The Anti-ana

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Throughout the years, many trends have come and gone. However in recent decades, one trend has stayed put: skinny. The cliché phrase “thin is in” is an understatement of our culture’s obsession with weight. A barrage of ads for diet systems, weight loss supplements, and exercise plans are constantly thrown at consumers. In addition, slim celebrities, models, and bodies are sensationalized, making weight seem like a top priority. For many, this pressure along with personal issues can lead to disorders like Anorexia and Bulimia. According to the National Eating Disorders Association, NEDA, about 35 million people suffer from Anorexia or Bulimia, and millions more suffer from disordered eating. On the Internet, many websites are available in support of these diseases, dubbed “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” sites. These sites can be found with a simple search or through social sites like Xanga, Myspace, and LiveJournal. In a 2008 study performed by Internet researcher Optenet, pro-ana and pro-mia sites have increased 470% since 2006. These sites can be extremely influential, and while the number of these sites increase, so does the number of eating disorders. Pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites should be censored because they are dangerous, encouraging those who are vulnerable to develop an eating disorder, preventing those who are ill from seeking help, and pulling those who are suffering farther into sickness.

Even for those who do no not have a problem, pro-ana and pro-mia sites encourage eating disorders. With so many of these sites online, innocent keywords like thin, weight loss, diet, or BMI could easily take an Internet user to such a site. Members are brutally honest, possibly causing a reader to become fascinated with the feelings of troubled users and read on. Glossy “thinspiration” pictures glamorize unhealthy behavior along with quotes like “thinner is the winner,” inferring great achievement through weight loss. Additionally, supportive users and an exclusive community make the appeal of these sites great. Someone who did not know what an eating disorder is could find every bit of help they needed to develop, maintain, and hide such a disease. This may seem like an unlikely situation, but just reading such blogs could lead to a problem with eating disorders. A study of 235 healthy female undergraduates at the University of Missouri found that those subjected to a single viewing of a pro-ana site reported lower self-esteem and were more likely to become preoccupied with exercise and weight loss (Bardone-Cone, Cass). Obviously, these sites provide a strong stimulus to develop disorderly tendencies. These disorders have a biological basis and are influenced by emotional and cultural factors, like the Internet and media (NEDA). Risk for development is increased for females, adolescents, and those who are insecure about their weight or feel a need for control and perfection in their life. That means for a very large group of people, simply visiting a pro-ana or pro-mia site could be a strong enough stimulus to trigger an eating disorder.

Once a sufferer has developed a relationship with other site members, they will be less likely to seek help. Pro-ana and pro-mia members give support to each other, but in “endurance” and “strength in starvation,” not healing. Many with an eating disorder feel they are different, and this online community lovingly gives them what they crave: acceptance. For people who feel they need to talk to someone about their problems, they can find refuge online instead of with a professional. This means that instead of finding help or a cure, they will fall into the traps of “support groups” who only support the maintenance of their illness. According to a recovered anorexic woman who
used “ana” and “mia” sites,

When you are in the middle of it and don’t want to give it up, you cling to these sites that tell you what you are doing is OK. Recovery is hard, staying sick isn’t, so it’s easier to hide behind these sites claiming that you are making a lifestyle choice, rather than admitting that you are sick and trying to get better (Head).

This is a problem for the chronic health of sufferers, who have reduced chances of recovery as time with a disorder goes on. Treatment, which can include psychological, behavioral, and nutritional counseling, can be very costly and last longer than ten years (NEDA). Unfortunately, the probability of death also increases with the length of the condition. Anywhere from 5-20% of individuals struggling with anorexia nervosa die (Zerbe, 1995). Obviously, early treatment is crucial. However, pro-ana and pro-mia sites prevent people from seeking help and having the chance to ever recover.

For those who are already suffering, pro-ana and pro-mia sites can exacerbate the degree of their illness. These sites provide a sense of belonging and justification for those who are suffering, making it seem like a “lifestyle choice” and a favorable culture. According to the NEDA, research proves that graphic images of anorexic’s bodies can trigger comparative thoughts like “She is thinner than I am and she’s still alive. I should lose more weight.” Pro-ana and pro-mia sites have “thinspiration” pictures, as well as testimonials of extremely low body weight and caloric intake. These numbers, one example being “87 lbs with a goal of 85 lbs,” have a similar, negatively motivational effect. One user stated, “Hearing girls your weight or smaller say they are fat makes you feel worthless. Ana tips can push you to take it too far and thinspirational pictures give you an unattainable goal” (Head). Dr. John Morgan, a specialist in eating disorders at St. George’s University Hospital, says, “It’s become a lot more interactive, which is more worrying. It much more rapidly reinforces the negative views these people have of themselves and provides an instant response to what they’re looking for.” Consequently, those with disorders who use such sites will probably become more engrossed in their problem, thus making their health worse and again decreasing their chances of recovery. A large survey of eating disorder patients at Stanford Medical School found that over one third of the test group had visited pro-ana web sites, and of those 96% learned new weight loss or purging methods (Peebles, Wilson). These sites compel users to continue and further dangerous behavior, making their conditions worse. Such actions, provoked by pro-ana and pro-mia sites, make medical issues, chronic illness, and death very real possibilities.

Some people disagree with censorship of pro-ana and pro-mia sites, and believe that people have the basic right to choose disorders as a lifestyle. This group argues that these sites are considered a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment. While eating disorders are in fact legal, this argument is flawed. Eating disorders are not choices; they are psychological diseases that are genetically linked and worsened by stimulus. These sites are extremely triggering, and for those who are suffering the alluring collection of photos, posts, and “understanding” peers can be too hard to resist. The Supreme Court ruled in Schenck v. United States (1919) that the government could regulate speech that created “clear and present danger.” Undoubtedly, these sites provoke actions that present “clear and present danger” to well over 35 million peoples’ minds, bodies, friends, and families. Eating disorders have hazardous health implications including abnormal heart rate, osteoporosis, muscle loss, chronic irregular bowel movement, dehydration, kidney failure, infertility, heart disease and death (NEDA). Recognizing that these sites pose a dangerous threat to those who use them, the French government has taken legal action to eliminate pro-ana and pro-mia sites. They did this on the grounds that these sites “provoke a person to seek excessive thinness by encouraging prolonged restriction of nourishment to the point of risking of death or damage to health” (Bremner, Tourres). In France, the fine for starting a pro-mia site is up
to 30,000 Euro and two years in prison, and 45,000 Euro and three years in prison if a provoked user dies. By doing this, the French government is sending the message that eating disorders are serious and that any kind of mental manipulation, even through the Internet, is abusive. The United States should follow France’s example, and eradicate pro-ana and pro-mia websites due to the psychological nature of eating disorders and the danger these sites pose.

For medical professionals, visiting pro-ana and pro-mia websites can be a useful mode of study. Having these sites online gives an honest and deep look into the minds of those who suffer, providing endless testimony of thoughts, feelings, and behavior. While these sites are a great resource, they should not be online. This distant research forum is more harmful than beneficial for those who are struggling; not only are users isolated from help through these sites, users who may have turned to family or a professional for help may dangerously turn to site members instead. With these sites on the web, it is nearly impossible for those who are suffering to find the way to recovery and accept that eating disorders are a real disease, not a social club. Additionally, for many their problems with a disorder would never have gone so far had they not been immersed in such a lonely, harmful world. While these sites may serve as a useful research forum, they do more harm than good by preventing users from getting help and worsening users’ conditions.

As a social network that has pro-ana and pro-mia groups, Myspace has created an alternative to censorship. Instead of removing these groups from their network, they are working to create partnerships with organizations that provide resources and advice to people suffering from such problems, and “will target those groups with messages of support” (Head). While this could help a small group, this approach has many flaws. Eating disorders need to be addressed intimately, and if these Internet treatment attempts failed, those suffering would be even more unlikely to seek help in the future. On many of these sites are warnings and rules that state, “If you are in disagreement with our views or do not support eating disorders, leave.” Members of these sites are clearly seeking understanding and acceptance through these pro-mia pro-ana forums. Myspace’s invasive approach would likely irritate pro-ana and pro-mia users, motivating them to further detach themselves from healthy society. Additionally, a desire to feel in control is often a main component in the development of an eating disorder (NEDA). Having strangers enter users’ private world telling them they are doing something wrong would only make them feel less in control and ignore the messages. While Myspace has good intentions, the best solution for sufferers' wellbeing is censorship.

For many with an eating disorder, the Latin phrase “quod me nutrit me destruit” is a mantra. It translates to mean, “What nourishes me also destroys me.” Although sufferers use the phrase in reference to food, it also embodies the idea of pro-ana and pro-mia websites. While they provide a sense of friendship and belonging, they also cause many to harm and isolate themselves from help. These pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites are very dangerous, and should be censored. They encourage those who are vulnerable to develop an eating disorder, prevent those who are ill from seeking help, and pull those who are suffering farther into sickness. We cannot control society’s obsession with weight; however, we can help the millions who are struggling and prevent more adults, young children, sisters, mothers, fathers, brothers, and friends from developing an eating disorder.

Works Cited


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