the site, they explicitly state that they do not permit the "Promotion or Glorification of Self-Harm," warning users:

> Don't post content that actively promotes or glorifies self-harm. This includes content that urges or encourages others to: cut or injure themselves; embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or commit suicide rather than, e.g., seeking counseling or treatment, or joining together in supportive conversation with those suffering or recovering from depression or other conditions. Dialogue about these behaviors is incredibly important and online communities can be extraordinarily helpful to people struggling with these difficult conditions. We aim for Tumblr to be a place that facilitates awareness, support and recovery, and we will remove only those posts or blogs that cross the line into active promotion or glorification of self-harm. ("A New Policy Against Self-Harm Blogs")

Tumblr operates on an intersection between free speech and resistance to promoting dangerous behaviors, evidently aware of the importance of free expression but recognizing a need to mediate the use of their space for self-harm promotion. While pro-anorexia based tags are still permitted and utilized, users have adapted their tags to fly under the radar of moderators on such

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sites, perhaps in response to such warnings and censorship, which includes the deletion of pro-ana pages.

It is likely that the prevalence of such content and overwhelming number of users prevents moderators from actually "banning" particular tags or perhaps the use of warnings without censorship is a nod to free speech. The modification of tags by users can be seen as subversive or just savvy, as they attempt to maintain control over self-created communities despite attempts to silence by those who ultimately own the sites and servers they occupy. The web is a constellation of pro-ana images, hyperlinking one site to another, providing access to spaces one may never be exposed to otherwise. Algorithms that have no mediating force, no moral compass or concern for who is viewing them or whether or not they should be directed to other, often more intense or dangerous sites or communities organize many of these links. The internet is about information access and whatever information one is seeking—whether recipes for dinner or recipes for starvation—one will find. The internet is, after all, a space that represents freedom of information and self-ownership. If one chooses to starve her or himself using the internet for support, do we (or more importantly does the internet, as a nebulous collection of 'we's') have a responsibility to intervene? Perhaps the internet is not the place for intervention but the place for invention, despite the outcome(s).

"I'm Doing this for Me": The Tension Between Agency and Complicity

The tension between agency and complicity is palpable in pro-ana communities. By actively citing anorexia as a lifestyle *choice* rather than a disorder, participants in pro-ana communities assert that they are in control—agents rather than victims. Participants create and

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maintain community based upon self-ownership and choice but ultimately aspire to ideals

dictated by dominant culture, reflecting the complex relationship between the individual and

culture, the private and public. Warner assesses the relationship between private struggle and

outward disclosure in his assessment of what enables a sense of community in public spaces,

writing that, "…when people address publics, they engage in struggles—at varying levels of

salience to consciousness, from calculated tactic to mute cognitive noise—over the conditions

that bring them together as a public" (12). Women are a public of their own in many ways,

joined in shared struggles around gender constructs, bodies, and imposed limitations. The

individual does not exist in a vacuum but in a broader cultural context. In her study of the

increasing prevalence of eating disorders in America, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber argues that

young women have to learn to "be a body" (108). Part of learning to be a body is comparative—

comparing oneself to others, whether in "real life" or in the images that surround us. We are

implicitly and explicitly taught to value what our society values and learn "to see ourselves as

others see us" (109). A crucial piece of culture that teaches us what we are supposed to look like

is media imagery. Media imagery generally reflects what Jean-Francois Lyotard refers to as a

"metanarrative" constructed by dominant culture to create, reinforce, and maintain specific ideals

about gender, appearance, and power in our culture, something experienced on personal and

public, or communal, levels.

As Hesse-Biber, Bordo, Butler, and others argue, biology is interpreted through cultural

standards; the visible or concrete physiological differences that sex denotes become social as

soon as they interact with culture. Comparing one's own body to bodies represented in images is

a common motivating strategy in pro-ana communities. Such images are key cultural

components in the production of docile bodies, though individuals often view personal appearance as choice or an agentic form of expression. Wearing makeup or losing weight to please oneself is a conundrum since we cannot know from where such desires originate but rather draw conclusions from industries built on making women feel bad about their "natural" or unmediated bodies and/or appearance(s).Butler insists that such "recitations" of cultural ideals constitute agency, but only "within the law" (qtd. in Salih 55). She at once implies that agency can be constrained but does not reject the possibility for radical interception or subversion, which I address further in Chapters Three and Five.

One result of conflicting messages largely disseminated through visual media (who we *are* versus who we are *supposed to be*) are culturally impelled disorders such as body dysmorphia, anorexia, and bulimia. This is not to say that eating disorders are the result of media but to acknowledge it as a contributing factor in contemporary contexts. Examining eating disorders necessitates, as Brumberg argues, that we transcend the biology/culture dichotomy and look at these issues in more complex terms. Bordo argues that we must regard the construction of individual identities as inseparable from social processes. She argues that, "The psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations, [are] characteristic expressions of that culture" (141). According to Bordo, these psychopathologies are manifestations of what is wrong with our culture, stemming from gender and beauty constructs. Otherwise healthy women make themselves sick, women's lives are consumed by body loathing, and girls turn to the internet for support to stave off hunger. Women do not have the luxury of neutral conceptions of their bodies, of moving through life unaffected by cultural inscriptions. "Our bodies, no less than anything else that is human, are constituted by culture"

(142). Catherine MacKinnon refers to the objectification of women by cultural imperatives and the internalization of that objectification as a process of "thingification," which leads us to treat our bodies as separate from ourselves (124). But what compels women to go along with the "grand narrative" that is the ideal gendered body?

Part of the grand narrative produced by patriarchal culture and carried out by everyone in it to some extent is internalization of norms and ideals. In her introduction to *Unbearable Weight*, Bordo situates eating disorders as "arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being *experienced* in terms of power and control" (27). We do not follow culture, we *are* culture and so, like breathing in our sleep, it is something we may not be aware of doing—we just do it. Critics argue that referring to women's beauty or body practices as complicit perpetuate "a top-down discursive strategy whereby an oppressor/victim binary serves to eradicate any notions of personal agency on the part of the subject herself" (Polack 248). I do not deny the role of personal agency or choice in pro-anorexia communities or behaviors but rather argue, along with the feminist theorists I cite here, that the concept of choice is constrained by cultural contexts.

In *Beauty and Misogyny,* Sheila Jeffreys posits beauty ideals as an integral part of women's subordination. She writes, "There are very real material forces involved in constructing […] 'choice' for women" (113). Speaking to the challenges in recognizing or transgressing these forces, she continues, "The absence of any alternative culture within which women can identify a different way to be a woman enforces oppressive practices. The subordination of women, then, because it is so pervasive a feature of […] culture will (if uncontested) appear to be natural—and

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because it is natural, unalterable" (8). Women collude in the (self-)enforcement of beauty

standards, often without recognizing them as oppressive and even claiming it as an active choice

made by and for themselves, as demonstrated by Instagram user "skinnyforme," who shares an

image/text that reads, "It's not society's idea of beauty. It's my idea of my own happiness"

(figure 17).
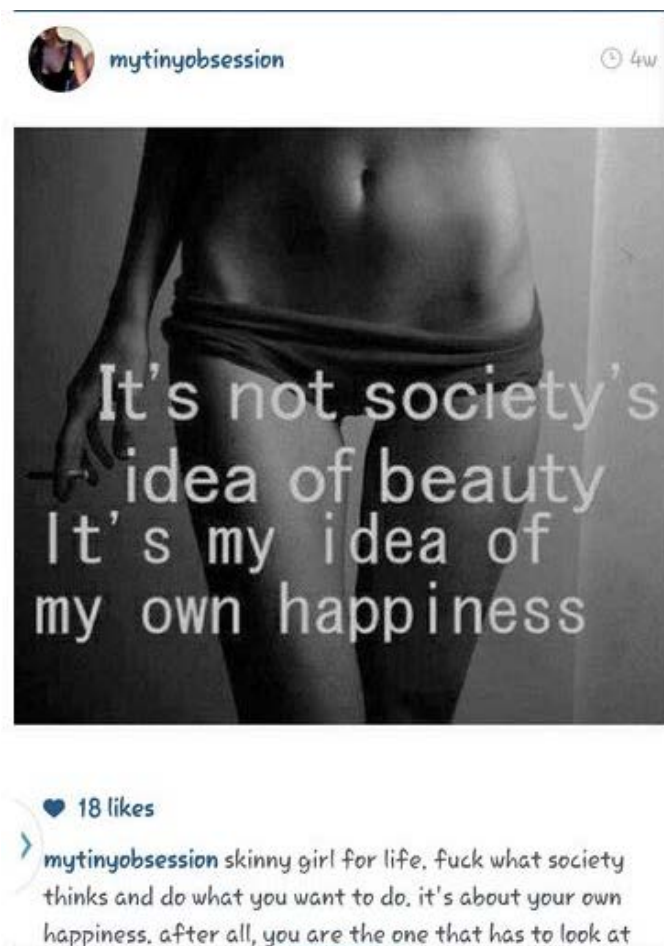
mytinyobsession (Reblogger). It's Not Society's Idea... Digital image. *Instagram*. Instagram, 22
May 2014. Web. 22 May 2014.

Figure 17 Image Demonstrating User Perception of Agency

The assertion that one's own idea of happiness is linked to physical appearance without the role

of external factors is paradoxical because "the physical" in the sense of appearance serves others

as viewers or "lookers." As both the user name ("mytinyobsession") and her own comment that begins "skinny girl for life" imply, her desires and idea of happiness are based on size or weight rather than physical or emotional health. She thinks she is enforcing thinness on herself for her own happiness but as Jeffreys reinforces, choice is heavily informed by cultural factors—in this case, beauty and body ideals. Foucault's docile body is of particular importance to a discussion of pro-anorexia communities because participants tend to reject the notion that they are simply adhering to cultural standards, often by surpassing or representing those standards more acutely. According to Sandra Bartky, women appear to choose because no exercise of obvious force is required to make women engage in beauty practices (qtd. in Jeffreys 7).

The social surveillance of women's bodies in most aspects of culture, and for my purposes, internet culture specifically, fosters conditions that impel self-surveillance and self-discipline as "normal." As Foucault argues, "Knowledge and disciplinary power relations combine to form bodily practices […] that control and 'normalise' the body within different cultural parameters, producing docile bodies that can be mastered, 'subjected, used, transformed and improved'" (74). In Western beauty culture, docile bodies are achieved through dieting, cosmetics, skin care, surgical procedures, exercise, and starvation—for some by whatever means necessary. Foucault cites language as a key variable in explaining how social power is exercised, pertinent to pro-ana communities, in that both images and written texts are primary modes of communicating and supporting body-based imperatives. "You're Fat. Stop Eating." is one example of a text shared hundreds of times on Tumblr and Instagram. This simple expression reflects an attitude disseminated across various texts and images, as many involve guilt around

eating, associations between fat and food, and self-loathing when one "fails" by eating. A

frequently shared image/text reads:

> Do you want hipbones or pizza?
>
> A gap between your thighs or cake?
>
> Collarbones or sweets?
>
> A flat stomach or soda?
>
> Don't give up on perfection.

The text is layered top of a series of images of women with said features, situating food in

contrast to the body desired by pro-ana participants (figure 18).

Don't Give up on Perfection. Digital Image. *Tumblr.* Tumblr, Inc. 6 June 2014. Web. 6 June 2014.

Figure 18 Image Demonstrating Tension Between Food or "Perfection"

Supporting claims of self-ownership, another image of a woman's skeletal back reads, "I'm doing this for me," creating a startling contrast between a culturally constructed ideal and an assertion of desire to please the self and the self alone (figure 19).

I'm Doing This for Me. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 9 Sept. 2014. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.

Figure 19 Image Representing User Perception of Agency

The bodies represented in pro-ana sites are extreme manifestations of an already dramatic

ideal and the utmost self-discipline that self-starvation requires. Two pro-ana image-texts,

"Starvation is Control" and "Control Yourself" articulate the tension of eating disorders as a

simultaneous state of control and lack of control, an imperative and a challenge. In her article

"Pro-anorexia and the Internet: A Tangled Web of Representation and (Dis)Embodiment," Elisa

Burke speaks to the relationship between agency and complicity demonstrated through pro-ana

communities: "Pro-anorexia exemplifies a complex and contradictory set of meanings about the

cultural and subjective management of the female body in which notions of individual agency

and empowerment are confused with those of social oppression and control" (62). Anorexia is

perhaps the pinnacle of self-surveillance since "success" is so dramatically apparent. The

anorexic woman is often praised for her success as weight loss brings personal and social rewards, especially as beauty ideals are increasingly extreme. Her sense of accomplishment is typically short-lived; however, as the anorexic is not in control of her disease or the cultural imperatives that prompt it but in our image-based beauty culture, even sickness is preferable to fatness. In a culture so heavily invested in gender categories and rewards and punishments for those who abide (and do not, respectively), do women have a choice but to collude in their own oppression?

The answer to that somewhat rhetorical question is both yes and no. Some women abide by societal standards to gain and maintain power in a patriarchal culture that limits access to power otherwise, recognizing what they are doing and why, even if their choice is constrained by culture. Many women abide and, if they do access power, it may be less subversive because they are still obeying cultural standards. Other women choose to actively resist such constructs and successfully exist beyond boundaries that dictate who they should be. While there are consequences—social ostracization or criticism, discrimination, and difficulty accessing power based on appearance or "beauty," women who may find liberation through resistance and the possibilities of being recognized and valued for one's mind or accomplishments over one's appearance. As Grosz astutely recognizes, "The practices of femininity can readily function in certain contexts that are difficult to ascertain in advance, as modes of guerrilla subversion of patriarchal codes, although the line between compliance and subversion is always a fine one, difficult to draw with any certainty" (144). One's physical body and/or ability to occupy standards of beauty play important roles, as well, as not all women can "fit the mold" even when they attempt to. Their unattainability makes beauty norms even more problematic and dangerous.

When discussing agency and complicity, pro-ana communities may benefit from being considered as two separate categories: women who actually struggle with or *claim* eating disorders ("anorexia acceptance" groups such as Project Shapeshift) and women seeking weight loss by co-opting pro-ana tools, rhetoric, and community (the vast majority of pro-ana communities on Tumblr and Instagram). The distinction is that women and girls who utilize online resources to achieve beauty ideals in (semi-)socially acceptable terms potentially increase their social capital and thus, access to power. However, by surpassing "ideals" and crossing the line into starvation and possibly death as in cases of anorexia, that power is subsumed by the frailty of emaciation and the isolation it ultimately entails, despite the company (or comfort) provided by online communities.

<u>The Virtual Gaze</u>

As demonstrated, images are a primary mode of interaction and communication within pro-ana communities. Users express desired material outcomes most prominently through visual exchanges and image sharing, including those of users, inviting others to participate in their successes, failures, and ideals visually, or through what I call the virtual gaze. The gaze, most notably referred to as "the male gaze," is a well-established concept in feminist and film theories where women are viewed as objects rather than possessors of the gaze, controlled by heteronormative factors. John Berger succinctly summarizes the male gaze in his 1972 book *Ways of Seeing*, when he writes:

> Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines
> not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women

to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female.

Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a

sight. (47)

Laura Mulvey elaborates on the male gaze through a critical feminist perspective in her 1975

essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," explicitly articulating that women were (and are)

the object of the gaze because those behind the camera tend to be heterosexual men attempting to

control women by objectifying them (8). In pro-ana communities, the gaze is not technically

male, but rather female, since participants in pro-ana communities are primarily women and

girls. The female gaze in pro-ana spaces regulates other females (as they regulate themselves).

Mulvey also recognizes this in her claim that women look at themselves through the eyes of men

even when the viewers are themselves or other women (11). Based around imagery and

viewership, pro-ana communities are dependent on "the gaze"—looking and being looked at.

The gaze functions as a control mechanism, under which women monitor and modify

their behaviors even if no one is actually watching them. Though Foucault does not refer to

women specifically, his discussion of the gaze is relevant to women's body and beauty practices:

There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An

inspecting gaze, a gaze which each individual under its weight will end by

interiorizing to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus

exercising his surveillance over and against himself. (56)

The male gaze controls women's behaviors even when there is no active looker (such as within a

panopticon) because women are conditioned to function as if the gaze is ever present. Pro-ana

community participants construct a gaze in a concerted effort to control their own behaviors and

implicitly encourage similar behaviors in others and, in active virtual spaces, there is always someone looking.

Relating feminist conceptions of the "male gaze" to beauty technologies, Wegenstein deploys a term that combines these ideas: the cosmetic gaze. "The cosmetic gaze is one through which the act of looking at our bodies and those of others is informed by the techniques, expectations, and strategies of bodily modification" (Cosmetic 2). Connected to the male gaze, the cosmetic gaze adds the possibility that we can use technology to change our appearances and more effectively meet expectations of the male gaze. In pro-ana spaces, these expectations are based on body size and weight, as well as features such as visible rib cages, collarbones, and thigh gaps. Pro-ana texts tend to focus on individual body parts, intentionally objectifying bodies. Balsamo writes about the fragmentation of female bodies the gaze impels, particularly applicable to pro-ana communities:

> This gaze disciplines the unruly female body by first fragmenting it into isolated parts—face, hair, legs, breasts—and then redefining those parts as inherently flawed and pathological. When a woman internalizes a fragmented body image and accepts its "flawed" identity, each part of the body then becomes a site for the "fixing" of her physical abnormality. (56-7)

As previously noted, thinspo imagery is typically composed of body parts rather than whole bodies (though both are represented) in need of repair to inspire or demand action on the parts of users to change their own bodies. Thin thighs, exposed ribs, flat stomachs, small wrists, and emaciated bodies without heads are core texts in pro-ana communities.

Wegenstein reads the gaze through various visual mediums, positing "the screen" as a "visual regime of a society" and noting how the body becomes another type of screen: "The screen onto which the cosmetic gaze is projected includes the body itself as well as […] reality TV and internet" (Cosmetic 1). As in advertising, participants in pro-ana communities are not simply the object of the gaze, they are also the commodity. In *The Mechanical Bride,* McLuhan refers to the phenomenon of using women's body parts to sell items as "messages with legs" (24); often the item being sold is not even pictured in an advertisement because what is being sold is an idea, an image, a representation reflected by the objectified female body, much like the ideal represented in pro-ana communities only the message has extremely thin legs and echoes sentiments such as "Not Skinny Enough."

Virtual Being(s) and Becomings in Online Communities

Online communities provide a safe space for individuals who could not otherwise share their experiences or express desires deemed "sick" or "abnormal" by families, peers, and the medical community. For women seeking support and/or community around eating disorders, the internet provides a type of home—one simultaneously private and public; private in that they can share personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences with some sense of anonymity, but clearly public in that anyone can access these private assertions via search terms or by merely stumbling upon one's page or post. Whatever specific social network pro-ana participants rely on, private confession can be publicly displayed and accessed, resulting in support, feedback, and communication that would not be possible without such forums. This speaks to Warner's "counterpublics," which teach us "to recognize in newer and deeper ways how privacy is

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publicly constructed" (62). The private/public binary is disrupted radically in social networks where one can choose to expose as much or little as one wishes, using screen names that permit anonymity and represent specific identities. Screen names such as "imstilltoofat," "deardarlingskeleton," and "93pounds" maintain privacy as desired while still preserving a sense of identity constructed around their function or purpose within pro-ana communities.

Common themes illustrated around individual experiences with eating disorders and body struggles in pro-ana communities include feeling misunderstood, isolated, or out of control; seeking support or connection; being unable to cope; conveying the tension between needing and needing to be rid of their eating disorders; struggling with medical or familial interpretations of their disorder; describing ambivalence about recovery; admitting self-loathing, and, ultimately, expressing a desire to look a certain way. As the repetition of these tropes indicates, community is formed around shared needs and desires. In *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People,* Michael Strangelove writes, "self-representational video practices," and, as I argue, all expressions in pro-ana virtual communities, are domains of "self-expression, community, and public confession" (4). The notion of public confession seems like a paradox but it is the primary mode of being in pro-ana social networks. For individuals whose disorders and desires have rendered them isolated, participation in social networks provides a sense of community and shared consciousness not otherwise available. These communities also help users negotiate and construct identity around their disorders, and participation in them can be transformative (for positive or negative outcomes) and, as Strangelove writes, can "represent a new mode of self-construction, multiple selfhood, and identity maintenance" (82).In *Imagined Communities,* Benedict Anderson writes about communities as "shared imaginings," which is

what pro-ana networks represent—a coming-together of individuals bound by shared desires or imagined selves. Whether or not these communities are "real" or imagined is beside the point.

Pro-ana communities represent and deploy a specific shared desire or imagining—achieving a particular body. Social networks devoted to pro-ana are dependent on users' mutual desires and the means they utilize to achieve them. Though virtual, pro-ana networks share features of face-to-face social networks in that they situate the body at the forefront of communication. In "Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture," Debra Gimlin emphasizes the role of the physical body in social settings. She writes:

> The shared attitudes and practices of social groups are played out at the level of the body, revealing cultural notions of distinctions based on age, sexual orientation, social class, gender, and ethnicity. But cultural rules are not only revealed through the body; they also shape the ways in which the body performs and appears. Ultimately, it is through the body's actions and demeanor that the self is constructed and displayed to the social world. (Gimlin 3)

In virtual communities, particularly those based around physical bodies and/or ideals, this is still the case, demonstrated most readily in pro-ana communities where images of bodies and narratives around performance of eating behaviors and their physical outcomes are one of the most common forms of communication. Users sometimes note whether an image is of themselves or someone else, reifying the presence of a physical body behind the screen. The merging of the virtual with the "real" where online social networks exist complicates notions of being, particularly when physical realities play out in virtual spaces.

Internet culture and the increased emphasis on virtual interaction have the capacity to undermine body and beauty ideals in their possibilities to shift the emphasis from bodies to minds and in their forms of interaction that deemphasize the physical. However, as pro-ana online communities demonstrate, the internet has not left the material body behind but, rather, shapes and controls it more explicitly than ever. Haraway's cyborg represents technology's potential to disrupt gender as an overriding material force for individuals but, while technology can and should be used to undermine gendered constructs, it often replicates and reinforces them (Balsamo 33). Participants in pro-ana communities can be read as cyborgs in that they operate on a border between the physical and virtual, using virtual texts and communications to modify material bodies. However, they emphasize the body through technology, sharing "selfies," "before and after" photos to document weight loss, and countless images of desired bodies, turning cyborg potential in on itself (figure 20).
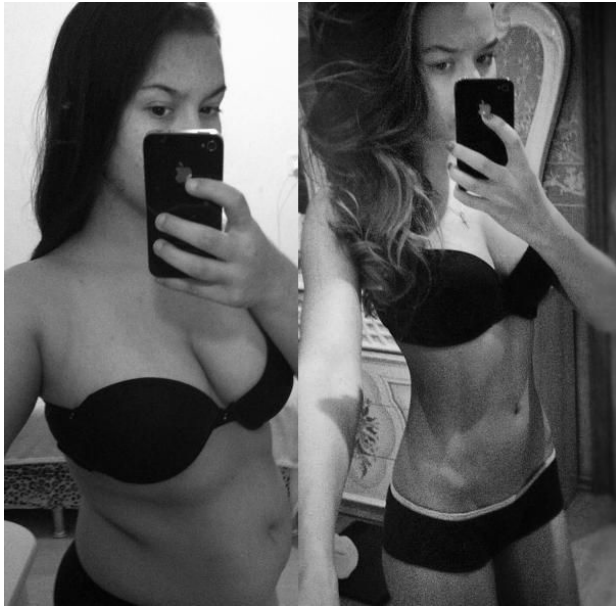
Mirella Vieira (Reblogger). Before and After Selfie. Digital image. *Pinterest*. Pinterest, 9 Sept. 2014. Web. 9 Sept. 2014.

Figure 20 Before and After "Selfie" Example

Users in pro-ana communities inhabit a type of augmented reality in which material bodies exist on the interface between physicality and imagery, where virtual texts represent desired material bodies. As Jurgensen articulates, "digital and material realities dialectically co-construct each other." Social networks "are not separate from the physical world but have everything to do with it and the physical world has as much to do with digital socializing" (Jurgensen). Pro-ana communities are based on users "real" or current physical bodies and an imagined (and in some cases, imaginary) future body.

Hayles articulates the overlap of (but difference between) physical and virtual or imagined bodies as a distinction between bodies and embodiment. She argues that bodies are discrete but inseparable from embodiment, as bodies are intrinsically linked to the material

realities or social and physiological contexts of embodiment but not the same, clarifying her distinction in *How We Became Posthuman*:

> In contrast to the body, embodiment is contextual, enmeshed within the specifics of place, time, physiology and culture, which together compose enactment. Embodiment never coincides exactly with "the body," however that normalized concept is understood. Whereas the body is an idealized form that gestures toward a Platonic reality, embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference. (196)

The texts shared in pro-ana communities represent bodies while embodied users who exchange these texts struggle with material or physiological realities. The strategies they utilize to achieve their goals include dieting, fasting, starvation, and (over)exercise—all forms of enactment. In her Prologue to *How We Became Posthuman,* Hayles emphasizes the flesh body as reality and the virtual body as a representation produced through "verbal and semiotic markers" via the electronic environment. She identifies the convergence of these bodies as cyborgs, since the "enacted and represented bodies are brought into conjunction through the technology that connects them" (xiii) (i.e. the human-computer interface). However, she takes the cyborg a step further with her concept of the posthuman to account for concerns that technology or virtual realities potentially undermine "real" bodies, while recognizing the persistence of materiality in RL. This is where her feedback loop comes into play, as the discord between desired and "real" bodies cannot be erased no matter how much media and technology insist upon the privileging of imagined bodies.

The relationship between embodiment and the body that takes place through the human-computer interface is both real and illusion—a suspended reality; the posthuman is its resident. Hayles defines the posthuman as "privileging informational pattern over material instantiation, [where] embodiment in its biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life" (2). She continues, "the posthuman view thinks of the body as the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate" (3). For pro-ana participants, the virtual or represented body is a desired outcome while their embodied reality is a problem in need of repair. Pro-ana participants are a compelling example of Hayles' posthuman, as the interface is their primary site of existence, and the images they use to represent their ideal selves are privileged over their biological realities, which they view as flawed and, thus, requiring manipulation. Hayles cites concerns that our virtual realities fail to acknowledge the power and importance of bodies in contexts, on or off the screen, and asserts that we are always connected to a physical reality, no matter how much we attempt to virtually represent ourselves out of it.

Substituting the real with images of a potential reality reflects what Jean Baudrillard refers to as "simulacrum." His philosophy operates on the concepts of hyperreality and simulation, referring to "the virtual or unreal nature of contemporary culture in an age of mass communication and mass consumption" ("Jean Baudrillard"). Baudrillard claims that we live in a world "dominated by simulated experiences and feelings and have lost the capacity to comprehend reality as it actually exists" ("Jean Baudrillard"). This is a bold assertion but is certainly applicable to pro-ana communities, which are largely dependent on representations of mostly unattainable realities. Unless one is anorexic, genetically determined to be thin, or photoshopped, to attain the bodies reflected though much pro-ana imagery is not possible. In *The*

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Cosmetic Gaze, Wegenstein applies Baudrillard's philosophy to cosmetic surgery, a different approach to attaining the unattainable. She also notes the confusion between images and reality that women with body dysmorphia face, writing that, "in the regime of the image, the real has been murdered and exchanged with a virtual version of it" (107). Pro-ana community participants depend on virtual spaces and visual texts to achieve their goals, and to maintain their existence *as communities*, and operate based on hyperreal ideals. Physical, flawed bodies intersect with virtual, imagined bodies, creating a new type of existence or augmented reality. Represented through the image, the real in pro-ana communities is a simulation.

We must consider how bodies operate in spaces that enable (at least theoretical) disruptions between bodies and minds while still under a largely materially based umbrella of existence. The increasing role of images over written texts online complicates these possibilities, as we still depend on physical representations of self, especially in social networks that do not revolve around role-play but around one's "real life." Individuals have more control over self-representation online because they can post modified images and choose which parts of their lives to share. In *Personal Connections in the Digital Age,* Nancy Baym agrees, claiming that "contexts that transcend space and offer few social cues provide people with considerably more latitude and control in shaping the ways they present themselves to others" (121). She also points out that the affordances do not erase the reality of our physicality, writing that, "the fact that technological affordances of media do influence self-presentations does not mean they determine them" (121). We are who we are online or off and have control—however limited it may be—to determine how others perceive us and how we choose to represent ourselves, even if within the limitations of our physical realities. However, as Michele White argues in *The Body and the*

Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship, "Through the processes of Internet sites, such social representations as gender and desire may be "accepted and absorbed by an individual as her (or his) own representation, and so becomes, for that individual, real, even though it is in fact imaginary. Unfortunately, these imaginary categories are maintained through extreme forms of regulation" (28-29). White's claims are particularly applicable to pro-ana communities as participants are fully invested in the possibilities of bodies as represented through thinspirations, played out in daily exercises built around regulation.

Conclusion

Pro-anorexia is a complex (sub)culture whose cyber-presence is increasing even though the movement itself is still relatively unknown and misunderstood among the mainstream. Whether one perceives it as a necessary support system, a community to foster embodied agency, or a dangerous development as a result of the increase of hyper-thin bodies in visual media, it serves multiple purposes while also resulting in outcomes that warrant concern and examination. As demonstrated, eating disorders are more complicated than biology or culture but reflect the explicit convergence of material bodies, mental processes, and technology as an integral part of our daily lives. Pro-ana culture is a disturbing but useful site of examination of the intersection of agency and docility and the relationships between virtual identities, real-life experiences, and material bodies.

CHAPTER THREE:
FITSPIRATION: PRO-ANA IN SNEAKERS OR HEALTHY ALTERNATIVE?

"Unless you puke, faint, or die…Keep going."
--Jillian Michaels, Making the Cut

<u>Introduction</u>

Fitspiration, like thinspiration, consists of images and written texts that function to provide inspiration to maintain a thin and "fit" body. Fitspiration, also referred to as fitspo, typically features less emaciated and more muscular or toned bodies than thinspiration but there is often an overlap between the imagery and messages presented, most notably in their emphasis on physical appearance. Users in pro-ana communities regularly use both fitspo and thinspo tags on images, demonstrating the interchangeability of, or at least relationship between, such texts. Fitspirations are prominent in fitness and health communities online, as well as social networks not devoted to pro-ana, but I am most interested in the role of fitspiration in pro-ana communities, fitspirations that reflect ideals or attitudes shared by pro-ana communities, and fitspo that emphasizes physical appearance as the key motivation for fitness. I also address the potential for fitness to be beneficial when disengaged from extreme or unhealthy ideals, particularly as related to self-care over appearance, sometimes referred to as "feminist fitness."

According to Google Trends, the search term "thinspo" has been trending since late 2005, while "fitspo" began trending in 2011. The interest in and prevalence of fitspo correlates with the period of time that moderators on social network sites started issuing warnings around and attempting to censor thinspo imagery, which indicates that the rise of fitspo may have been at

least partially a response to challenges against thinspo. While the banning of pro-ana sites and

communities began well before 2005, Google Trends did not begin tracking search trends until

2004. Perhaps the most prominent rise in trends is the term "thigh gap" which spikes

dramatically in 2013, and is associated with both thinspiration and fitspiration (figure 21).
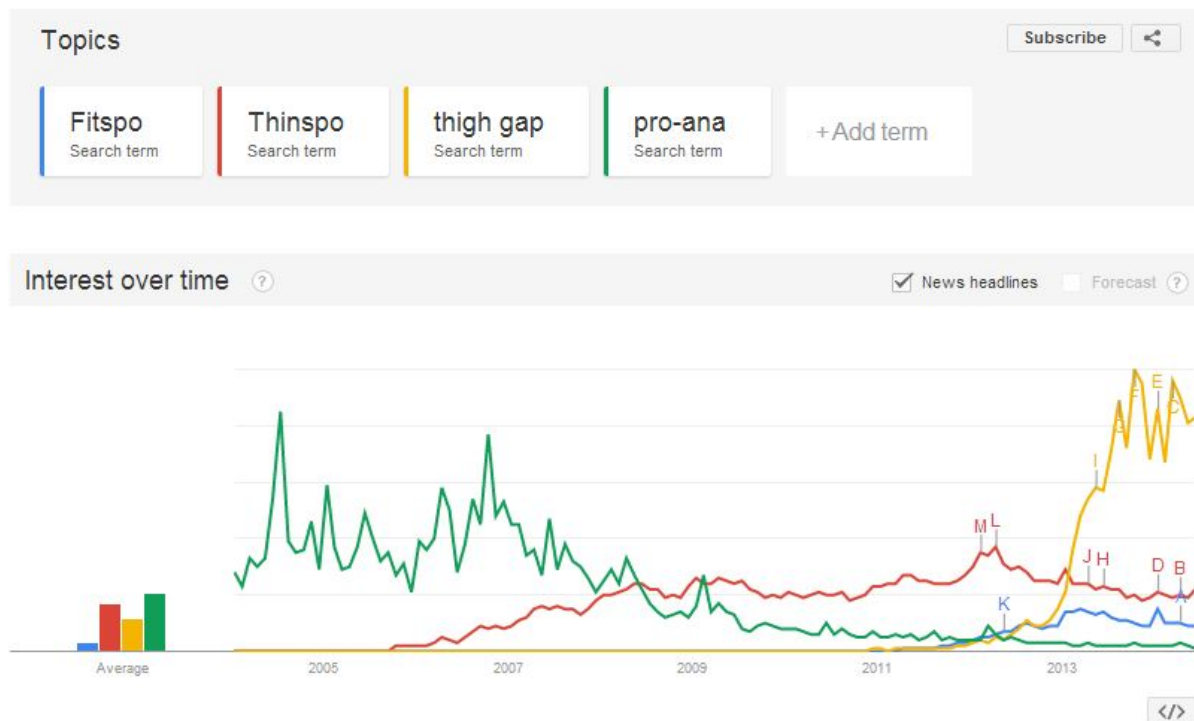
Google Trends of Terms Related to Pro-Ana and Fitspo. Digital image. *Google Trends*. Google, Inc., 5 June 2014. Web. 5 June 2014.

Figure 21 Screenshot Reflecting Google Trends of Terms Related to Pro-Ana and Fitspo

Fitspiration developed independently, as fitness communities and blogs have used images and

motivating messages to promote exercise and healthy lifestyle choices since their virtual

inception (and even earlier, as posters and pictures in gyms are commonly utilized motivators),

though the term "fitspo" is relatively new based on search trends.

Fitness culture has shifted over time and, according to Sarah Hentges in her book, *Women and Fitness in American Culture*:

> For more than four decades, "fitness" has evolved in American culture and consciousness. The publication of Dr. Kenneth Cooper's […] work in 1968 changed scientific and popular conceptions of fitness as either "freedom from disease" or as the kind of peak conditioning of elite athletes. […] Since then, a variety of fitness forms have developed in the U.S. from early incarnations of aerobics to interactive fitness programs, from Step Aerobics to P90X, from boot camp to yoga. (3)

Based on her assessment of the changing emphases of American fitness culture, the role of social networks and fitspiration to promote and inspire fitness and "health" are simply contemporary manifestations of a long history of fitness culture. She acknowledges the role of the internet in the expansion of fitness spaces as "online, virtual, or digital, […] found on social networks like Facebook and in blog and Twitter and Pinterest form" (59). These representations are not necessarily negative and Hentges spends much of her text developing a feminist conception of fitness that brings together body and mind, celebrating rather than critiquing fitness practices and the human form, whatever it may look like (5).

In "Beyond the Burn: Toward a Feminist Fitness," Janet Elise Johnson, a professor, feminist, and aerobics instructor, distinguishes fitness solely based on appearance from "feminist fitness," noting that "the new messages the fitness industry includes about self-care are often drowned out by other messages about appearance" (52). She defines feminist fitness as "motivated by the goals of women's health and empowerment," with women's "well-being and

self-care at its heart" (53). She also cites Colette Dowling's *The Frailty Myth: Redefining the Physical Potential of Women and Girls,* within which Dowling argues that being physically strong can actually make women more free in its promise to increase physical power, self-esteem, and promote longer, healthier lives (Dowling, cited in Johnson 49). Later in this chapter, I emphasize fitspo that represents feminist fitness attitudes but primarily address fitspo in which physical appearance is predominant, serving to undermine the promise of feminist fitness in its focus on appearance over health.

Distinguishing fitspo imagery from pro-ana imagery is challenging since visible rib cages or collarbones, especially in conjunction with muscle tone, do not necessarily denote unhealthy behaviors or eating disorders. Like the thigh gap, this is due to distribution of fat and bone structure, where someone at a healthy weight (or even overweight) may still have a visible rib cage or collarbone (Arrington). Where thinspo texts share very specific features and are more clearly identifiable, it is not always possible to distinguish fitspo from thinspo. In many cases, they are both. Rather than deeming texts one or the other, I examine Tumblr texts tagged as both "fitspo" and "thinspo" or "pro-ana." I also provide an overview of the various fitspo tropes that reflect attitudes of pro-ana communities and analyze fitspo imagery's focus on physical appearance.

Distinguishing Constructive from Destructive Texts and Attitudes

Fitspo can be constructive, depending on the messages promoted and the goals and/or propensity for self-harm of its recipients. Fostering positive body image and healthy lifestyle choices is empowering but when the promoted ideal mimics thinspo, it can be destructive since

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fitspo is considered a healthier or more socially acceptable alternative to thinspo. Thinspo and pro-ana texts are generally viewed as fringe, representing attitudes of a disordered minority, despite their widespread use and dissemination by those who do not have eating disorders, such as wanarexics or young women pursuing "a better body." Health and fitness are beneficial but some fitspo rhetoric promotes ideals and attitudes that encourage viewers to meet unreasonable demands, such as overexercise or attempting to achieve a body that is unattainable for the average person. Fitspo is not inherently harmful or necessarily related to anorexia, eating disorders, or extremes; however, it is important to examine the relationships among fitness, exercise, and particularly overexercise and eating disorders or unhealthy attitudes around weight as reflected in fitspo texts.

In "Fitness and in Health: Crafting Bodies in the Treatment of Anorexia Nervosa," Helen Gremillion analyzes the use of health rhetoric in the treatment of anorexia. She argues that, as in fitness and health rhetoric, the body is construed as a resource, which creates mixed messages for those struggling with eating and exercise behaviors since the line between fitness, health, and disordered eating can be a fine one, particularly since dieting is often associated with fitness and health. Eating healthy and not eating are clearly not the same, but for anorexics, eating food with little to no calories (usually vegetables or fruit—"healthy" foods) is an important practice. Gremillion writes that, "the fit female body, in particular, is a problematic and contradictory social and medical construct" (385), particularly because what constitutes fit is not always accurately defined. Related to Gremillion's argument, Hentges notes that, "Historically and across culture women have exhibited self-control about the types of foods they eat for reasons such as appearance […]; to an extent control over the type of food that is eaten becomes a moral

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imperative that can only be maintained through acts of self-discipline" (194). As exhibited through pro-ana and some fitspo communities, this self-discipline is often taken to the extreme and lauded as triumph over weakness.

The United States Department of Health and Human Services defines physical fitness as "a set of attributes that people have or achieve that relates to the ability to perform physical activity" ("Physical Activity"). This is broken down into two broad categories—health related physical fitness and skill related physical fitness. Health related fitness components include cardiovascular endurance, body composition, flexibility, and muscular strength and endurance (Caspersen 128). Skill related fitness addresses agility, balance, coordination, power, and speed (129). The only categories that relate to physical appearance are "body composition" and, somewhat indirectly, "muscular strength and endurance." To assess the role of appearance in fitness inspiration, I searched Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram using the "fitspo" tag on ten separate occasions between February and June 2014. I categorized fitspo as "non-appearance based" if the imagery and/or written text did not focus on physical appearance, such as photos of food (figure 22), messages emphasizing mental or emotional benefits of exercise, inspirational quotes not related to physical appearance, images of sneakers, nature, or other non-body objects, and exercise or eating plans that did not cite physical appearance as a benefit or outcome ("Stay Strong and Eat Healthy" for example).

Image Result from "Fitspo" Search. Digital Image. *Tumblr.* Tumblr, Inc. 6 June 2014. Web. 6 June 2014.

Figure 22 Non-Appearance Based Fitspo Example

Examples of fitspo focused on physical appearance include women with thin, muscular, or "in shape" bodies wearing little clothing (bikinis, lingerie, workout gear that exposes legs and stomachs) (figure 23) or phrases that promote fitness in the name of appearance ("sweat like a pig to look like a fox."). Of the first 50 results of each search, an average of 71% of images and/or messages focused on physical bodies or appearance-related benefits of fitness (figure 24).

Image Result from "Fitspo" Search. Digital Image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc. 6 June 2014. Web. 6 June 2014.

Figure 23 Compilation of Fitspo Emphasizing Physical Appearance
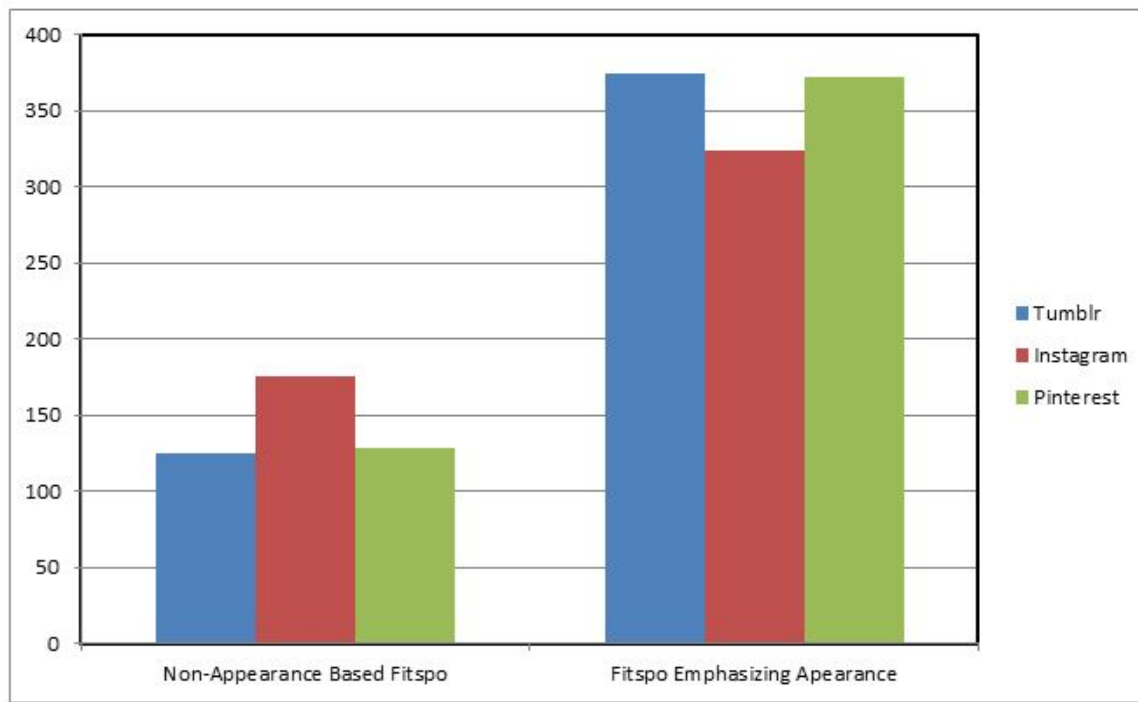
Preston-Sidler, Leandra. Appearance-Based vs. Non-Appearance-Based Fitspo Imagery. Graph. Microsoft Word, 12 Oct. 2014.

Figure 24 Graph Representing Findings Regarding Appearance-Based vs. Non-Appearance-Based Fitspo Imagery

While fitness culture itself is not inherently about appearance over health, more often than not, fitspo emphasizes physical over mental or health benefits of fitness. Hentges distinguishes appearance-based fitness from "feminist fitness," defining feminist fitness as promoting "[w]ell-being, self-care, and a whole mind-body approach," where power resides in its potential for "social and cultural transformation" (94). Fitspo that does not emphasize appearance tends to reflect this mind-body approach, encouraging empowerment and self-love, but unfortunately a vast majority of fitspo reflected through the communities I examine reinforces appearance as the ultimate goal. Phrases such as "do it for the skinny jeans" and "I'm in training to be the hottest ex-girlfriend you've ever had" posit fitness as a gateway to its

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material benefits. While some fitspo-tagged images can be construed as pro-ana (very thin bodies without muscle tone and emphasis on thigh gaps), more images feature muscle tone, healthy food (including foods considered high-calorie such as pasta, such as that featured in Figure 22), and more mind/body-positive messages than found in thinspo ("Breathe in Inspiration and Trust Yourself. The answer is yes you can."). However, the represented ideal is still relatively extreme in a different way. Thin, proportional, attractive bodies with muscle tone are the most frequent imagery reflected in fitspo and average bodies are absent, even when the message accompanying an image is about fitness for health reasons rather than physical appearance. The focus on the physical in fitspo lends itself to use in pro-ana communities (figure 25).
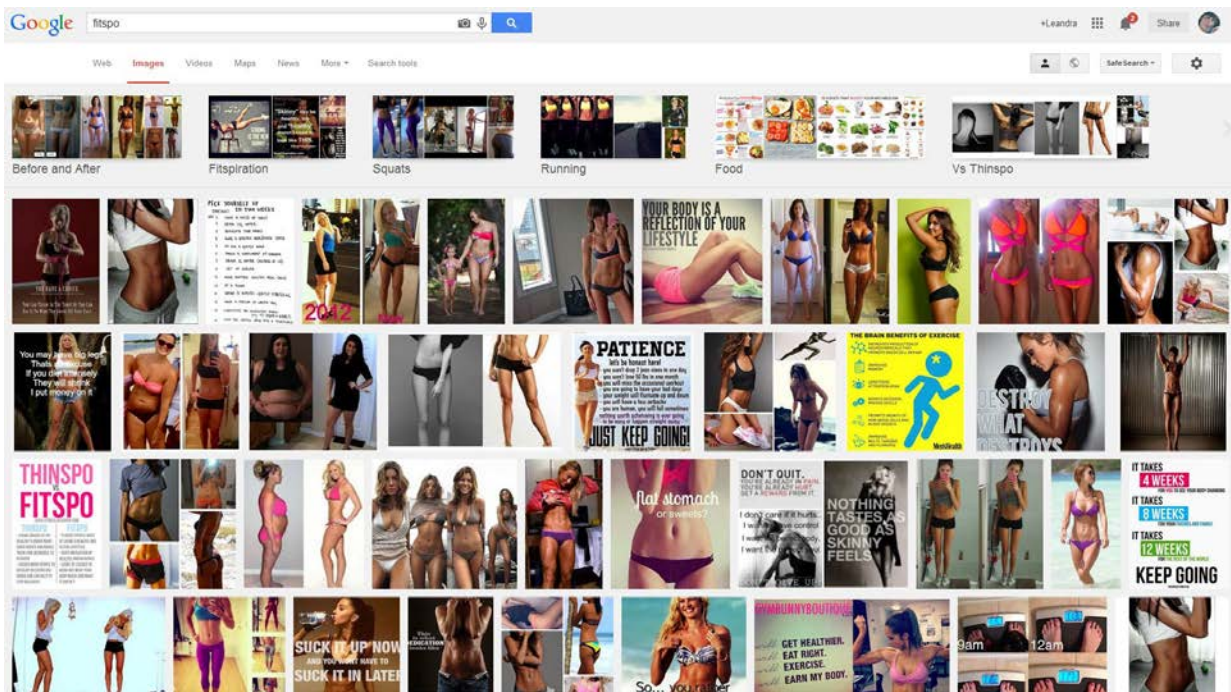
"Fitspiration" Search Results. Digital image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 6 Jun. 2014.

Figure 25 "Fitspiration" Google Image Search Screenshot

Appropriation of Rhetoric and Tensions between Fitspo and Pro-Ana Communities

In communities that do not permit thinspo or pro-ana tags, such as Instagram, the use of #fitspo (or simplified and potentially more innocuous tags such as #thin or #fit) can be a strategy to maintain the exchange of pro-ana imagery without inviting immediate censorship or deletion. The appropriation of health and fitness rhetoric by pro-anorexia communities to undermine attempts to censor and control them in virtual spaces is expressed most notably through tags. Instagram moderators delete images tagged thinspo but permit fitspo. #Thinspo triggers a warning and #fitspo does not (though #thin does). However, if moderators deem images flagged by users as promoting self-injury or eating disorders, they delete them, so the use of tags is not foolproof. Fitspo shared on Instagram more often reflects fit, toned, and still thin bodies but without the promotion of starvation or skeletal bodies seen in thinspo. However, #thin seems to be the replacement for the banned thinspo tag on Instagram, demonstrating users' abilities to find ways around censorship (figure 26).
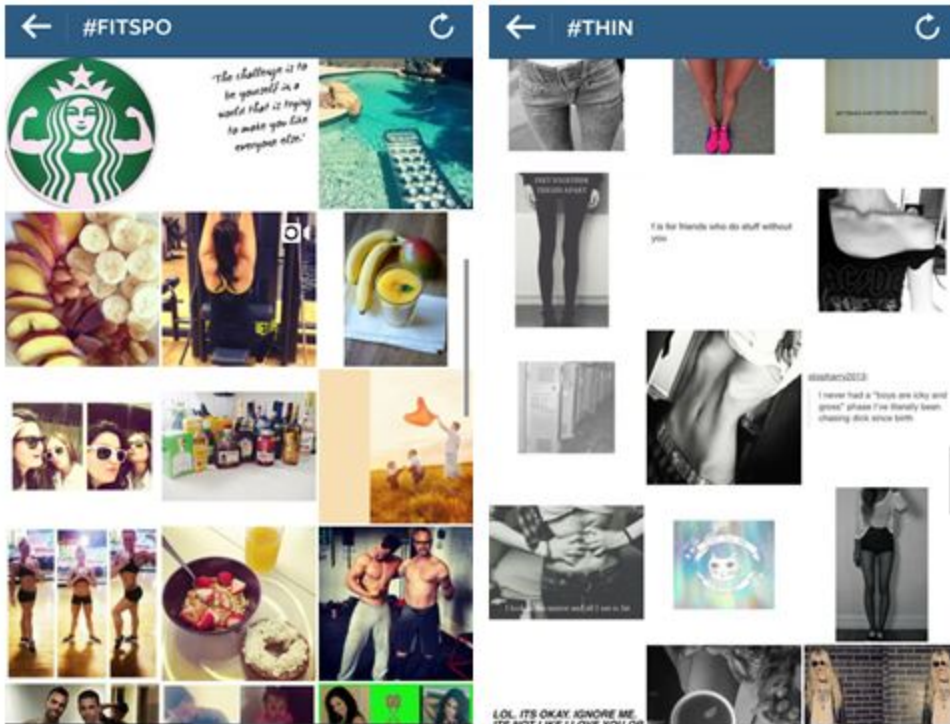
#Fitspo and #Thin Instagram Screenshots. Digital images. *Instagram*. Instagram, 31 Aug. 2014. Web. 31 Aug. 2014.

Figure 26 Instagram Imagery Based on Search Results for #Fitspo and #Thin

Tumblr permits users to search multiple terms at one time and a search of both "thinspo" and "fitspo" yields literally countless results since scrolling down continually allows more images to load. Similar results appear when searching "pro-ana" and "fitspo." That users tag images with multiple terms including #fitspo speaks to the overlapping attitudes reflected through shared texts regarding thinspo, pro-ana, and fitspo within pro-ana communities (figure 27), even if those are not users' explicit intentions.
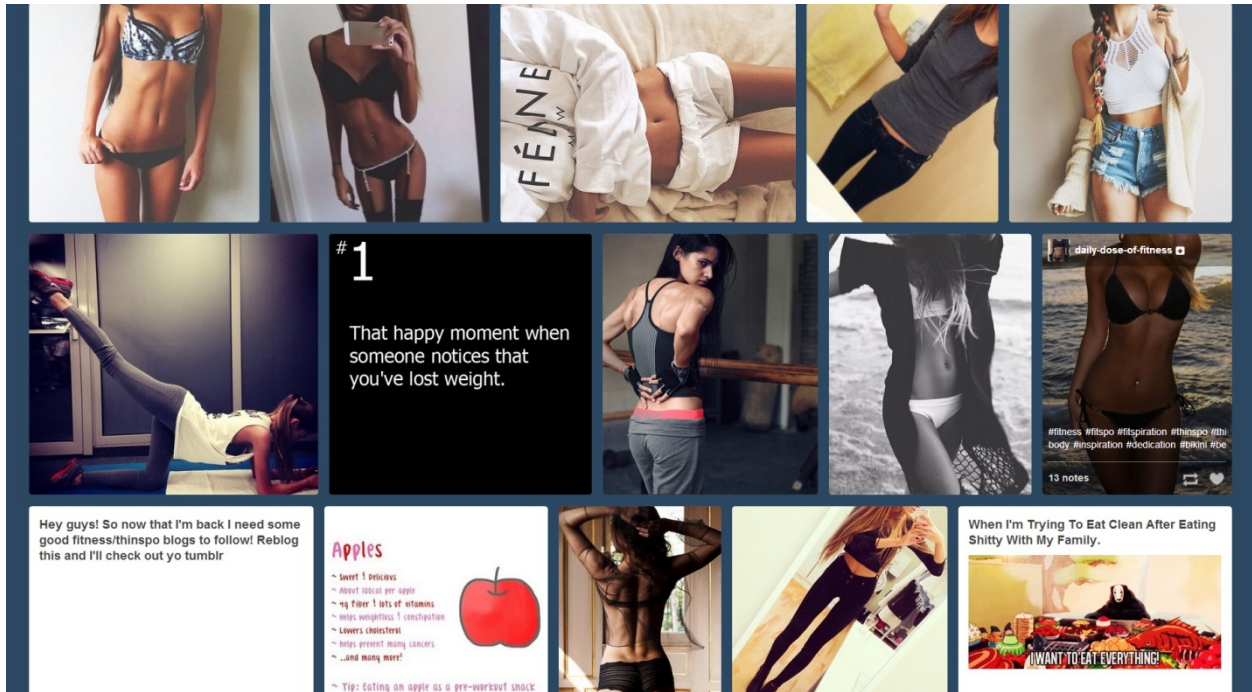
#Thinspo and #Fitspo Tumblr Screenshot. Digital images. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 20 Jun. 2014. Web. 20 Jun. 2014.

Figure 27 Tumblr Image Search of Images Tagged Both "Thinspo" and "Fitspo"

Tags affect the landscape of fitspo communities, as images tagged both fitspo and thinspo appear when one searches for either term. Thus, if one is seeking fitspo imagery, s/he is also exposed to thinspo. Accordingly, if one uses fitspo as a tag to avoid thinspo censorship, they populate fitspo communities with thinspo imagery. Increasingly, commentary within fitspo communities directly addresses the proliferation of thinspo texts, as users chastise participants who include thinspo tags on fitspo texts. One Tumblr critique reads, "Is it just me or does anyone else get sick of seeing Pro-Ana BS on our fitspo tags?" while another reads:

Stop tagging photos of dangerously thin women as "fitspo" and "thinspo."

Fitspo promotes a healthy life style and strong mind.

Thinspo promotes eating disorders.

There is a big difference.

The tension between thinspo and fitspo is notable within fitspo communities. One image-text frequently shared in fitspo communities makes a clear distinction between pro-ana behavior and healthy attitudes: "Healthy: Eating enough of the right foods and working out. Healthy does not mean starving, ever."

A different type of tension between thinspo and fitspo exists in pro-ana communities, as one participant expresses, "Constantly torn between thinspo and fitspo." The quest for a thin body compels pro-ana participants to rely on thinspo while others are torn between a desire to be healthy and a longing to be ultrathin; for some users these are mutually exclusive since certain body types do not allow for both. Others struggle to achieve the fit body reflected in fitspo due to their eating disorders. On MPA, an eating disorder forum for those in recovery or seeking support, "Paperskinned" writes:

> My ideal body is a fitspo not a thinspo. I feel like I've gone too far but it's impossible to get that perfect body balance. I see lots of photos of anorexia and like bones and that *[sic]*, even though I have an eating disorder and look like a skeleton it's like... I know it's wrong but the body I want is unachievable. I might as well remain like a skeleton because I can't get that perfect body. Does anyone else feel like this?

Preferring skeletal over anything but perfect elucidates the complexity of thought associated with eating disorders. Simplifying and seemingly dismissing her complicated emotions around her own body and conflicting cultural ideals, "Advanced Warrior" responds, "Yu *[sic]* can totally get a perfect body! All you need to do is eat clean and exercise." Advanced Warrior's response

reflects the same attitude as typical fitspo—"all you need to do" is eat right and exercise to achieve the perfect body. The tension between thinspo and fitspo is tied to the difficulty of achieving a particular desired body by simply eating right and exercising. For many, particularly those with eating disorders, the issue is deeper than lifestyle choices, and involves psychological struggles that lie at the impasse between physiology and culture.

The discord between images and messages displayed in much fitspiration potentially fuels struggles with body image. The images utilized in fitspo texts are of the highest order—the ultimate fit body: proportionate, thin but muscular, sexy, usually tan—what many viewers perceive as "perfect." In *The Body Project*, Brumberg refers to these "perfect" bodies as "hyperbolic bodies." She expresses concern about the effect of immersion in such imagery, "Because we see so many extraordinary, hyperbolic bodies, young women today grow up worrying about specific body parts as well as their weight" (124). Most fitspo texts that promote health and/or fitness include bodies with little to no body fat, problematic because weight is not necessarily a key indicator of health or even fitness and these images clearly associate a lack of fat with health. "Strong is the new skinny" is a frequently shared fitspo message, but it usually features a thin, even if muscular, body. Examining images of female Olympic weightlifters via Google Images, it is evident that strength does not require a thin frame. Most female Olympic weightlifters could be considered overweight (or visibly large and not only in the muscular sense) by Body Mass Index (BMI) standards (figure 28).
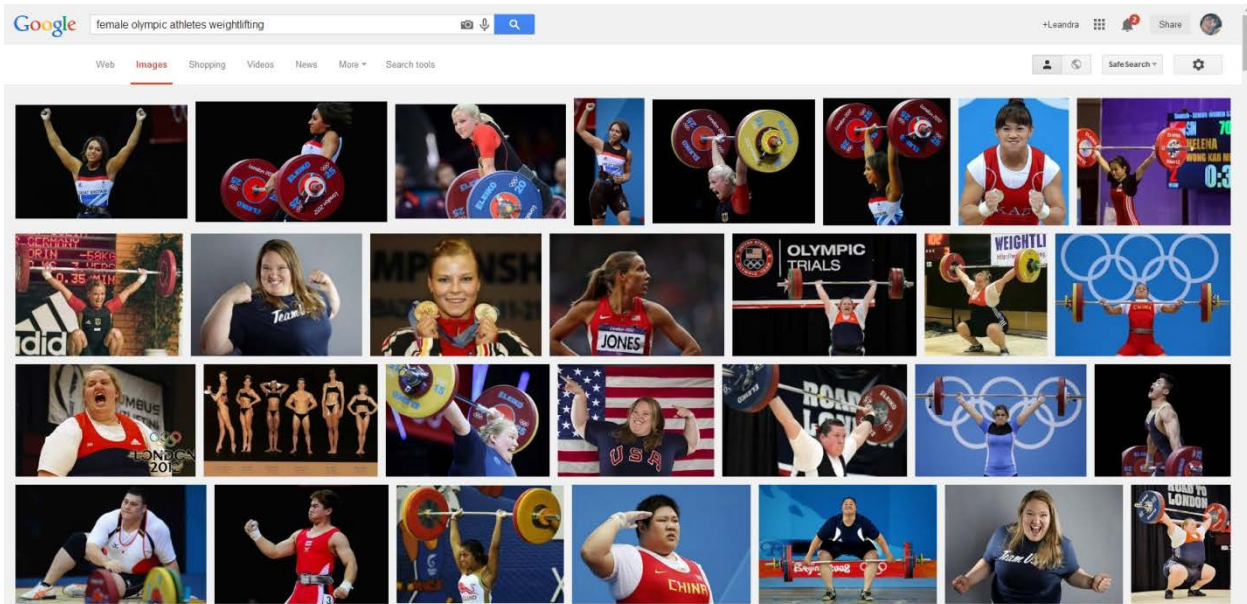
"Female Olympic Athletes Weightlifting." Search Results. Digital image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 20 June 2012

Figure 28 "Female Olympic Athletes Weightlifting" Google Image Search Screenshot

According to fitspo, strong is the new skinny but only if you are already skinny. One can be skinny and strong but those who are strong but not skinny do not exist in the world of fitspo, even though they exist in the world of fitness.

The Body Mass Index, or numerical value of one's weight in relation to their height, is a standard measure used by medical and fitness communities to assess ideal weights for individuals (CDC). Introduced in the early 19th century by Belgian mathematician Lambert Adolphe Jacques Quetelet, the BMI has been the standard measure body fat for over 200 years (Blackburn). Critics of the BMI scale argue that it deems healthy individuals overweight because it fails to account for muscle mass and makes no allowance for the relative proportions of bone, muscle and fat in the body (Pavlidis). The Harvard School of Public Health acknowledges that, "BMI is not a perfect measure, because it does not directly assess body fat," but it continues to

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be relied upon by doctors, personal trainers, health insurance companies, and is commonly referenced in pro-ana communities. There is even a #BMI tag for Tumblr and Instagram, which results in pro-ana imagery; in my first search, four of the first 25 Tumblr results were thinspo images, three of emaciated bodies and one that read, "Help! I just worked out my BMI and now I'm freaking out about it. It's 22. Is that too much?" Participants in pro-ana communities often include weight, height, and BMI in their self-descriptions. Some pro-ana websites include a BMI scale and directions for assessing BMI. One particular pro-ana blog, "Pro-Ana (L)" includes a "pro-ana BMI calculator" which, in addition to "normal," "overweight," and "underweight" categories, includes "anorexic" and "emaciated" categorizations based on individual BMI (figure 29).
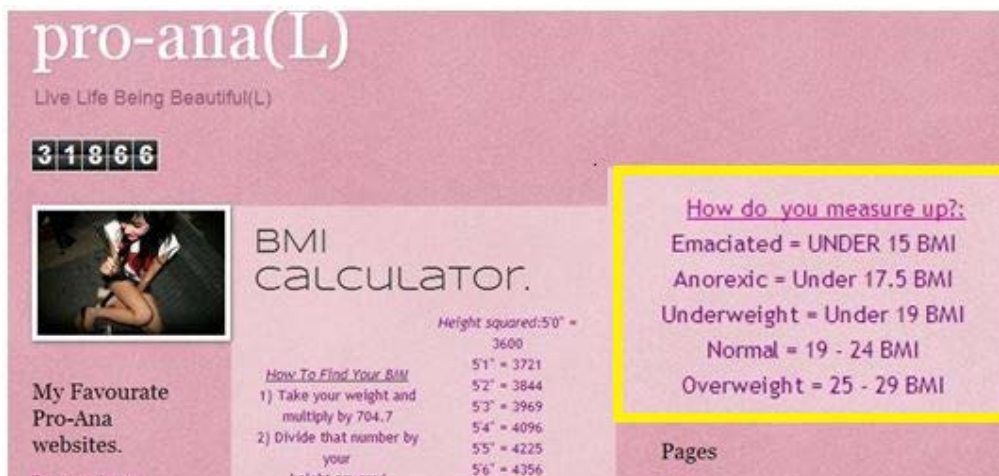
Annieolivia. "Pro-Ana BMI Calculator." Digital Image. *ProAna (L).* Blogspot. 11 Jun. 2014. Web. 20 Sept. 2014.

Figure 29 Pro-Ana BMI Calculator

One critic of the use of numbers to assess health, blog and newspaper contributor Foz Meadows, uses varying women's bodies to demonstrate how inconclusive BMI and weight can be. In her article, "Female Bodies: A Weighty Issue," Meadows presents five women of the same

weight who have dramatically different body types and appearances to make the point that what

constitutes a healthy body has been misconstrued by our dependence on numbers (clothing sizes,

BMI, and weight).

Meadows, Foz. "Female Bodies: A Weighty Issue." *Shattersnipe: Malcontent and Rainbows.*
Wordpress, 28 March 2014. Web. 2 Jun. 2014.

Figure 30 Variations of Body Type Based on Same BMI

She begins her article by writing that: "We have, as a society, such a completely disordered,

distorted perception of female bodies that the vast majority of people are incapable of

recogni[z]ing what 'overweight' actually looks like on a woman, let alone 'healthy.'" What

counts as healthy is misconstrued in fitspo imagery; bodies that clearly take substantial work to

achieve and maintain are represented as the healthy ideal while "average" healthy bodies are not

accounted for. Meadows continues her critique:

> [W]e're now at a point where women are not only raised to hate their bodies as a
> matter of course, but are shown, from childhood, a wholly inaccurate picture of
> what they "should" look like—a narrow, nigh on impossible physical standard
> they are then punished, both socially and medically, for failing to attain.

This standard is reflected in almost all avenues of visual media, including fitspo, but in fitspo
there is an associated message that one can attain this standard with enough hard work or
commitment, which is not necessarily the case.

The hyperbolic bodies featured in fitspo function as cyborgs on multiple levels—sculpted
through nutritional and fitness technologies such as weights, reflected through visual technology
(which may include Photoshop), and disseminated through internet technology. Hentges
acknowledges the dramatic continuum of female versus male hyperbole in fitness when she
writes, "The irony of the term 'fitness,' as applied to the emaciated bodies of models or the
hyper-pumped bodies of athletes and body builders is 'American fitness'" (15). This is the very
imagery generally reflected through both fitspo and thinspo texts—women shrinking and men
taking up as much space as possible. As Myatt Murphy illustrates his article, "Fitness Bucket
List for Guys," fitness-based texts illustrate "the ways in which masculinity can be confining and
demanding for men," similar to the dictates women face in maintaining particular bodies
(Murphy, cited in Hentges 18). Balsamo contends that more than mere reflections of cultural
ideas, bodies are the medium through which these ideals are propagated:

> The virtual body is neither simply a surface upon which are written the dominant
> narratives of Western culture, nor a *representation* of cultural ideals of beauty or
> of sexual desire. It has been transformed into the very medium of cultural

expression itself, manipulated, digitalized, and technologically constructed in

virtual environments. (131; emphasis in original)

Bodies are not inscribed by ideals—they are the ideal. The layers of technology that create the

bodies represented in fitspo establish an unfair and largely unattainable standard since the

average body cannot or will not have the same results, even when determination and hard work

are employed, due to genetics and other physical limitations.

<u>Exercise or Excess?: Common Fitspo Tropes</u>

An analysis of fitspo illuminates various recurring themes. Common fitspo tropes that share

pro-ana or thinspo attitudes typically fall into the following categories:

- disregarding one's limits or the body as enemy

- shame

- food versus fitness

- fitness as a socially acceptable obsession or neurosis

- ideal body as choice

Kevin Moore identifies several of these fitspo categories in his blog article, "The 6 Most

Shockingly Irresponsible 'Fitspiration' Photos," in which he critiques fitspo for sending

unhealthy messages to viewers. He emphasizes the importance of recognizing one's limits and is

opposed to fitness rhetoric that encourages excessive exercise or pushing boundaries. He writes,

"Your body has limits. Those limits are there so that daily function—up to and including heavy

manual labor—requires a relatively small amount of physical stress and sacrifice." Fitspo tends

to promote exceeding bodily limitations. One example of a frequently shared fitspo image

includes a quote attributed to celebrity fitness trainer Jillian Michaels, "Unless you puke, faint, or die—Keep going," encouraging individuals to exceed their limits beyond healthy bounds (Michaels).

Disregarding one's limits or failing to listen to one's body is an attitude shared between thinspo and fitspo. In thinspo, it relates to not eating, regardless of the body providing messages that it is hungry. Using water to trick the body is a common recommendation in thinspo, "If you are hungry, drink water. It makes you feel full." In fitspo, failing to listen to the body is expressed through disregard for the body's indications that it has had enough exercise. Vomiting or excessive pain due to exercise is probably a fair indication that the body is being pushed too hard (Conover). Working out will result in some pain as muscles tear and rebuild when trying to increase muscle size (Sarnataro). However, the notion that unless one "pukes" one is not pushing hard enough is a dangerous assertion, as excessive exercise can have negative health outcomes. As noted by Brenda Woods, a primary care physician at Remuda Ranch, which treats eating and exercise disorders, "The most significant dangers of extreme exercise are overuse syndromes such as stress fractures, low heart rate, amenorrhea, and osteoporosis." In his critique of fitspo, Moore echoes Woods when he writes, "Routinely stressing your body's physical capacity is called overtraining, and it's a massive problem in the fitness industry. It is linked to everything from joint degeneration, ligament tears and bone spurs to depression." Fitspo examples that encourage excessive exercise include, "Puking is acceptable, tears are acceptable, pain is acceptable. Quitting is not acceptable," "At the end, when your legs are tired and your arms are giving out, get angry. Get angry that you are tired. Then hit it harder," and "When it hurts, keep

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going." Is taking a break because one's body is "giving out" the same thing as "quitting" or is it simply responsible to honor one's bodily cues (figure 30)?

Puking is Acceptable... Digital image. *Fatkidgoespaleo.tumblr.com* Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 5 June 2014.

Figure 31 Fitspo Example Encouraging Pushing Limits

Shame is another common theme in thinspo and fitspo imagery. In thinspo, body shame is demonstrated through messages that express self-loathing or body hatred and images that show thighs, other body parts, or whole bodies deemed fat. Fat shaming, discriminating against or criticizing individuals based on weight, is exhibited across multiple domains, including the workplace or educational spaces, health care systems, within interpersonal relationships, and through media (Tomiyama). One example of an image shared in both fitspo and thinspo communities features a hand grabbing excess stomach fat, putting the flawed body part on display for viewers. Though no written text accompanies the message, in the context of other images featuring extremely thin or emaciated bodies (or fit bodies, in fitspo communities) as inspiration, the implication is that this type of body that should be avoided or overcome. In

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fitspiration, shame is associated with failure to achieve a fit body or a lack of willingness to try hard enough to accomplish one's body-based goals, whether because one eats the wrong foods or does not exercise enough. One example includes a thin, toned body with text that reads, "Don't stop until you're proud," connecting pride to physical appearance. Another fitspo message asks viewers, "Would you rather be covered in sweat at the gym or covered in clothes at the beach?" Thinspo and fitspo imagery often cite the beach or summer as crucial considerations, indicating that one will not enjoy summer or should not be exposed at the beach unless one is thin or fit or that one should be ashamed to don a bathing suit or shorts if one's body does not live up to set expectations.

Food versus fitness, as if one can only have one or the other, is another theme featured in fitspo. In thinspo, this is represented as a choice between the desired ultra-thin body or nourishing the body, as thinspo promotes starvation while fitspo promotes exercise and healthy eating for a desired body. Both messages promote deprivation in the name of perfection. "Flat stomach or sweets" or "So you'd rather have that bag of chips?" set on top of thin, toned female bodies sends the message that no matter how much one works out or watches her diet, a mere "slip-up" or indulgence will undo one's progress or act as a barrier to success. This message is seen frequently in both thinspo and fitspo texts and discourages balance in the name of dogged perfectionism.

Fitness as obsession is a characteristic of anorexia, as starvation and overexercise are key symptoms. However, fitspo posits fitness as obsession as a healthy attitude, since exercise is commonly understood as good for the body. While fitness is generally healthy, just as with pushing one's limits, it can go too far. Moderation, whether in dieting or exercise, is a

conventional recommendation for health (Lofgren 154) but obsession or neurosis related to diet and exercise is indicative of an eating or exercise disorder (Mond 227). "Obsessed is a word the lazy use to describe the dedicated" is a fitspo example in which obsession is not only acceptable, but the opposite of lazy, obfuscating the possibility of moderation. One Tumblr page devoted to fitspo is titled "Fitspo Addict" and the subtitle of the page encourages viewers to "develop a healthy fitness addiction." Another fitspo reads, "Your workout is my warm up insanity." While much of this is hyperbole, the prevalent use of fitspo to encourage and inspire preoccupation or even obsession with fitness and/or diet legitimates concern. A Google search of "fitspo" in June 2014 returned 1.2 million results, indicating that fitspo is a frequently utilized tool for those desiring and/or attempting to change their bodies.

Perhaps the most problematic message shared through both thinspo and fitspo texts is that attaining a "perfect" body is all about choice. One can look however s/he desires if s/he works hard enough, wants it badly enough, and exhibits enough determination. "You have a choice. You can throw in the towel or you can use it to wipe the sweat off your face." As a written text, this is an innocuous, motivating message. However, the image that accompanies it is of an extraordinarily fit woman with well-defined, exceptionally developed muscles who is clearly not representative of the average "fit" body. She is blonde, tan, and attractive, reflecting multiple ideals at once and, while her physique is worthy of lauding because of the evident investment and work it demanded, she is not indicative of what most women could achieve no matter how much sweat they wipe off their faces (figure 31).

Davis, Stuart (Reblogger). *You Have a Choice*. Digital image. *Pinterest*. Pinterest, 13 Oct. 2013. Web. 9 June 2014.

Figure 32 Fitspo Image Reflecting a Hyperbolic Body

Another example features a toned woman with written text on top of her flat but muscular

stomach and what appear to be breast implants; it reads, "Your dream body can be a reality with

a little sweat, motivation, and healthy eating." This also encourages healthy behaviors—

sweating, eating nutritiously, and exercising—but the implication that anyone can achieve their

dream body is just not true. We must think within our physiological limitations and the term

"dream body" is loaded, in that dreams are often out of reality's reach. Many women believe

they can have a particular body if they starve or exercise or engage in particular behaviors but

individuals have varying genetic codes, metabolisms, and body types that make achieving certain

bodies impossible. So no matter how hard one works, how determined s/he is, or how healthily or little s/he eats, s/he may be chasing a dream beyond realization.

<u>Taking Up Space: Positive Fitspiration and Subversive Bodies</u>

While I have discussed fitspo tropes that share features or attitudes of thinspo, much fitspo promotes healthy attitudes without the discord of unattainable imagery or dangerous behaviors. This includes fitspo that directly addresses thinspo and discourages starvation or pro-ana behaviors. While a search for fitspo on Tumblr, Instagram, Pinterest, and Google Images results in examples of the extreme fitspo I address throughout this chapter, there are also glimmers of positivity—simple messages such as "love your body," "don't give up," and "yes you can," encouraging self-love and self-care. Also common are quotes that advocate exercise for mental benefits rather than a focus on the physical, such as "A good run clears your lungs, but also your thoughts." A quote found three times in one fitspo search on both Pinterest and Tumblr reads:

> Eat because you love yourself.
>
> Move because you love yourself.
>
> Speak because you love yourself.
>
> Act because you love yourself.

Another encourages viewers to conquer fear: "Surrender your fear and be brave with your life" These messages apply to physical, mental, and emotional health and balance the prevalence of flat abs, thin thighs, and physical ideals.

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Physical fitness ideals in fitspo tend to reflect thin, normative female bodies, but also represent subversive bodies in the form of muscular bodies that do not adhere to typical feminine beauty ideals. One fitspo example speaking to thinspo imagery reads, "Visible abs are the new visible ribs." The image is problematic because the woman featured is extremely thin with visible ribs even though her abs are equally prominent (figure 32).
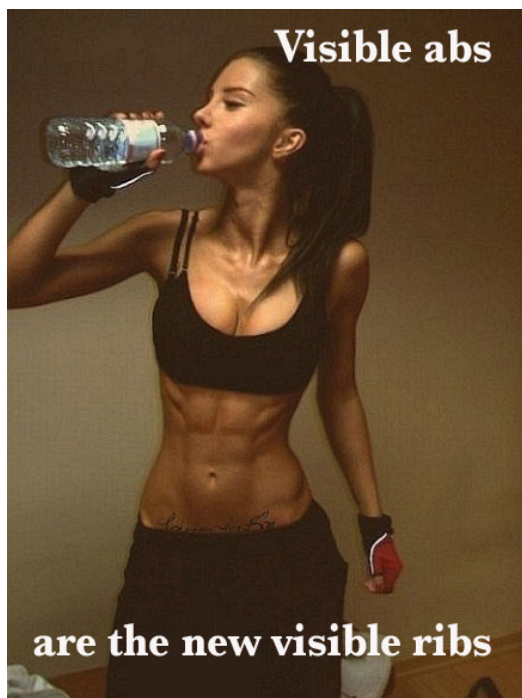
Visible Ribs are the New Visible Abs. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 13 June 2014. Web. 13 June 2014.

Figure 33 Example of Overlap of Fitspo with Thinspo Imagery

Female body builders and individuals who pursue fitness not to be thin but to be muscular challenge pro-ana attitudes, as well as gendered beauty ideals. In her analysis of female body builders, Balsamo examines how physiological characteristics serve as emblems of female identity. Addressing how female bodybuilders subvert traditional feminine ideals, she writes, "[H]istorically the properly feminine body was considered constitutionally weak and

pathological; to be both female and strong implicitly violates traditional codes of feminine

identity" (43). Pro-ana practices correlate with the "properly feminine body," as small and/or

weak and, in some cases, pathological, while women who build muscle, particularly beyond

what is considered feminine, violate it (figure 33).

Female Fitness Inspiration. *Ripped.* Digital image. *Tumblr.* Tumblr, Inc. 10 June 2014. Web. 10
June 2014.

Figure 34 Image Reflecting Violation of "Feminine" Beauty Standards with Muscles

Even when female bodybuilders wear heels or bikinis, their bodies pose a challenge despite

feminine accessories. In fact, the accessories potentially make their muscles more subversive as

they highlight the contrast between traditional feminine imagery and powerful bodies (figure 34).

Such representations of gender may reflect what Butler terms "parodic" gendered bodies, or

bodies that dramatically embody *and/or* bodies that radically disrupt gender through

embodiment. Butler claims that all gender is parodic but that, "parody by itself is not subversive" (*Gender Trouble* 139). However, female body builders destabilize gendered bodies and do represent a subversion of beauty ideals, even if they uphold norms in other ways.

Motivational Fitness Pictures. *Muscular Body Fitspo*. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 10 June 2014. Web. 10 June 2014.|

Figure 35 Image Representing Body Builder with Feminine Pose and Accessories

Taking up space as a body is encouraged by feminists due to the association of smallness with weakness. To build strength and/or muscle despite one's size is a symbolic taking up of space that disrupts gendered expectations. Promoting strength as empowerment rather than the path to a "perfect body" is another alternative approach, as in a fitspo that features a woman picking up a barbell that reads, "I have a dream that women will discover the power of grasping a barbell."

Promoting power and, thus, empowerment in women is a marked improvement over the barrage of visual media in popular culture that does just the opposite.

Perhaps the question of agency and complicity or docility within fitness communities and fitspo texts is more convoluted than in pro-ana communities since there is such potential for positive outcomes within fitness and health communities. Despite the fact that most fitness focuses on the physical, mental and emotional components of one's body/life can be affected positively by health and fitness practices. Hentges finds the most potential of fitness through the mind-body connection possible through certain fitness practices such as yoga. Unfortunately, fitspo imagery does not frequently reflect that component. In "Folding: A Feminist Intervention in Mindful Fitness," Pirkko Markula asks, "Is it possible to provide exercise practices that do not build docile bodies?" (64). Though docility seems to be a necessary part of the equation within both fitspo and thinspo communities, another benefit of mind/body feminist fitness might be a greater capacity to think critically, to shift perspectives. Fitness might just be a means for challenging and transforming these institutional structures—education and incarceration [as referenced by Foucault] (64). So while eating disorders and self-control of one's body are an assertion of agency, regardless if the outcome is healthy or not, their relationship to culture and docility are complicated.

Conclusion

Fitspo and fitspo-based communities are distinct from thinspo and pro-ana communities in their emphasis on fitness and nutrition rather than starvation to achieve specific bodies. The desired body is also different in that the ideal fitspo body is typically thin and muscular, while

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the ideal pro-ana body tends to be skeletal or extremely thin without muscle tone. However, fitspo and thinspo share attitudes regarding pushing bodily limits and the importance of fit or thin physical bodies. The role of fitspo in pro-ana communities is often identified through the use of fitspo tags to undermine censorship while fitspo does not typically utilize thinspo tags and many fitspo community participants demonstrate opposition to the use of explicit pro-ana rhetoric. The role of health and healthy behaviors encouraged in fitspo are important distinctions from pro-ana when examining general fitspo compared to extreme fitspo. The attitudes prevalent in fitspo as discussed in this chapter do not necessarily represent fitspo as an attitude or way of being but rather note correlations between fitspo and thinspo as expressed through specific virtual communities. Acknowledging the overlapping goals of fitspo and thinspo can illuminate the dangerous line between fitness and body obsession and eating disorders and/or unhealthy preoccupations with body size and appearance. Encouraging critical thinking around fitspo texts is not to discourage the importance of exercise, healthy eating, or body awareness, but to expose the propensity for cultural ideals to lead to unhealthy or dangerous behaviors and practices while recognizing their power to challenge gender norms that equate femininity with weakness and masculinity with strength, both physically and otherwise. At its best, fitness—or rather feminist fitness—emphasizes healthy minds as well as healthy bodies. Hengtes articulates that, "Perhaps the most important space associated with fitness is the space that we open in our heads and our lives and our hearts through fitness. […] When we clear some space, we have more space to move. More space to live, more space to breathe" (60). And for women, taking up space is more than empowering; it's revolutionary.

CHAPTER FOUR:
I HURT, THEREFORE I HURT MYSELF:
SELF-INJURY IN PRO-ANA COMMUNITIES

"Skin signals. Skin communicates. Skin tells a story." --Marilee Strong, A Bright Red Scream

"What is carved in human flesh is an image of society." --Mary Douglas, qtd. in Marilee Strong, A Bright Red Scream

Introduction

Self-injury (SI), wounding or physically harming one's self without suicidal intent, includes cutting, burning, branding, breaking bones, hair pulling, and punching one's self, among other behaviors that range from superficial to moderate to severe. In my examination of self-injury in pro-anorexia communities, I focus on superficial and moderate forms, mostly cutting. Imagery shared in pro-ana communities often includes explicit photos of cutting among thinspiration and pro-ana images. Cutting imagery includes body parts (most frequently arms and legs) with visible slashes and cuts, scabs or scars from cutting, and open wounds with the presence of blood. As is the case with eating disorders, the psychological underpinnings of cutting are beyond the scope of my expertise so I utilize existing research and analyze specific texts to address the relationship between the two behaviors. The occurrence of cutting images in pro-ana communities compels an analysis of the role of self-injury in pro-ana spaces. What is the relationship between eating disorders and self-injury, particularly as expressed and demonstrated in pro-ana communities? Why are images of cut bodies tagged "pro-ana" in addition to "cutting"? And, as with eating disorders in pro-ana communities, what does it mean to publicly share experiences that have traditionally been considered private or isolated?

Like eating disorders, self-injury behaviors cannot be attributed to one cause (psychological, physiological, or cultural) but rather involve an amalgam of contributing factors. Armando Favazza, a leading researcher on self-mutilation as both a cultural norm and pathology, suggests that the phenomenon of self-mutilation is "not purely a biological, or psychological, or socially determined act but rather involves a combination of these factors as they operate within the web of culture" (Musafar, in Favazza 325). Acknowledging the role of culture in self-injury and eating disorders while recognizing the complexity of both, Marilee Strong writes in *A Bright Red Scream: Self-Mutilation and the Language of Pain*:

> A factor that plays an important role in both self-mutilation and eating disorders is a distorted body image. Although many women suffer from poor body image brought about by oppressive public attitudes and media images, societal pressure alone does not cause the kind of deep-seated mental and physiological disturbance that leads to serious and chronic self-mutilation or eating disorders. (122)

If culture were the only factor leading to eating disorders or self-injury, their rates would be even higher, since virtually everyone in western culture is exposed to beauty norms and ideals in one form or another. In their article examining self-injury based online communities, Janis Whitlock, Amanda Purington, and Marina Gershkovich assess the relationship between media and self-injury, writing that, "Although it would be naïve to assume that media causes behavior, such as self-injury, research overwhelmingly shows that media plays an important role in disseminating behavioral innovations [and] normalizing novel behaviors" (143). The implication is that viewers, particularly young viewers, may be encouraged to adopt behaviors they might never otherwise consider through media exposure.

Favazza argues that self-mutilation is a culturally contingent practice, with culturally sanctioned, "non-pathological" self-mutilation existing in non-western settings, while "pathological" self-mutilation occurs in western settings and is often explained individualistically rather than as related to cultural norms and discourses (Franzen 282). The increasing prevalence of SI communities complicates this distinction since, as noted by Patricia and Peter Adler in *The Tender Cut*, while self-injury is still a largely private or solitary practice, individuals are now socialized to it through peers and media (8). Adler and Adler examine how the internet affects "deviant" communities, enabling private practices to be shared publicly (108). Therefore, while self-injury is still an individualized practice, it is also communal when shared through social media.

Cut Down to Size: The Relationship between Eating Disorders and Cutting

The relationship between eating disorders and self-injury is evident in the pro-ana communities I examine, as searches for "pro-ana" return images of cut bodies, in addition to thin and emaciated bodies. However, research points to an even more pronounced connection than demonstrated in virtual communities. According to Strong's research, 35% to 80% of cutters also suffer from eating disorders (116). In 1985, Karen Conterio and Wendy Lader founded the first treatment program in the nation that specifically treats individuals who self-injure, S.A.F.E. Alternatives (acronym "Self Abuse Finally Ends"). They do not admit patients whose only issue is an eating disorder but, as they note in *Bodily Harm: The Breakthrough Healing Program for Self-Injurers*, they rarely see self-injurers who don't have issues with food (118). Among the self-injurers they see, "eating problems range from mild preoccupations with food intake,

weight, and body image to severely disordered and dangerous patterns, like anorexia nervosa, bulimia, or compulsive overeating" (118). In a research study establishing connections between eating disorders and self-injury, Favazza and Conterio gathered data on 290 female self-injurers. Their findings support an explicit connection between eating disorders and other self-injury behavior:

> The typical subject was a 28-year-old single Caucasian female who had cut herself on more than fifty occasions. Half of the women reported the history of an eating disorder. […] The same survey data was gathered on a large group of female undergraduate students enrolled in a basic psychology course; 14.5 percent had an eating disorder and 38 percent of this group also had a history of deliberate self-harm. (Favazza 49)

What accounts for the overlap of eating disorders with self-injury behaviors? According to Conterio and Lader, "Self-injury and eating disorders may have very similar aims. Both behaviors counteract a sense of being out of control of oneself and one's mind" (120) or, as I contend, unable to control a body in relation to cultural standards. Rather than attempting to assess the underlying psychological factors around eating disorders or self-injury, I establish the connection between eating disorders and self-injury to understand the role of self-injury imagery in pro-ana communities.

As with the "me too anorexia" phenomenon, those who treat self-injurers claim that self-injury can be "contagious" and that SI communities and imagery normalize and encourage self-injury behaviors, particularly among young people. For this reason, researchers and medical communities tend to view Internet communities dedicated to providing information about SI and

SI communities as problematic. Claims include that such communities normalize SI, do not provide sufficient or effective help, and "expose vulnerable adolescents to a subculture in which SI is normali[z]ed and encouraged" (Whitlock et al., qtd. in Sternudd 422). Hans Sternudd, a scholar and historian who conducted a study on viewer responses to SI imagery, emphasizes the importance of anonymity to self-injury communities, notes:

> SI is said to emerge spontaneously, or spreads interpersonally and mediated [sic]. One of these mediations is photographs of self-inflicted wounds and scars which are often found on the Internet. SI-photos are considered problematic: they are said to introduce and spread SI. Publishing SI-photos is equali[z]ed with glorifying SI, believed to be triggering and used in struggles to be the "worst" self-injurer. (421)

In addition to photos of wounds, participants in SI communities also share techniques and document the act of cutting through videos or graphic descriptions. A search of "cutting myself" on YouTube in August 2014 returned nearly 74,000 results, most of which are just that—videos of individuals cutting themselves with various tools. Adler and Adler argue that such "how-to" videos or discussions in SI communities reinforce and encourage self-injury, particularly among impressionable young people. "Self-injury cyber subcultures may […] reinforce members' acts by sharing techniques and motives and by normalizing and encouraging these" (165). Fear of contagion is valid, as self-injurious behavior follows epidemic-like patterns in institutional settings, such as hospitals and detention facilities, indicating that it may be socially contagious in other settings, such as the internet (Graham 179).

Despite critiques by "outsiders," self-injurers, like pro-ana community participants, point out the positive effects of SI-community membership (Sternudd 422). The responses of self-injurers to the research questions Sternudd posed about their reaction to online SI images varied but were more positive than negative overall. According to Sternudd's findings:

> The reaction to exposure to SI-photos was described as comforting or calming in nearly half of the statements. About one-third describe the outcome as triggering. Barely a quarter experienced the SI-photos as disturbing and inspiring, alternatives that could indicate a preventive as well as a triggering effect. (426)

While community members acknowledge that SI imagery can be triggering, it is not the case for all viewers. The responses of viewers of SI imagery demonstrate that SI imagery has complex outcomes dependent on many variables, including where viewers are in their own self-injury behaviors (recovering versus active). That less than a quarter experienced such imagery as "disturbing" may speak to a level of desensitization related to being a self-injurer rather than an outsider to the practice. Viewing comments on SI videos on YouTube, it is evident that many self-injurers are seeking community, as self-disclosure is the most common type of response in the video comments I examined. In an extensive study conducted to assess the effects of viewing SI videos on YouTube, Stephen Lewis found that of 22,311 comments, 38% were self-disclosure about cutting or self-injury (383). While the prevalence of self-injury behavior is troubling, the availability of online communities and the opportunities they provide for individuals to communicate about self-injury can be helpful to those who are otherwise isolated, as in the case of eating disorders. In some cases, however, community members can be hostile, potentially exacerbating self-injury behaviors.

Similar to the phenomenon of "wanarexia," self-injurers often challenge the authenticity of other self-injurers, deeming those who display their wounds publicly or those who self-injure as part of a subculture whose members seek to gain attention rather than because of a mental condition as "wannabes" (Sternudd 422). Some self-injurers claim that individuals who publicly display wounds indicate that s/he is a "poser" rather than an authentic self-injurer. An informational page titled "The Basics of Self-Injurious Behavior" features an image of "a cutter's wrist" and one comment in particular charges the featured subject as a "poser" because of the superficiality of the wounds. "Katie" comments, "I look at that picture and laugh, that's not even a scratcher's wrist, but a poser. Look at real scars, and you can see, the jagged torn into scars." (Katie) (figure 35).

A Cutters Wrist. Digital image. *The Basics of Self-Injurious Behavior*. Hubpages, 4 Apr. 2009. Web. 16 July 2014.

Figure 36 "A Cutters Wrist" Image

A participant in a discussion forum titled "I Self Harm" deems herself a poser because she does not "cut or burn herself like most" but uses her fingernails to scratch herself (iloveowlssss). Another participant offers validation, "…you're not a poser. Inflicting pain onto yourself no matter the tools used is self-harm" (Synthrax). Comments on an article titled "Self-Harm Around

Teenage Girls is on the Rise" speak to the relationship between particular subcultures such as "goth" or "emo" and cutting. "Emoprincess" responds, "Sometimes girls self harm to fit into cults such as emo […] some girls are just simply misled by posers." As part of his research study, Sternudd analyzed discussion boards focused on self-injury to assess the perception of public displays of SI by other self-injurers and found that many criticized the practice of displaying self-injury online as attention seeking, distinguishing it from self-injurers who keep their wounds private. Sternudd finds that, "To openly show scars is often seen as a sign related to wannabes, which means that this act threatens claims of being an authentic self-injurer (who is understood as someone who is ashamed of their SI and therefore hide[s] wounds and scars)" (422). As is the case in pro-ana communities, authenticity around self-harming behavior is an important part of SI communities, perhaps because participants are often accused of self-injuring for attention by those who do not understand motivations behind such behavior.

Various examples of imagery found in pro-ana communities demonstrate the connection between cutting and eating disorders. My initial examination of cutting imagery in pro-ana communities focused on prevalence more than content to evaluate the overlap of such behaviors, but an analysis of specific texts demonstrating the relationship(s) proved to be more productive. My original methodology involved searching the tag "pro-ana" on Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest and counting how many images featured cutting per the first 100 results. I conducted this search on ten different occasions. However, my findings varied dramatically, with the lowest number of cutting texts identified in a search being four and the highest being 22. These inconsistencies led me to focus more closely on the content of texts that demonstrated an overlap rather than the number.

Images featuring cutting in pro-ana communities include hipbones with cuts or scarred

bodies tagged "proana." A Tumblr search using both "pro-ana" and "cutting" resulted in an equal

combination of thinspiration and cutting imagery. User's self-descriptions across the

communities I examined often indicated they struggle with both eating disorders and other forms

of self-injury. A Tumblr page titled "Stay Strong Darling" includes a description that reads,

"Hey, my name is Kaya, welcome to my blog. […] I'm struggling with self-harm and pro-ana."

Tumblr user "last breath" utilizes both cutting and pro-ana tags and describes herself as "Just a

girl…problematic, weird, ugly and fat." As the images and research I emphasize throughout this

chapter demonstrate, connections between self-injurious behaviors are readily demonstrated

throughout pro-ana communities.

In addition to images of women with the word "fat" or "ana" cut into their bodies, other

examples include a very thin woman on a bathroom floor next to a scale with bruises and cuts on

her legs; the user who shared the image includes a comment that reads, "This picture to me is so

beautiful, yet so sad. You can see her sadness, wanting to be thinner, her pain, not feeling good

enough, everything," and tagged it #proana, #cut, #anorexia, #bulimia, and #ED (figure 36).
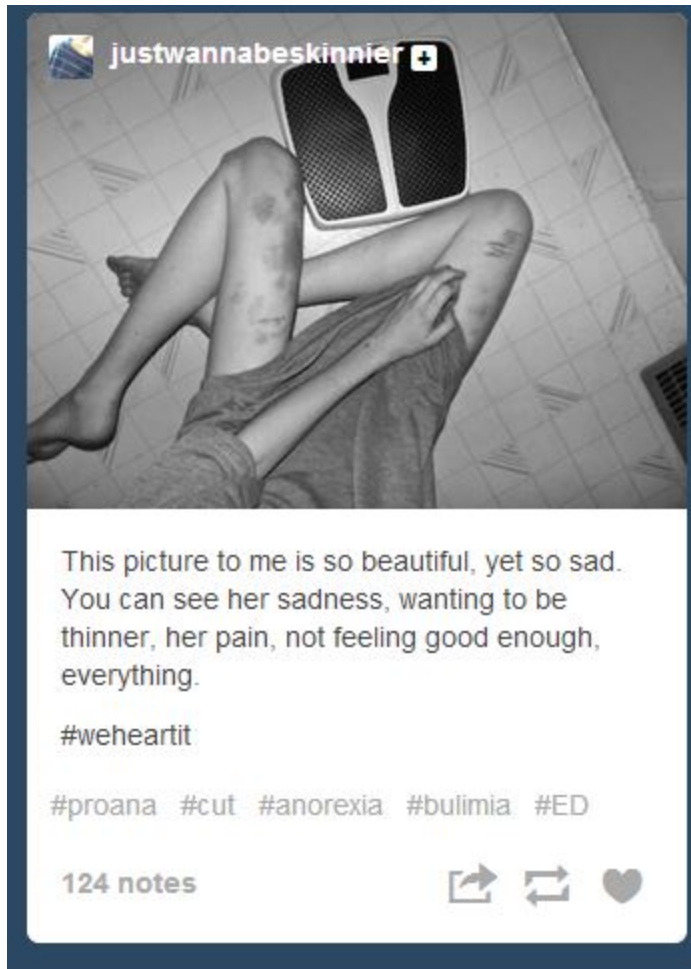
justwannabeskinnier (Reblogger). This Picture is So Beautiful… Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 13 June 2014. Web. 13 June 2014.

Figure 37 Image Demonstrating Relationship Between Pro-Ana and Self-Injury

One posted by "live-skinny-die-pretty" includes two images side by side, one of two individuals

holding hands, their arms covered in cuts and bandages next to an image of a woman's hand

scratching her bare stomach, on which "not thin enough" is written (figure 37).

live-skinny-die-pretty (Reblogger). Not Thin Enough. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 30 June 2014. Web. 30 June 2014.

Figure 38 Side-By-Side Images Reflecting Relationship Between Cutting and Pro-Ana

Another image features a woman with a pair of scissors in one hand poised to cut the fat from

her stomach she is holding with the other hand. One of the more startling images is a pair of legs

covered in what appear to be hundreds, if not thousands, of cuts from hip to ankle; the written

text that accompanies the image reads "I'm Not Hungry" and in almost indecipherable lettering

underneath, "because who would love a girl with scars?" (figure 38).
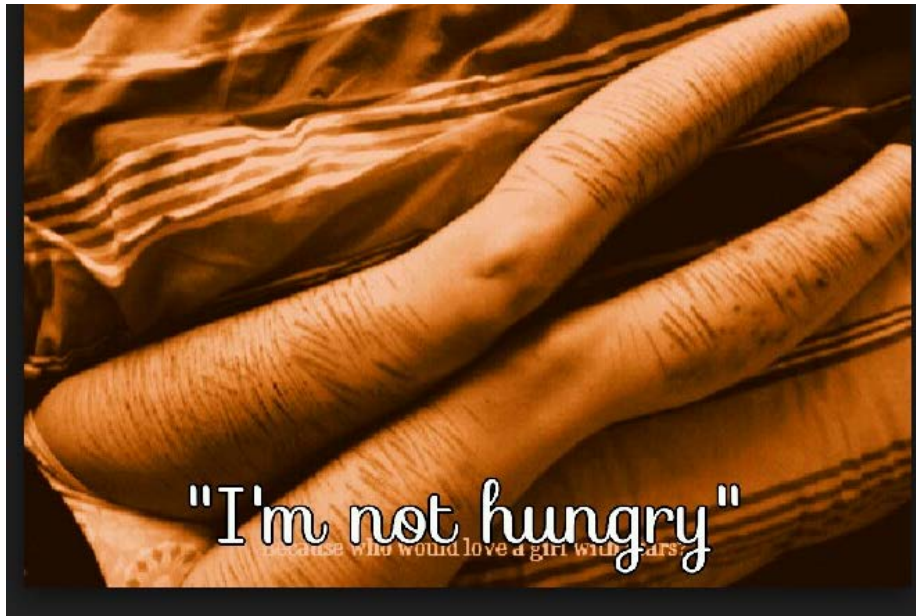
I'm Not Hungry. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 11 July 2014. Web. 11 July 2014.

Figure 39 Image Demonstrating Relationship Between Cutting and Pro-Ana

This particular image speaks to the complex relationship between desired, culturally sanctioned bodies and those dictated as "ideal" by beauty norms. The image can be read as a bucking of beauty ideals as its subject damages a body that meets beauty standards in its thinness (whether or not she views herself as such) or as docile in its adherence to ideals to such an extent that she views herself as (still) not good enough. Concepts of agency and docility, as discussed in previous chapters, are more complicated than either/or, particularly where self-injury is concerned, because such behaviors can be read as a conflation of both power and disempowerment, depending on the extent and reasoning behind them and their ultimate outcomes.

From Religious Ritual to Media Trend

Self-injury is not a new phenomenon; it has been practiced for religious and ritualistic purposes in both primitive and modern societies for centuries (Levenkron 20). In the mid-twentieth century, psychiatrists began to document cases of self-injury and the term "self-mutilation" was introduced in 1938 by American psychiatrist Karl Menninger when he distinguished such practices from suicidal behavior (Adler and Adler 14). Between the 1960s and 1980s, doctors noted the rise of "wrist cutting syndrome" which was associated with "unmarried, attractive, intelligent young women" (14). During the 1990s, public awareness about self-injury increased due in part to media coverage and celebrities openly admitting self-injuring. In the early 2000s, self-injury communities populated the internet, leading to a growing cybercultural movement based on cutting and other self-injury behaviors (17). Eating disorders can also be considered a form of self-injury. As Strong writes, "…the two afflictions operate so similarly that eating disorders may really just be another form of self-mutilation" (117). Depriving the body of food or binging and purging cause bodily harm and are essentially forms of self-injury, but for the purposes of my discussion, I distinguish between eating disorders and self-injury, only referring to self-injury in terms of deliberately cutting the body.

Due in part to its presence in internet communities, self-injury continues to gain visibility in media and professional literature (Favazza 240). Currently, the prevalence of superficial self-injury is about 1,400 cases per 100,000 people (238). Comparing the revelation around self-injury to that of eating disorders, Favazza claims that once the issue was addressed through media, individuals who self-injure came out "in droves" (241). As in the case of the public preoccupation with Karen Carpenter's death from anorexia, a 1992 *People* magazine article

featuring Princess Diana's confession that she was a cutter (who also struggled with eating

disorders) ignited public interest in self-injury. Adler and Adler describe the evolution of self-

injury from "being the limited and hidden practice of the psychologically disordered to becoming

a cult youth phenomenon, then a form of more typical teenage angst, and then the province of a

wide swath of socially disempowered individuals in broader age, race, gender, and class groups"

(2). While girls and women tend to be cutters more often than men (Adler and Adler claim that

85% of cutters are women) and it seems predominate among middle-to-upper class individuals,

SI occurs across gender, race, and class categories.

<center>I Cut Because… Why Cutters Cut</center>

Self-injurers often express that cutting is a physical articulation of emotional pain. A

Tumblr page titled "I Cut Because…" includes hundreds of anonymous responses to why

individuals cut themselves. One response that echoes others on the site reads, "I cut because the

physical pain gives me something other than my emotional pain to focus on, even if only for a

few minutes." Another reads, "I cut because it's easier to feel the pain on my skin than the pain

on my heart." Other responses indicate feelings of worthlessness, being addicted to the pain of

cutting, and body loathing. Responses such as "I cut because I feel fat" and "I cut because they

call me fat" correlate poor body image with self-injury. Strong refers to cutting as "body

language" or a paralanguage (44), arguing that, "Eating disorders, like cutting, are a powerful

form of communication" (130). In her article "Carved in Skin: Bearing Witness to Self-Harm,"

Jane Kilby reads cutting as an important form of expression in response to childhood trauma,

something so taboo that many individuals do not want to talk about it using a conventional voice.

<center>140</center>

She writes, "…if the promise of language fails and speaking cannot sustain life, another 'voice' must be found, especially when faced with the need to testify to the traumatic conditions of life itself" (125). While Adler and Adler argue that women are more likely to self-injure because they are taught to internalize anger and pain while men are taught to externalize it through violence, I disagree. Women are typically encouraged to communicate feelings more freely than men; even though they are not taught to express emotions through physical acts, they are not necessarily taught to internalize emotions but rather to express them differently. Women are more likely to self-injure because of issues related to body image, sexualization, and oppression though factors that contribute to self-injury are complex regardless of gender.

While men also self-injure, especially through punching walls and breaking bones, expressions of other forms of violence, particularly against others, are more socially acceptable when expressed by men. Women are generally taught to express themselves verbally or through other forms of communication and men through physicality, which may be why women are more often deemed "self-injurers," since physical violence (whether inflicted upon others or oneself) is considered standard behavior among men. Constructions of masculinity are closely linked to violence, as argued across studies of masculinity. Women's and Gender Studies have encouraged examinations of the role of gender constructs on men and interrogated links between masculinity and violence, though self-injury among men is still underrepresented in masculinity research (Katz; Kimmel).

Women's bodies are sites of struggle. Women and girls are objectified through culture and media and are held to nearly impossible physical standards. Women and girls are also objectified in other ways, as they are victimized by sexual violence 10 to 1 over men ("Who are

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the Victims?"). While this argument is not intended to undermine the reality or impact of sexual abuse against boys and men (or the fact that it is less reported due to shame, fear of being deemed homosexual, and a myriad of other factors), statistics support that sexual abuse against girls and women is significantly more prevalent. Research consistently links self-injury to childhood sexual abuse and rape (Klonsky) and the correlation between eating disorders and self-injury is well established (Adler; Conterio; Favazza; Lader; Strong). Eating disorders and self-injury serve as a form of control or ownership over a body claimed by culture (or others, in cases of abuse); both are acts of resistance and/or agency, even if highly problematic. Strong notes the correlation, writing that, "…they each involve attacks on the body, a disturbance in body image, and an attempt to control body boundaries" (117). While individuals utilize pro-ana communities and practices to achieve ideal bodies as determined by media and culture, those who starve themselves beyond socially-accepted ideas of beauty produce subversive bodies, even if only theoretically. Cutting the body achieves a similar result. Pro-ana community participants can be read through Hayles' posthuman, for which the interface is a primary site of existence, as they privilege images representing their ideal selves over their flawed biological realities. The tension between desired and actual bodies may be one cause of the self-injury witnessed in pro-ana communities, where cutting is a response to further damage a body already perceived as flawed or imperfect.

Visibly injuring the body in a way that is not socially acceptable (unlike weight loss, which is more likely to be praised even when taken to extremes) is at once a form of resistance and acquiescence to pressures placed on women and girls to conform to beauty and body ideals. Bordo terms this "embodied protest" though she recognizes it as an unconscious and

counterproductive form of protest (176). She writes, "The pathologies of [such] protest function, paradoxically, as if in collusion with the cultural conditions that produce them, reproducing rather than transforming precisely that which is being protested" (177). This relates to Butler's notion of subversion through parody or disruption of gender norms, particularly in the question of whether or not such protest is effective, radical, or a mere byproduct of particular behaviors taken on by individuals in response to cultural demands (*Gender Trouble* 139). Creating a subversive body is not necessarily a conscious motivation behind eating disorders, cutting, or even women's bodybuilding, but all potentially function to disrupt gender norms and ideals. Individuals' use of visual and digital media—the very mediums often charged with promoting eating disorders and self-harm—to support and display such practices is an intriguing conflation of beauty ideals with their most detrimental outcomes.

Cutters often claim to cut in order to externalize internal strife, which may or may not be related to body image. However, in the pro-ana communities I examine, cutting is often in response to a body that does not live up to established ideals, most notably demonstrated by recurring images of body parts with the word "fat" or "ana" carved into them (figure 39).

Compilation of Pro-Ana/Cutting Imagery from Tumblr. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., n.d. Web. 10 Oct. 2014.

Figure 40 Compilation of Tumblr Images Demonstrating Relationship Between Cutting and Eating Disorders

Feminist and embodiment theorists refer to physical articulations of cultural norms or ideals as inscription practices. The body, and the female body in particular, is a social construction rather than a natural object—a "thing of nature" transformed into a "sign of culture" (Balsamo 3). The discord between beauty ideals and the material realities of most women and girls is demonstrated in part by the high rate of eating disorders among women. Balsamo elaborates on the body as inscribed by cultural ideals:

> When the body is said to be "inscribed," "painted," or "written," it makes sense to write of the "discourse of the body," meaning the patterned ways that the body is represented to broader cultural determinations and also the way that the body becomes a bearer of signs and cultural meaning. (19)

Anorexic and self-injured bodies are literally inscribed and, in pro-ana communities, these practices express a simultaneous control and a lack of control. Control is exercised over bodies (conquering the desire to eat, for example) but also common are expressions that represent an inability to either stop starving or stop cutting. Articulating the struggle between a desire to be thin and a desire to eat, a pro-ana Tumblr text reads, "Ate too much today. Kill me."

Me Cutting Myself: Self-Injury Communities Online

The concurrent private and public nature of online self-injury communities enable sharing of personal experiences or struggles with self-injury that may not be possible in other contexts, such as with family members or friends. Confession around cutting, expressions of discomfort with one's self or appearance, and general self-loathing are common in self-injury and pro-ana communities. As Adler and Adler note, "Only in the early twenty-first century did self-injurers begin to find a common community, and then only in cyber space, where they could communicate, learn from each other, and offer each other knowledge and understanding" (3). The internet affords a safe place to communicate with others without risking discovery, as it permits participants to form community and disclose personal experiences without exposing themselves in their offline worlds. Sternudd writes, "Anonymity is often crucial for this mutual exchange because of the stigmati[z]ation of SI outside the safe space provided by the community. SI-communities make it possible to show your wounds to others with a similar experience and still keep them hidden" (429). Identifying others who self-injure is another benefit of internet communities, as a simple search term can lead to individuals who share similar struggles and relationships that may not otherwise be available. Cyberspace can be a

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respite for those whose behavior marginalizes them in mainstream culture. As Vaughn Bell argues in "Online information, Extreme Communities and Internet Therapy," the internet reduces the costs of expressing marginalized or pathological desires, leading to the emergence of "extreme communities," such as those constructed around eating disorders or cutting (445).

Like pro-ana communities, self-injury communities take various forms, including discussion forums, social networks like Tumblr organized by tags such as "cutting," self-injury," and "SI," and YouTube channels and topics devoted to self-injury. Some communities exist for those seeking recovery, support, and/or information, while others function as a place to share techniques, display injuries, and offer acceptance for those who self-injure but are not interested in recovery. A Google search of "self-injury" or "cutting" results primarily in informational resources but a Tumblr or Instagram search using the same terms returns a multitude of images of cuts and other wounds, scarred body parts, quotes and written confessions expressing self-loathing, depression, a desire to cut, and/or a desire to stop cutting (figure 39).
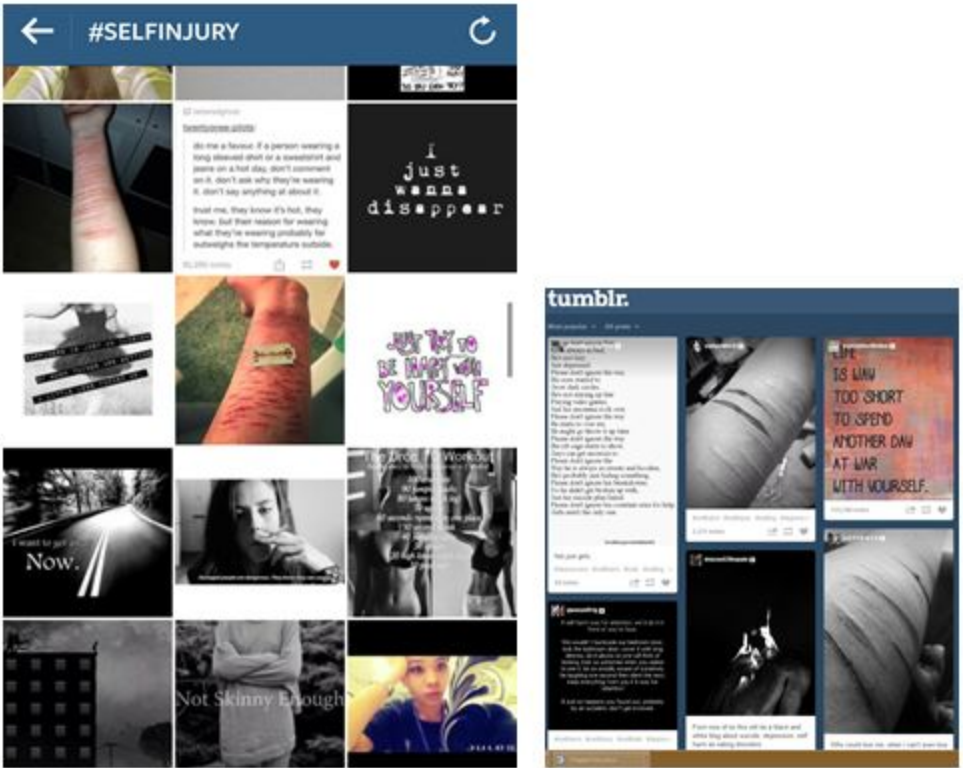
#Self-Injury Results. Digital image. *Instagram and Tumblr*. Instagram & Tumblr, Inc. 16 July 2014. Web. 16 July 2014.

Figure 41 #Self-Injury Instagram and Tumblr Screenshots

A YouTube search of "self-injury" or "cutting" results in videos of individuals engaged in the act of cutting, intermingled with videos offering hope, and encouraging viewers to seek help. Interspersed throughout self-injury imagery on Tumblr and Instagram are texts that offer support or discourage self-injury, such as an image of a razorblade with the written text, "You are so much more than a stupid piece of metal," or white text on a black background that reads, "If you are looking for a sign not to kill yourself tonight, this is it." Other texts include suicide hotlines or phone numbers of organizations that provide help for self-injurers.

As with pro-ana tags in social networks, searching "self-injury," "cutting," or "cut" on Tumblr, Instagram, or Pinterest results in various warnings. A search for "self-injury," "cutting," or "cut" on Tumblr, results in the following warning:

> Everything okay? If you or someone you know is engaging in self-harm, SAFE Alternatives is here to help: call [with a phone number]. If you are experiencing any other type of crisis, consider chatting confidentially with a volunteer trained in crisis intervention of www.imalive.org or anonymously with a trained active listener from 7 Cups of Tea.

Viewers then have an option to "Go Back" or "View Search Results." If participants choose to view search results, at least they are aware that concrete services are available, even if just to talk. The organization "7 Cups of Tea" describes itself as "an on-demand emotional health and well-being service" which allows for immediate one-on-one chats with trained professionals. Utilizing the very technology that self-injury community participants engage to view cutting imagery, such resources make help more accessible and perhaps attractive than conventional treatment facilities. Maintaining anonymity may also be encouraging to individuals ashamed of their behavior. A search of "cutting" on Instagram results in a similar content advisory that reads, "Please be advised: These posts may contain graphic content. For information and support with suicide or self-harm, visit http://befrienders.com." Befrienders is an international suicide prevention network of volunteers trained to "listen to and help people without judging them." (*Befrienders Worldwide*). While medical professionals and researchers who specialize in self-injury recognize cutting and other self-harming behaviors as distinct from suicidal behaviors, the relationship between self-injury and suicide and/or the potential overlap in behaviors should not

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be underestimated. A search for "self-injury" on Instagram returns the same content advisory but the resource provided focuses on those with eating disorders. Eating disorders are a form of self-injury but the resource does not provide resources or assistance for those who self-injure in other manners, demonstrating a lack of understanding about the range of self-injury.

Pinterest employs a similar approach to Instagram in searches of "self-injury," providing information and resources about eating disorders even though several images that appear through such a search relate to cutting. While viewers have immediate access to search results, the top of the page contains a preface that reads:

> Eating disorders are not lifestyle choices, they are mental disorders that if left untreated can cause serious health problems or could even be life threatening. For treatment referrals, information, and support, you can always contact the National Eating Disorders Association Helpline at [phone number] or www.nationaleatingdisorders.org.

A search for "cutting" on Pinterest does not include any warning or resources, but it seems Pinterest moderates self-injury imagery regularly, since the first 15 or 20 results, on average, include posts, or "pins" as they are termed on Pinterest, related to self-injury while the rest feature "cutting" in relation to fashion or crafts, such as cut clothing (cut-off jeans, cut t-shirts), jewels (with particular cut styles), cookie cutters, scissors and fabric, and paper or wood cut outs. Except as featured on personal pages, almost no results feature actual cut bodies (figure 41).
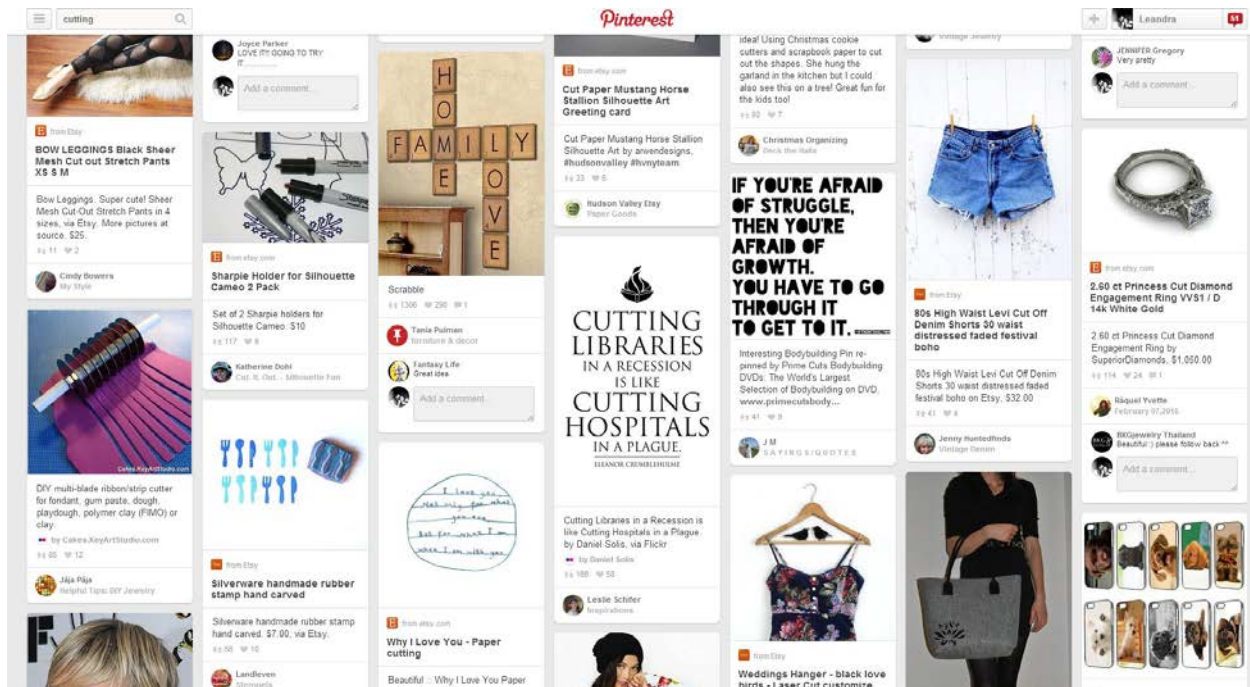
Pinterest Results of "Cutting" Search. Digital image. *Pinterest*. Pinterest, 29 June 2014. Web. 29 June 2014.

Figure 42 Pinterest Results of "Cutting" Search

Pinterest addresses self-injury and eating disorders in their "Acceptable Use Policy" and provides examples of what they do and do not allow. "Stuff you can't post" on Pinterest includes anything that "promotes self-harm, eating disorders or hard drug abuse." They elaborate, "Pinterest is a place to get inspired and we think promoting dangerous behavior detracts from that." As many personal pages feature "self-harm," Pinterest distinguishes sharing individual experiences from promoting self-harm behavior: "Sometimes people want to share their experiences with these things as a way of helping others who are struggling, and that's okay. We just don't want to encourage harmful behaviors." ("Acceptable Use Policy"). They also allow user "reporting and blocking" and remove pins that violate their policies.

<u>Conclusion</u>

Online communities based around cutting share similarities with pro-ana communities, most notably in the spaces they provide for users to share private practices publicly, enabling connections for individuals who might otherwise suffer alone. The use of visual and written texts to foster communication and maintain community is an important feature of both cutting and pro-ana communities. Though I theorize possible reasons behind the relationship between cutting and eating disorders throughout this chapter, understanding the correlation between starving to achieve a particular body upheld by cultural standards while cutting it to disrupt that ideal may be difficult to understand. Such practices potentially function to assert a sense of ownership over one's own body in the face of a culture attempting to determine who and what that body should look like. However, why girls, women, and other individuals follow codes of such limited and limiting beauty and physical ideals is informed by a multifaceted, deeply ingrained set of desires driven by psychological, physiological, cultural, and other factors. Medical communities and scholarly research, as well as the recurrence of cutting images and references to self-injury in pro-ana spaces, support a clear relationship between eating disorders and cutting. Whether such practices are a subconscious form of protest or indicative of overlapping responses to body image disturbances, the public display of such private behavior provides a unique opportunity to explore motivations and articulations of self-injury behaviors online.

CHAPTER FIVE:
"RIOT DON'T DIET": SUBVERSION THROUGH CYBER RESISTANCE

If you look closely at a tree you'll notice its knots and dead branches,
just like our bodies.
What we learn is that beauty and imperfection go together wonderfully.
--Matthew Fox, Actor

Introduction

Previous chapters focus on virtual communities constructed around particular body practices, such as pro-anorexia, fitness and health, and self-injury behaviors. While these communities are related through their use of images and written texts to represent and, in some cases, promote hyper-thin, overly disciplined, anorexic and/or self-injured bodies, one of the most hopeful threads throughout these sites are pockets of resistance—individuals utilizing virtual tools to undermine negative or harmful messages and behaviors to promote positive body image, self-care, and self-love. These messages encourage healthy body image attitudes among the cultural barrage of imagery and written texts that foster the opposite—bodies that embody a narrow conception of perfection—and the often-related self-harm behaviors that normalize behaviors such as cutting. Body positive activists employ several methods to resist and provide alternatives to pro-ana, extreme fitness, and self-injury messages, including the subversive use of hashtags, culture jamming, the promotion of "average" bodies and "fat acceptance" via cyber movement(s), and more traditional approaches, such as offers for communication and links to professional resources. This chapter reinforces the significance of media-based resistance by providing information about the effects of media on girls and women's attitudes about their bodies, as well as presenting examples of such resistance.

As noted throughout my work, a substantial body of research consistently documents relationships between exposure to thin-ideal media and women's body dissatisfaction, making body positive media activism imperative and consequential. While media and advertising are not the only contributing factors to eating disorders and body image concerns, they play an increasingly significant role, as visual imagery is an integral and largely unavoidable part of everyday life. In *Can't Buy My Love: How Advertising Changes the Way We Think and Feel,* Jean Kilbourne focuses on how advertising leads to overconsumption and points to the pervasive nature of advertising in our everyday lives. She writes, "Advertising is our environment. We swim in it as fish swim in water. We cannot escape it" (57). More importantly, advertising changes the way we perceive our biological realities, as malleable through beauty technologies, exercise, dieting, and desire. Kilbourne continues:

> Advertising constantly promotes the core belief of American culture: that we *can* re-create ourselves, transform ourselves, transcend our circumstances—but with a twist. […] It is this belief that such transformation is possible that drives us to keep dieting, to buy more stuff, to read fashion magazines that give us the same information over and over again. (68)

We tend to believe what media tells us and, with the increasing presence of such imagery, we become it.

Correlational studies have linked media exposure with negative feelings about one's body image, showing that the more time spent watching television and reading magazines, the higher the experience of body dissatisfaction and problematic eating behaviors (Ashikali and Dittmar 515). Nearly 70% of adolescent girls report that magazine and other media images influence

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their idea of the "perfect body shape" and/or generate inspiration or a desire to lose weight (Levine 102). Steven D'Alessandro and Bill Chitty conducted a study that sought to "examine the effectiveness in terms of the use of a more realistic and obtainable body shape of women in advertising" (845). Their research supports what seems to be common knowledge among media critics and consumers, that media representations affect self-image, particularly for women and girls. They note that:

> [P]eople seek to satisfy their need for self-evaluation by comparing themselves with people who share the same characteristics. However, in the absence of similar people for comparison, models in advertisements can act as benchmarks. With this in mind, images in the media provide a focal point for individuals searching for physical standards to emulate and to evaluate themselves by. Several studies have proven that individuals compare their level of attractiveness with that of models in advertisements. (850)

Based on D'Alessandro and Chitty's assessment, providing a range of body types, as well as other forms of diversity such as race, through media is necessary to provide alternatives for self-comparison. If girls and women regularly see variations of beauty ideals represented across media sources, "average" and larger bodies are more likely to be normalized, accepted, and emulated, ideally resolving some of the issues individuals face when looking in the mirror through a lens shaped by media imagery, what Ron Burnett refers to as our image-world(s) (5).

In addition to attempting to sell products, advertising functions to shape attitudes and perceptions of social norms and values (Zhou and Chen 344). In their article, "Marginal Life after 49: A Preliminary Study of The Portrayal of Older People in Canadian Consumer Magazine

Advertising," Nan Zhou and Mervin Chen note how consistent immersion in visual media distorts our concept of reality, making it difficult to distinguish between images and reality:

> Constant exposure to advertisements will generate a reality's distortion because of these stereotypes and it will be almost impossible to eradicate them in our later years. Also, in most cases women are presented in subordinate roles that generate undesirable impacts on women's self-perception of themselves. Efforts to ameliorate the harmful effects of these images are thus often focused on finding methods to assist women and girls in resisting the internalization of the thin ideal. (349)

A strategy educators and activists employ to facilitate resistance is through the direct critiques of images in advertisements, exposing the extent of their digital manipulation. As psychologists Ngaire Donaghue and Anne Clemitshaw document in their article, "'I'm Totally Smart and a Feminist…and Yet I Want to be a Waif': Exploring Ambivalence Towards the Thin Ideal within the Fat Acceptance Movement," "Many interventions designed to inoculate girls and young women against the pressure for thinness focus on deconstructing the images and developing critical media literacy, presumably on the assumption that if women understand that these images aren't 'real' that they will lose their power" (416). Critical media literacy empowers people to think critically about the increasingly wide range of media messages that utilize images, language, sound, and technology to achieve specific goals, such as advertising that seeks to sell products by both capitalizing on and reinforcing cultural ideals ("Media Literacy Defined").

However, even when girls and women are provided with critical thinking skills, body image workshops, and education about the role of Photoshop and image manipulation in

advertising, they still tend to be negatively affected by visual media representations of thin

bodies. A study of preteen girls conducted by researchers Tiina Vares, Sue Jackson, and

Rosalind Gill found that, although their sample population were "sophisticated decoders of

media images, they also reported that these images made them feel 'bad' and 'sad,'" calling into

question whether the ability to recognize these images as problematic decreases their negative

effects (cited in Donaghue and Clemitshaw 416). In their assessment of the effects of body

positive strategies geared toward first year female college students, TeriSue Smith-Jackson,

Justine Reel, and Rosemary Thackeray found that effective tactics to improve body image are

rare, despite student recognition of the negative health effects associated with body

dissatisfaction (105-6). Since eating disorder causality is more complex than exposure to media

and differs from more common issues girls and women face with body image, eating disorders

require different approaches than general body image issues with varying success. Smith-

Jackson, Reel, and Thackeray note that:

> Even though they are often paired together, positive body image promotion and
>
> eating disorder prevention are distinctly different. Body image concerns are
>
> widespread and even considered normative for college females, whereas eating
>
> disorders are much less common, affecting roughly 15% of the college female
>
> population. Eating disorders often require more intensive psychological
>
> intervention, whereas body image concerns can be more easily addressed.
>
> Interventions that focus on positive body image promotion may help with the
>
> prevention of eating disorder symptomology. (106)

While teaching girls and women to be critical viewers of media images may not necessarily be effective in treating severe body disturbances such as eating disorders, attempting to normalize various body types by presenting media images that are more diverse may still produce favorable outcomes for others. Since many participants in pro-ana communities do not actually have eating disorders, body positive activism in these spaces may be more effective than previous research indicates.

Access to information and alternative attitudes about the implications of poor body image, eating disorders, and self-injury may not be sufficiently accessible beyond activist texts or educational programs, particularly because thin bodies continue to dominate on television, in magazines, and through standard cultural attitudes. In their article, "Is Fat a Feminist Issue? Exploring the Gendered Nature of Weight Bias," Janna Fikkan and Esther Rothblum address the lack of body diversity in television. Commenting on a study informing their research, they note, "One of the first studies examining prevalence of body types in prime time television was conducted by Lois Kaufman in 1980, who found that 88% of the individuals shown in prime time television programming had thin or average body types and only 12% were "overweight or obese" (10). By 2010, that number shifted only marginally, as almost 90% of women represented on television were considered at or below "normal" weight (Whyte). Body positive activism seeks to mediate more typical and unhealthy reflections of ideal bodies by providing exposure to and celebrating representations of "real" bodies—bodies that may not adhere to standards reflected in popular media. As Joan Jacobs Brumberg emphasizes and Ashikali and Dittmar's research supports, not all women are affected the same way by exposure to idealized media images and a number of vulnerability factors for negative media responses have been identified,

including one's tendency to engage in social comparison, familial attitudes around body type or weight, and those who exhibit other traits of body dissatisfaction (Ashikali and Dittmar 516). Therefore, just as some women's exposure to media representations of thin or underweight body ideals leads to eating disorders in conjunction with physiological or pathological factors, exposure to more diverse (larger or at least average) body ideals through media images may potentially have positive outcomes.

Presenting and celebrating realities of human bodies, which include flaws and disparities—weight variations, differences in proportions, cellulite, scars, moles, skin discolorations, and wrinkles—and exposing the role of technology in erasing what are perceived as imperfections is a mode of reclamation of the material body in cyber contexts. Populating mainstream media with "real" bodies rather than more typical Photoshopped and homogenized representations of beauty negotiates the tension between the cyborg as a technological object with its undeniable biological origins or material realities (Bordo 25). "Real body" imagery functions to reassert the "humanity" of the posthuman and confront the threat of technology to subsume the material body that Hayles' cautions about in her work. In *How We Became Posthuman,* she writes:

> If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognizes and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that

understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one

on which we depend for our continued survival. (5)

Models touched and retouched in magazines and other media sources are both cyborgs and

posthumans as physiological beings modified by technology; their makeup, clothing, and

accessories serve as prostheses while the technological interventions that make them thinner and

erase imperfections undermine the material realities of their actual bodies. Presenting realistic,

imperfect bodies untouched by photo filters is an act of resistance in a visual culture that

attempts to fix such bodies through normalizing dieting, (over)exercise, and digital manipulation.

Beauty Doesn't Come in One Size: Fat Acceptance Movement(s)

Perhaps the most prominent cultural development to critique beauty ideals has been the

"fat acceptance" (FA) movement, also known as fat positive, size acceptance, fat liberation,

fativism, and/or fat power, through which fatness and/or "average" sized bodies deemed

overweight by popular culture (and the associated terminology of "fatness") are reclaimed,

normalized, and embraced, and the negative implications of being "fat" are illuminated and

contested. Speaking to the necessity of such movements, Donaghue and Clemitshaw write:

> Despite the elision of contemporary ideas of beauty and health with thinness in
>
> western cultures, the [fat acceptance movement provides] a counter-discourse
>
> rejecting the requirements of the thin ideal and advocating for the recognition and
>
> celebration of diversity among bodies in a wide range of respects, including body
>
> size. These alternative "fat acceptance" discourses form a basis for resistance of

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the thin ideal and have provided a rallying cry for some of those marginalized and

excluded by mainstream exhortations to thinness. (416)

The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) was organized in 1969 in

response to the institutionalized and socially accepted discrimination of individuals based on

body type, as well as the prevalence of eating disorders and increasingly dramatic cultural ideals.

Born out of other civil rights movements in the late 1960s, the NAAFA recognized weight

discrimination as a corollary to other forms of discrimination based on physical attributes such as

sex or race ("Welcome to NAAFA.org"). While gender and race discrimination are still

significant issues in American (and other) cultures, they receive more legislative and active

attention than weight discrimination, arguably one of the most socially acceptable forms of

discrimination

Girls and women realize early in life that being thin is typically associated with success,

whether personal or professional. Fikkan and Rothblum document research that articulate the

myriad of disadvantages that women deemed overweight experience "in employment and

income, education, romantic relationships, and health care" (582). They find that women receive

substantial social and institutional penalties for deviations from the "ideal" body type, and in

occupational spheres alone face discrimination where hiring, promotion, performance evaluation,

and compensation are concerned (576). Donoghue and Clemitshaw's research support assertions

that the implications of weight exceed personal desires and emotions, noting that, "The

privileges attached to thinness are very real, and reinforce the importance of understanding

preoccupation with weight as a thoroughly social issue, and not as a result of problematic and

unnecessary 'internali[z]ations' made by individual women themselves" (416). Women

recognize the social capital and potential power that thinness generates, so attempts to maintain thinness or "ideal" (or even extreme) bodies are not necessarily weaknesses but attempts to attain power within a culture that rewards those who are thin and imposes negative consequences on those who are not. Such normalized conceptions of thinness as the only ideal demand interception, hence the rise of activism and social movements around the promotion of "average" and/or "fat" bodies.

Virtual communities and blogs constructed around the fat acceptance movement (or the general online presence of FA) are sometimes referred to as the "fatosphere." The fatosphere is defined by Donaghue and Clemitshaw as "a set of inter-linked blogs in which proponents of FA confront the personal and political elements of the pathologi[z]ation and demoni[z]ation of fat bodies by sharing their thoughts, feelings, experiences, and personal practices as they pursue fat acceptance as well as their reactions to and analyses of public discourse concerning fatness" (423). The fatosphere has increased the public profile of and access to the FA movement by folks who may not realize that such support or communities exist. Just as pro-ana communities potentially provide support and acceptance for individuals struggling with eating disorders and desires to maintain thin bodies, the fatosphere serves those who have occupied varied places on the body spectrum and struggled with body dissatisfaction, discrimination, and a lack of community support for their physiological realities. The exchanges that occur on FA sites allow insight into the dynamic processes by which embodied subjectivities are made and remade (417). Critics have charged the FA movement with being largely U.S.-centric, so the fatosphere makes FA more accessible to a range of individuals beyond the United States (417). The fat activism movement represents individuals across races and the role women of color are playing is

increasingly clear, particularly in online spaces that mix fashion and body acceptance. As examples provided later in this chapter indicate, some of the more prominent FA bloggers are black women. As blogger Marie Denee points out, racial and cultural factors shape beauty and body norms. So while cultural factors purportedly make it more acceptable for African Americans or Latinas (for example) to embrace curves, fat activist Virgie Tovar is quick to point out that this "does not necessarily mean that women of color don't also suffer from the mainstream norms that clearly preference thinness" (cited in Perez). Women of color face multiple struggles related to appearance in a culture that typically privileges Caucasian features and a thin frame as the ultimate paradigm of beauty.

Academic programs and courses referred to as "Fat Studies" based on similar objectives have gained prominence across universities in the United States, including courses offered at George Washington, Oregon State, and Rutgers universities (Binder). In the "Foreword" of *The Fat Studies Reader*, scholar and activist Marilyn Wann connects the academic and activist arms of the fat positive movement by noting that, "Fat Studies has the potential to make a unique contribution as a theoretical and analytic undertaking, and also to provide much-needed momentum and moral suasion for social justice for people of all sizes" (x). The mere presence of fat acceptance imagery does not create a fat accepting culture but challenges the social acceptability of thinness as the only standard of beauty. Just as individuals in most cultures are taught to value and internalize thinness as beautiful, alternatives advocated by the fat acceptance movement and "average is beautiful" attitudes can also become normalized and valued, particularly for young and/or more impressionable individuals.

Critics of the fat acceptance movement have voiced concerns that critiquing the thin ideal and/or some of the techniques employed by fat activists demonize thinness and make women feel guilty about exercising, dieting, or being "naturally" thin, using terms such as "thin shaming" and "skinny shaming." While such charges may be valid, as larger bodies tend to be emphasized within body acceptance dialogues, the role of power in relation to body type must be considered. White, upper/middle class, thin, and/or attractive individuals tend to hold more power in a culture that deems these features dominant and more highly valued in general. In her article, "Thin Shaming is Just as Harmful as Other Forms of Harassment," Sarah Joseph shares her conflicted experience about her thin body as she recognizes the role of thin privilege in her life, proclaiming, "Although [fat acceptance] may empowering for some, it also inherently contributes to thin-shaming." Though she acknowledges being hurt by those who deem her "too skinny," she writes, "Something I didn't consider, however, is a concept known as 'thin privilege.' Society predominantly stereotypes people who are not skinny as lazy, unattractive, incapable, and undesirable, while the thin woman has been idealized by pop culture." "Thin shaming" is a valid concern for some, but thinness is considered ideal and thin bodies are generally afforded privileges and greater access to power; therefore to compare thin shaming to the role of fat shaming in a culture that privileges thin as ideal is misguided. While body positivity and fat acceptance movements promote acceptance of all body types and reject a narrow or pre-determined "ideal," this chapter emphasizes the celebration of bodies that do not fit the normative or thin standards privileged in popular culture.

Being Subversive: Examples of Hashtag Activism and Culture Jamming

"Hashtag" activism, an essential form of resistance in the communities I examine, depends on words or phrases preceded by a pound (#) sign to identify and aggregate messages related to a particular topic. Hashtags (also referred to as "tags" throughout my work) bring otherwise unrelated individuals and groups together to generate discussion or action around shared interests or concerns. Hashtag activism can subvert messages endorsed through specific tags such as "cutting" or "pro-ana," challenging the values or ideals originally intended by those tags. Hashtag activism can also lead to concrete change(s) by mobilizing masses around issues, calling for legislative changes or governmental intervention, or urging direct action. In her *Ms. Magazine* article, "Future of Feminism: The Hashtag Is Mightier than the Sword," Catherine Scott writes about the potential power of the hashtag. She writes, "Remember the old days when the symbol # just meant a number? Now it's more likely to signify a serious call to action." She also emphasizes how rapidly activist tactics have morphed from the streets to the internet, "Twenty years ago, feminist activism might have meant writing a letter to your Congress(wo)man or picking up a pen to sign a petition. Nowadays it's much more likely to involve Twitter, Facebook or online petitions, as feminists begin to use social media to effect change." While hashtags may simply generate conversations about sports games or television shows, they can serve as powerful tools to challenge self-injury attitudes and foster body positivity in pro-ana and cutting communities.

Culture jamming, another form of media-based activism, is similar to hashtag activism, but depends on the original source of a message to undermine it, provide an alternative, or "talk back" to the initial message. Culture jamming is typically a direct assault on an advertisement or

message to defy the intended message or, as Naomi Klein defines it in *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*, "the practice of parodying ads and hijacking billboards to drastically alter their messages" (280). Culture jamming is not only limited to advertisements, as I demonstrate through examples of fitspo and thinspo imagery modified by users to promote body positive attitudes over unrealistic or extreme expectations. While Klein claims that the term "culture jamming" was "coined in 1984 by the San Francisco audio-collage band Negativland" (281), she also recognizes that, "Attempting to pinpoint the roots of culture jamming is next to impossible, largely because the practice is itself a cutting and pasting of graffiti, modern art, do-it-yourself punk philosophy and age-old pranksterism" (282). With the accessibility of new media technologies such as Photoshop and online meme creators, individuals can engage in culture jamming more readily and transmit their messages through social media and the internet in order to reach a broader audience ("Culture Jamming: Ads Under Attack" 7-8). In "Culture Jamming…What is it?," an online article that addresses the relationship between feminism and culture jamming, the "Jammin' Ladies" emphasize that "many women's groups fight against the use of unhealthily skinny models and the portrayal of women in general in advertising. Many ads make the female viewer feel insufficient and self-doubting but through culture jamming these women are given a voice and a means to fight back against the ads." Specific examples of activism and forms of resistance provided within this chapter intercept the very sources that lead to the prevalence of and need for pro-ana and self-injury communities

Within pro-ana communities, users employ tags such as "ana" and "proana" to share images and texts that disrupt the messages such tags espouse. Examples include "Beauty does not require starvation"; "You're not ugly, society is"; "You don't need a thigh gap to be pretty;

mermaids don't have thigh gaps and everyone thinks they're gorgeous"; and "Break Free from

this Weight Obsessed World." Other examples feature scales with empowering messages to

destabilize the importance of weight and images of women considered "overweight," such as, "If

a size 2 is beautiful then my size 22 must be glorious" (figure 34), and an image tagged #proana

with a naked woman proudly embracing her curves staring at the camera with "No shame, just

love" written across her stomach (figure 42).

Natalie. If a Size 2 is Beautiful... Digital image. *Take Fat Back*. Tumblr, Inc., 25 Apr. 2014.
Web. 6 July 2014.

Figure 43 Size Acceptance Image Tagged "Pro-Ana"

Web links to organizations that assist those struggling with eating disorders and provide support

for those seeking recovery are also commonly shared within pro-ana communities. Users often

post anti-pro-ana texts and create blogs on Tumblr devoted to anti-pro-ana messages and

rhetoric, such as those titled "Fuck Pro-Ana/Mia" and "Anti-Ana," that highlight the dangers of

pro-ana attitudes, provide support and resources, as well as alternative and body positive

messages. Culture jamming examples include a text intended to read as, "Dear Fat, Get the Fuck

Out of My Body," but modified with strikethrough text to read, "Dear Fat, Thank You for Giving

Necessary Nutrients to My Body" (figure 43).
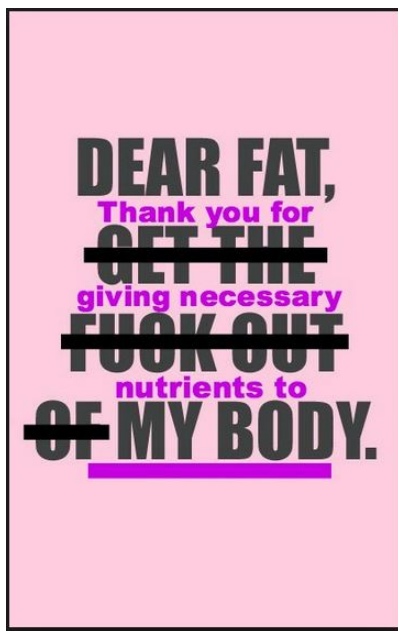
Dear Fat. Digital image. *Tumblr*. Tumblr, Inc., 9 June 2014. Web. 9 June 2014.

Figure 44 "Dear Fat, Thank You" Image

Another features a commonly shared pro-ana text (which I reference in Chapter Two) that reads

"Collarbones or sweets, a flat stomach or soda" on the top of the image and a woman laughing

while holding several snacks such as popcorn, sweets and soda on the bottom part of the image.

The image-text attempts to undermine pro-ana rhetoric while reminding viewers that food can provide pleasure. It also pokes fun at pro-ana texts in an attempt to diminish the power of the original message (figure 44).

Rifkin, Adam. *Do You Want Hipbones or Pizza Parody?* Digital image. *Panda Whale*. Panda Whale, Inc., 6 Sept. 2012. Web. 3 July 2013.

Figure 45 Satirical Play on Pro-Ana Imagery

Many hashtag activist movements promote body acceptance and normalize and celebrate body diversity and fatness but do not necessarily operate within pro-ana communities. Tags such as #body positivity, #body positive, and #fat and proud include photos of "plus-sized" women embracing their bodies, advice for how to love your body, and strategies to counter negative messages around non-thin bodies in popular media. Tumblr blogs devoted to body positivity despite size include those titled "Run Your Sand through My Hourglass," "Plus Size Chinese Fashion and Culture," and "Body Positive Zone." Many of these blogs and tags also honor

thinner bodies to avoid "thin shaming." #Fatkini encourages "larger size" women to share

pictures of themselves in bikinis within virtual communities such as Instagram; as of early

October 2014, Instagram featured over 10,000 images with the tag (figure 45).
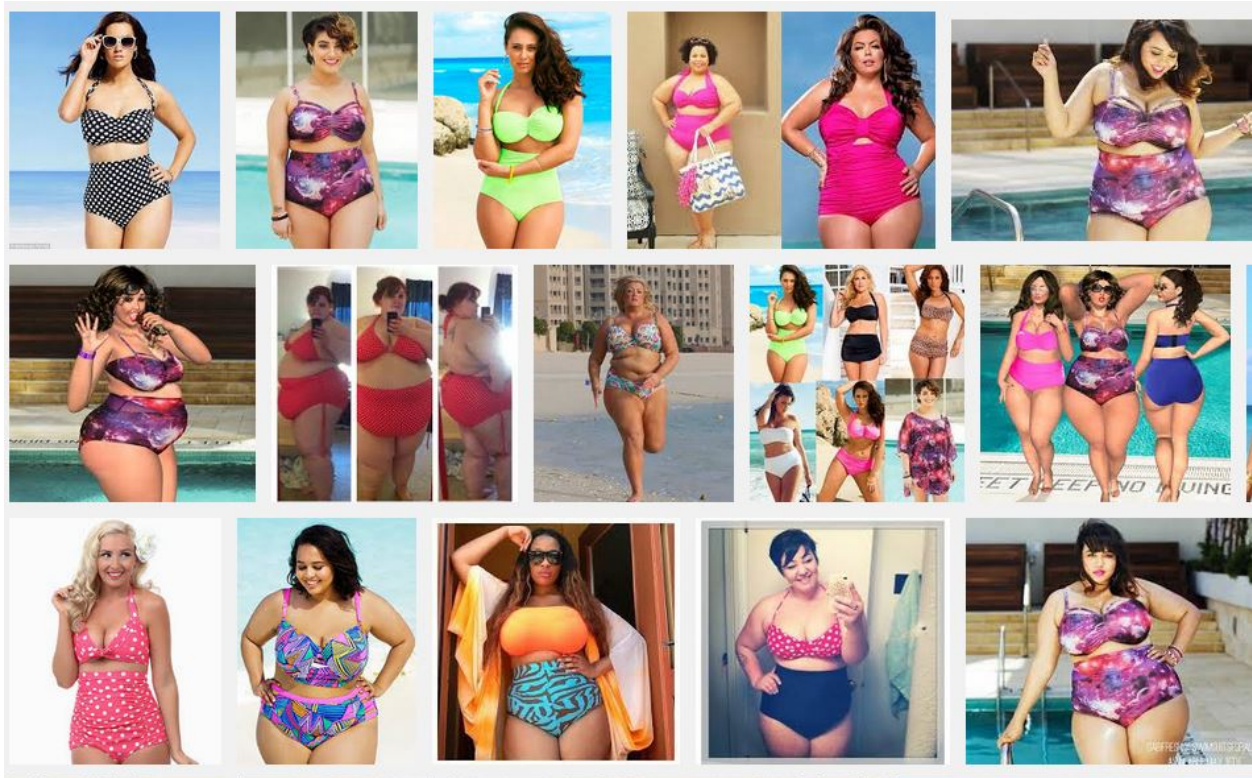
"Fatkini" Search Results. Digital image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 12 Oct. 2014.

Figure 46 #Fatkini Google Screenshot

In her article "Fat Activists Take Body Acceptance to the Beach," Miriam Perez starts with the

basic question: "What is a 'fatkini'?" Her response is that, "Simply put, it is a bikini made for,

and worn by, a fat, plus-size, or curvy woman" (Perez). Bikinis have not traditionally been

available to larger women because they were not sized for a proper fit. As noted by Jessica

Probus who featured the movement in her article, "Women are Sharing Gorgeous Pictures of

their Real Bodies with the #Fatkini Hashtag," the #Fatkini hashtag is often attributed to beauty

blogger Gabi Gregg, who created her own line of plus-size swimwear as a response to the lack of swimwear options provided to larger bodies. Probus cites the power of such hashtag activism to foster community as well as size-acceptance, "#Fatkini and other hashtags like #LoseHateNotWeight are becoming micro-communities of women who are sharing their stories and their selfies with the world." Fashion blogger Marie Denee, who writes for Curvy Fashionista, agrees, "Social media allows for these women to congregate, interact with each other. […] They're like, 'Oh, you like bikinis too? Let's demand our bikinis!'" (Probus). Such hashtag movements are a contemporary arm of the fat acceptance movement that seeks to empower and embolden women to feel beautiful and worthy despite their body type.

Addressing the #Fatkini movement, Virgie Tovar, one of the nation's leading experts and lecturers on fat discrimination and body image, emphasizes the personal benefits such movements enable: "There's not only this sense that I'm transgressing this rule that fat girls don't wear bikinis. There's [also] this corporeal experience of the wind and sun on my stomach. That feeling is not only novel and exhilarating but also political" (cited in Probus). Body positivity is indeed a personal and political issue as the intimate nature of one's relationship with her body has concrete consequences on social and institutional levels, as demonstrated by the fat acceptance movement. Related to the notion of the "bikini body" so prevalent in pro-ana and fitspo communities, an image-text shared on Pinterest includes a simple approach to the issue: "How to get a bikini body: Put a bikini on your body." Another similar text features an illustration of a woman with hairy legs and sagging breasts, purposefully presenting a version of womanhood that does not fit the ideal beauty norm and reads: "How to have a beach body: 1) Have a body. 2) Go to the beach" (LauraJul). Other images shared across Tumblr, Pinterest, and

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Facebook feature a range of body types and advice for how to achieve a bikini body, which

include basic tenets like being human. In answering the question, "How to dress for your shape,"

the response asks, "Are you human shaped? Play up your confidence and natural sex appeal by

wearing whatever the fuck you want" (Ross). Another chart asks questions like, "Have you had a

baby?"; "Do you have cellulite?"; "Did you skip your morning workout?," with each result

pointing to the fact that one still has a bikini body because all it requires is to have a body and a

bikini (Grey). These tactics creatively undermine the notion that one must have a particular body

type to wear a bikini "properly," reinforced by magazine articles and cover stories emphasizing

bikini-ready bodies, such as "how to get a summer body in thirty days." As I demonstrate in

Chapters Two and Three, summer and bikinis are commonly cited motivators for pro-ana

thinspirations; alternative attitudes such as the statements and charts cited above are attempts to

mediate such ubiquitous and generally accepted attitudes about the relationship between "bikini

bodies," thinness, and self-worth.

Anti-self-injury advocates employ similar media based tactics to discourage cutting in

virtual communities, where images such as arms and wrists with writing on them provide

alternatives to normalized behaviors within those communities. Wrists with hearts drawn on

them or tattoos over scars to represent healing are tagged "cutting" or "self-injury" so individuals

seeking self-injury communities will see these images in the context of typical cutting texts.

Resources such as "Self-Injury Urges: What to Do Instead" or phone numbers to hotlines provide

access to community participants who may feel alone or inclined to resort to dangerous or self-

destructive behaviors. Tumblr includes hundreds of pages focused on self-injury recovery that

compile images and messages emphasizing dangers of cutting, self-love and appreciation, and

discourage viewers from romanticizing self-harm, which appear when searching "anti-self-injury," "anti-cutting," or "stop cutting." A search of anti-self-injury on Pinterest results in several boards devoted to such messages but a search of "anti-cutting" mimics a search for "cutting," where most results relate to crafts, haircuts, and recipes featuring particular cuts of meat, demonstrating the cultural difference between Pinterest and Tumblr. Instagram provides a broader range of images; a search of #antiselfinjury results in only one image but #stopcutting returns over 18,000 results, with many related to self-injury while others are more difficult to decipher in relation to the tag, perhaps because the cutting (and hence, anti-cutting) community on Tumblr is more established than the more recently launched Instagram.

Even fitspo communities, conventionally thought to inspire healthy behaviors, attract adversaries who use hashtag activism and culture jamming to counter extreme attitudes that some fitspo texts advocate. Anti-fitspo pages on Tumblr and Pinterest promote moderation in exercise and dieting rather than strict regimens often dictated by fitspo texts, while image-texts tagged "fitspo" encourage body diversity. Examples such as, "You do not have to look like a fitness model to be strong, fit, and healthy" and "I don't have a runner's body but I have a runner's heart and that is all you need" emphasize the health aspects of fitness over appearance. A website titled #StopFitspiration is described as "a movement […] to bring awareness to the harm of Fitspiration messages and to offer support for those recovering from exercise addiction while providing information and tips for a more healthy, balanced, and body positive approach to fitness" (Bersaglio). One article posted on the site, titled "Fitness Apps: The Good and the Bad," includes an assessment of fitness-based phone and tablet applications, outlining beneficial and harmful aspects of such apps. Another, titled "12 Signs You're Exercising Too Much" (Roop),

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attempts to distinguish between "healthy" and excessive exercise habits. The site also includes an "Images" link that compiles examples of culture jamming—fitspo images modified to reflect healthier attitudes, celebrate body diversity, and/or point out problems with extreme fitspo messages. Also featured is a "confession" from former fitspo blogger Taylor Davidson who writes, "Sorry for the days I used to tout clean eating and fitspiration. I can do what's right for my body without shaming others. #stopfitspiration." She also responds to another fitspo blogger, writing, "[T]here is nothing wrong with having your own personal goals but from a former fitspo blogger I know that culture is toxic" (Davidson). Davidson's statements elucidate the tension between the benefits and potential damaging outcomes of fitspiration texts.

<u>Embrace Your Shape: Body Positive Media Activism</u>

Media-based body positive movements are increasingly widespread as visual media is more prominently integrated into most Americans' daily lives, most notably through advertising, whether online or through more traditional mediums. Direct anti-pro-ana activism includes virtual spaces specifically constructed to challenge such attitudes. Tumblr users create blogs with the express purpose of promoting recovery and fighting against pro-anorexia and self-injury attitudes. "Anti-Pro-Ana" describes itself as "a blog against pro-ana/mia for those recovered, recovering, or still suffering" and, while the number of written posts and images are limited, they focus on recovery and anti-pro-ana attitudes, encouraging viewers to "fight against pro-ana and pro-mia websites." "Anti-Ana" features a subtitle that encourages viewers to "Accept. Ask for Help. Recover." Its creator begins the blog description with a simple assertion: "You're gorgeous," and indicates that the blog is "[a] strike against the glorification of eating disorders"

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where viewers can ask questions and share their experiences. "Anti-Ana" is much more active than other similar pages, with 31,875 "notes" (as of September 2014) which include shares and comments.

Whether searching "pro-ana" or "anti-pro-ana" tags on Tumblr, viewers encounter frequent expressions against pro-ana from users castigating those who post pro-ana imagery to those who express the seriousness of eating disorders, share experiences, or urge sufferers to seek help. Others criticize Tumblr for failing to block "pro-ana" and "thinspo" tags; for example, "alightwhendarkenssfell" posts, "Instagram blocked the 'thinspo' tag why doesn't Tumblr? I mean it's against the community guidelines so you actually break them if you post it. I say block proana, pro ana, promia and pro mia." Others focus on pro-ana posters more directly. "[S]uckitproana" writes, "Just because you are diagnosed with an eating disorder doesn't give you a right to promote it." Pinterest also hosts active "anti-pro-ana" boards and while only seven different pages appeared from a search of "anti-pro-ana" in October 2014, one boasted almost 600 followers. In the same month, an Instagram search of "#antiproana" resulted in 1,971 images and while most feature food, they represent the relationship between celebrating food and fighting pro-ana attitudes.

Organizations and/or websites such as "About-Face," whose subheading is "Don't Fall for the Media Circus," challenge narrow conceptions of women's bodies represented in popular media by illuminating problematic advertising campaigns, sexism in popular media, and the lack of body diversity reflected in advertisements, on television, in magazines, and via other media sources. With a concisely worded mission, their objectives are clear but ambitious and emphasize cyber-based forms of activism. Their mission reads, "About-Face equips women and

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girls with tools to understand and resist harmful media messages that affect their self-esteem and body image," and their strategies include media-literacy workshops and body-image programs in schools, through organizations, and within communities, in addition to their pronounced online presence across social media platforms, including Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, and YouTube (Berger). About-Face encourages viewers to create and participate in campaigns to inspire friends and family members as well as larger media sources to create new norms in body representations by providing specific campaign ideas and lauding advertisers who provide alternatives to increasingly extreme bodies reflected in popular media. The About-Face "action" link invites viewers to not only educate themselves about the role of media in promoting unrealistic ideals for girls and women but to "do something about it," emphasizing consumer and individual power in realizing change based on a simple assertion: "You don't have to put up with media that makes you feel badly about yourself" (Berger). They expose the (over)use of Photoshop in advertising and feature a "Gallery of Offenders" and a "Gallery of Winners" to mobilize letter-writing and online communication campaigns, as well as consumer activism (refusing to purchase goods from particular companies, for example).

"Operation Beautiful," another media-based movement whose goal is to intercept self-loathing around weight and body image, utilizes "post-it notes" to spread body-positive messages in places where girls and women may be more susceptible to beauty ideals or self-consciousness, such as in locker rooms or on dressing room mirrors" (Boyle). According to their website, the goal of Operation Beautiful is "to end negative self-talk or 'Fat Talk.'" Their founder Caitlin Boyle emphasizes the emotional, spiritual, and physical implications of negative self-talk, which she calls "toxic." Boyle encourages participants to upload their own messages to

the Operation Beautiful website for others to read. Examples of messages that participants share include simple assertions such as, "You are beautiful just the way you are," "You are loved, so smile!" and "Change the voices in your head. Make them like you instead. You are PERFECT" (figure 46).

"Operation Beautiful" Search Results. Digital image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 2 Oct. 2014.

Figure 47 Examples of Operation Beautiful Messages

She hosts and helps organize workshops and speaking engagements to help facilitate healthy body image and promote critical thinking about media imagery. She has also published two books, one for older teens and adults and one for pre-teens and girls. Her book geared toward the older demographic, *Operation Beautiful: Transforming the Way You See Yourself One Post-It Note at a Time,* is described as, "An empowering book with photos, notes, and true stories about the underground OperationBeautiful.com campaign to recognize the true beauty within every woman." Her book *Operation Beautiful: One Note at a Time,* geared toward 8-14 year old girls, "addresses topics such as body image, bullying, cliques, puberty, relationships, community service, and gossiping, all via the message of Operation Beautiful Post-Its that were written by tween and teen girls, as well as adults reflecting on their own teen experiences" (Boyle).

Using art to promote body positivity and expose the detrimental capacity of beauty ideals is another powerful technique employed by photographers and artists. Such artists include actor

Leonard Nimoy, who launched "The Full Body Project" through which he diverts from his usual representation of actors and models who reflect the norm of performance culture to emphasize women who are not only larger but also identify as part of the "fat liberation" movement (figure 47)**.**

Nimoy, Leonard. *Full Body Project Images*. Digital image. *Google Images*. Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2014.

Figure 48 Full Body Project Photography Examples

Another body image activist, commercial photographer Frank Cordelle, spent twenty-five years working on "The Century Project," an exhibit that features photographs of girls and women from birth until 100 years old to represent the range of bodies reflected by reality rather than bodies that advertising and media convince viewers are the norm. "The Aunties Project," an exhibition of paintings by twenty-something artist Aleah Chapin feature huge, hyperreal oil paintings of

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nude women in their 60s and 70s exposing and embracing their aging bodies, including

"imperfections" such as sagging skin, cellulite, wrinkles, and grey hair (Abbitt) (figure 48).

Chapin, Aleah. *The Aunties Project Images.* Digital Image. *Google Images.* Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2014.

Figure 49 Aunties Project Painting Examples

A haunting photography exhibit by German photographer Ivonne Thein titled "Thirty-Two Kilos" (70 pounds) features a series of fourteen photographs of "terrifyingly thin, bandage-wrapped models in fashion editorial poses" to highlight the relationship between high fashion and anorexia (Consilvio). She obscures the models' faces to force viewers to focus on their bodies. Thein created the series after reading about the pro-ana movement; she cites her work as a commentary on the "pathological striving of young men and women to be extremely thin" (Consilvio) (figure 49).

Thein, Ivonne. *Thirty-Two Kilos Images*. Digital image. *Google Images*. Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2014.

Figure 50 "Thirty-Two Kilos" Gallery Examples

A perhaps more well-known example of a project to expose the relationship between the fashion industry and anorexia is a billboard featuring former model Isabelle Caro who died at age 28 in 2010 of symptoms related to her fifteen year struggle with anorexia. She allowed Italian photographer Oliviero Tocani to capture her nude, emaciated, and clearly ailing body for a billboard campaign by Italian fashion label Nolita in 2007. The advertising campaign was in part a response to critiques of the fashion industry after 21-year-old Brazilian model Ana Carolina Reston died of anorexia in 2006 (Grimes). Caro's intention was to "shock people into awareness" and "warn girls about the danger of diets and of fashion commandments" (Grimes) (figure 50).

Tocani, Oliviero. *No Anorexia*. Digital image. *Google Images*. Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 29 Aug. 2014.

Figure 51 Nolita Campaign Billboard Sample

Some groups who worked with anorexics claimed the campaign was a disservice to those struggling with eating disorders. Italy eventually outlawed the billboards, as Fabiola de Clercq, president of Italy's Association for the Study of Anorexia and Bulimia deemed the image "too crude" ("Italy Bans 'No Anorexia' Poster"). The paradox between the normalization of anorexic bodies represented by models such as Caro and Reston in fashion contexts and the response to the Caro billboard reflecting the same body ideal demonstrates the failure of the fashion industry to acknowledge the implications of the very ideals they promote.

<u>Never Too Early: Recreating Barbie</u>

Ruth Handler, creator of Barbie and co-founder of Mattel, introduced the now iconic doll to America in March of 1959 ("History"). As Barbie's unrealistic body proportions indicate, girls are indoctrinated into beauty ideals early, even if implicitly, through the appearance of their

seemingly innocuous dolls. As part of a larger body of research on the effects of dolls on children's body image, "Does Barbie Make Girls Want to Be Thin? The Effect of Experimental Exposure to Images of Dolls on the Body Image of 5- to 8- Year Old Girls" by Helga Dittmar, Emma Halliwell, and Suzanne Ive indicates that children's toys play a more substantial role on self-perception than parents and others may realize. They maintain that, "For young children, fantasy and play are vital parts of socialization in which they internalize ideals and values and dolls provide a tangible image of the body that can be internalized as part of the child's developing self-concept and body image" (283). Research comparing Barbie's bodily proportions to that of the average women indicates that the ratio of Barbie's body parts on a living person would make it impossible for her to properly move or function. In her article emphasizing Barbie's proportions in comparison to both "average" and anorexic women, Nina Golgowski notes that, "if Barbie was a real woman she'd be forced to walk on all fours and would be physically incapable of lifting her over-sized head. […] Her 16-inch waist would also be four inches thinner than her head, leaving room for only half a liver and a few inches of intestine." Graphs released by Rehabs.com, a site for locating mental health treatment centers in the U.S., point out the outrageous physical characteristics of a doll seen for more than 50 years as a role model for girls (Golgowski).

In response to the absence of dolls representing healthy body proportions, Pittsburgh artist and illustrator Nickolay Lamm recreated Mattel's iconic Barbie using proportions of the average 19-year-old woman as indicated by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) (Petri). The doll, which he named "Lammily" (combining his last name and "family"), was financially supported through a crowdfunding campaign initiated on March 5, 2014. Within 24 hours of its

launch the campaign was successfully funded and by April 2014 more than 13,000 supporters

contributed over half a million dollars by pre-ordering approximately 19,000 dolls, making the

demand for such a doll clear. Lamm articulates that he created Lammily to show that "average is

beautiful" after comparing fashion dolls to more typical body types (*Lammily*) (figure 51).
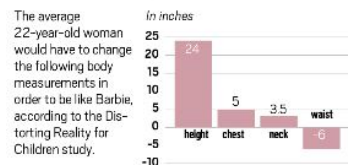

Espinoza, Ericka. *Beauty in Proportion: Barbie versus Lammily*. Digital image. *The Daily News*. Unified Student Media, Ball State University, 18 Mar. 2014. Web. 2 Oct. 2014.

Figure 52 Barbie versus Lammily Proportions

The doll was born out of a simple question he asked himself: "what if fashion dolls were made using standard human body proportions?" Lammily wears minimal makeup, non-gendered clothing, and her feet are flat rather than shaped for high heels. Lamm hopes to continue his series with future dolls that reflect "real life in miniature form" (Lamm); he envisions her reading books that inform, playing instruments that educate on the intricacies of music, constructing her own home, and cultivating her own garden (Lamm). Reflecting a promising future for children who are indeed affected by their dolls' bodies, Lamm's ultimate philosophy is that, "Lammily represents the idea of being true to yourself in a world that too often convinces us to pursue an unattainable fantasy" and asks future supporters to join him "in promoting the beauty of reality" (Lamm).

Also exposing the narrow scope of normative beauty standards using Barbie dolls, photographer Sheila Pree Bright explores the complexities of racial identity in a series titled "Plastic Bodies," which she developed in 2003. Juxtaposing Barbie's facial features with real women, most frequently women of color, to illuminate "their complex relationships to white beauty standards" (Bahadur), Bright contrasts fragmented bodies of multicultural women with the dolls. As Bright notes, "American concepts of the 'perfect female body' are clearly exemplified through commercialism, portraying 'image as everything' and introducing trends that many spend hundreds of dollars to imitate" (figure 52).
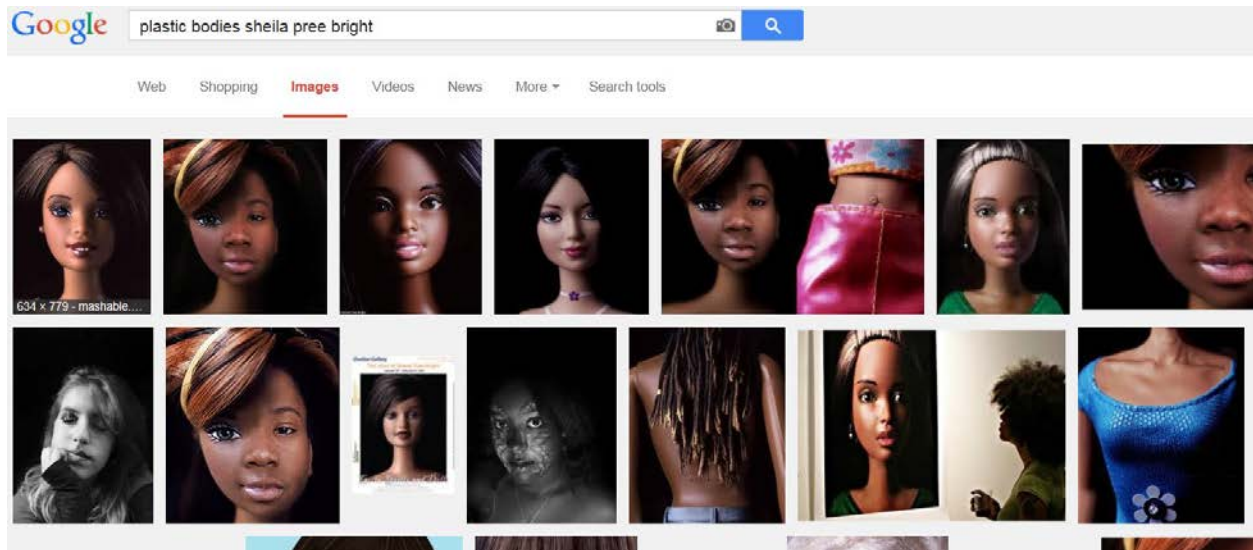
Bright, Sheila Pree. *Plastic Bodies Images*. Digital image. *Google Images*. Google, Inc., n.d. Web. 4 Oct. 2014.

Figure 53 Bright Plastic Bodies Images

She cites silicone breasts, hair extensions, acrylic nails and changing eye color through contact lenses. Bright compares the use of digital manipulation such as airbrushing and Photoshop to making the female body "a replica of a doll," replacing "the essence of natural beauty in popular American culture" with fantasy. In 2010, Mattel released a line of African-American Barbie dolls but were condemned by many for their straight hair, light eyes, and failure to represent the features they promised, such as fuller lips and broader noses, brown eyes, and the range of features embodied by particular demographics of black women (Scott). While mixed race women may have straight hair and dark skin or light eyes and curly hair, the lack of range of available Barbie types is problematic for girls who consider themselves "unremarkable" because they do not have the combination of features deemed "exotic" and, thus, "attractive" that the line of African-American Barbies reflect (Slim).

<u>Conclusion</u>

The role of personal agency regarding bodily practices related to appearance, whether to shrink one's body through dieting or starvation, tone and sculpt it through exercise, damage it through self-injury, or embrace it in its "natural" form without diet or exercise regimens is, as addressed in previous chapters, constrained by cultural imperatives. In *The Bioethics of New Media,* Joanne Zylinska emphasizes the relationship between technology, identity, and power, noting that virtual communities go "some way toward interpreting media culture as a productive apparatus of power, a network of nodes and temporary stabilizations of forces, where the self is neither entirely 'free' and autonomous nor entirely and permanently subjugated" (93). There is an inherent tension in finding empowerment through self-starvation or self-injury, especially when the desired outcome is not self-defined. Women who starve themselves to maintain a beauty ideal exercise a constrained form of choice, informed by a culture that wants them to starve, as long as they look good doing it. Because choice—whatever choice that may be—is inevitably affected by cultural contexts, so are the notions of agency and docility. Are women who identify as pro-ana or suffer from eating disorders making active choices or struggling with pathological and/or culturally based conditions? Are those who devote extensive time and energy to appearance through body sculpting, cosmetic surgery, or fashion and makeup regimens responding to cultural cues or doing things "for themselves"? Is it fair to hold women accountable for the choices they make regarding appearance when power is so intimately linked to the external cues they exhibit?

Such complicated issues do not have specific answers or solutions but, as I demonstrate throughout my work, the convergence of social constructions of gender with deeply ingrained

personal desires, the relationship between power and appearance, and the physiological

pathologies that contribute to extreme bodies and the virtual communities that support and

sustain them warrant increased attention as "real life" is intimately connected to our virtual and

visually-based identities. Women's bodies are never neutral; they are laden with meaning—

social, political, cultural, and personal. The gendered body is a site of cultural inscription where

social ideals are internalized and perpetuated through our activities around our bodies and

appearances. The body is malleable, never fixed, and always inscribed with gender and cultural

standards. Despite the mode of resistance, a range of responses to a well-established beauty ideal

are expanding and attaining more attention as they branch out through various virtual

communities, infiltrating largely unattainable beauty ideals with a healthy dose of the real—

bodies that do not hide but rather embrace the unique differences of human bodies, flaws

included. From the more obscure #fatkini movement to the popular and prominently advertised

"Dove Beauty" campaign, a cultural shift is palpable. While pro-ana communities are still

relatively fringe, the association of thinness with perfection is increasingly ubiquitous with the

expansion of virtual forums, technological interventions, and an emphasis on the visual.

However, as evidenced by the examples provided throughout this chapter, responses to the

potential negative outcomes of narrow beauty ideals are also increasing.

The implications of body image issues, whether widespread self-loathing by teenage girls

or more serious cases of eating disorders, have been established through research and are

demonstrated by the existence of pro-ana culture and virtual spaces. While fitspiration is not

necessarily a negative outcome of pro-ana culture, body positive activism and critical media

literacy expose the potential for extreme fitness to lead to unhealthy attitudes. Since poor body

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image and eating disorders have been linked to other self-harming practices, such as cutting, it is important to recognize the relationship between the range of body-based attitudes, and support and promote modes and movements that resist, raise awareness about, and seek to change cultural values based on appearance, and provide resources to encourage individuals to embrace self-love over self-loathing and to create a culture that values body diversity over the narrow, extreme, and deeply entrenched beauty ideal that has haunted media culture and consumers since its inception.

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