

"I Am a Waste of Breath, of Space, of Time": Metaphors of Self in a Pro-Anorexia Group

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Abstract

According to recent research on eating disorders, heavy users of pro-anorexia (pro-ana) sites show higher levels of disordered eating and more severe impairment of quality of life than non-heavy users. A better understanding of how pro-ana members self-present in the virtual world could shed some light on these offline behaviors. Through discourse analysis, I examined the metaphors the members of a pro-ana group invoked in their personal profiles on a popular social networking site, to talk about the self. I applied the Metaphor Identification Procedure to 757 text profiles. I identified four key metaphorical constructions in pro-ana members' self-descriptions: self as space, self as weight, perfecting the self, and the social self. These four main metaphors represented discourse strategies, both to create a collective pro-ana identity and to enact an individual identity as pro-ana. In this article, I discuss the implications of these findings for the treatment of eating disorders.

Keywords

anorexia; discourse analysis; eating disorders; Internet; self

In the last two decades, widespread use of the Internet has revolutionized the social ways of communicating and living the experience of illness, and new medical discourses and practices have emerged. Besides the proliferation of Internet sources such as personal websites, bulletin boards, and electronic support groups exchanging experiential information, one significant change has been the rise of so-called "online social movements" (Conrad & Stults, 2010). The pro-anorexia movement, a large web-based community of users who endorse and promote the maintenance of anorexia, is one of the most controversial.

The pro-ana (short for anorexia) movement has been the focus of attention of clinicians, sociologists, and feminist researchers (Davies & Lipsey, 2003; Dias, 2003; Ferreday, 2003; Fox, Ward, & O'Rourke, 2005; Harshbarger, Ahlers-Schmidt, Mayans, & Hawkins, 2009), and both qualitative and quantitative studies have been conducted on the content (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010; Juarascio, Shoaib, & Timko, 2010), the structure (Lipczynska, 2007; Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006), the linguistic style of self-presentation (Lyons, Mehl, & Pennebaker, 2006; Wolf, Theis, & Kordy, 2013), and the type of interaction developed in pro-ana forums and websites (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Maloney, 2013; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009; Smith, Wickes, & Underwood,

2013). Collectively, these studies indicate that members of the pro-ana community adopt a code of symbols, rituals, and shared meanings about weight loss, anorexia, and its practices, that openly challenges mainstream conceptions of eating disorders as conditions to be treated and cured (Fox et al., 2005; Miah & Rich, 2008).

In part as a result of the social pressure that has led to the dismantling of many pro-ana websites (see Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Dias, 2003; Giles, 2006), in recent years the movement is migrating to social media platforms, such as Facebook, LiveJournal, MySpace, Xanga (Juarascio et al., 2010), Flickr (Yom-Tov, Fernandez-Luque, Weber, & Crain, 2012), or YouTube (Syed-Abdul et al., 2013). These new social media afford the tools to interact with other users, as well as the opportunities to create and perform individual and peer identities in significantly different ways from offline communication (Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008).

One of the main settings where users participate in this experimentation of the self is in the personal profile. Profiles are now the backbone of social networking sites

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(SNSs; Boyle & Johnson, 2010), and a regular discursive device for users to articulate and enact their identities online (boyd & Heer, 2006). Users of megasites, such as Facebook, MySpace, or Xanga, can create a virtual identity through an individual profile that contains pictures and personal information, and view the personal profiles of other users. The profile owner controls and selects the content of self-presentation and the level of self-disclosure made available to the audience.

In the realm of eating disorders, researchers have conducted several studies on the construction of identities in pro-ana sites. A fundamental problem in addressing this issue, however, is that the researcher does not know who the participants are and “what affiliation to the ‘ana’ identity means” (Hammersley & Treseder, 2007, p. 294). Despite these difficulties, researchers have unraveled some key components of the pro-ana identity.

In one of the first studies on the discursive construction of “anorexia nervosa,” Hardin (2003) focused on the pro-ana subject position of “wanting” to become anorexic, and how this position was judged as “fake” by members of an anorexia support group. The difficult issue of negotiating and defining authenticity was also addressed in Giles’ (2006) research on pro-ana forums. According to Giles, a well established hierarchy of in-group pro-ana identities, whose boundaries were often fiercely contested, could be found in pro-ana groups: “pure” or “true” ana was the most valued, followed by mia (an abbreviation of bulimia), and, in a more marginal position, EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified).

From a feminist standpoint, Day and Keys (2008) identified constructions such as “the saint,” “the conformist,” and “the rebel” as subject positions adopted by users of pro-ana sites. Focusing on the presentation of “pro-anorexia” in online interactions, Gavin, Rodham, and Poyer (2008) found two interconnected themes related to the management of pro-ana identities: maintaining a sense of the pro-ana self as an abnormal condition that bonded the members of the group, and concealing the “ana” identity from friends and family. In a related study, Haas, Irr, Jennings, and Wagner (2011) concluded that the co-construction of an “ana” personal identity involved resorting to two main strategies: “staying true to ana” by self-disclosing extreme behaviors and practices for weight loss, and creating an “audience for ana” by co-crafting a shared virtual social identity.

Considering the interplay between identity and interaction, Maloney (2013) examined the emotional energy deployed by members of the pro-ana community in their online networks, and suggested that the sense of belonging to an understanding and supportive community aided its members in defining a collective pro-ana identity while shaping the individual identity as a pro-ana anorexic. More recently, Smith et al. (2013) argued that

online and offline identities created both in pro-ana and fat acceptance cyber-communities were connected and mutually reinforcing, and collectively gave form and furnished identity.

The functions of “body talk” (text-based descriptions about the body and bodily practices) in the articulation of a pro-ana identity have also been documented and examined. Riley et al. (2009) compared recovery and eating disorder websites and discovered that both sites promoted the thin ideal, included valid claims of group membership, and used discussion of bodily experiences to support either a recovery or a pro-ana identity. Boero and Pascoe (2012), in turn, investigated how pro-ana discussion groups on MySpace negotiated authenticity and embodied practices to police the boundaries of the community. No study to date, however, has been conducted on the way pro-ana members construct their identities in their personal profiles on SNSs.

One route to explore this research topic is to focus on the metaphors pro-ana members employ to talk about the self in their online profiles. Metaphors, as carriers of conceptual meaning and as a product of language (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999), are a powerful tool to transmit knowledge and ideologies, and to understand the phenomenological experience (Steen, 2010). As shown in contemporary work on human cognition, culture, and communication, metaphors “can cast light on why we understand ourselves as we do” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 108). In Garrett’s (1996) words, “metaphors help create the self” (p. 139). Accordingly, metaphors can become instrumental in uncovering how pro-ana users make sense of their identity, both as individuals and as active participants in a pro-ana social network.

Whereas in the case of mental health disorders, such as depression, there is a large body of literature on how metaphors shape the experience of illness and recovery (see Charteris-Black, 2012; Fullagar & O’Brien, 2012), in the domain of eating disorders, few studies have been devoted to the metaphorical meanings with which individuals explain these conditions. Garrett (1996) was one of the first to examine the role of metaphor deployment during the course of anorexia and recovery. In the context of treatment, Mathieson and Hoskins (2005) delved into the meanings of the metaphors of change produced by girls recovering from eating disorders, and Skårderud (2007) systematized the concretized metaphors of bodily and emotional experience arising from therapeutic sessions with anorexic patients. The only study to date dedicated to the metaphors structuring the experience of pro-ana members was conducted by Knapton (2013). The author identified two metaphorical constructions, *anorexia is a skill* and *anorexia is a religion*, as the key conceptual metaphors in pro-ana websites.

These findings open a promising line of research on the role of metaphors in the process of meaning-making of eating disorders and, specifically, in the construction of identities in the pro-ana community. Taking this perspective, my aim in the present article is to expand and to contribute to our understanding of how identities and selfhood are discursively produced in pro-ana sites, focusing, in particular, on the use of metaphors to talk about the self in the personal profiles of a pro-ana group on a popular SNS.¹

Method

Data for this study were comprised of 1,000 public personal profiles posted on a large SNS. In accordance with previous studies on eating disorder online forums (Gavin et al., 2008; Winzelberg, 1997), I applied an unobtrusive, passive observation method. I also carefully considered the ethical implications of the present study and I conformed them to the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, approved by the American Psychological Association (2003, with 2010 amendments).

In the context of Internet-based research, it is critical to substantiate whether the individuals under study are expecting to be observed or if they are unaware of the observation (Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002). Adopting the ethical considerations laid out by Mulveen and Hepworth (2006), I assumed that investigating the profiles of a pro-ana community on a SNS could be compared to a naturalistic observation in a public setting. The personal profiles examined in this project constituted open messages to which anyone could have access. Consequently, the study of this Internet medium did not raise specific concerns about violations of privacy. I did not obtain informed consent from the users because I gathered the data retrospectively and profiles were available to the general public (Gavin et al., 2008). In practice, obtaining informed consent would be difficult because any announcement of the intention and the goal of the research could disrupt the dynamics of the group, negatively affecting the results of the study. Even posting the request for consent could be viewed as unethical (King, 1996).

With regard to protecting individuals' anonymity, the mere citation of the name of the online community could be damaging for its members and for the group as a whole (Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002; King, 1996). In addition, including verbatim quotations from the personal profiles could jeopardize anonymity because, with Internet search engines, the original message could be traced and the email address of the sender could be revealed (Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002). To prevent any harm, I decided not to mention the names of the SNS nor the pro-ana group investigated in this project, as well as any individual's

name or username. To further ensure that individual anonymity was preserved, I entered random phrases from the personal profiles collected for the present study into Google and I checked to see if they could be traced back to the personal profiles in the pro-ana group. Results of these searches did not return to the original post or to the site.

Participants

The demographics of the sample were difficult to ascertain because users withheld specific personal details in their profiles. The profiles were open to a mass and unknown audience, in which family members and friends might be included. To avoid being exposed, pro-ana members actively cloaked themselves in anonymity. Users of the site, therefore, remained unknown to me. Some scholars agree that it is reasonable to assume that members of the pro-ana community are mainly White women (Dias, 2003; Fox et al., 2005; Norris et al., 2006; Peebles et al., 2012). In the pro-ana personal profiles, information about gender was only made explicit in 57 profiles. When age was specified, the user was a teenager or a young adult (113 cases).

Procedure

Data collection and sampling were purposive, guided by the aim to explore the research question. I selected the sample of personal profiles by applying the pragmatic principle of attaining a deep understanding of the research question (how the self was discursively produced and enacted in a pro-ana community) with a degree of internal coherence. I focused the study on the analysis of the user profiles from one of the largest pro-ana communities on a blogging SNS popular among adolescents (aged 12–18; Boyle & Johnson, 2010).² I selected a blogging site because the social networking features were integrated in cyber-communities (online spaces dedicated to certain topics of interest) in that particular platform. Other SNSs, such as Facebook or Twitter, are structured, instead, around personal networks.

Traditional social support in cyber-communities is linked to identity construction, although users can decide whether to reveal their identity or to remain anonymous (Smith et al., 2013). The blogging SNS for the present article constituted a megasite composed of myriad interactive and anonymous cyber-communities. In this sense, it offered a unique scenario for identity creation and management, in particular for those who ascribed to non-conventional or marginalized identities, as was the case for pro-ana members (Smith et al., 2013).

I identified the pro-ana groups in the site through a search by entering the terms “pro-ana,” “pro-eating

disorder,” “weight loss,” “weight issues,” “thin,” and “thinspiration,” and by following links from previously identified groups. I selected the sample after a careful observation of the dynamics operating in the different pro-ana groups. I realized that many users joined more than one pro-ana group in the site, and that in the largest groups the profiles were more discursively elaborated (they were longer and contained more descriptive material) than in those with few members. After the initial observational phase, I decided to focus on one of the largest groups, which was founded in July 2006 and had 9,294 members registered when I began sampling. The majority of the weblogs (personal diaries) on the site were protected with the option called “Signin Lock.” Only “signed in” members of the blogging network would be able to view the user’s personal diary. This feature allowed pro-ana members to hide their identities from their families and friends, and prevented their personal sites from being indexed by search engines. Few weblogs were accessible without signing in. Therefore, I only gathered the public information available in the open-ended profile field (not in the weblogs) for this study.

I selected the sample with the aim of performing an inductive analysis of a variety of personal profiles posted and updated in different time periods since the group was created. Therefore, I ordered the profiles alphabetically and chose the first 1,000 instances. Data collection took place at the end of May 2011. Within the initial sample of 1,000 profiles, 243 contained no text (24.3% of the sample), and 116 lacked a profile picture (11.6%). The final sample for this study consisted of 757 text profiles (profiles in which the owner offered a short self-description in the field entitled “about me”).

Analysis

I conducted a qualitative analysis of the metaphors invoked by members of the pro-ana group to talk about the self. My focus was, specifically, on the ways pro-ana members developed metaphoric meaning-making processes of identity in their profiles. This contextualized approach to the study of metaphors in discourse required starting not with an analysis of metaphors per se, but with the topic of interest of how pro-ana members metaphorically performed acts of self-description in their personal profiles. The first step in the analysis was to highlight the linguistic metaphorical expressions arranged by profile owners to construe self-definition. In this phase, I applied the Metaphor Identification Procedure, devised by the Pragglejaz Group (2007) and known as MIP (see Appendix A for a description of the procedure). MIP is a flexible tool for metaphor recognition that can be applied in a variety of language studies. It consists of an explicit

method for marking metaphorically used words in spoken and written discourse. MIP is the only procedure in the field of metaphor studies that has been formally tested and found reliable and valid (Steen et al., 2010).

With the Pragglejaz method (MIP), I marked all the metaphorical linguistic expressions used by the members of the pro-ana group to talk about the self. The next step was to organize these metaphorical expressions into meaningful clusters. I conducted this part of the analysis bearing in mind that the essence of a metaphor is to relate and compare two different objects, notions, or experiences, with the aim of explaining the more abstract, unfamiliar, poorly delineated, or complex element in terms of the more concrete, familiar, physical, or simpler one (Semino, 2008). Consistent with this definition, I proceeded to carefully examine and identify the main thematic areas of meaning which pro-ana members drew on to explain the complex notion of self. I then classified and coded the linguistic metaphorical expressions underlined in the sample according to these main areas of meaning.

I conducted the qualitative analysis of the main metaphors pro-ana members brought into their self-descriptions in the framework of a discourse analytic approach oriented to the social sciences, as described by Potter (2004). In this more general version, discourse analysis is action-oriented: It is concerned with the actions and practices that the talk is doing, how it is constructed, and what resources are available to perform this activity. It is situated, because talk and text are considered in the context of sequences of interaction, and because discourses are located in institutional settings and identities, and created rhetorically. It is also both constructed (out of linguistic expressions and rhetorical strategies) and constructive, in the sense that discourse constitutes and fixes specific “versions of the world” (Potter, 2004, p. 610).³

Consistent with this approach, I directed the analysis to the text itself (the personal profiles) as the place in which the psychological theme of the self was managed, handled, built, and made available through specific linguistic metaphors (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Following McGannon and Spence (2010), I oriented the focus of the present study to the conception of self and identity as grounded in the use of language, thus giving primacy to the process and outcome of the linguistic activity, and exposing the links between text and discursive and social practices, instead of regarding the self exclusively in terms of the processes and operations within the mind. As Riley et al. (2009) remarked, identity is constituted and performed in the course of interaction, and not something that people simply are. Individuals have at their disposal a variety of ways of speaking with and about themselves, and these different discourses are tied to specific social and behavioral practices (McGannon & Spence, 2010).

According to Boero and Pascoe (2012), the process of creating the self in a pro-ana community is an interactional achievement in a particular context, that is, the result of building a distinctive community through discourse.⁴ For the members of the pro-ana group examined in this study to be socially intelligible in the community, they must engage in identity performativity. This identity performativity is discursive in nature (Edwards & Potter, 2005), and, in the case of the personal profiles, is realized by means of a core set of metaphorical constructions. By resorting to these metaphors, pro-ana members allocated specific meanings about the self to particular categories (such as space or weight, for example). In the present article, I discuss the function of this metaphorical talk in the process of construction of self and identity in the pro-ana group. I also attend to the variability of talk in the key metaphorical constructions identified in the sample (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), as well as to the wider psychological, cultural, and social discourses from which these metaphors are drawn (Riley et al., 2009).

Findings and Discussion

Taking into account previous research, I speculate that the pro-ana community selected for this project was populated by a variety of individuals: some of them were suffering from an eating disorder; others might have been in the process of recovery; still others were probably “dieters” or “wannabes,” that is, people who aspired to participate in the group but whose credibility as real anorexics was dubious (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). In pro-ana forums and discussion boards, these identities are fiercely contested: authenticity is in dispute and “true” membership is something users have to earn (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Giles, 2006).

Rather than focusing on how pro-ana members explicitly questioned or contested others’ identities, however, I aimed to explore the discursive constructions of self and community articulated by pro-ana users in their personal profiles when introducing themselves to an unknown (and possibly heterogeneous) audience. In particular, the relevant issue for my analysis was the way members of the group metaphorically strategized their self-definitions, simultaneously hiding their real identity from a mass audience while enacting a credible “pro-ana” identity. With this identity performance, profile owners intended to draw the attention of other members, who then would read the weblog and leave their comments.

Careful reading of the profiles revealed that the self-description created by pro-ana members to stage this identity enactment was often forged with recurrent metaphorical constructions of space, weight, and transformation. I proceeded to systematically analyze the linguistic

metaphors participants deployed in their profiles. I distinguished four thematic areas of meaning to strategically articulate the self in metaphorical terms: space-location, body-weight, transformation-perfection, and relation-identity. From these four thematic areas of meaning, I identified and formulated the key metaphorical constructions about the self in the sample.

Profile owners sourced from four prominent metaphorical constructions to self-describe and introduce themselves to others: self as space, self as weight, perfecting the self, and the social self. Pro-ana members employed the metaphors of self as space and self as weight to define the self and its multiple facets and variations (current self, future self, true self, and so forth), and resorted to perfecting the self and the social self to describe practices of the self (such as changes, connections, and transformations). Profile owners consistently drew on these four key metaphors both to discursively create a pro-ana collective identity and to manufacture their individual identities as pro-ana.

In the following sections, I combine the report of the research findings and the discussion of their significance to explore the conceptual and empirical implications of these four metaphorical themes of the self in the pro-ana personal profiles.

Self as Space

The experience of space in relation to the self was the foundation of one of the basic metaphorical themes to which the users resorted to organize their profiles: self as space. Users evoked this metaphor in 7% of the profiles.⁵ Appealing to this construction, some members of the group concretized selfhood in terms of the place that the person occupied in the physical world. As one user claimed, “There’s only one corner of the universe you can be certain of improving, and that’s yourself” (texts are reproduced including all spelling and punctuation errors). The profile owner invoked a metaphorical statement describing anyone’s self (“yourself”) as a private space (“one corner of the universe”) that could be “improved” at will, to devise self-description. Two relevant themes about the self emerged from her posting: space and agency. This pro-ana member construed space as a place to fight for symbolic power and control (see Warin, 2005), but also as a potential transformative setting to shape the individual self. Agency, one of the central themes in pro-ana websites (Richardson & Cherry, 2011), appeared constructed in this particular self-description, as is often the case in pro-ana profiles, as a driving and productive force to transform and to better the self. By showing willingness to undergo a project of self-improvement, and by calling others to undertake the same venture, the profile owner was making the identity claim of being a legitimate and committed pro-ana member (see Riley et al., 2009).

In a more radical variation of this metaphorical construction of self as space, some pro-ana members chose to depict themselves in derogatory and self-deprecating terms because of the space they were, undeservedly, taking up in the real world: “Thank you, please but your flattery is truly not becoming me. Your eyes are poor. You are blind. You see, no beauty could have come from me. I am a waste of breath, of space, of time,” wrote one such member.

Self-deprecation and devaluation of the self, common features in many profiles, enabled the group member to strategically frame herself as an imperfect person in pursuit of a better self by undergoing a radical process of weight loss. Generally, self-deprecation is an important component of the pro-ana identity, and can be considered a rhetorical device that radically models the discursive behavior in pro-ana interactions (Gavin et al., 2008; Haas et al., 2011). By projecting self-loathing comments about personal limitations and failures into the personal profile, the individual user aimed to assure others that she legitimately belonged to the pro-ana community because she shared the same struggles and sought identical goals to those of the rest of the participants in the group.

In addition, several profile owners made sense of and interpreted the self in relation to anorexia metaphorically represented as a place. In this variation, the self was often described as an entity fluctuating between being situated “in” the specific location of the eating disorder, or being “out”:

ok, so here’s the deal. I’m a recovered anorexic. Yet it is still all that i think about. I tend to go in and out of waves of anorexia. I don’t know what is wrong with me but I know that anorexia is where I belong.

In the profile above, the user expressed her ambivalence to finding a place of identity, as well as her shifting sense of being located in an ambiguous place between two identities: anorexic and recovered anorexic. The poster construed the meaning of being a “recovered anorexic” as being outside the boundaries of identity of anorexia (an “outside belonging,” according to Warin, 2010), whereas she figuratively framed anorexia as a space of belonging, situating and defining the true identity of the subject.

The metaphorical construction of self as space resonated with the understandings of space when living with an eating disorder. In the discursive dimension, the concretized metaphors that often surface in the therapeutic sessions with people suffering from anorexia nervosa suggest that spatiality constitutes one of the specific categories in the anorexic discourse (Skårderud, 2007). Skårderud’s (2007) interviews with anorexic patients revealed that low self-esteem and negative self-evaluation were consistently related to the sense of not being worthy of taking up space.

The powerful metaphor of fearing to take up space, becoming larger and more visible, also arose in Brown’s (2007) therapy sessions with anorexic women. In fact, one of Brown’s clients described herself as a “waste of space” (p. 287). A similar experience of spatiality metaphorically defined as “filling up” or “taking up space” emerged in the profiles I examined in the present study as a key feature of the self discursively produced. The related notion of anorexia as location, as illustrated in the example above, also seemed to be relevant for some members to discursively articulate a positioned self in relation to the eating disorder (see Warin, 2010).

Self as Weight

The most recurrent metaphorical theme in the pro-ana group was to explain the self in terms of weight. Around 28% of the personal profiles contained some form of this key metaphor. Thus, with statements such as “working to become 95 pounds,” “trying to lose weight and get back to my old 130ish self,” or “5ft . . . 118 . . . want to be 110,” pro-ana members mobilized a concretized metaphor that placed the weight as the domain in which the self was essentialized and discursively produced.

The pro-ana members using this metaphorical construction of self as weight constructed it in their profiles as a variation of the more general metaphor of the “Essential Self” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 282). As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) discussed, we all think about ourselves as possessing an individual essence that emanates from our consciousness and makes each of us unique. When there is a discrepancy between our essence (core values, ethics and beliefs, personality traits, inner feelings, and emotions) and our actions, we tend to represent the discordance by metaphorically confronting two selves: the real or true self, which is compatible with one’s essence, and the non-real or non-true self, which is incompatible with one’s essence. The real or true self is then understood as hidden inside the unreal or untrue self (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 283).

Many members of the pro-ana group adopted this metaphorical theme of the essential self as a tool to craft their self-description. For instance, one pro-ana member posted in her profile,

Need to lose weight. Tired of looking in the mirror and not even recognizing myself. I’ve done it before. I CAN do it again. Depressed, yes. Anxious most of the time. Angry, I need support getting back to the real, thin me!”

In this quotation, the profile owner built self-description by discursively confronting two selves: the “real, thin me,” the discursive person that truly fits the essence of the person, and the current self, portrayed as an unrecognizable

self, and, consequently, untrue and unauthentic to the “real, thin me”: “Tired of looking in the mirror and not even recognizing myself.” She then introduced a dramatic mismatch between the current self and the “real, thin” self (the essential self) in her portrait. With the final metaphor “getting back to the real, thin me,” the poster tried to reconcile two opposing selves (current self and true self) by symbolically representing thinness as the return to the core essence of her personhood.

The recurrent metaphorical theme of self as weight was oriented in the profiles to wider and culturally dominant social discourses on weight management and normative bodies, that pose the cultural values of weight and body as reflecting one’s personal attributes, moral character and strength, successful (or failed) gendered embodiment, health, and even “one’s entire life” (Malson, 2008, p. 38). Framing the self in terms of weight also allowed pro-ana members to make their bodies present in the disembodied virtual world of their personal profiles. As Boero and Pascoe (2012) reasoned, in pro-ana groups, interactions specifically gravitate around body size and bodily practices, although, paradoxically, these discussions take place in communicative settings, the virtual environment, presumably “disembodied.” To resolve this contradiction, members of pro-ana communities have produced a particular set of communicative strategies to explicitly manifest their bodies and their personal body projects in the online interaction.

One way in which pro-ana members make the body visible is through descriptions of the body (Riley et al., 2009). This form of body talk was, essentially, the foundation of the metaphorical construction of self as weight, identified in the pro-ana profiles. Many members of the pro-ana group performed and enacted identity through the online embodiment built on this metaphorical construction. This “enacting embodiment” (Boero & Pascoe, 2012) created a common ground of rituals and practices that assured intelligibility and complicity within the group. By articulating the self in terms of weight, pro-ana members bolstered a “sense of community through a sense of shared embodiment” (Ferreday, 2009, p. 198), while claiming an individual pro-ana identity (Riley et al., 2009).

Actually, this very act of performing a pro-ana identity sustained on the online body was constrained both by the individual’s needs and aspirations, and by the group’s rituals (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). One of the most characteristic group rituals identified in the profiles (119 cases) was the generalized use of what is called, in the pro-ana jargon, “signatures” (that is, statistics of height and weight, provided, respectively, in feet and inches, and in pounds), to formulate self-description. In many instances, the signature was the only information made public in the profile: “H: 5’6. HW: 160. LW: 130. CW: See blog. GW1:

140. GW2: 125” (H stands for “height”; HW for “highest weight”; LW for “lowest weight”; CW for “current weight”; and GW for “goal weight”).

Pro-ana members utilized the signature as a tool to discursively concretize and project the metaphorical construction of the essential self in their profiles. The current weight stood for the external heavier self that did not fit the essence of the subject, whereas the goal weight (or the ultimate goal weight, as stated in many profiles) was construed as the thinner, truer, essential self, hidden inside the external self. Inevitably, the quest for the true self required a radical transformation of the subject from the current heavier self to the thinner true self. By means of their signatures, pro-ana members imagined a better version of the self that was contemplated as desirable and discursively constituted as achievable. In fact, it was easier for profile owners to endorse and engage in a self-transformation project, once the self was reduced and problematized as weight.

The metaphor of self as weight was also connected in the pro-ana personal profiles to a more basic metaphorical understanding of the body as a container (for the container metaphor, see Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Robinson, Mitchell, Kirkeby, & Meier, 2006). As one participant declared, “I am working to build the strongest character inside the gentlest body possible.” This statement illustrates how the body was literally constituted as the container of the true, inner self, for some members of the group. The common metaphor of the body as an object or container appeared in 28 profiles.

Understood as a container, some members problematized the body as an obstacle to find the real, true, inner self, and, hence, they described it metaphorically as a “shell,” a “layer of fat” burying the inner self, or a “cage,” in which the subject felt “trapped.” In the following profile, the poster clearly articulated the conflicting coexistence of the current, external, flawed self and the inner, true, essential self as a battle to redefine the embodied boundaries of her personhood:

I feel savagely surrounded by myself on all sides. I feel the substance sticking to my alabaster bones in contempt; you can rid of me so easily!; says the flesh, holding and sticking every bite to the pure frame that truly is the heart of me.

The user deployed metaphorical expressions such as “my alabaster bones” and “the pure frame” to refer to the true inner self, as opposed to the external self, the latter negatively constructed as “the substance” or “the flesh” that covered and hid the pure essence of the subject (what she referred to as “the heart of me”). With this dichotomy between bones and flesh, the profile owner brought to her virtual self-description the metaphorical opposition between thin/fat and identity/lack of identity often

ingrained in anorexic women's accounts (Malson, 1998). Similarly to Malson's (1998) participants, some pro-ana members portrayed the flesh-fat body as blurring the borders between self and outside world, whereas the thin/anorexic body (represented by the bones) unambiguously defined identity. The pro-ana body was thus imagined as a battleground to fight for the self and to conquer identity.

This call for the bones as the ultimate expression of the true essential self served two complementary purposes: to challenge the boundaries of the body and to create a community "rooted in anorexic embodiment" (Ferreday, 2003). Pro-ana members of the group re-created the visual images of emaciated bodies, so pervasive in pro-ana websites (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Ferreday, 2003; Fox et al., 2005; Richardson & Cherry, 2011), with verbal imagery that glorified and exulted the bones as the symbolic meaning of pro-anorexic beauty. Through claims such as "Wishing for hipbones that stick out for Christmas," "I love collar bones and ribs, I will be thin," or "I would wear my bones proudly rather than hide them away under disfiguring flesh. I would be beautiful," profile owners embraced the anorexic body both as an ideal and as an ongoing and relentless project of self-improvement and self-realization.

The metaphorical theme of the bones as the essence of the self echoed a discourse of resistance to the mainstream beauty ideals of the thin, but not "too thin" bodies (Richardson & Cherry, 2011, p. 123). As Richardson and Cherry (2011) contended, the regular posting of images of extremely emaciated models and even "bone pictures" in pro-ana sites have reframed beauty ideals in a new "hyperthin ideal" (p. 122). In spite of this resistance, however, members of the pro-ana group reinscribed mainstream beauty norms in their personal profiles when articulating self-improvement and self-transformation as enterprises based exclusively on weight. They were enacting, in Richardson and Cherry's terms, a "hyperconformity to the beauty ideal" (p. 123), a theme that became the foundation for the metaphorical construction of perfecting the self.

Perfecting the Self

A persistent theme in the pro-ana profiles examined in this project was the commitment to a personal endeavor of perfecting the self. Up to 24% of self-descriptions invoked this metaphorical construction. In 41 personal profiles, the poster clearly expressed her determination to perfect herself: "I'll be better," "striving for nothing less than perfection," "I have another motive, perfection." Bettering the self always entailed the unrelenting process of slimming, an endeavor supported by the rest of the members of the group, who shared an identical body project (Shilling,

2003). Indeed, in as many as 106 personal profiles, the poster defined self-transformation metaphorically in terms of weight management. As one pro-ana member proclaimed, "I need to meet my goal weight in 3 weeks and just better myself in general . . . I CAN'T FAIL!"

The discursive articulation of this drive for weight loss stemmed from the shared fantasy of perfecting the self through thinness, a recurrent theme in pro-ana communities (Ferreday, 2009). Members of the pro-ana group endorsed this particular project of self-realization by defining the true essential self as the thinnest possible self. In participants' self-descriptions, transformation into a thinner version of the current self automatically granted the dreamed qualities of being "beautiful," "happy," and "perfect." As one poster claimed, "I'm just wanting to be beautiful. To me, that's weighing 95lbs—13 less than what I do now."

Many members routinely reduced the future thinner self to goal weights, and operationalized it in numbers. For instance, one participant claimed: "seventeen. Height is 5'7, goal is 115"; another assured: "my ultimate goal weight is to be 87–90 lbs. I want to look and feel gorgeous by July." For other users (19 profiles), the ultimate rhetorical desire was to be weightless, and that wish constituted the whole self-description in the personal profile: "wishes to be weightless." One member even equated weightlessness with perfection: "want to be thinner than thin. so thin I float and flutter like a feather. I wonder if I will ever reach the perfection."

The metaphorical theme of perfecting the self by means of weight management oriented pro-ana self-descriptions to the dominant cultural messages that promote weight loss and thinness as the key factors to attain success and happiness (Malson, 2008; Malson & Ussher, 1997; Williams & Reid, 2007). Similarly, it also drew on the contemporary Western culture conceptualization of the body as an entity in the process of "becoming," a project to be fulfilled as part of the individual's development of self-identity (Shilling, 2003, p. 4). Borrowing Malson's (1999) words, in the capitalist culture of mass-consumption, the body is transformed in an "ever-imperfect but always 'perfectible' spectacle" (p. 140). As a displayed phenomenon, the body becomes nothing more than a "resource," a "passive object to be worked upon, controlled and made 'fit'" (Malson, 2008, p. 35).

Members of the pro-ana group framed their profiles in the discursive context of consumer culture by constructing the quest for the essential self as an embodied process of transformation, an effortful metamorphosis controlled with willpower and resolution. What is more, they radicalized the main-stream conceptualization of the body as part of the individual's self-identity by strictly defining self-fulfillment as a programmed decreasing change in weight. With posts such as "Time to change. My goals

159[x] 154[x] 150 [] 148 [] 147 [] 146 [] 145 [] 144 [] 143 [] 142 [] 141 [] 140 [] *138 *[] my LW!" or "Gonna shrink: 139 138 136 134 132 130 128 126 124 122 120 118 116 114 112 110 108 finished" (the numbers indicated weight in pounds), pro-ana members eagerly accepted this particular view of self-realization.

A relevant feature in the pro-ana profiles, as illustrated in these examples, was the articulation of the transition from the current self (first weight) to the future thinner self (successive weights) as a series of stages. Each goal weight represented an intermediate state in the self-improvement project, until the final state, corresponding to the lowest weight (LW) or the ultimate goal weight (UGW), was reached. As the two quotations above exemplify, profile owners discursively produced this process of self-transformation as a linear progression toward an end (the final weight), and, hence, they inserted the radical modification in a clock-time model of change.

In 17 self-descriptions, pro-ana members adopted a more radical version of the key metaphorical construction of perfecting the self through perfecting the body, by which perfection was dramatically characterized as an act of "disappearing." For instance, one participant wrote in her profile: "Goal Weight = 0," whereas another metaphorically described herself as "a disappearing act"; and yet another called for just disappearing: "just let go and hope you disappear before you hit the bottom." Some members even proclaimed that they were not afraid to die: "we're not afraid to die." In other cases, profile owners announced the performance of an act of physical erasure, such as, "This is where I disappear [eloquently] and alone," or, "minimizing, simplifying, disappearing," and still others offered the spectacle of vanishing: "watch me disappear."

By publicizing the act of disappearing, members of the pro-ana group embraced a rhetoric of death—or, to be more specific, of "being beyond the world," in Spignesi's (1983) words—commonly found on other pro-ana sites (Lavis, 2011). As Ferreday (2009) noted, "pro-ana slogans play with the idea that the body becomes perfected only at the moment of death" (p. 196). For many profile owners, the perfect self for which they strove was, at its core, an invisible body. To some extent, this particular metaphorical theme mirrored the discursive construction of the thin body, in anorexic patients' accounts, as a "body which is fading away" (Malson & Ussher, 1997, p. 49), disappearing, "almost a non-body, 'just a nothingness'" (Malson, 1999, p. 145). As a result, the impossible anorexic body literally means the physical "dematerialization of that body" (Malson & Ussher, 1996, p. 276). Fading away also signified a process of self-destruction that could be read as a feminine identity "under erasure" (Malson, 1999, p. 147).

In this metaphorical construction of perfecting the self through erasing the body, two contrasting views of self-realization seemed to be bridged, that of the anorexic as a tensional figure, embodying both life and death, and that of the medical model, in which the anorexic desire for thinness was imagined as having "its own inescapable linear trajectory (i.e., towards death)" (Ferreday, 2009, p. 189). In the pro-ana personal profiles, both aspects of the anorexic self-realization blended.

This rhetoric was in stark contrast to the discourse produced in many other pro-ana forums, where users are regularly warned about the risk of death associated with extreme practices of weight loss, and they are advised on how to manage anorexia without jeopardizing their lives. Death is framed as a loss of control, and not as an achievement, because anorexia is construed as a daily enactment of practices aimed to maintain and control the boundaries between life and death (Fox et al., 2005; Lavis, 2011; Richardson & Cherry, 2011). The pro-ana community examined in the present study fostered, instead, a radicalization of the rhetoric of death, probably because some of its members felt more need to depict themselves as "true" and committed "pro-anas" to obtain acceptance and legitimacy within the group.

The Social Self

Pro-ana members also made explicit the tensional nature of the self-realization process by resorting to the metaphorical theme of the "Social Self" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, p. 277) in approximately 17% of the profiles. In this metaphorical construction, the self was positioned either as participating in a dynamic relationship or as ascribing to a collective identity. Both versions of this metaphor functioned as identity claims that validated the profile owner's membership to the pro-ana community of practice.

With regard to the first metaphorical variation, the social self interpreted as a relationship, some pro-ana members organized their self-descriptions in terms of a conflicting and adversarial dynamic between "I" (the subject) and "me" (the object). According to Potter and Wetherell (1987), the grammatical differentiation between "I" and "me" is consistent with our disposition to construct the self as split when performing introspection on self-experience. This differentiation also reflects the division between public and private selves, so that "me" corresponds to the social self and "I" monitors the actions of the social self (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 107). In 70 personal profiles, this metaphorical construction involved an evaluative social relationship between "I" (the subject) and "me" (the external self). The subject often belittled and/or fought against the external, current self, expressing emotions of disgust and rejection, as the

following quotations illustrate: “I am not happy with me,” “I hate myself,” “I struggle with my own self for complete happiness.”

Specifically, some pro-ana members articulated the relational structure of the self as a struggle between the subject and the eating disorder. For instance, one user wrote, “I’m 20 years old and have been struggling with an eating disorder,” whereas another confessed, “I’ve been struggling with anorexia for almost 5 years now.” Other posters, instead, depicted the relationship as a dialogue between the subject and anorexia, personified as a goddess (“Ana”) who could offer guidance and a code of behavior sanctioned by the pro-ana community (Csipke & Horne, 2007; Day & Keys, 2008; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006). Indeed, some members of the group turned to a pro-ana religious rhetoric that included prayers for Ana’s guidance (see Maloney, 2008): “Skeletal goddess, teach me how not to need.” “Ana” was also in some occasions introduced as a friend, whom the user addressed: “Dear Ana, I’m back again.”

In other cases, Ana was purported as a voice that subjugated the subject to a strict disciplinary code of rules and rituals: “Don’t give up what you want most for what you want at the moment.” In another profile, the user postulated: “You decide once and for all that you aren’t going to eat. Then there are no further decisions to make.” This interaction between self and goddess “Ana” could be viewed as the realization of the conceptual metaphor ANOREXIA IS A RELIGION, identified by Knapton (2013) as one fundamental key conceptualization in the pro-ana movement.

In a second variation of the metaphor of the social self, profile owners defined the self as “ana.” As stressed in previous studies, members of the pro-ana community tend to draw a clear line between two kinds of anorexia nervosa: one denoting the clinical diagnosis of anorexia as a mental illness and the other referring to anorexia as a lifestyle chosen by the individual (Strife & Rickard, 2011). This latter type is known as “ana” and is usually substantiated in pro-ana groups as an extreme “method of weight loss that deliberately uses similar techniques as those used by individuals with anorexia nervosa” (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006, p. 289).

In the pro-ana community, the commitment to pursue perfection awarded its members with a highly regarded collective identity. The discursive construction of this collective identity involved the incarnation of “ana” as a desirable and positive form of identity (Day & Keys, 2008). In 23 personal profiles, the poster professed to be “ana” or positioned herself as “pro-ana”: “I am pro-ana. I am currently 18 years old and am a Senior in High School.” In many cases, the user provided the length of time being “ana” or “pro-ana”: “I’m 24yrs old, been ana since I was 15.” With these identity claims, profile

owners made manifest their adherence to the pro-ana movement, while allegedly portraying themselves as legitimate “pro-anas.”

Ultimately, “ana” symbolized an eating disorder ideal which members of the group gravitated toward and to which they aspired to improve themselves. Beyond that, the explicit endorsement of the “pro-ana” values, ideals, extreme sacrifices, and duties, as reflected in the personal profiles, became a rhetorical strategy aimed to validate membership in the group and to gain acknowledgment and acceptance from the other participants (see Giles, 2006).

Some members of the group (48 personal profiles), in contrast, performed their identity claim of being a genuine member of the pro-ana community by selectively drawing on the medical discourse of eating disorders (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Fox et al., 2005). By providing medical diagnoses, pro-anas proved their “authentic” eating disordered condition: “anorexic in 2004. Diagnosed eating disorder not otherwise specified in 2008. Obsessive compulsive disorder. Overachiever. Perfectionist.”

Medical diagnoses served in the profiles, like in other pro-ana sites, as “marks of authenticity” or a “matter of qualification” (Giles, 2006, p. 475). As Giles and Newbold (2011) reported, these specific claims about health status were sufficient to achieve accreditation and validation in the pro-ana community. These medical understandings were used strategically in the profiles as a tool to build credibility and expertise (see Riley et al., 2009).

Conclusion

In this article, I explored how the self, a standard psychological topic in clinical research on eating disorders, was specified in discourse practices in the personal profiles of a pro-ana group on a popular SNS. I focused on the metaphors profile owners employed to self-describe and self-introduce to others in the online community. Through my analysis, I discerned that pro-ana members drew on a core set of metaphors of self (self as space, self as weight, perfecting the self, and the social self) that operated as efficient rhetorical devices for managing self-description and promoting interactional practices (Horne & Wiggins, 2009). In that respect, they became the apparatus to discursively articulate the “appropriate” or “adequate” identities within the pro-ana group (Horne & Wiggins, 2009). By resorting to two embodied metaphorical descriptions of the self (self as space and self as weight), and two metaphorical practices of the self (perfecting the self and the social self), members of the online group formed and aligned themselves to a collective pro-ana identity while making specific claims of their own individual identity as “pro-ana” (Riley et al., 2009).

These findings have relevance for the mental health practice because they capture the singularities of the pro-ana articulation of the self in the specific identity discourse of personal profiles. In this regard, the analysis of the metaphorical language to talk about the self provides a new level in the characterization of pro-ana online identities, opening possibilities for understanding the diverse tools devised and applied by pro-ana members to perform their identities. The present study falls thus into the scope of a large and growing body of research within social psychology that advocates for a psychological conception of self and identity in the realm of discourse practices (Horne & Wiggins, 2009; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2000).

The data presented in this article, and the contextualized discussion of their implications in wider clinical, cultural, and social discourses, extend previous research on the communicative strategies applied by pro-ana users when building community and personal identity. In particular, the results support previous findings on the embodied nature of the identity work in pro-ana groups (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Riley et al., 2009), and provide further insight into the ways members of a pro-ana group manage their bodies in the online world. In the apparently disembodied context of an online social network group, pro-ana users rely heavily on online embodiment to enact the self. Central to the pro-ana self-description is the concreteness of the self construed as weight, thereby making the body present both in the individual identity performed in the personal profile and in the online group interaction. These results are in line with the conclusions reached by Boero and Pascoe (2012) on the embodied nature of the boundary work performed in pro-ana communities.

This study has important implications in terms of clinical interventions. Knowledge of the discursive construction of a pro-ana identity in the new media might be particularly relevant for clinicians treating clients who regularly engage in pro-ana groups and forums. Following Maloney (2013), active participation in pro-ana sites creates an interaction ritual chain enabling “the formation of an identity as pro-ana and the generation of the emotional energy necessary to continue in that interaction” (p. 114). The interaction ritual chain is sustained in the constant reference to bodily experiences and sensations, the use of linguistic norms and standards of morality that act as barriers to outsiders, and the description of mental and physical consequences of being pro-ana or anorexic (Maloney, 2013). The metaphors of self, examined in the present article, can also be regarded as another discursive tool stimulating the pro-ana interaction ritual chain.

The peril of the continuous engagement in this set of rituals is that users’ identity as pro-ana can solidify (Maloney, 2013). The particular process of identity formation and maintenance in pro-ana communities is

probably one of the key factors in the longer and more persistent attachment to anorexia found in those who are regular visitors of pro-ana websites (Wilson, Peebles, Hardy, & Litt, 2006), as well as in the higher levels of disordered eating and more severe impairment of quality of life found among heavy pro-ana users (Peebles et al., 2012). For long-standing members of pro-ana communities, giving up the disorder might mean renouncing the highly regarded pro-ana identity crafted with and within the group, and embarking on the difficult journey to discover a whole new sense of self (Williams & Reid, 2007). The repeated exposure to pro-ana self metaphors and the regular use of this symbolic language to talk about the self in the online communication are likely to have an impact on the process of developing a new identity in recovery.

Consequently, the rhetorical articulation of the pro-ana self investigated in the present study might be particularly useful for professionals who seek to foster aspects of the self that are beyond the narrow definitions of being pro-ana or being anorexic (Malson et al., 2011). As Malson et al. (2011) indicated, “Being ‘anorexic’ or ‘bulimic’ can take on the appearance of an enduring ‘essential self’ that makes recovery unimaginable and unattainable” (p. 32). Likewise, the discursive production of an essential self, understood as the thinnest possible self in the personal profiles I examined for this study, can have a deleterious influence on regular members of the group (see Borzekowski et al., 2010), and should be considered in therapy when facilitating a client’s elaboration of a multifaceted self.

In a cultural context where the self is mainly defined as a core set of unchanging and stable features across time and contexts (Malson et al., 2011), the frequent participation in pro-ana groups and forums is likely to reinforce the ideal of an enduring essentialized “anorexic” self. This self-schema should be challenged in therapy, by facilitating the reflection with the client on other culturally available constructions of self and personhood that incorporate change, evolution, and reinvention, instead of immutability and permanence. To explore new facets of the client’s self, the clinician should view identity not as a unique, singular, and unified entity, but as a multiple and complex structure of selves contextually based and adaptively performed. As Mathieson and Hoskins (2005) convincingly argued, “A constructivist counselor might focus on the idea that we can actively construct ourselves, rather than find our true selves, thus offering clients a more agentic view over their behavior and how they want to be” (p. 270).

One way to facilitate the client’s discovery of new aspects of her selfhood could be by eliciting her own metaphors of self. When treating clients who have been or still are regular members of pro-ana groups, the clinician

can ask them to write a pro-ana profile, and then reflect with the client on the metaphors of self projected in the description. The clinician's disposition to carefully listen to clients' metaphors is key to building the bridge connecting their respective conceptual views of self, change, and recovery. This cooperative reflection on the pro-ana metaphors of self might assist the clinician in understanding better the client, and in acknowledging the egosyntonic role that anorexia and membership in the pro-ana group play in the person (Vitousek, Watson, & Wilson, 1998).

Bolstering self-acceptance is a critical component in the process of constructing a more elaborate self, composed of a rich structure of more present and future selves (Erikson, Hansson, & Lundblad, 2012). Therapeutic activities that stimulate and increase the number and variety of discursive constructions of the self, focusing, in particular, on the more positive and desired possible selves, are recommended (Stein & Corte, 2007). Working with metaphors in therapy, the practitioner can suggest to the client to propose alternative self metaphors that fracture the solidified pro-ana metaphors used in the online communication, and make future selves more imaginable, achievable, and credible for the person. Self as a student, as a traveler, as a mother, as a friend, and so forth can be examined, discursively produced as alternative self metaphors, and progressively enriched during the course of recovery, as a way to move beyond the strict body-weight self-definition.

Further research on pro-eating disorder interactions in the new platforms of electronic media should be conducted to examine the system of beliefs, symbols, meanings, and practices that bond the members of these online groups. The present study was limited to the restricted information that profile owners were willing to display publicly. Future studies should determine whether this core set of pro-ana self metaphors is also evoked in the more regular and private interactions among pro-ana members, or if any other metaphors are in use. In addition, the analysis was limited to one group, but comparison among different pro-ana communities should also be explored. Many other groups, featuring men with anorexia, minorities with eating disorders, Christians with eating disorders, and adult anorexia, were created in the blogging SNS examined in this article. The systematization of the particular self metaphors featured in these groups could allow researchers to identify similar and different patterns in the identity work weaved into the pro-ana movement.

In addition, a comparative study on the metaphors of self articulated in pro-ana and pro-mia online peer groups might shed light on the discursive practices promoted in different eating disorder forums. With the increasing number of visitors accessing pro-ana sites in recent years

(Traae Brynolf, 2009), it becomes peremptory for researchers and practitioners to achieve a better understanding of how the movement evolves and adapts to new forms of expression and interaction, and how regular participation in pro-ana communications can affect treatment for eating disorders.

Appendix A

Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP)

MIP (Pragglejaz Group, 2007) involves determining, for each lexical unit in a stretch of discourse, whether or not the lexical item is used metaphorically in that particular context. The procedure is described as follows:

1. Read the entire text–discourse to establish a general understanding of the meaning.
2. Determine the lexical units in the text–discourse.
3. (a) For each lexical unit in the text, establish its meaning in context, that is, how it applies to an entity, relation, or attribute in the situation evoked by the text (contextual meaning). Take into account what comes before and after the lexical unit. (b) For each lexical unit, determine if it has a more basic contemporary meaning in other contexts than the one in the given context. For our purposes, basic meanings tend to be

—More concrete; what they evoke is easier to imagine, see, hear, feel, smell, and taste.

—Related to bodily action.

—More precise (as opposed to vague).

—Historically older.

Basic meanings are not necessarily the most frequent meanings of the lexical unit.

(c) If the lexical unit has a more basic current–contemporary meaning in other contexts than the given context, decide whether the contextual meaning contrasts with the basic meaning but can be understood in comparison with it.

4. If yes, mark the lexical unit as metaphorical. (Pragglejaz Group, 2007, p. 3)

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Notes

1. In this article, and following Maloney (2013), I assume that “the key difference between being pro-ana and being anorexic might be the sense of belonging to a social network with a purposeful desire. The pro-ana people want to be seen as having made a valid lifestyle choice” (p. 111).
2. One of the main features hosted by the blogging social networking site (SNS) chosen for the present study was the possibility of creating a simple personal profile in which the new member chose a username, wrote a short description of himself/herself (“About me”) in an open-ended profile field, and uploaded a picture. The profile was linked to the user’s personal diary (weblog). The weblog could be public, with free access, or could be made private. The blogging SNS has been in the process of transformation to a paid service since July 2013, and, as a result, the former cyber-communities hosted by the site (including the pro-ana group examined in this article) are no longer active.
3. There are a number of versions of discourse analysis available to the researcher. Their similarities and differences have been increasingly debated in recent years. Wetherell (2001) described as many as six different approaches to discourse analysis. In contrast, for Willig (2008), two major ways of doing discourse analysis could be distinguished: discourse psychology and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Whereas some authors emphasized the contrast between these two versions (Parker, 1997), others (Wetherell, 1998) advocated for an eclectic and synthetic approach. Potter and Wetherell (1995) argued that the distinction between a variant of discourse analysis more concentrated on discourse resources (“what people draw on when they talk or write”) and another more oriented to discourse practices (“what people do with their talk or writing”) was not so sharply defined, and that these two perspectives were really a “twin focus,” rather than two separate strands (Potter & Wetherell, 1995, p. 80). Based on these reflections, I opted to apply a general and more hybrid version of discourse analysis that could accommodate a shared focus on discursive practices and resources in the analysis.
4. In the case of the pro-ana group examined in this article, the explicit interaction among the members did not take place in the space of the personal profiles, but in the personal diaries linked to the profiles, where the friends added to the page could read the updates posted on the diary and leave comments. It can be assumed, nevertheless, that the personal profiles were also the result of the implicit interaction with the potential audience, because the profile

owner created her self-description having in mind and imagining how her profile would be received by the other members, and how to attract their interest and acceptance (see McGannon & Mauws, 2000). Being open groups, where anybody could create a personal blog, the pro-ana communities in the SNS selected for this study offered the researcher the possibility to explore the rhetorical means deployed by the members to articulate and to enact their self according to the rituals and collective meanings they understood were operating in the group.

5. I decided to provide information about the number of profiles in which the metaphor was used, rather than the number of members resorting to the metaphorical construction, because it could not be determined whether all the members posted just one profile or some owned more than one. Also, the percentages of each metaphorical theme are based on the final number of text profiles ($n = 757$).

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