

ABSTRACT

Websites promoting anorexia nervosa (AN) as a valid lifestyle choice, commonly referred to as pro-ana websites, have burgeoned in recent years (Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008). It has been pointed out that pro-ana websites create a secretive and exclusive forum where pro-anorexics are welcomed and others are shunned (Giles, 2006). It has also been noted, in clinical literature on AN (e.g. Minuchin, Rosman & Baker, 1978), that these interpersonal relationships are often dysfunctional, as those diagnosed with the disorder have been described as having a low tolerance for conflict and difficulty in resolving problems. The purpose of this research was to explore how interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites in comparison to how past research has described anorexic individuals ways of relating. This was then considered in light of how members are influenced by the in-group dynamics in terms of social identity theory and McMillan and Chavis' model of sense of community. Thematic content analysis of three pro-ana websites yielded two overarching themes: relationships on the pro-ana websites and in-groups and out-groups on the pro-ana websites. Results indicated that the quality of relationships on the pro-ana websites were portrayed as more open and conflictual in comparison to how both past research and the website members presents their face-to-face interactions as secretive and conflict avoidant. This certain quality of interpersonal relating was found to be strengthened by the meaning and value placed on in-group membership and social identity.