

AN EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL AND INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS THEY ARE PORTRAYED ON PRO-ANA WEBSITES

A research report submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree

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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.

DECLARATION

I declare that this research project is my own, unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Clinical Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for another degree or examination at this or any other university.

Signed this _____ day of _____ 2010

Tamlyn Carol Anderson

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1) INTRODUCTION

The pro-ana phenomenon has increased in recent years (Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008). This movement of websites supports AN, gives advice and provides motivational messages to help sustain continued weight loss (Williams & Reid, 2007). The websites provide anything that promotes AN from chat forums where the pro-ana members can communicate, to 'thinspirational' pictures and messages. Williams and Reid (2007) describe the websites as "a movement of empowerment among females and males that have an eating disorder and do not want to recover." (p.142). Hundreds of people visit these websites, although an exact estimate is unknown. Due to the limited literature on these websites, little is known about them as they are secretive and tend to be shut down or move through cyberspace (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006).

This chapter will consider how the aims of the research have been set out. It will also provide a rationale which gives an explanation of why it is important for this research to be conducted. Chapter two will follow on from this with an exploration of AN and pro-ana websites as a way to better understand this literature in order to frame it in the context of this research. Studies that consider the interpersonal relationships of individuals with AN, social identity theory and sense of community will also be explored as they are important to hold in mind while looking at how these types of relationships are portrayed on pro-ana websites. A section on communities in cyberspace will be outlined in order to acknowledge some of the dynamics which may exist on the pro-ana websites. Lastly, this chapter will provide the research questions. Following on from this, chapter three outlines the research methods, taking into account the structure of the analysis, the step-by-step process that the researcher underwent in collecting and analysing the data as well as an exploration of the ethical considerations of the research. A presentation of the results of the analysis will be provided in chapter four which is broken up into two overarching themes which look at relationships on the pro-ana websites and in-groups and out-groups on the pro-ana websites. From these two overarching themes, the subthemes will also be explored. The final chapter provides a discussion of the analysis and brings the research together by exploring the implications of the research and a conclusion.

1.2) RESEARCH AIMS

This research aims to explore specifically how social and interpersonal relationships are portrayed on pro-ana websites as a way of reaching a better understanding of the meanings generated from them. Firstly the research aims to explore how past research has addressed the dysfunctional relationships of individuals with anorexia by exploring how interpersonal relationships are described and referred to on the websites. Secondly the research aims to explore how in-groups and out-groups are presented by examining social identity theory. Thirdly, this research aims to consider how an exclusive sense of community and identity is portrayed on the websites through the use of McMillan and Chavis' theory. This three part focus allows an appreciation of how the quality of interpersonal relationships is conveyed, how 'insider' and 'outsider' are delineated and how a sense of community is created, thereby offering an understanding of the portrayal of relationships of pro-ana websites from a social and interpersonal perspective. It is hoped that a new understanding of pro-ana websites can be created that varies from what research on this topic has previously considered.

1.3) RESEARCH RATIONALE

Approximately 80% of women will suffer from an eating disorder (ED) at some time in their lives (Farrell, 2000). This varies from sub-clinical eating disorders such as obsessive dieting, to the severe and often fatal anorexia nervosa (AN). Farrell (2000) explains how this estimated percentage means that only 20% of women do not have a negative relationship with food. Even though this may be the case, the majority of women express shock and outrage towards those who have AN. This suggests that unclear boundaries around eating disorders exist as someone who is starving themselves seems less acceptable than another who is slowing their metabolism down with a strict diet (Farrell, 2000). This may be due to the fatality of AN as this disorder can lead to cardiovascular complications induced by electrolyte abnormalities, osteoporosis caused by severe weight loss, gastrointestinal complications, renal failure, skeletal complications, as well as rapid intravenous hyperalimentation (Sharp & Freeman, 1993). Attia and Walsh (2007) describe the course of AN with outcomes ranging from full recovery to a chronic and severe psychosocial disability accompanied by physical problems and even fatalities. Due to its fatality rate, research on AN is of great importance because the more the disorder is understood, the better the professional world will be equipped to treat it.

Giles (2006) describes the pro-ana websites as offering a 'naturally occurring' discourse which allows a unique opportunity to explore the perceptions of people with anorexia without the boundaries of medical evaluation. Past research has described the context from which data is collected as an important variable (Giles, 2006). Thus there is a difference when data is collected in controlled conditions where a person is more likely to censor her/his language, compared to a context where there is less intrusion by the researcher (Giles, 2006). It is important to expand on this type of literature, especially with analysing pro-ana websites. The reason is that the social space pro-ana websites provide is a worthwhile source of information for study purposes. The sites allow for a different form of analysis in comparison to that of off-line interactions with anorexic individuals (Giles, 2006). Dias (2003) explains how individuals with AN are exposing very personal stories of their negative relationship with their bodies in the public space of the internet. This current research will place specific emphasis on the pro-ana members' perspective. This has been lacking in the existing body of research on AN (Williams & Reid, 2007).

Attia and Walsh (2007) stipulate that engaging an anorexic patient to participate in a psychiatric evaluation presents a greater challenge than would be the case for patients with other disorders, including other eating disorders. The websites can be said to be a space where people with anorexia have the chance to write their own narratives away from the scrutiny of society or under the influence of professionals (Dias, 2003). What people with AN feel they cannot say to family, friends and professionals, they may be able to say in the safer and more ideal space that the websites provide (Dias, 2003). The internet therefore offers an opportunity for researchers to access such groups in a different way to that offered by clinical research in the past (Gavin, Rodman & Poyer, 2008).

The internet has opened up communication for socially isolated or stigmatised individuals such as those who have AN (Giles, 2006). The websites have been described as portraying expressions of loneliness, pain, anger and defiance (Dias, 2003), which does seem to show that the pro-ana members feel they can use the websites to express their conflicts and problems in their real lives. Dias (2003) suggests that pro-ana websites provide a safe space where a community of likeminded people, who share the same values and beliefs, can meet. For some anorexic individuals, the community provided on the internet allows for a shared sense of experiences, knowledge and support (McCormack, 2010). It is thus suggested that although clinical research portrays individuals with AN as avoiding conflict and lacking healthy communication, the pro-ana websites may provide them with an anonymous identity which gives them the ability to express themselves in a way that they feel unable to do in real life.

In addition to this, treatment of AN has been shown to be complicated. Steinhausen (2002) stipulates that there has been a lack of progress in understanding the treatment of AN. Fisher (2003) suggests that both intermediate and long-term follow-up studies show that a significant proportion of patients with AN achieve psychological and physical recovery. However, on follow up assessments, at least 20% continue to meet full criteria for AN and many others, even if they do not meet the full criteria for AN, report significant residual ED symptoms (Fisher, 2003). Bardone-Cone and Cass (2006) state that many professionals are unaware of the potential impact that pro-ana websites may have on the treatment of AN. It has been argued that if the anorexic individual's own perception of her/his illness had been given a voice in literature, then this would have helped to facilitate a better understanding of what needed to be considered when treating AN in a clinical setting (Wilson, Peebles, Hardy & Litt, 2006). This research may help to create awareness by analysing the content of these sites. This research is also important, as it helps to build a greater understanding of social and interpersonal relationships presented by the pro-ana member as they are portrayed on pro-ana websites. This may help add to the existing knowledge of the aetiology of AN, which lies in dysfunctional interpersonal relationships as well as what a sense of community and identity means for pro-ana members. In addition theory will be utilised in considering the analysis of themes. This will help to strengthen how social identity theory and sense of community are portrayed on the websites.

This research is attempting to provide a new and different perspective on pro-ana websites by looking at how relationships are portrayed as a way to understand the members' feelings, perspectives and ways of relating through cyberspace. A portrayal of the pro-ana members' ways of relating will take two aspects into account. The first takes into account how interpersonal relationships are portrayed in the hopes that it will provide a deeper understanding of the members' emotional and behavioural ties with family and friends. The second is that this research utilises social identity theory and a sense of community model as a way to better understand how social relationships and group dynamics have come to have important meaning for the members. It is hoped that this will allow for a greater understanding of how the meaning generated from the pro-ana websites affects the pro-ana members' ways of behaving and interacting in cyberspace. In addition, this research considers the debate which looks at whether pro-ana websites are either a harmful space that helps maintain disordered eating versus being a lifestyle choice. However, it does not choose one side of this debate. Instead, it will explore a new way of thinking about them by considering how they portray relationships and what this new understanding might mean in the understanding and treatment of AN.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1) Introduction

There have been three types of research which have contributed to the limited body of research on pro-ana websites. These will be considered in order to understand what the existing research on pro-ana websites has focused on. The first type of research evaluates pro-ana websites as either a healthy life-style choice or a controversial space where they create or help maintain AN as a dangerous illness (Davies & Lipsey, 2003). The second type of research is more descriptive as the websites have been explored in order to understand their content, and create public awareness of what they contain. The third type of research considers the common identity and community found on the websites (Giles, 2006) which have been described as a sanctuary for individuals with AN (Dias, 2003).

In order to explore and understand how relationships are portrayed on the websites, the literature review will look at how both interpersonal and social relationships are portrayed. For this reason, clinical research on AN will be looked at, which considers the dysfunctional family system as one of multiple aetiological factors of AN (Minuchin, Rosman, & Baker, 1978). This will allow an examination of whether this abundant literature is applicable to the websites when it has been suggested that people with AN tend to avoid conflict and lack healthy communication (Goldstein, 1981). Social relationships are also going to be considered in order to understand what the websites mean to the members and how it has affected their ways of relating in cyberspace. In order to do this, social identity will be examined in order to analyse how in-groups and out-groups may be delineated and portrayed on the pro-ana websites. In addition, McMillan and Chavis' (1986) model of sense of community will be discussed as a way to help understand how the pro-ana community has come to have meaning and value for the members. Lastly, research on identities in cyberspace will also be acknowledged as a way to understand what the anonymity of using the websites might mean for how relationships are portrayed.

2.2) Anorexia Nervosa

In order to analyse the pro-ana websites, there should first be an understanding of the history of AN in order to appreciate when it was first documented, how it has progressed in modern times and how its frequency and symptomatology can be delineated from other eating disorders. The earliest report of AN in medical history was found in *Treatise of*

Consumption by Morton (1689) whereby it was called a 'nervous consumption' (Chassler, 1994). Chassler (1994) explained how it became a clinical entity in the 19th century and was called a psychophysiological condition in reports by Gull (1868). After this AN became known as an endocrine disturbance (Chassler, 1994). It was not until 1930 that AN became acknowledged as a psychological entity (Chassler, 1994).

AN has an onset of usually between ages 10 and 30 years (Kaplan & Sadock, 2007). AN became defined as a separate and distinct ED and is measured by the person being of an unusually low weight (Palmer, 2003). The DSM-IV-TR diagnostic criteria for AN is as follows: 1) refusing to maintain body weight at or above a minimally normal weight for age and height; 2) an intense fear of weight gain/ becoming fat, even though underweight; 3) disturbance in experience of one's body weight or shape, undue influence of body weight or shape on self-evaluation, denial of the seriousness of the current low body weight; 4) amenorrhea (absence of at least three consecutive menstrual cycles) in postmenarchal females (DSM-IV-TR, 2000). In accordance with the DSM-IV-TR there are two subtypes of AN. The first is the restricting type with the symptom of weight loss which is caused by self-induced starvation where the patient will confine herself to small amounts of food but will not purge. In order to ensure further calorie loss, compulsive exercising may occur. The second is the bulimic type which is marked by dietary restraint combined with bingeing and purging as well as other forms of purging such as using laxatives (Sharp & Freeman, 1993).

Anorexics can live on about 400 calories a day (Chassler, 1994). Sours (1980) gives a mortality report which varies from 2% to 15% dependent on severity of the disorder and treatment (Chassler, 1994). AN is described by Chassler (1994) as a psychological disturbance that causes deterioration at an emotional, mental and physical level. Anorexic individuals have problems at an emotional level as they express despair, feelings of loneliness and worthlessness (Chassler, 1994). Prevalence rates for AN are nine female anorexics to each male anorexic (Crisp and Toms, 1972). Attia and Walsh (2007) describe ranges from 0.5% to 1.0% among females with males being affected about one-tenth as frequently. Furthermore, the prevalence of AN in both males and females was found to be greater among individuals born after 1945 (Attia & Walsh, 2007). These results were also indicated by Hoek (2006) who conducted a study with findings that suggest that the prevalence of AN is about eight per 100 000 persons per year and that there was a substantial increase amongst white females aged between 15--24 years observed between the years 1935-1999. This suggests that AN has been on the increase in recent years and for this reason it is of significant importance that more research is done in order to understand and combat the disorder.

2.3) Pro-ana Websites

Websites which promote self starvation and endorse the anorexic lifestyle have been labelled as “pro-ana” websites (Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008). There has been an estimation of over 500 pro-ana sites (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006). However, this figure is unreliable as the secretive nature of many of the sites means that they change or move location through cyberspace (Giles, 2006). From the limited amount of research on pro-ana websites, there has been an emerging debate examining alternative portrayals of these websites. This debate considers whether pro-ana websites are either controversial spaces which help the website users to become or maintain AN (Davies & Lipsey, 2003) or whether the websites help to promote a lifestyle choice and provide a place where individuals with AN can seek acceptance (Dias, 2003). This research engages in these two debates, as a way to understand but will not side with either debate. Instead this research seeks to depict its own stance that will be considered later on.

Giles (2006) suggests that pro-ana websites have moved away from the portrayal of AN as an illness or disease to embracing it as a life-style choice. An article by Dias (2003) suggested that pro-ana websites act as a “safer” space where people who are battling with AN can express themselves as they may feel they cannot communicate with people in their day-to-day lives. Many individuals with AN feel as though they are under criticism and surveillance when they are among other people in social contexts (Dias, 2003). It is for this reason that Dias (2003) describes the websites as a sanctuary where there is the opportunity for communication with others who have common ideals and experiences. This opportunity is argued to be important as it is noted that individuals with AN, particularly in the early stages of the disorder, experience isolation and disconnection from others (Dias, 2003). This side of the debate explains how the voices of those with AN are being suppressed due to media criticism of pro-ana websites (Dias, 2003). It is argued the pro-ana members are turning to the sites looking for acceptance and contact with people who can offer understanding (Dias, 2003).

The alternative side of this debate presents literature and discussions on the websites which describe them as a form of media acting as a dangerous source of medical misinformation (Norris, 2006) or as a source which causes the development of AN. The pro-ana websites have been compared to other unsafe and unhealthy life-style behaviours which are supported by internet groups such as unsafe sex, paedophilia, smoking and self harm (Giles, 2006). Pro-ana websites have been described as a source of mass media which women

suffering from eating disorders go to as a way to help validate their disorders and keep them motivated and committed to AN (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006). This was found in Harper, Sperry and Thompson's (2008) examination of 1575 women, which offered evidence that viewing pro-ana websites created higher levels of body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance. A pilot study conducted by Bardone-Cone and Cass (2006) showed that young women who are not diagnosed with an ED, and who view the pro-ana websites, tend to experience negative thoughts. Giles (2006) postulates that there is the fear that these websites act as an ED trigger for people who are vulnerable. Dias (2003) acknowledges the outrage expressed by people of the medical community, parents of anorexic individuals and among recovering individuals with AN. In addition, the information on the websites have been described as inaccurate and dangerous as it has been designed to help people with anorexia maintain their ED (Harshbarger, Ahlers-Schmidt, Mayans, Mayans, & Hawkins, 2009). The American eating disorder advocacy group (ANAD) asked internet servers to remove these sites, with the result that within 4 days, 115 of them were taken down (Dias, 2003).

As a result of this many of the websites have been blocked or have included disclaimers describing the website's intentions and explaining that they are not to be entered by people who do not have an ED (Giles, 2006). The pro-ana websites are easily found through search engines on the internet which means that children and adolescents are gaining access to them (Custers & Van den Bulk, 2009). Custers and Van den Bulk (2009) built on from previous studies by examining 711 undiagnosed young school adolescents of both sexes. Results indicated that many of the participants had visited these websites. More girls than boys visited the websites, particularly those who had a higher drive for thinness and higher levels of perfectionism. Participants with a pre-existing positive attitude about their body tended not to have visited the websites (Custers & Van den Bulk, 2009).

Descriptive research has investigated information which can be obtained from the content of pro-ana sites including motivational content, known as 'thinspiration' in the form of pictures or writing, tips and tricks for weight loss (Harper, Sperry & Thompson, 2008), disclaimers and warnings, medical information and religious metaphors (Norris, 2006). These analyses are in the interest of creating awareness of the existence and content of these websites. Davies and Lipsey (2003) discuss whether or not to publicise the contents of these websites in order to create a better understanding of the secretive pro-ana community and to create a better understanding of AN. They also consider the possibility that publicity could lead to greater use of the sites because the more people hear about the sites the more tempted they may be to visit them (Davies & Lipsey, 2003). Research on pro-ana sites has

highlighted the dynamics of whether these sites are good or bad and what they mean to the aetiology of AN. There is another branch of research which has considered what the websites mean for the users and they are important to explore in order to gain a better understanding of the websites, and how relationships are being portrayed.

Dias (2003) explained how people with anorexia do not feel like they can turn to family, friends or people in the professional world due to fear of being misunderstood. Chassler (1994) has a parallel argument where she describes how people with anorexia feel extremely isolated and lonely:

I feel myself excluded from all real life. I am quite isolated. I sit in a glass ball. I see people through a glass wall, their voices come to me muffled. I have an unutterable longing to get to them. I scream but they do not hear me. I stretch out my arms toward them, but my hands merely beat against the walls of my glass ball (p. 243)

Previous research has examined how food takes on a representation of anorexics' struggle with their relationships with others. Research by Dias (2003) gives a description of some themes on the websites being, "not feeling understood by those around them; feeling out of control; feeling isolated and in pain, using the eating disorder as a form of coping and a security blanket." (p. 38). Dias (2003) appears to be suggesting that the websites fulfil an emotional need for the pro-ana members. This argument is potentially trying to eliminate the stigmatised label of AN and explaining that the websites are trying to offer these individuals with a place of comfort and understanding. Whereas the alternative side of the debate is highlighting the dangers of pro-ana websites as they are fundamentally supporting self starvation and disordered eating.

2.4) Interpersonal Relationships

It has been outlined how AN and the pro-ana websites have been discussed in literature. However, an equally important aspect, which has not been researched previously, is how interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites. It has been ascertained that there is value in being an anonymous voice on the pro-ana websites so that relationships may be portrayed in a different way to that experienced in the real world. For this reason, it is important to acknowledge the vast research which has emphasised the importance of understanding family dynamics of AN and the way in which anorexic individuals relate to others in their interpersonal relationships.

There has been a vast body of literature and research which has discussed multiple aetiological factors of AN such as a person's genetics, cultural values, personality and family dynamics (Beumont, Russell, & Touyz, 1993; Garfinkel, Garner, 1982 & Latzer & Gaber, 1998). This research will, in particular, focus on ways of relating in interpersonal relationships as well as the family dynamics of individuals with AN. Studies which specifically focus on the pathology of the anorexic's family system look at the interactions among family members. Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker, (1978) and Latzer and Gaber (1998) have described AN as a disorder which reflects dysfunctional relating in the family. Goldstein (1981) reported that parents of those with AN exhibit a combination of enmeshment and avoidance of conflict compared to patients of pre-schizophrenic and non-anorexic hospitalized individuals. Latzer and Gaber (1998) postulated an agreement of this by explaining that families of individuals with AN have a tendency to withdraw from confrontation. They conducted research using forty families with daughters who had AN and compared them to forty control families. Results showed that families with daughters who have AN had significantly greater difficulty "choosing the topic of discussion, adhering to the topic, developing and exploring the chosen topic, and reaching a solution—all within a family setting." (Latzer & Gaber, 1998, p. 539).

Minuchin et al. (1978) were some of the first to suggest that families of anorexic individuals struggle with conflict and have difficulty in dealing with problems. It has been argued that unresolved conflict exists within these families, and because there is a constant increase in conflictual feelings which are discarded, they thus act as underlying issues (Latzer & Gaber, 1998). With the use of a Family Aggression Scale, Shuger and Krueger (1995) conducted research which showed that families of anorexic individuals have a covert way of communicating aggression. This research was offered as a means of explaining why past clinical observation of families of people with AN showed a strong pretence of togetherness and avoidance of overt conflict.

Lattimore, Wagner and Gowers (2000) followed on from these research findings by considering the discrepancies between parents and their anorexic adolescent's ways of solving problems. As a means to demonstrate deficiencies in communication skills within anorexic families, it was seen as important in their study to have a key family relative of each of the anorexic adolescent girls. The mother was seen as the most appropriate choice. This study was conducted using low- and high-conflict family problem solving tasks between the mothers and their anorexic daughters. Results indicated that there was more destructive communication between mothers and their anorexic daughters than in comparison groups.

Daughters with AN showed higher destructive communication in comparison to their mothers.

A study by Geller and Cockell (2000) compared 21 women who met the DSM-IV criteria for AN against 21 psychiatric and 21 normal control women. The samples were assessed using the State-Trait Anger Expression Inventory, which measures the suppression and expression of anger, and the Silencing the Self Scale, which assesses four cognitive schemas that engage the repression of needs and feelings to protect interpersonal relationships (Geller & Cockell, 2000). Results indicated that women with AN showed greater inhibited expression of interpersonal orientation and negative feelings. The women with AN reported higher scores on the four Silencing the Self schemas and on suppressed anger. These schemas include; “externalized self perception or the tendency to judge the self by external standards; care as self-sacrifice or the tendency to put other’s needs first as a way of securing attachments; silencing the self or inhibiting one’s self-expression and action as a way of avoiding conflict and losing the relationship; presenting an outward compliant self, while inwardly hostility and anger grow.” (Geller & Cockell, 2000, p 16).

A study by Humphrey (1986), using a sample of bulimic-anorexic girls and their parents, suggested that these families were more likely to be less involved and supportive, and more isolated, conflictual, under structured, and detached. This was reiterated by Stern, Dixon, Jones, Lake, Nemzer and Sansone (1989) who conducted a quantitative evaluation on family functioning in eating disorders by comparing groups of anorexics, bulimics and a control group matched by sex, age and race, as well as one of each of the participants parents. Findings indicated the anorexic and bulimic group had less supportive families all of whom scored low in expressiveness.

In addition to dysfunctional family dynamics and ways of communicating, research has also highlighted the lack of trust and openness that individuals with AN have within their interpersonal relationships. One study examined 34 females with AN against 34 non-eating disordered females (Cunha, Relvas & Soares, 2009). Results suggested that individuals with AN are less likely to trust and be open and honest with their mothers and peers. In addition, these individuals also show a detachment to their parents and friends (Cunha et al., 2009). Furthermore, Warin (2006) suggested that by individuals entering into a relationship with AN, this affects their relationships in their everyday world. This means that new meanings and experiences are created when relating in terms of their AN (Warin, 2006), which has an effect on their every-day relating with other people. In other words, Warin (2006) suggested that anorexic individuals create a whole new set of social relations. Such

was seen with the use of the name 'Ana' which is a term used to personify AN. AN was also found to categorise these individuals as secretive as well as belonging to an eating disordered group that has been described as "a religion" or a "competitive sporting group", which has changed their relationships with both themselves and in their everyday lives (Warin, 2006).

Cunha et al. (2009) highlighted that even though the results of these studies are variable, which makes it hard to discern a general description of these patterns, most findings are directed towards dysfunctional family relating in AN. This research aspires to acknowledge the findings obtained from this abundant body of research describing the dysfunctional interpersonal relationships of people with AN. This will be done by applying these findings to the pro-ana websites to ascertain how interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites. It is hoped, that this may be accomplished by understanding how the pro-ana users come to relate on the websites by considering how they delineate between in-group and out-group membership. A further examination of how social identity theory can be used to ascertain what the pro-ana identity means to the website members will be conducted.

2.5) Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory will be explored in this section because it will be applied to the websites in order to help generate an understanding of how social relationships are portrayed. Social identity theory is a social psychological theory that describes how group membership in a particular group affects individuals cognitively (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It can be used to describe how individuals with AN can conceive of themselves via a sense of group membership and relationships that exist within the group (Hogg, 2006), which is found on the pro-ana websites. Social identity can be defined as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to a certain social group together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership" (Tajfel, 1972, p.292). Social Identity theory places emphasis on the cognitive processes which exist through group membership as the group exists psychologically (Tajfel, 1972). This occurs on the websites as the pro-ana users have shared beliefs and attributes distinguishing them from other people (Hogg, 2006). In accordance with Social Identity Theory, people automatically classify themselves and other people into groups and categories (Forsyth, 2010). If a person is a member of a group it does not necessarily mean that that person is influenced by the social identity of the group (Forsyth, 2010). In the case of a member identifying with a particular group, he/she is more likely to accept the group as an extension of him/herself and as a result will acknowledge the group members who similarly identify with the group and therefore have similar qualities which

qualify them to be part of the group (Forsyth, 2010). As a result of social identification, membership in the group is of personal significance as the people in the group feel connected as well dependent on, and attached to the group (Forsyth, 2010). Hence emotional significance becomes attached to being a member of the group.

Turner (1982) describes how group norms are constructed through in-group membership and behaviour which become internalised and acted upon as part of their group identity. The content on pro-ana websites is of a nature that the users can define their identity (Turner, 1982). However, the pro-ana users are also given the opportunity to act out, agree to and acknowledge what it is to be anorexic, have pride in their AN, know what it means to be anorexic and what must be done to maintain their ED (Giles, 2006). Furthermore, the websites allow the vision of the self as an anorexic individual to be strengthened and the opportunity for the self to be compared to everyone else who does not have AN (Giles, 2006). When non-eating disordered individuals place attacking messages on the sites (Giles, 2006), this causes the website members to form a resistance which strengthens the in-group identity.

Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament (1971) conducted research indicating that by categorising the self into a group, this causes people to discriminate in favour of their own group. This is seen on the websites as the pro-ana community rejects anyone who does not have AN, has a different ED and any other outsiders (Giles, 2006). The disclaimers on the websites warn against anyone seeking to become anorexic as they feel the websites are primarily for individuals who are anorexic. Research also describes how being part of an intergroup context prompts individuals to maximise the differences between self as an in-group member and others as out-group members (Tajfel, 1974). This in-group and out-group delineation is conceived through the creation of boundaries which provide members of a particular group with emotional safety, which is important for the development of strong intimate relationships (Tajfel, 1974).

Another aspect of social identity theory looks at how group members exclude or include an individual (Curley, 2009). In accordance with Curley (2009) this works in line with the 'over exclusion effect' whereby people tend to categorize more people as outsiders than members of their in-group. As suggested by the 'over exclusion effect', it is expected that people are more likely to categorize based on perceived likeness to the group identity (Curley, 2009). This is seen on the websites as being considered an insider means that an individual has to fit into very specific criteria, which are based on the commonality of having AN and the experiences that come with it. In addition, people who do not fit the criteria of being 'similar'

are excluded from the websites as they do not fit in line with the requirements of being a group member (Curley, 2009). Through a discourse analysis, Giles (2006) examined how a true 'Ana' is created by valuing discipline and purity through self starvation. Pride is placed in being a true Ana and people who want to be anorexic rather than those already diagnosed with the disorder 'blur' these boundaries (Giles, 2006).

Such is seen with pro-mia (bulimia) websites which essentially support an eating disordered lifestyle as do the pro-ana's. However the two wish to remain separate as the pro-ana users view pro-mia users as contaminating their sense of purity as they do not restrict their food intake (Giles, 2006). There is a need for pro-ana's to be distinct from outsiders as they keep anyone who is not anorexic at bay. In addition, members who feel their social identity is threatened become motivated to protect and maintain a positive sense of social identity (Lee & Ottati, 1995). Outsiders who use the websites for hate mail and abuse were found to further construct the belief of self and other (Giles, 2006). Bos, Shami, Olson, Cheshin and Nan (2004) conducted research which found that individuals who become excluded from an in-group are likely to form their own in-group based on being excluded from others. As has been noted anorexics tend to express feelings of being excluded and even shunned by the rest of society (Dias, 2003). The notion of in-group and out-group delineation may have been further strengthened on the websites due to the social identity that is created by the pro-ana members. This would strengthen in-group membership even more and can be understood in terms of McMillan and Chavis' sense of community model.

2.6) Sense of Community

McMillan and Chavis set out a definition and theory of sense of community which has formed a primary base for psychological literature (Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002). They describe two ways in which the term community can be used. The first refers to territory and geography such as a physical place or area where a group of people live together. The second relates to this study's use of the term community which refers to the quality of human relationships rather than location. A sense of community can be defined as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to a group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p.9).

Papadakis (2003) postulates that people can create a sense of community in cyberspace. Therefore the pro-ana websites will be considered through the use of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) four components which define a sense of community. The first is *membership* which

is the feeling that one belongs to a particular group or having been able to share a sense of personal relatedness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Research by Gavin et al. (2008) indicated that sharing a secret identity on the pro-ana websites creates and helps to strengthen group bonds. They further describe how the pro-anorexic identity becomes normalized and strengthened due to common pro-ana behaviours and thoughts (Gavin et al., 2008). There are other aspects in accordance with McMillan and Chavis (1986) which strengthens group membership. Examples are having boundaries which demarcate who belongs to the group and who does not. These boundaries can be set up through common language, rituals or the way group members dress (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Emotional safety provides structure and security at an emotional level (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A sense of belonging and identification allows an individual to feel that he/she fits into the group and is accepted. Personal investment is the belief that one has earned one's place in the group due to one making a difference to that group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This makes membership more meaningful and valuable at a cognitive level. Furthermore, having a common symbol system helps to create and maintain a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Such can be seen through the use of "logos, names, rites of passage and ceremonies" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 10). When McMillan (1996) updated this theory he included the notion that a community can come to have its own spirit due to the friendships that develop through membership.

The second is *influence* which is an internal process (Fisher, Sonn & Bishop, 2002) of the belief that one is making a difference to a group and of the group mattering to its members. A study by McCormack (2010) looked at 325 messages on anorexia discussion forums as a way of examining the nature and types of social support which took place. Results indicated that the group's main function was to encourage its members and establish esteem and information support. Overbeke (2008) presented similar findings in her research. The websites were more effective in sustaining the pro-ana users' need for a sense of community rather than creating any kind of conceptual 'pro-ana' philosophy.

The third element is *integration and fulfilment of needs* which is a feeling that membership is reinforced as the members' needs are met through resources that they otherwise may not have obtained (Giles, 2006), if they had not been part of the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Anorexics are a socially stigmatised group. However, as pro-ana members, they obtain the title of anonymity on the websites where they gain a sense of community and can share common experiences (Giles, 2006). It can be argued that having a sense of an intergroup relationship on the websites allows those who are anorexic to move away from the narrative of ill health and embrace, as a community, an alternative narrative of support,

control and superiority. As argued by Miah and Rich (2008), were it not for the websites these people would feel even more isolated.

The final component is *shared emotional connection* which includes a sharing of history, time together, common places and experiences that are similar (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Giles (2006) describes the pro-ana users as a community of like-minded people who share a sense of goals, values and beliefs. From McMillan and Chavis' theory, this research can ascertain how the bond between pro-ana users is portrayed on the websites through a common sense of community. It is important to broaden the knowledge of having a sense of community and identity on the websites in order to further understand and help to treat individuals with AN. The social and community dynamics on the pro-ana websites can further be explored by considering how cyberspace plays a role in members' ways of relating to others through the space that the internet provides.

2.7) Communities in Cyberspace

The community which is created on the websites is established within the social realm of the internet. There are two sides to the social relationships found on the websites. The first is the way in which the websites are used to find a sense of belonging away from the social isolation and stigmatisation that is experienced by those with anorexia in the real world by anorexics. The second is that the websites are a social space where outsiders may gain access to their community. This is an ambiguous relationship as pro-ana users are using a public space to discuss private and secretive experiences of their AN and interpersonal relationships (Dias, 2003). The reason for this may be explained in light of the fact the websites provide a sense of identity, but one which belongs in the safety of anonymity that cyberspace provides.

In cyberspace interactions and communication are different than when people meet face-to-face (Kollock, 2005). Dias (2006) talks about using cyberspace as a way for computer users to alter themselves into a fantasy self. Wallace (1999) stipulates:

The internet explosion happened so rapidly that we have not had enough time to step back from the medium and look at it more systematically, as a new environment that can have potent effects on our behaviour (p. 1)

Sometimes people do things on the internet they might not do in any other environment (Wallace, 1999). The internet is a somewhat new environment where people can transform their persona and be different to how they are in real life. In an on-line environment people tend to become disinhibited and allow their tempers to flare more easily as they interact with others (Wallace, 1999). Wallace (1999) described the differences in a real life persona as compared to an online persona. In real life, people pay more attention to verbal and non-verbal cues such as being respectful by greeting another person, or making eye contact with them. When entering into an on-line environment, less detail is given to the respectful persona. The pro-ana websites allow the users to use the sites as a different environment where they are able to create a persona different to the one which they allow others to see in their real life interactions. Dias (2003) describes the pro-ana websites as a therapeutic community. This suggests that there may be something about the safety and sense of community found on the websites which allow the pro-ana users to express themselves in a way that they might not be able to do in their face-to-face interactions with others.

The literature discussed has been beneficial in allowing a greater understanding of the possible dynamics of the relationships existing on the pro-ana websites. By understanding what past research on the ways those with anorexia relate with others has been documented, it can be deduced that the findings indicate conflict avoidant and inhibited styles of relating. This will help in examining whether these styles of relating are also portrayed on the pro-ana websites. Social identity theory was discussed as a way of understanding the possible delineation between in-groups and out-groups which might exist and influence the members' ways of relating with others on the websites. In addition, social identity theory was used to help depict how meaning and value enhances the social identity of a group. McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community model was also considered in order to help ascertain how social relationships may be portrayed on the websites. Lastly, it was considered how ways of relating in cyberspace could be influenced by the anonymity the internet provides. This will also be considered throughout the analysis as a way of understanding how social and interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the pro-ana websites and what this might mean for the understanding and treatment of AN.

2.8) Research Questions

1. How are interpersonal relationships portrayed on pro-ana websites?
2. What is the relationship between in-groups and out-groups on pro-ana websites and how are these groups defined?
3. How is a sense of exclusive community and identity portrayed on pro-ana websites?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

3.1) Research Design

Qualitative research seeks to understand the different dimensions of human behaviour as opposed to explaining and predicting behaviour (Boonzaier & Shefer, 2006). A qualitative design is well suited to the analysis of website text (Patton, 2002). The reason is that qualitative research can capture greater detail and provide more in-depth understanding to what texts present (Patton, 1980). It is the most appropriate for the purposes of this study as it will allow a deeper interpretation and greater exploration (Durheim, 2006) of the content found on the pro-ana websites. By using a qualitative design, everyday language can be analysed in order to better comprehend how it can be viewed in the social world (Kerry, 2006). The data corpus in this study involves an in-depth analysis through systematic and concise observations which can be achieved more successfully through the use of a qualitative design (Patton, 2002). As qualitative research is less restrictive and broader in its understanding of the data, it allows for continual interaction between the gathering and analysis of the data, understanding and development of the theory, the space made for refocusing of the research questions and acknowledging threats to validity (Maxwell, 1988).

Flick (1998) describes how perspectives, rather than truth, can be found when using a qualitative design. This design is appropriate for this study as it seeks to understand and interpret the portrayals of relationships on pro-ana sites. Emphasis is placed on perspectives rather than truths as portrayed on the websites. Through the use of a qualitative study, a fine-grained exploration of pro-ana sites will allow for greater understanding and deeper meaning of a subject which has been under-researched. The idea of understanding experienced meaning is important (Elliot, 1995) as a qualitative design will help to elicit how the meanings of relationships are portrayed on the websites. Qualitative research is fluid in nature (Flick, 1998). The pro-ana sites are full of different meanings, and therefore a fluid research design will help to build up an analysis of what is portrayed on the sites.

3.2) Sample and Sampling

The sample consists of two pro-ana websites which are named *Worthless one: the thinner the winner* and *The Pro-Ana Lifestyle*. Research on pro-ana websites conducted by Grilo (2006) has suggested that the most popular search engines on this subject are Google, Yahoo and MSN. For the purpose of this study, Yahoo was chosen and a search was

conducted under the title “Pro-Ana websites”. The two websites chosen were selected based on popularity and accessibility to provide greater density of the data corpus. Importantly these two sites were also rich in content as they provide more information than other sites which are thin in content. During selection, ethical considerations were acknowledged in order to ensure that there would be no infringement of anonymity, as many of the sites provide some form of the users’ identity. Chat rooms were excluded to ensure that there were no interactions between the researcher and the pro-ana users. Sites were not considered if they required some form of password, as this showed explicitly that they were not meant for public use. Only English websites were chosen, to ensure standardisation of the content collected from the various sites.

Due to the similarities of the pro-ana sites, by selecting two of the largest and most popular websites, the data will not be compromised. Using a qualitative approach in this study, sufficient information could be elicited from the data obtained on the two sites. The websites and their contents were sampled over a period of three weeks. This period of time was long enough to ensure that sufficient content was collected and that changes in the content over time were included. The content from the websites formed the data corpus. The data was sampled according to the common features of the websites. The common features found on the websites were the disclaimers, bulletin boards, tips and tricks, pictures and thinspiration, poetry, quotations, the Anna creed, thin commandments, stories and links to other sites (Dias, 2003). The two sites were also chosen because of these common features and this allowed for an easy comparison of them.

3.3) Method of Data Collection

The data corpus for this research was collected over a period of three weeks. When two websites which provided enough information and had common features had been found, the data collection was complete. The next step was to extract the data set from the data corpus. This was done by printing out the content of the websites and from the data corpus. The data sets were sampled. First, this was done by looking at the websites as a whole, and then extracting the common sets which helped to answer the research questions. This was done by using the disclaimers, bulletin boards, tips and tricks, pictures, images and thinspiration, poetry, quotations, stories and links to other sites (Dias, 2003). The use of symbols and names (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) of websites was also considered as these are an important aspect in forming a sense of community on the websites. From these it was deciphered as to what the reoccurring themes were in the data analysis. Other features on the websites, such as the website design, layout and colours were excluded. The reason for

this was that they were not important in considering how social or interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites.

3.4) Method of Data Analysis

After the collection of the data corpus, an analysis was conducted with the use of thematic content analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (pg. 79). When this form of analysis is used in a theoretical and methodological manner that is acceptable, it allows for greater flexibility as well as a rich and detailed analysis of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A thematic content analysis is an appropriate method to use in this research as it helps organise the data. This allows the researcher to interpret the research topic from various perspectives (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The data was analysed in a way to provide a specific, coherent, consistent narrative of the data which was not repetitive, within and across themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An inductive approach was used as the data had been collected specifically for the research and the coding of the data was done in a way that fitted the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In addition to this, the thematic analysis was conducted with an understanding that both meaning and experiences are socially created as opposed to being inherent within individual people (Burr, 1995; Braun & Clarke, 2006). The framework is beneficial for this study as data comprised of material from pro-ana websites represents a portrayal within a socio-cultural context which enables individual accounts rather than being inherent within individual people (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The coding of data cannot be done in a vacuum away from other influences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher aspired to be self reflective throughout the analysis by acknowledging how the self is positioned through an awareness of one’s own subjectivity (Shohov, 2004). The researcher, who is a young, white female who does not have an ED, is likely to analyse and interpret the data differently compared to someone who is perhaps male, non-white or someone who does have an eating disorder. The researcher is also South African and as the websites can be accessed around the world by those of different cultures, the views and interpretations made might be subjective in the analysis of pro-ana websites. Therefore the subjective process was declared and scrutinized throughout the research process. In addition, sensitivity in terms of language was considered throughout the research. An example was with the use of the word “anorexics” which was substituted with terms such as “individuals/people with anorexia”.

The process of using a thematic content analysis in this research was based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) step-by-step guide for using a thematic analysis in psychology. The analysis of the data began when the data set was extracted from the data corpus where the researcher looked for any patterns or meanings arising from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher first became immersed in the data through repeated reading of the data set as an active way of discerning if there were any repeated patterns or meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). During this time the researcher took notes as the starting point for main ideas to emerge. After this a more formal coding process was undergone. The codes used sought to identify a specific feature of the data at the latent level. This means that the data was examined at a deeper level so that a greater understanding of the underlying ideas and meanings emerged. This gave the data a particular form. Therefore the analysis underwent a greater interpretation and did not just describe the data but also applied a theoretical understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding is a way to organise the data into meaningful groups.

These codes were then refocused into a broader level of themes where there was an interpretive analysis of the data. (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The codes were sorted into potential themes as the different codes combined formed overarching themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These themes were then in turn refined or else collapsed, depending on whether the data was meaningful and whether there was a clear distinction between themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were then defined and named and a detailed analysis was written up for each individual theme. The researcher was given the opportunity to relook and rework the various themes while keeping the information gathered from the literature review in mind. Two themes, relationships and group membership were used, then sub-themes were delineated within these two overarching themes. Doing this helped to answer the research questions and ensured that none of the themes overlapped (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Once this had been successfully done then the final write-up of the report was ready for completion. The quotations extracted and presented in this research were not changed. The grammar was left in its original form.

3.5) Quality of the Analysis

When considering reliability, qualitative research lends itself to enhancing the quality of the research. A qualitative analysis means that the researcher was able to constantly check, reorganise and make corrections which helped to ensure greater reliability and validity and allowed the researcher to remain true to the data (Morse, Barret, Mayan, Olsen & Spiers,

2002). It also allowed the researcher to recognise her own experiences, beliefs and assumptions (Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999) in how they relate to the data that was found on the pro-ana websites. This allowed for a more intensive analysis of the study. Elliot et al. (1999) describes how this helps the reader to interpret the findings and understand alternative perspectives. Specific examples are illustrated in this research which helps to develop a greater understanding of the research findings (Elliot et al., 1999). This being a qualitative study allowed for another person to yield information from the data. The researcher utilised the help of a supervisor who enhanced the quality of the research by providing an outside perspective. A qualitative analysis also allowed for a comprehensive mapping and structuring of the results which allowed the discussion to be more structured (Elliot et al., 1999).

3.6) Ethical Considerations

When conducting psychological research certain ethical principles and guidelines, as set out by the American Psychological Association (APA), need to be adhered to (Stanley, Sieber, & Nelton, 1996). A main concern in human research is the treatment of the participants in the research. This study does not require the use of human participants as the data was collected from websites where individuals had already made information accessible in the public domain without them directly participating in the study. This guarantees anonymity, as those who use the websites do not display their identities in any way. The use of any pseudonyms was removed to guarantee confidentiality (Dias, 2003). The use of the websites is voluntary as there are no formal arrangements with individuals to participate in the study, so voluntary participation is not of concern. Informed consent is not required in this study as the information provided on the websites is part of the public domain, allowing easy access to the data without permission being needed from the website users.

Of significant concern in research conducted in many countries, including South Africa, is that of a possible language bias. This research places focus on websites which are accessible internationally and for this reason only English-based websites were used. This ensured that the data gathered for this research was only obtained from individuals who are fluent in English. Furthermore problems of illiteracy are also not of concern in this study as individuals who are using the internet are guaranteed to be able to read and write. Even though individuals with anorexia are considered to be a vulnerable group, there were no direct interactions with the individuals on the websites. Personal safety was therefore not compromised. However, images of the some of the website members were used in the analysis. The use of images which allows the members identities to be seen was decided to

be included because the websites are a public domain and the members displayed their images freely. The choices of the images used were done respectfully and with sensitivity.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS SECTION

4.1) Introduction

This chapter seeks to consider how pro-ana members portray their interpersonal relationships both within and outside the pro-ana community on the websites and to offer an analysis of the power that in-group membership has on the members' ways of relating. Embedded in this is an exploration of what the social community on the websites means to members and how they believe it has come to influence their interpersonal relationships and ways of relating to others. With the use of thematic content analysis, two overarching themes became apparent during the analysis of the three pro-ana websites. The first is **relationships on the pro-ana websites** which considers how interpersonal relationships are portrayed by the members of the websites. The second is **in-groups and out-groups on the pro-ana websites** which considers the group dynamics existing on the pro-ana websites. From these themes, certain subthemes were delineated within the two overarching themes. Embedded within the first theme is **secrecy and inhibition of the self as a way of avoiding conflict**. This is the first subtheme which explores how individuals with AN attempt to keep their disordered eating a secret, as well as how they inhibit their self-expression and feelings as a way of avoiding conflict. The second subtheme is **expressions of loneliness and a desire for understanding and support** which considers how the members express feelings of intense loneliness and how they compare this to the way they feel understood and supported on the pro-ana websites in a way that they feel is lacking in their relationships with family and friends. The third subtheme is **a sense of belonging and personal relatedness** which explores how the members feel they belong in the pro-ana community, as they share common experiences and can relate to other members on the websites. **Openness** is the fourth subtheme which looks at how the members feel they can be honest and open on the websites in a way that they express they cannot with other people who do not have AN. The fifth and final subtheme which surfaces from the first overarching theme is **confrontation** which looks at how people with AN are depicted in past research as being conflict avoidant and inhibited in comparison to how they are portrayed on the websites as being highly confrontational and at times aggressive.

The first subtheme that presents itself from the second overarching theme is **inclusion criteria based on the formation of social identity** which explores the criteria which must be met for a person to be part of the pro-ana in-group, as well as the meaning and value members feel they gain from their group membership. **Personal investment in the pro-ana**

community is the second subtheme which looks at how the members feel their membership in the in-group is valued and strengthened, based on their perceptions of being able to influence and make a difference to the community. As the websites dictate who belongs to the in-group, website content also functions to exclude those who are perceived as outsiders. This is portrayed in the third subtheme: **excluding people who are perceived as outsiders**. The final subtheme is **boundaries** which portrays how the websites delineate between who belongs to the in-group and who is an outsider.

4.2) Relationships on the Pro-ana Websites

This section will consider the overarching theme of relationships and how they are portrayed in different ways on the pro-ana websites. The members use the blogs to describe some of the difficulties they experience in their relationships with the people in their lives. They compare this to their experiences with other website members. This will be looked at in five ways. The first will consider how the members maintain secrecy about their AN, so that others do not discover their ED, as well as how they inhibit their self-expression as a way of avoiding possible conflict with others. Second, it will explore how the members say that as a result of their feelings of loneliness and isolation, they have sought out the websites where they feel they are supported and accepted in their AN. Third it will consider how this leads to feelings of belonging in the pro-ana community as a result of the members feeling like they can personally relate with others on the websites, who share similar experiences and have similar beliefs (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Fourth, this section will compare the previously considered inhibition of self-expression with how members express an ability to be open and honest on the websites in a way they cannot be with family and friends. Lastly, past research which describes people with AN as conflict avoidant will be compared to how the members appear to exhibit a highly conflictual and aggressive stance on the websites in the safety of cyberspace.

4.2.1) Secrecy and inhibition of the self as a way of avoiding conflict

Maintaining secrecy is a strong subtheme presented on the websites and appears to be portrayed in two ways. The first is in an attempt for the members to hide their AN from being discovered. There is a common narrative of the members finding a way to lie about where or what they have eaten as a way to avoid eating, and also as a way to prevent people from becoming suspicious about their eating disorders. This section will consider how the members describe ways in which they keep their AN a secret for what appears to be the

purpose of avoiding the conflict which might arise from their disordered eating being discovered. The second factor is that of members keeping their thoughts and feelings a secret in what appears to be an inhibition of self-expression. These two aspects will be considered in conjunction with one another as a way of exploring what purpose secrecy and inhibition of self-expression might be fulfilling for many of the members on the pro-ana websites.

One of the ways in which secrecy is communicated on the websites is through members lying to family about eating. One member describes how she will avoid eating by lying to her father about having eaten somewhere else:

My dad works 7 – 4 so if I get up at 6:45 and start working. Then I can go to the twin's house and say I am eating at home. Then come home and not eat anything and say I ate there. Then Tuesday we are going skating. I will say I had a big lunch at school and I'll eat when I get home but just get a shower and go to sleep. Wednesday He works close so I'll go out someplace, maybe with Austin or Kody. Then Thursday I'll do the same as tomorrow. And Friday I'll go out again. Cool huh? So my fast will work and I will lose weight. I have to be 80 pounds by September 25th, 2006!

The above excerpt is taken from a member's diary extract on a pro-ana website which describes how she will avoid having to eat, as she lies to her father as a way of successfully losing weight during the fast she has set up for herself. She seems to be using the pro-ana space to consider a step-by-step course she will take to fool her father into thinking she has eaten. By considering what she will say and where she will go, she is consciously preparing herself to lie to others as a way of avoiding eating. More importantly if her father does not suspect she is not eating, he will not know she has an ED which means she can avoid any conflict which might arise from his knowing, as well as continuing with her disordered eating. In this way she is able to avoid eating and lose weight. By lying about her eating, she is supposedly able to keep her AN a secret as people will not realise that she is not eating.

Lying is an initial way of hiding AN. Another way secrecy is portrayed on the websites is when the members describe inhibiting their self-expression. Inhibiting or hiding their true feelings appears to be a way for members to avoid conflict which could arise as a result of their AN being discovered. The excerpt below was written on the websites as a way of explaining how one should lie in a way that others will believe the lie.

Don't get angry. Don't deny everything if confronted. People will believe a little truth with a big lie much easier than a huge lie. Act as if it's no big deal instead of reacting emotionally and people will tend to believe you.

The excerpt above is a tip written on one of the websites which suggests to the members that they do not show anger as this might cause confrontation. This suggests that if a member is asked about their disordered eating, they must act as if it is no big deal rather than becoming emotional. By not reacting emotionally, this will help avoid conflict. Lying is not the only way secrecy is portrayed on the websites. The members describe keeping their feelings secret by inhibiting themselves, and presenting a submissive outward appearance. By doing so there is a sense that conflict will be avoided. This is expressed in the above as the member links a non-angry, compliant demeanour to having people "believe you" which in turn will help avoid any conflict which could arise from the situation. The way this member describes hiding her feelings in this excerpt encourages the pro-ana members to keep their true feelings secret and inhibit their self-expression as a way of avoiding conflict.

Conflict avoidance, in accordance with Geller & Cockell (2000) will cause inward aggression and hostility to grow. This is portrayed below by one member who describes how she inhibits her self-expression which results in her feeling hostile and angry:

I'm sure my mum could recall the many days I would return from school teary eyed or angry at this prospect of being forced in my situation at school I wanted out of, but scared of the inevitable 'no', so I never asked and my mum didn't consider it, why this I'll never know but that just boosted my frustration and built up anger and pain which always lead to and another argument and another cry where I would then apologise and have to 'forget it' and say 'everything's alright' to reassure her, until the next morning for school where I would always wait until the last minute to get up, I don't remember a day of wanting or looking forward to school only a pain of worry stuck in my stomach, I remember a lot of days feeling like this, which has become pretty normal to me.

This girl felt like she could not ask her mother if she could leave the school she attended as she feared that her mother would say "no". In this way she appears to be inhibiting her feelings and trying to present what Geller and Cockell (2000) call an outward compliant self. This action appears to work in the favour of avoiding conflict due to a fear of losing the relationship (Geller & Cockell, 2000). Believing that she could not confront her mother, feelings of anger and pain built up. This led to her arguing with her mother and becoming upset as a way of communicating the feelings which had built up within her. She would then

feel that she needed to apologise and reassure her mother, possibly due to a fear of losing the relationship with her mother (Geller and Cockell, 2000). This girl describes her experience of school as a painful one, which she felt she just had to get used to. However when these built up feelings would become too much she would communicate them through becoming aggressive and arguing with her mother. This would make her feel like she had to make her mother feel better by reassuring her. Not only was this member inhibiting her self-expression but also hiding her feelings about wanting to leave her school. She inhibited her self-expression and instead presented a more amenable self (Geller and Cockell, 2000) and so kept her real feelings about wanting to leave school a secret from her mother.

Another way that inhibition of self-expression is portrayed on the websites is when members describe hiding behind a mask. This member below explains how she hides her emotions by putting on a smile:

Another bad relationship with my father. I hate living here in Idaho with all these hatred people. I personally think that we should move back home to Pennsylvania. Anyways, we went to Stokes and Jordan just happened to be in the door way when we walked in. I said "Hi Jordan" and turned the other way. He smiled back so yea. I wanted to look really upset and everything but decided to hide behind my smile once again. I can't believe he won't go out with me because I'm not 16. I hate this. I like him and I think he is great and he thinks the same about me, but yet he can't date me until I am 16. He said he wasn't rejecting or accepting it. I really like him but I guess there is nothing left to say to him so I guess I just won't talk to him anymore. I hate to admit it, but I'm heart-broken....Bye Journal.

This excerpt presents a girl who describes herself as hiding behind a smile so as not to look upset. She says she wanted to look really upset, but decided rather to smile. She is expressing a strong feeling of hatred for her situation as she likes this boy and believes he likes her but he won't go out with her due to her age. She does not however want him to know these feelings, and therefore smiles when she is around him. As a result of her heart-broken feelings she will not talk to him anymore. There is a strong sense of her not wanting him to know how she is feeling which portrays a silencing of the self through retaining her feelings rather than through communication. At the same time, by including it on the website, she is communicating the importance of hiding behind a smile.

As in the case with the above excerpt, another member also describes keeping her emotions within rather than letting others know how she is feeling. Her poem communicates a sense of being hidden from others:

Poem

*Two people in one,
One happy, one sad,
Two sides of me,
One mad and one glad.*

*There's only one side
I try to let show;
My feelings inside
The others don't know.*

*I'm two people in one,
As strange as that sounds,
The real me inside
No one has found.*

The poem is about inhibition of emotions as this member uses the metaphor of feeling like she has two people within her, one which she must hide away. She cannot amalgamate these two sides of her as she feels split within herself. She describes only letting others see the one side of her, while hiding the other side. She also states that no one has found the side of her which hides away. This hidden self is silenced which implies that she does not feel she can communicate all of her thoughts and feelings. Her phrase, "others don't know", suggests that this girl feels a sense of being hidden from others and that she is misunderstood. She appears to be keeping this "other" side of her secret and inhibited, while at the same time communicating it on the website.

The pro-ana members describe how they maintain secrecy as a way to keep their AN hidden as well as to avoid conflict which might arise from their ED being discovered. In addition, the members inhibit their self-expression and present a more amenable self. They also appear to avoid possible conflict which could arise with the discovery of their AN. Furthermore, and as stipulated by Geller and Cockell. (2000), those with anorexia have a tendency to silence themselves and repress their self-expression as a way of avoiding conflict and the possible loss of relationships. By keeping their ED a secret the pro-ana members are maintaining an ideal outward appearance (Geller & Cockell, 2000) as a way of avoiding the disruption of the quality of interpersonal relationships through any conflict which might arise. As a possible

result of their secrecy and inhibition of self-expression (Geller & Cockell, 2000), the pro-ana members also express feeling lonely and misunderstood by others. This will be explored in the next section.

4.2.2) Expressions of loneliness and a desire for understanding and support

Pro-ana members portray a feeling of loneliness and attribute this to a lack of understanding and support for their AN. There is a sense of being excluded from the rest of society, as well as within interpersonal relationships because of having an ED. This section will explore how many of the excerpts on the websites imply that the members move away from interpersonal relationships, and instead embrace the websites where they are able to express themselves freely and gain support. It will also be considered how the websites are sought out, not only to gain encouragement for AN, but more importantly for a feeling of being understood by others who have common narratives and similar experiences.

One way loneliness is portrayed on the websites is by the members describing how they do not feel understood. For example, one member expresses feeling lonely because others do not understand what she is going through with her AN:

If someone could hear me, if someone could see, maybe they wouldn't all isolate me. I used to think I did this to myself, but sometimes I can't help what's wrong with my health. Do I even know how to find a way out? Does one even exist, my lungs need to shout! I need to scream to the world all the truths of my pain, for I'm not the only one. P.s - I'm not insane.

This member uses a creative rhyme to express how she feels unheard by other people and as a result feels isolated. She appears to attribute this to her AN, and she initially blames herself. Then in turn she says she cannot help it if something is wrong with her health. There is a sense that she feels trapped and cannot find a way out of her ED. Feeling trapped also seems to convey that her AN has put a wall up between herself and others. She does not know whether she can find a way out. She wants to shout and scream about her pain which reiterates that she feels unheard and misunderstood by others. Loneliness is evident on the websites and this appears to strengthen the desire for understanding and support to be found in a group where others are the same, and share similar experiences, goals and beliefs. This member expresses this by saying she is “not the only one” who feels alone with her AN.

As with the above, one member describes feeling alone and that others do not understand the struggle going on within her. In addition, she polarises the badness of her loneliness and the goodness and understanding on the websites:

Always felt alone always felt left out like no one can understand this side of me nor knows about it I was afraid of getting judged out of people who don't know this struggling that goes inside of me. I found prettythin I found out am not alone! People here were so nice and helped me so much! Even just reading stories of people here makes me feel..Not so alone.

This above excerpt highlights the feeling of loneliness and isolation that many of the members experience. This member attributes her feelings of loneliness to her experience of being judged by those in her life who do not understand the struggle she is going through with her AN. There is however a contradiction as she says that others do not understand her but also says she does not let others know about this side of her. If she does not let others know about her AN then it does not give them the opportunity to understand what she is going through. Therefore she appears to feel that she can only be understood by others who also have AN. Her experience on the pro-ana website is different, as it helps her to not feel alone as people do not judge her but rather offer help. By reading the stories of others she can relate to, she no longer feels the loneliness that once plagued her. By not feeling alone and having something in common with others on the website there appears to be a sense of understanding and support.

Feelings of loneliness appear to be related to feeling isolated from others. As with the above, the excerpt, below presents a member voicing her struggle with loneliness which she links to her experiences of abandonment and pain. She also compares this to how she experiences being saved from her loneliness on the websites:

I have no family. My mum abandoned me when I was 13. Left me with a drunken abusive step father who use to physically hurt and emotionally. I didn't really have friend as I don't talk very much and am a very shy person. I have no one to turn to I been in desperate situations when I been in hospital after suicide attempts. I remember crying so much in the hospital no one to come see me hug me or tell me it would be ok except a very kind nurse who listened and heard how lonely and desperate I was. Now on anti depressant after my 4th suicide attempt. And a website like this could help people see they aint the only ones who feel alone and scared.

This member describes an intense feeling of loneliness as she does not feel like she has anyone to turn to. She has a history of abandonment, as not only was she abandoned by her mother at the age of 13 but was also left with her drunken step father who physically and emotionally abused her. Her feelings of loneliness were heightened as she didn't have many friends and was an introvert. She remembers feeling extremely sad as there was no one in her life who cared enough about her to come to visit her in hospital after she had attempted suicide. She greedily accepted the care shown to her by a nurse which suggests that she desperately wants some respite from her loneliness. Her answer to being uplifted from her loneliness was the pro-ana websites which she views as a way for people to see that they are not alone in their feelings of loneliness and sadness.

In contrast to the loneliness and isolation portrayed, pro-ana members talk about finding understanding and support that they feel they are lacking in their relationships with family and friends:

Imagine living in a world where the mention of your eating disorder causes you to lose friends, and causes your family to look at you as if you're a bomb about to go off. You think a certain way - your thoughts are consumed - and no one understands. Sure, they don't encourage it, but do you truly think anyone on this site encourages eating disorders? But they understand. Do you truly think that an alcoholic doesn't know that drinking won't solve anything? Do you truly think that an anxious individual would remain anxious if they knew how to snap out of it?

This person is using an evocative image of a bomb going off as a way to convey the idea that nobody understands her. She has brought together a feeling of not being understood and a need to defend the pro-ana websites. Firstly, she describes how she feels alienated from her family and friends who do not understand how her mind is consumed with AN. Secondly, she defends the websites by saying that they do not support AN. However, she does get the support from them that she feels is lacking with her family and friends. Thirdly, she compares AN to alcoholism or anxiety perhaps as a way to try to describe the disorder's severity. There is a sense that others do not understand what she is going through with her AN and, she implies, this prompts her to turn to the pro-ana community which she defends and views as understanding. By feeling alone, the pro-ana members turn to the websites as a place of sanctuary (Dias, 2003), where they feel understood and supported in their AN.

Another way that understanding and support is portrayed on the websites is through the members talking about the relationships that have developed as a result of being a pro-ana

member. One member for example talks about specific friendships which she has made on the websites:

And soon after discovering thinspo, I discovered prettythin.com and although when I found it there I wasn't an active moderator, people used it and I talked to people on the chat board thing, and although they were all older than me, there was this one lady who called herself purple pixie, and I think she was forty and I was twelve, but I really enjoyed talking to her, and I met Becki who is like a best friend to me now, so I have so much to thank prettythin for. I've watched it develop and come alive, and I want to thank you guys so much, because you saved me, thank you (L)!

The chat rooms have allowed a dialogue to form between the pro-ana members. This member describes the relationships that developed for her on one of the websites. One was with an older woman and the other was with 'Becki' whom she describes as now being like a best friend to her. By using the description of a best friend, she implies that the relationship is like an interpersonal relationship as opposed to one based in cyberspace, where there is no contact with the other person other than communication through chat rooms. She attributes the development of these relationships to the website which she believes she has watched come alive and which has saved her. This indicates that the relationships formed on the pro-ana websites serve an important function which is a respite from the ever-present loneliness described. That is, the websites have not only become a place of sanctuary away from feelings of isolation, but also fulfil emotional relationships through cyberspace, whereby the members gain a sense of understanding and support.

The interactions which occur on the websites between its members are portrayed as real interpersonal relationships built upon the understanding and support that people gain on the websites. Through this comes a feeling of acceptance on the websites which is described as lacking in the interpersonal relationships of those with AN. This is seen through the members' descriptions of intense loneliness and isolation experienced with their families and friends. The websites appear to be fulfilling a relational need the members seem to feel is lacking with their family and friends. However, the interpersonal relationships that are formed on the websites are ones which exist primarily within the realm of cyberspace as opposed to face to face contact with others. In addition, the relationships portrayed on the websites are built on having a need to feel accepted in a space where others have a common narrative. It is easier to feel understood and supported in a place where others have the same experiences and can relate to the same problems. This will be further considered in the next

section with the use of McMillan & Chavis' (1986) perspective on belonging in a community based on a sense of being able to relate personally to others in the group.

4.2.3) A sense of belonging and personal relatedness

In order to feel like one is part of a certain group, McMillan and Chavis (1986) advocate that one must feel like one belongs to that group. The way belonging seems to be portrayed on the websites is through a sense of personal relatedness. This section will look at how the members feel they can identify with and share common experiences with other members on the websites and in the safety of cyberspace. In addition, it will also consider how this leads to them feeling that their membership means something to them and that they mean something to the group. A feeling of belonging and being able to relate personally is an important aspect of being involved in an interpersonal relationship.

One way a feeling of belonging is communicated on the websites is by members who equate feeling understood and safe with being a part of the pro-ana group. In the excerpt below a member describes her experiences of not being understood and compares it to feeling safe and accepted by belonging to the website:

The night I found this website I had just binged. The night I found this website I had a bottle of pills nearby. The night I found this website I thought nobody would ever understand. I've been diagnosed with depression, anxiety, OCD and anorexia. I always felt like a worthless freak until I came on here. Knowing that I'm not alone makes me a little less scared, a little less lonely, a little less empty inside. This website is my safe haven. Everyone here is kind, accepting and friendly and never judges me for what I do. Instead they simply understand, accept, and let me know that it's all okay. Nobody has ever done for me what these people have do on a daily basis. I love you all. XOXO

This member expresses having felt alone and not being understood prior to becoming a member of this website. Repeating the words "the night I found this website" is a dramatic way of conveying how bad things had been for this member prior to finding the website, as well as emphasising the importance of finding the website. By calling herself a worthless freak implies that she did not feel like she belonged, that she was different. However, by coming to the website she no longer felt alone, empty or scared. This implies that she felt like she belonged to the group, as the people in the group, as well as the group itself have become meaningful to her. She defines the website as a safe haven, where the other members have treated her in a way that no one else has. She feels included in the

community and experiences a sense of belonging. “Nobody has ever done for me what these people have done” implies that she experiences a sense of congruency with other people on the websites.

It is not only a sense of belonging that makes those on the websites feel that they are members of the group. Personal relatedness allows them to define themselves as members of the pro-ana community through a sense of commonality. One member, for example, feels like she belongs to the group because others are similar to her:

I never thought there would be people like me. I'm not the average girl with an ED and because of PrettyThin I could find people JUST LIKE ME with no problem. Those are the people who make it all worth it. This site is what makes me understand people.

This member is placing value on finding a space where people are like her. By expressing that there are people “like me” this member seems to feel that she belongs to the prettythin community. Believing she is understood by others on the website implies that she feels accepted, which in turn makes her feel emotionally safe. She also stresses a commonality between her and the other members who are “just like me”, written in capital letters, perhaps to highlight the importance to her of her sense of being included. This suggests a feeling of belonging, which she believes causes her to feel that other people on the websites “make it all worth it” and that the site makes her “understand people”. She appears to be conveying that belonging to a group, who she can relate to personally, allows her to understand them better. A sense of belonging seems to be an important reason for group membership, because with it appears to come a feeling of acceptance, of being part of the group.

Personal relatedness is also expressed by how members talk about others on the websites who look like them. For example one member talks about feeling she belongs due to feeling familiarity with someone else on the website:

I think that this picture is really thinspiring and really appeals to me because she looks how I would want to look myself. She's wearing similar clothing to what I'd wear and makeup and hair are also other features that I feel I have in common; more so than catwalk models who look nothing like me whatsoever. That's what scenespo is to me. It's thinspo but more for people who relate to the scene style. I think it's easier to relate yourself to someone who you can see shares something with you rather than trying to compare yourself to someone who you're not interested in and are completely different to. That's why I think I'd find it easier to relate to scenespo.

The above excerpt is referring to pictures which were exhibited on a pro-ana website for the purpose of inspiring anorexic girls to maintain their anorexic lifestyle. The pictures are of members themselves displaying their bodies and how they are progressing with their AN. This girl perceives herself through looking at one of the pictures of these members and believing that she can personally relate to this girl more than she can to catwalk models. Personal relatedness appears to come from the members being able to relate to others with whom they share something and who are like them. This allows her to feel like she belongs to the group, as she sees something in the scenespo picture that she can relate to herself and, which strengthens her feeling of membership and allows her to invest meaning and value into the community.

A sense of belonging is portrayed on the websites as the members view the pro-ana community as a family where they are understood and accepted. Some of the members imply that they have felt a lack of belonging or acceptance until they discovered the pro-ana websites, which have allowed them to feel like they are part of a family. In addition, a sense of belonging appears to be established for many of the members through perceiving themselves as personally relating to the group. By expressing a sense of commonality, some pro-ana members feel that they can relate to others on the websites. This strengthens their feelings of group membership. Another dynamic which must be noted is the existence of a sense of openness, as members are portraying very personal parts of their lives in the public domain of cyberspace.

4.2.4) Openness

The pro-ana websites portray a sense of openness where members share very private aspects of their lives in the public domain of the internet (Dias, 2003). This section will explore how this openness is portrayed on the websites, while keeping in mind how it is in contrast to the secretive nature of AN, which has been considered above. It will also consider how the members display personal stories on the websites, providing an in-depth look at their AN, as well as the struggles that they have had to face. It will also be kept in mind how members often describe others on the websites as interpersonal friends who have become a source of understanding and support. This has led to a feeling of comfort to develop which in turn increased openness on the websites.

Openness is communicated on the websites when the members describe a freedom to be honest in a way that they feel they cannot be in other situations. For example, this member

below compares her inability to be honest with friends with her ability to be honest on the websites:

I can't be honest with my friends about my eating disorder, but on PT I can be the real me and talk about numbers, calories, etc. I can let others see another side of me that most have no idea exists. I love PT

This member explains how she is unable to be open and honest with the friends in her life, possibly because they would fail to understand what she is going through. She distinguishes this from the websites where she can be open and honest about her AN. This excerpt culminates in describing how she can allow the people on the websites to see another side of her that others are unaware exists. This implies that this pro-ana website has allowed her to be open in a way that she feels she cannot be with her friends. However, the websites exist within the public space of the internet and so the members are actually being very open to everyone who can gain access to what they are saying. The secretiveness which has been previously discussed may be based on the common narrative that the websites provide a space where understanding and support allow for a feeling of openness in contrast to relationships with friends and family, who do not understand the struggle of AN, and are the reasons for secrecy and hiding the disorder.

Another way that openness is presented is through the members' descriptions of being able to be open and honest about their AN on the pro-ana websites. Such is seen in the excerpt below, whereby this member expresses appreciation for having a safe place where she can be open and feel understood:

Sometimes when I'm on this site it just hits me, I can't believe there is a place where I can come and talk about my eating disorder; openly and honestly. It's amazing, and I am so glad this site is here for me to have as a safe haven. I feel understood. When I look at a comment on a post and it's exactly how I am feeling or thinking I am just blown away at the realization that I am not alone. Thank you pretty thin.

This member also describes the website as a space where she can be honest and open. She expresses a powerful feeling of being hit by the sudden realisation that there is a place where she can talk about her ED. This suggests that there are not many places where she can be open and honest. There is a sense that she can be open and honest on the website because she feels safe by others mirroring her own feelings and thoughts, and this results in her feeling that she is not alone. She appears to attribute this to the websites being a safe

haven which coincides with Dias's (2003) argument that the websites are a safer and less conflicted space as opposed to what is offered to anorexics in their relationships with family, friends and professionals. This implies that the pro-ana members are relating in a different way on the websites in comparison to how they relate in face-to-face interactions with family, friends and people in the professional world.

Members stress openness and honesty on the websites in comparison to secrecy and inhibition with family and friends. This is a contradiction as the websites are a public domain that anyone can gain access to. Cyberspace seems to provide them with a space where they can talk about their AN with others who have similar experiences and therefore can be understanding. Members express feeling a freedom to be open on the websites in a way that they cannot be with other people. This also appears to be because they feel comforted by the interpersonal relationships that develop on the websites. It has been ascertained that secrecy has been portrayed on the pro-ana websites as a way for the members to hide their AN and in so doing avoid conflict which may arise as a result of having their ED discovered. It shall now be considered in the next section how confrontation is portrayed in a very different way to how members describe interacting with people who are not on the websites.

4.2.5) Confrontation

The body of past literature on those with anorexia and how they relate interpersonally has reflected an overwhelming agreement that people with AN tend to avoid conflict with others. Goldstein (1981) highlighted that those with AN have a tendency to exhibit conflict avoiding behaviour. This was further described by Latzer and Gaber (1998) as well as Minuchin et al. (1978) who postulated that families of anorexics have a low tolerance for conflict as well as difficulty in resolving problems. This argument is important as it describes the escalation of unresolved conflictual feelings (Latzer & Gaber, 1998), which in turn becomes aggressively communicated in more covert ways (Shuger & Krueger, 1995). The past research describes people with anorexia as avoiding conflict on one level, yet at the same time expressing their aggression in covert ways. This section will look at how the pro-ana members use the websites as a vehicle of expressing their aggression in a direct way. A comparison between the conflict avoidant style of those with anorexia described in the literature, and how the pro-ana members are using the websites to express their aggression in a confrontational manner, will be explored. This aggression and confrontation appears to be produced in two ways. The first is acrimonious aggression which is directed towards friends and family. The other is a more angry form of confrontation which is expressed via the pro-ana members joining in unison and using pictures of themselves to express their feelings.

One way that confrontation can be seen on the websites is by the strong exclamations of aggression that exist. One member for example uses the websites to talk about how her mother makes her feel when she is confronted about her AN:

My mom is freaking me out, she's on top of everything I (don't) eat, and she thinks I'm vomiting everything I eat...Right, I do vomit everything I eat, but that's not for her to know! Anyway, I'm gonna get dressed now, and then on my way to the gym. Burn calcs Burn!!! Muhahaha!

This member punctuates her statements with exclamation marks possibly as a way of expressing her strong feelings. She does not believe that her mother should get involved in her AN as “that’s not for her to know”. This implies that she is hiding her ED from her mother, and believes that it is her business and her mother does not have the right to get involved. Her use of expression is highly confrontational as she writes “burn calcs burn” in a way that is going aggressively against what her mother wants. The use of a stereotypical evil laugh at the end of her excerpt suggests that she is being confrontational in a covert way as she is not confronting her mother, but coming onto the websites and overtly describing her confrontational feelings. This reflects how this member is using the website to relate in a more confrontational way than she feels she can in face-to-face interaction with her mother.

Anger is expressed in a conflictual way on the websites, which is in contrast to the findings of the vast body of research which has suggested that anorexics avoid conflict. This may suggest that the websites have provided a new way for anorexics to express their aggressive feelings. For example, one member voices her opinions about people with AN having rights over their own bodies:

Yes the majority of PrettyThin is anorexia guided, but that's because a lot of sufferers come here to find somewhere to breathe! That is in no way your fault. You provide what we want, you also stand your ground that anorexia is an illness and anyone suffering should get help asap. And we [anorexia's on here] will argue to the moment we die for our right to chose what to eat, to have control of our own bodies, that we should be able to do whatever we like to our own bodies, I don't know what it's like to have to deal with that. Under the logo of PrettyThin it says "a site about beauty in our eyes", showing that the site isn't revolving around anorexia through choice, it has simply ended up that way. The members actually encourage anyone who isn't already trapped in the hole of an ED, to eat healthy, to exercise a bit more and lose gradual healthy weight, properly.

This member is writing for the host of the website and is saying that he/she is providing the members with what they want. She is using argumentative language and describes how the anorexics who use the websites will argue until the day they die. By arguing for a right to eat what they want, and have control of their own bodies, this member seems to be in opposition to people who believe that those with anorexia do not have the right to starve or hurt themselves. She is confronting this opposing notion by using the websites as a safe place where she can argue this point among others who have the same beliefs and opinions as she does, as they too are pro-anorexic. By writing this excerpt on the website she appears to be challenging opinions about AN which, have made her feel angry and in this way she is using a confrontational stance to describe how anorexia is not their choice. There is a common, argumentative and conflictual narrative on the websites which the members appear to feel that they can use with safety because of the security that the websites provide.

The pro-ana websites are coloured with confrontation that promotes control over one's own body and others not having the right to say otherwise. There is an aggressive stance for choice, which argues that society is misled in its beliefs about health and weight. The members use the freedom of cyberspace to confront stigmas about AN, and they present what pro-ana means to them in a highly confrontational manner. This member below speaks for herself but in a way which can assume that she is speaking on behalf of the group. Her excerpt uses confrontation as a way to stand up for the pro-ana community:

*This is NOT a place where others should be trying to change your opinion.
This is NOT a place where you should come to try to form your opinion or have others change the one you have. This IS a place to come to feel welcome; to ask questions if you have them; but more than anything, contribute to the global understanding of beauty and understand that one way is not better than another; it is just what makes you feel more comfortable in your own skin.*

Confrontation is overt in her statement as she writes "NOT" in capital letters to emphasise her points. This is derivative of a desire for the members to obtain rights over their own opinions and beliefs about themselves. Expressing that one must form one's own opinion away from the influence of others is confrontational in the sense that it speaks of personal choices. This appears to be a voice on the websites promoting freedom of choice, implying that this right has been taken away from them in some way.

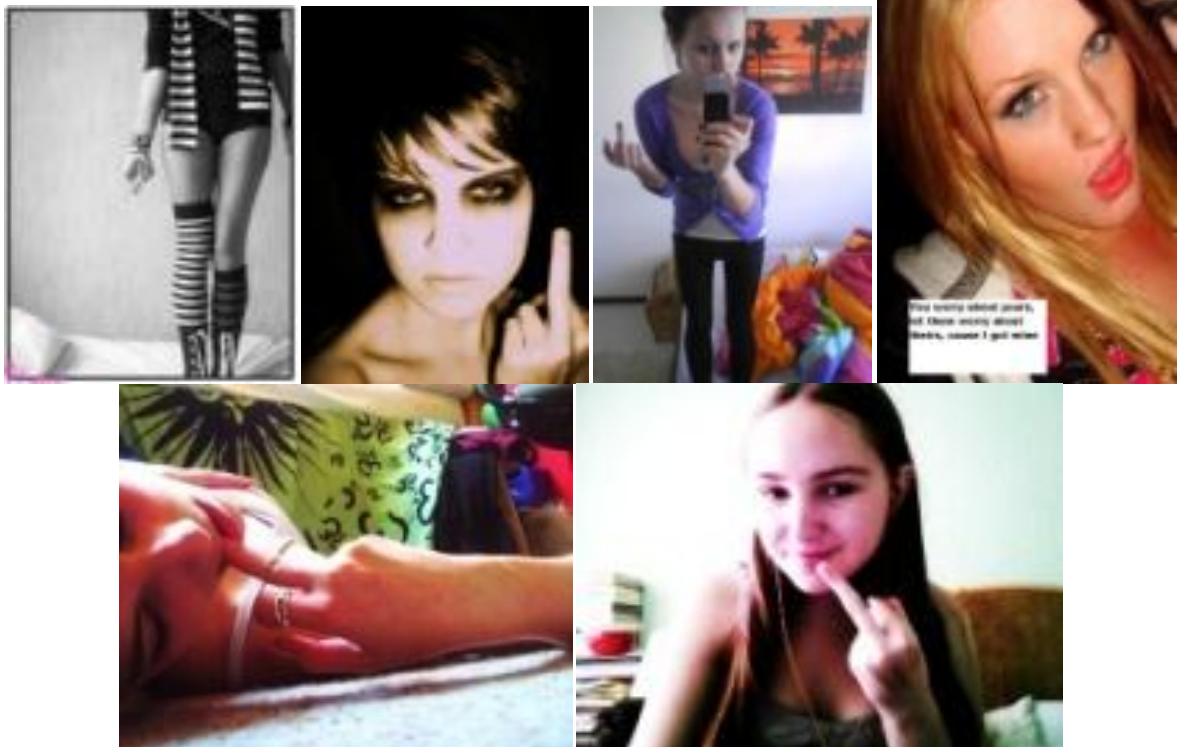
It has been explored how acrimonious aggression has been expressed in a highly confrontational manner on the websites. It will now be considered how the websites are also

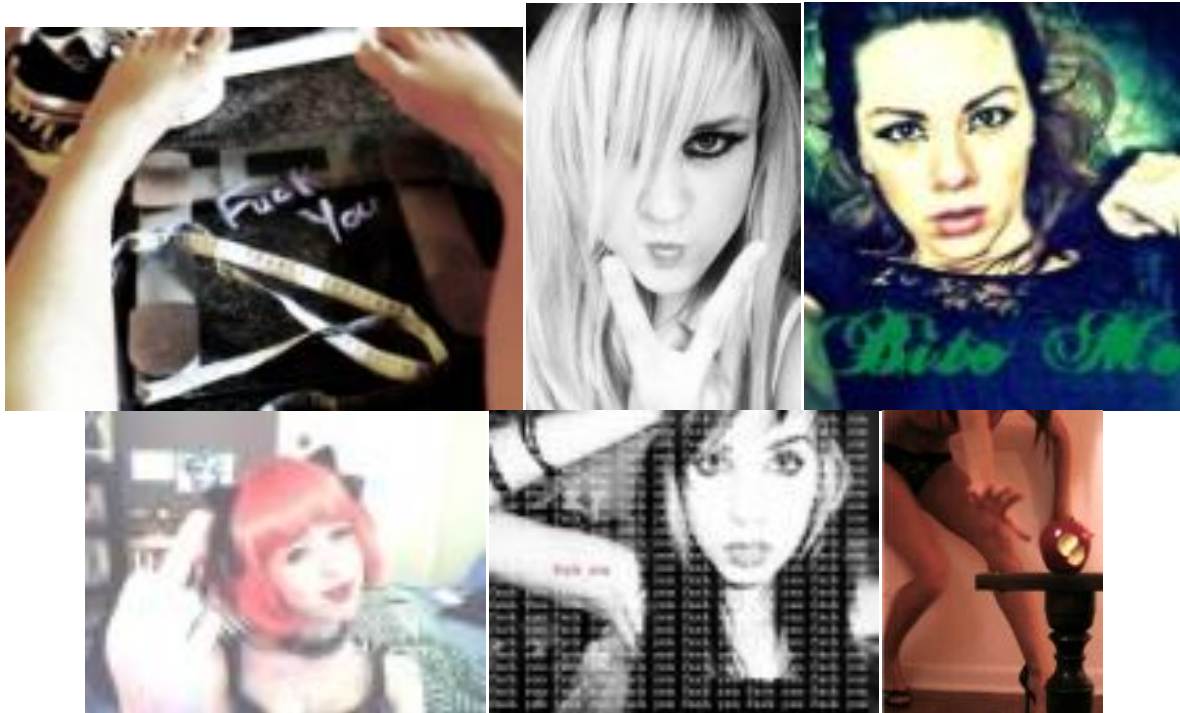
used just to show aggression and anger purely in service of the search of one's identity, to vent negative feelings, or just for the sake of doing so. On prettythin.com a space on the website called bitchspo has been dedicated to this:

Bitchspo

I finally Googled something that doesn't exist. We have thinspo,. we have scenespo, and now, we have Bitchspo! What is bitchspo? It's Bitch-spiration! It's you yelling out in a Lilly Allen kind of way "F^%\$ you...F^%\$ you very very mu-u-uch..."It's you screaming into the camera, flicking off all the little things that just don't matter; laughing in the face of all things that suck. It's about you, in a world that wants to define you. Be you, and always strive to know yourself, so that you may better yourself. But do it on your terms, in your own time, the way you see best for your life, your path, and your journey.

Bitchspo Pics





Bitchspo invites the pro-ana members to exhibit personal photographs of themselves. The purpose of bitchspo is for the members to express themselves in a confrontational way. It represents an exploration of the self which goes aggressively against the socially acceptable way of relating to others. This facilitates the notion that what society has offered the anorexic individual is a feeling that they are not good enough because they could not conform to social values. Therefore they can come to the websites and rebel against society and its expectations in a conflictual and confrontational manner. This is done in a creative way as the members have taken photographs of themselves showing the rude finger. The excerpt above defines Bitchspo as a way of getting to know oneself. This suggests that by allowing the members to explore their feelings of pain, anger or hostility which has built up (Latzer & Gaber, 1998) in a creative way, they will be able to use the websites to “better” themselves. The fact that there is a section on the websites dedicated to the expression of aggression and confrontation goes against what past research has suggested about those with anorexia avoiding conflict and inhibiting self-expression. The space of the internet allows the pro-ana members to feel safe, to present a different side of themselves in cyberspace in comparison to how they are in face-to-face interactions. The vast body of past research describes people with AN as conflict avoidant (Goldstein, 1981) and having difficulties with communicating aggression (Shuger & Krueger, 1995). However, the websites present another picture as many of the pro-ana members are highly confrontational and use the websites as a way of expressing these feelings.

4.3) In-groups and Out-groups on the Pro-ana Websites

This section will draw upon social identity theory to explore how in-groups and out-groups are delineated on the websites. The members' feelings of loneliness and isolation from the rest of society have already been discussed. This section will explore how members construct a place on the websites where they are the same as everyone else rather than being different based on their AN. Due to these feelings of being isolated, the pro-ana community has appeared to form their own in-group identity based on their AN. In-groups on the websites seem to have been created because many of the members have sought out a place where they feel they can belong and are understood by others who are also anorexics, and who have had the same experiences. In addition, it will be kept in mind how important the meaning of pro-ana identity is to the users and how they perceive it to enhance the strength of in-group membership. This section will also explore how the members place emphasis on being personally invested in the community as an important part of what it means to the in-group identity. This section will also consider how the members seek to retain a strong in-group identity by excluding people who do not have AN or who have a different eating disorder. Lastly, it will consider how boundary markers are created on the websites between insiders and outsiders as a way to protect the pro-ana identity.

4.3.1) Inclusion criteria based on the formation of social identity

Inclusion is a subtheme portrayed on the websites as the pro-ana members classify themselves into a category or group (Forsyth, 2010). If group members are able to identify with the social group formed on the websites then, in accordance with Forsyth (2010), they are more likely to accept the group as an extension of themselves. This is based on identifying with other group members who similarly identify with the group where a feeling of personal significance, connectedness, dependency and attachment develops within the group and between group members (Forsyth, 2010). This section will explore how the notion of an in-group has been created on the websites and what the pro-ana identity has come to mean to its members. It will also consider how the pro-ana members are influenced by the social group on the websites, based on their emotional attachment and feelings of inclusion, as well as the structure and security they get at an emotional level.

Criteria for being a pro-ana member are seen through the use of the Thin Commandments which appear to act as a list of what the in-group is meant to stand for:

Thin Commandments

- 1) If you aren't thin, you aren't attractive*
- 2) Being thin is more important than being healthy*
- 3) You must buy small clothes, cut your hair, take laxatives, anything to make yourself look thinner*
- 4) Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty*
- 5) Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing afterwards*
- 6) Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly*
- 7) What the scale says is the most important thing*
- 8) Losing weight is good, gaining weight is bad*
- 9) You can never be too thin*
- 10) Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.*

The Thin Commandments can be found on most pro-ana websites. They appear to be used as a replica of the Ten Commandments in the Bible. This suggests that the websites intend them to be followed by the members as if they were part of a religious faith. All of the criteria set out are based on looking thin and being attractive. AN is a striving for thinness and the Thin Commandments appear to uphold what the pro-ana member is meant to value if they are to be part of the in-group, even if looking “thin is more important than being healthy”. One of the most important criteria for being pro-ana appears to be self-starvation and self-punishment if a member does eat. Placing emphasis on the power and success which comes from self-starvation suggests that these Commandments are intended to help the members maintain their AN and help keep them motivated in their search for thinness. In-group criteria is very specifically set up and it allows the members to decipher what is expected of them if they wish to be part of the in-group.

An insider identity is portrayed on the websites through the emotional attachment which members feel for the in-group. This member below describes the value that the website holds for her:

Searching for somewhere for guidance and I stumbled across PRETTY THIN. You have helped me find acceptance and it's like a community of people who care for each other and don't judge. The people on here help me as does everything in the site itself... thank you pretty thin

It is illustrated above how this pro-ana website has emotional value which is significant to this member (Tajfel, 1972). She says that she was looking for guidance which suggests that

the website gave meaning to her life. It can be implied that the acceptance and lack of judgement she found in the “community” signifies emotional gain from being included as an in-group member. She also feels that she was helped by the people on the website, which seems to indicate two things. The first is that she is acknowledging the other people on the website as group members who also identify with the group. The second is that through social identification, her group membership is of personal significance to her and she feels connected and attached to the other members of the group as well as to the website itself (Forsyth, 2010). This coincides with Tajfel’s (1972) definition of social identity as a person’s knowledge of belonging to a certain social group and perceiving some emotional value significant to her/him of being part of the group. This member seems to feel that having found personal meaning and value in the group, her/his feelings of being able to identify with and therefore be included in the group have been enhanced.

Another way that inclusion is seen on the websites is when the members perceive themselves and the group as a family, and particularly one in which anorexic symptoms are normalised by the group. For example:

I've had an eating disorder most of my life. After a period of recovery, I relapsed, and had been beating myself up mentally and physically over how huge I'd gotten. I became withdrawn, moody, (okay moodier than usual) and completely secretive of my eating habits. Then I found PT. I started posting and immediately I stopped the self-harm, because this site made me realize I'm not alone in this, I'm not the only one who can't eat normally, that counting calories obsessively isn't abnormal for my ED. I'm so grateful I've found this site. Zander, you and the fine people here SAVED MY LIFE. If it weren't for this place, I would have gone down that road to another suicide attempt. THANK YOU SO MUCH for creating this site. I feel like I have a family, now, one that understands!

By calling the pro-ana community a family, this member is categorising the pro-ana members into a group. As highlighted by Forsyth (2010), when a member identifies with a particular group they are more likely to accept the group as an extension of themselves. By calling them family she is acknowledging that she is part of this group and that the group is significant to her. She expresses gratitude for the other members on the website who she describes as saving her life. She also seems to be dependent on the website as she explains that she would have attempted suicide if it were not for the in-group community saving her. Forsyth (2010) explained that dependency and attachment to a group indicates that the individual feels connected to the other in-group members as they share an emotional bond. Based on this bond, this member feels she is an insider on the pro-ana

website. In addition, the most important part of being a pro-ana member is that you must have anorexic symptoms. This member feels integrated into the in-group by explaining how she felt normal on the website with her anorexic symptoms. The pro-anorexic identity becomes normalized and strengthened due to common pro-ana thoughts and behaviour (Gavin et al., 2008). By expressing the ability to talk about not eating and obsessively counting calories as normal, she appears to be classifying herself as an in-group member who identifies with the group and what it stands for.

Another important aspect is emotional safety which provides structure and security for the members at an emotional level, allowing members to feel that they fit into the group and are accepted (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). A host of one of the websites places importance on members feeling welcomed and cherished in the excerpt below:

So the answer is simple. Create a place where people can feel welcome, respected, and appreciated. Allow people to share their life, their stories, their pain and art and fears and wants. Allow a community to grow where everyone knows they are cherished for being who they are; and that no matter how they see themselves, someone sees them as beautiful

The host of this website wrote the above excerpt for what appears to be the purpose of allowing the members to understand that they are cared for on the website. He/she describes creating a place for the members where they feel they are insiders as a result of feeling “welcome, respected and appreciated”. In this way their membership becomes valuable as they can share a part of themselves on the websites whether those aspects of themselves are good or bad. Meaning is placed on being an insider in the community which results in feeling cherished and gaining a sense of being beautiful. Meaning is placed on group membership as their emotional needs are recognised in the pro-ana community. In this way, the host is enhancing the meaning of being part of the in-group by allowing members to feel as if they are emotionally cared for.

As with the above excerpt, the one below places emphasis on insiders feeling a sense of emotional safety on the websites. However, this next member goes a step further as she emphasises who is an insider and who is an outsider by discriminating in favour of her own group:

Hi everyone just writing to say that PrettyThin has really changed my life in so many ways. Not only is one of the best support sites out there with all the information any one person can need and always has the answer to my many questions, but the people are always nice,

nasty, rude and hurtful comments are rarely posted upon this site and when they are they are always dealt with in the best ways. Also this site is much appreciated by not me but all members including Zander most of all as you can see from the site its self it's in good hands, and that's what brings a community together with open arms and makes you feel welcome. Well for me at least it's really helped me along my strive to perfection. If I have had of never found this site I would had never became the person I am today and who I'm becoming. This site for me has worked wonders and helped me do my job and for this I'm am truly grateful and proud to be a part of it X

In the excerpt above, this member describes the other people on the website as “nice”. She appears to feel safe from emotional abuse as “nasty, rude and hurtful comments are rarely posted”. When they are posted she feels they are dealt with in the “best way”. There is a sense that by being part of the in-group, her emotional needs are looked after as she is protected from negative comments from people she might perceive as potentially wanting to hurt her. This suggests that the people who want to hurt her are outsiders and the people that are “nice” are insiders. This is further reiterated as she points to the community as a place which welcomed her with open arms. She also considers the website as a system of support helping her in her struggle for perfection, and the hope of becoming the person she wants to be. In addition, she appears to be idealising the in-group as she uses words such as “best”, “good” and “perfection”. This suggests she views herself as being part of the in-group as she is discriminating in favour of her own group (Tajfel et.al., 1971).

The pro-ana members classify themselves into an in–group category on the websites. Very specific criteria are set up to emphasise who belongs in the pro-ana community. As a result of members feeling emotional attachment to the websites, they are able to identify with the pro-ana identity. In this way they appear to be accepting the group as a part of themselves, where they feel that their in-group membership has some emotional component or value important to them. Many of the members are dependent on the websites and regard them as a family of like-minded people who make each other feel understood. What creates a further feeling of being understood is that the pro-ana identity is based on normalising anorexic symptoms, which enhances the members feeling of being insiders. Some of the members discriminate in favour of their own group, enhancing the meaning of group membership. The websites appear to influence the members by providing them with an in-group identity in which they gain emotional attachment, feelings of inclusion and emotional safety. The next section will consider how the members feel they are making a difference to the pro-ana community.

4.3.2) Personal investment in the pro-ana community

In discussing how a sense of community is built, McMillan and Chavis (1986) describe an internal process where community members feel they are making a difference to the group and that the group matters to them. Personal investment is the member's belief that they have earned their place in the group due to the contributions they have made to the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The meaning and value of the websites for the members has already been considered. This section will explore the ways in which group members contribute to pro-ana websites and what this may tell us about their personal investment in the pro-ana community.

One of the ways in which personal investment is communicated on the websites is through the contributions of individual people to the general values of the websites. One member, for example, speaks for herself, but in a way which assumes she is also speaking on behalf of the group:

It's not difficult to ruin someone's day; it's not difficult to ruin a community. What IS difficult is keeping a community together. Understanding that you as an individual are an important part of a collective, but in the end, just part and not the whole.

This excerpt highlights the voice of a single person within the grander scheme of the collective. Speaking on behalf of the collective, but also as an individual person, she is conveying not only the reader's importance as a person, but also her own importance. By comparing what *is* difficult (keeping the collective together) with what is *not* difficult (ruining someone's day or ruining a whole community), a particular kind of value is placed on the individual person's contribution to the whole. The excerpt raises the stakes by suggesting the damage, both personal and social, that can result in failure to keep the pro-ana community together. As she is both speaking to herself and enjoining others, her own personal investment is compounded by a sense of speaking on behalf of the group. This is also expressed in her content: she is telling herself and others that the individual person is important, but only as part of the group. This seems to support McMillan and Chavis' (1986) notion of how a member wants to perceive herself as mattering not only to the group, but also wants the group to matter to her. Through being important to the collective, the quote implies, a pro-ana member has influence and can make a difference to the group. Overbeke (2008) suggested that pro-ana websites primarily fulfil a need to be part of a community rather than establishing any kind of comprehensive 'pro-ana' philosophy. In this excerpt the

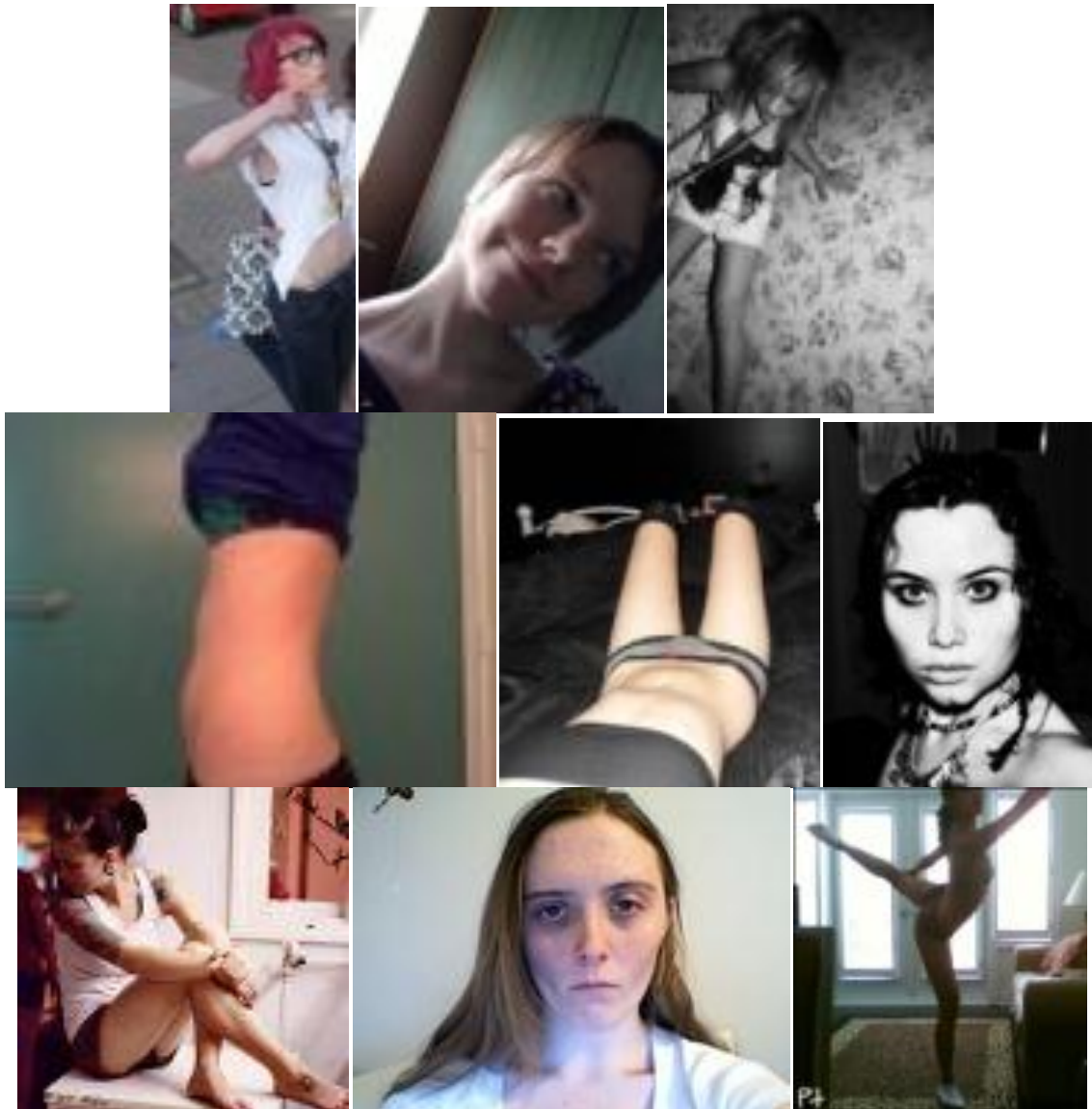
importance of community is asserted through its contrast to dire personal and community consequences.

Another way in which personal investment is expressed on the websites is through the inclusion of personal photographs. Because the pro-ana community exists in cyberspace, it is not based on face-to-face encounters with other members. One way for the members to feel like they are actively participating on the websites is by posting images of themselves. The irony of this has been noted in a previous section: that the pro-ana community is portrayed as an exclusive and secret community, but that identifying photographs are posted by its members. One website includes a section called *scenespo* where the members can post images of themselves in their strivings for weight loss. This appears to be for 'thinspirational' purposes: by posting their photographs, other members can evaluate their own 'progress' and also compare themselves, and their individual 'progress' to the images. Many of the *scenespo* images focus on bodies rather than faces, foregrounding thinness as a defining aspect of identity. For example:



The photographs, visually expressing the body as a ratification of membership of the community, speak to the personal investment of members in two potential ways. The first is that the photographs are given to the websites. Giving one's image, and not just one's words, embodies the contributions of members, making them seen as well as heard. In turn, they can be seen by others and thus offer their own bodies as 'thinspiration' to others. Second, the images are *received* by other members. Other members will write to them – replying, so to speak, to their bodies – and keep them motivated to lose weight. The photographs thus enhance personal investment in the community and also offer a particular form of social interaction within the websites.

Another section of the website allows members to post profile pictures, often of their faces but sometimes also of parts of their bodies. Again, members choose which photographs of themselves to submit.



Through these photographs, members become identifiable rather than anonymous and become known to others in a different way. The photographs tend to be evocative, not only communicating identity and perhaps a desire to be known by others, but also emotion. Offering a profile picture allows individual people to be seen by others and allows them to contribute themselves to the community. This seems to make the website appear more like a social realm of real people than a collection of words or ideas. When another member enters the website, they can see photographs of others and feel that they are looking at someone who is just like them. The photographs therefore play a particular role in enhancing group belonging and investment in the group.

Photographs offer a particular understanding of individual investments in the broader community, but of course the posts also act to build the community through individual contributions. Members participate directly in the pro-ana community by posting personal

experiences, advice and encouragement. One post, entitled 'Life is about taking chances and never...', illustrates how members can invest personally in the community by sharing their own experiences and, in the process, give advice to others.

My tattoo says "Life is about taking chances and never... regretting them"! This is basically the only thing I live by, I'm a firm believer that things happen regardless of what a person tries to do... whether it's good or bad! In my life I feel everything has happened for a reason and it's going to lead me where I need to be[in] life no matter what, and just because a person might have chosen the wrong decision and is regretting it, that's what you wanted at the time and you decided to take that path for a reason! I hear so many people complain that their life is horrible and that everything goes wrong and I used to think the same thing but then I would always realize it was my choice and only me why things are the way they are and only I can make the best out of the situation, or sit and bitch about it.

This woman uses her tattoo as a meaningful way of influencing others in the community. Her tattoo is about life and the ability to make choices without regretting them. The excerpt is about life and what she has learnt from what she has experienced. In this way she offers something of her own experiences to the community, both as an assertion of her own belonging in the community and as a communication to others.

This section not only portrays the emphasis placed on how the in-group can make a difference for its members, but also how important it is for the members to feel that they make a difference to the group. This suggests that the websites are not only used to convey a pro-ana lifestyle but also to enhance the meaning of group membership. As group membership exists only in cyberspace, the pro-ana members appear to have found different ways – using both images and words – of sharing a part of themselves and creating virtual social spaces to talk to one another and give each other advice. Personal investment in the pro-ana community in turn contributes to the growth of the community. However, there is a sense that not only do the pro-ana members define who belongs to the websites, but also who must be excluded and acknowledged as part of the out-group.

4.3.3) Excluding people who are perceived as outsiders

As people classify themselves into groups, they also place others into categories (Forsyth, 2010). As has been explored, many of the pro-ana members express having felt isolated from friends and family because of feelings of being misunderstood. The common feeling of exclusion which has been experienced by many pro-ana members strengthens the in-group bringing people together through their AN, which it is felt that only in-group members can

fully understand (Bos et al., 2004). Tajfel et al. (1971) postulated that people will favour their own group over others when they categorise themselves into a group. This section will explore how outsiders are excluded from the in-group as pro-ana members feel a need to protect their in-group identity from people who might have the potential to harm it.

A way that outsiders are excluded is when the members own the anorexic lifestyle. One member, for example, shuns others who do not understand or embrace pro-anorexia:

I came to this website because I googled pro-ana sites. I think it's awesome. I hate it when people say it's not healthy or whatever but it's OUR life style and they can fuck off if they don't like it :) I'm just glad I found other people who care about this kind of stuff, like me! :)

By experiencing other members on the website as being “like me” this member is able to embrace the website as a representation of the in-group, as she feels there are others who are sharing the same struggles and experiences as she is. Based on this commonality, in-group bias is apparent as this member describes anyone who does not live the pro-ana lifestyle as other, asserting out-group exclusion by telling them to leave if they don't like it (Tajfel et al., 1971). Not only does she appear to be discriminating in favour of the in-group, but she also labels anyone who is not a part of the group as bad. This is implied by her cursing them. She is owning AN as an in-group criteria by writing “OUR” lifestyle in capital letters.

Another way that exclusion is emphasised is through the members' reactions to hate mail on the websites. People who are anti the pro-ana way of life are seen as outsiders. As has been acknowledged, many of the members are sensitive to how they are treated by people in their lives because of lack of understanding their AN. When the members have turned to the websites as a way to feel accepted and understood, the presence of hate mail may appear damaging within a secretive community which is trying to hide their AN on the basis that outsiders would not understand them. From this stems the reaction of the members wanting to exclude these offending outsiders. This is seen below as a host of one of the websites describes what the members should do if hate mail is posted on the websites:

I have received a lot of notices from people about someone attempting to ruin the community that we have here. Are you seeing disturbing comments? Seeing things that just hurt or bother you? Please do the following:

1 - Do not respond back. Don't feel the fuel of hurt and hate or the words that disturb. Don't add words to which a response can be given in hopes of causing more problems.

2 - Flag the post so that I can remove them.

Do these two, and the problem will go away...

StayBeautiful,

Zander

Exclusion, as is seen in the above excerpt, is based on people who are seen as wanting to “ruin” the pro-ana websites by imposing hate mail on the community. Hate mail appears to reinforce a need to exclude people who are perceived as belonging to the out-group who do not understand or respect the in-group values. This excerpt was written by the host of prettythin.com. The two points of advice offer different kinds of exclusion. The first is that they must not respond, which in itself is a very direct way of excluding “other” people who are not insiders. The second is that the host will exclude the person from the website, as a way of removing them from the community in a more permanent way. In addition, the assurance that the “problem will go away” suggests that, by being an insider, one is automatically protected from harm which might come from outsiders. By removing hate mail and excluding the non-eating disordered people who enter the sites, the websites are both protecting the in-group members from the opinions of society as well as demarcating who belongs to the in-group and can be trusted and who is part of the out-group and must be banished.

It is not only anti pro-ana people who are excluded from the websites and perceived as belonging to the out-group. Pride is placed in being a true pro-ana and anyone who has another ED is placed outside of these boundaries. Furthermore, excluding everyone who is not pro-ana helps to keep outsiders at bay. This is seen below as one member talks about feeling excluded because she has bulimia nervosa:

Pt made me feel less alone and more accepted until I read that Zander is anti mia. So now I feel a lot more rejected. thanks pt!

This person expresses feeling rejected on the pro-ana website due to her having bulimia nervosa as opposed to AN. In this way, this pro-ana website is demarcating between in-group members and everyone else who is part of the out-group (Tajfel, 1974). Being pro-ana is based on certain criteria that a bulimic individual does not adhere to. The host of this

website, Zander, does not accept bulimic individuals on the website as they cross the boundaries which are important in retaining an in-group identity. This member feels that the pro-ana community rejects anyone who is not anorexic or has another eating disorder (Giles, 2006).

Another way exclusion is seen on the pro-ana websites is when members exclude people who do not have AN. One member talks about people in the medical community as not understanding the pro-ana life style and categorises them as outsiders.

This site means so much to me everyone's going through the same thing. It makes me feel accepted and not different like everyone else sees me. No one truly understands what we go through, doctors and psychiatrists can't 'cure' us if we don't want to be 'cured', and I don't want to be cured, I want to be accepted as who I am. Which is why I'm so thankful to this site, It's the only place where I feel like me, and happy for once. So thank you so much Zander, this website is a life saver and I don't know what I'd do without it, you're amazing. x

This member refers to the medical community as outsiders whom she perceives as failing to understand the true nature of what it is to have AN. She states that doctors and psychiatrists do not understand what she is going through. She views them as wanting to cure her, even though she believes that firstly, they cannot cure her and secondly, she does not want to be cured. Medical professionals are seen as outsiders who cannot truly understand what is going on within her. By demarcating medical professionals as outsiders, this member appears to be strengthening the value of in-group membership on the website, as she views it as a space where she can be herself and feel happiness. In addition, an intergroup context tends to prompt individuals to enhance the differences between self as part of the in-group and others as out-group members (Tajfel, 1974). It is suggested that the medical community is perceived as wanting to get rid of the disorder that means so much to those with anorexia and has come to define the pro-ana community. It is also the medical community that suggests that they understand AN and its symptomology. As this member seems to feel understood on the websites and not by medical professionals, she feels that she is an insider on the websites and that people in the medical world are outsiders.

The identity of pro-ana has value which is significant to the in-group on the websites. Anyone who is either attempting to damage the in-group identity, or pollute the importance of what it means to be pro-ana, are excluded from the websites and categorised as being outsiders. Excluding people from the in-group enhances insider value as it helps to protect the pro-ana members from people who could attempt to devalue their AN. Furthermore, anyone who

does not follow the pro-ana lifestyle is excluded from the community based on their not fully understanding what it means to be pro-ana. Turner (1982) explains that the in-group becomes internalised by its members and acts as a place of safety where they can define their identities. It is for this reason that the websites put boundaries in place which help to protect the in-group from the damage or lack of exclusivity that might be caused by letting outsiders enter.

4.3.4) Boundaries

It has been discussed how the concept of insider and outsider has been delineated on the pro-ana websites through including anyone who is a pro-ana, and excluding anyone else who is not. In accordance with McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory of sense of community, another way that in-group and out-group criteria are demarcated is through creating boundaries which differentiate between those who belong to the group and those who do not. Boundaries appear to facilitate two important factors for the pro-ana in-group. The first is that they might make the in-group members feel special and important to the group as they are accepted into the in-group, while others are not. The second is that they help to enhance emotional safety by keeping outsiders, who may be potentially offensive or hostile, away. This section will explore how boundaries allow the members to act out, agree to and acknowledge (Turner, 1982) what it means to be anorexic which helps to strengthen the in-group bond that the pro-ana members have with each other and the websites.

A powerful way in which boundaries are set up on the websites is through the disclaimers which explain who may enter the websites and who may not. For example:

Welcome

This is my pro-ana site. If you do not wish to come here then I suggest you don't enter my site. I will not be held responsible for anyone coming into my site or anyone becoming anorexic. You are here on your own time and at your own risk. Thanks.

The disclaimers on a pro-ana website warn against anyone who does not have AN but who is trying to use the websites in order to become an anorexic person. The host of this website claims ownership over the website by stating that this is "my" pro-ana website. This alludes to the power that the host perceives he/she has over the website as he/she is indicating who may enter the website and who may not. However the host cannot actually implement this as

the websites are public domain which means anyone can enter. Instead the disclaimer seems to act as a boundary which demarcates who belongs as an insider and who does not. This disclaimer suggests that if anyone is not anorexic then they should not enter the website. This appears to be a way to keep anyone who is an outsider or not part of the pro-ana in-group away from the community. In this way it can be suggested that the disclaimers act as a boundary rejecting anyone who is not anorexic (Giles, 2006). In addition, this also helps to maximise the differences between in-group and out-group, as a person with AN will feel safe and accepted by entering the website. In contrast, a non-eating disordered person or a person with another ED could view the disclaimer as a sign of not being welcome. The disclaimer is the first thing seen on many pro-ana websites and seems to set up the in-group boundaries before anyone can enter.

Another way that boundaries can be identified is discussed by McMillan and Chavis (1986) who suggested that boundaries can be set up through common language, rituals or the way group members dress. Such is seen with the use of bracelets below:

Bracelet Project

Die hard Ana's already know what this means. off course! But, maybe some newbies don't, soo.... The bracelet project exists so other pro ed girls can recognize each other. Ana girls are wearing a red beaded bracelet around the left wrist. Mia girls are wearing a blue beaded bracelet around the right wrist. The bracelet has to be beaded, and in the right colour, those are the only things that matter. The size/length/shape of the beads can be all kinds. You can buy the bracelet, or you can make it yourself. A lot of girls are waiting to wear this bracelet until they think they're worth it...Don't do it! It's made to show you're an Ana girl, not to show you're underweight already. If we all wear our bracelets, we can recognize each other, and so we can help each other! So please, don't wait!



The above describes how bracelets are used for pro-ana members to emphasize their in-group membership. McMillan and Chavis (1986) explain how boundaries can be set up when in-group members have a common dress which demarcates them as an insider. The excerpt starts off by stating that the “die hard” Ana’s will know what the bracelets mean “of course”. This implies that the bracelets have an important meaning which will only be understood by a true in-group member. The bracelets are a way for girls with ED’s to recognise each other. However, boundaries are set up between the different ED’s as girls with AN wear a red bracelet, while girls with bulimia nervosa wear a blue bracelet. Emphasis is placed on the beading and colour of the bracelet which may symbolically create value and meaning for what it means to be part of the in-group. The excerpt also states that the bracelets are for a true insider who is Ana and not just for people who are underweight. A bench mark is being set as only a real Ana girl can wear the bracelets. However the excerpt appears to be explaining that it is about members being worthy to wear the bracelets and not just about being thin. This further demarcates the boundaries of what is to be part of the in-group. In this way, the members are able to acknowledge who is an anorexic individual by creating boundaries

Another way that boundaries are created is through weight. Such is seen below as criteria for in-group and out-group are set up through the use of Body Mass Index:

BMI

Emaciated = Under 15 BMI

Ana = Under 17.5 BMI

Underweight = Under 19 BMI

Normal = 19 - 24 BMI

Overweight = 25 - 29 BMI

A BMI was included on this website as a way to demarcate who is a pro-ana member and who is not. This allows for boundaries to be set up as it can be seen who is overweight, normal, underweight, Ana and emaciated. To be classified as Ana, ones BMI must be somewhere between underweight and emaciated. These are clear boundaries that have been set up for the pro-ana members to observe and work towards as it also ensures that anyone who does not meet this criteria understands that they are not Ana and are therefore

perceived by the pro-ana community as an outsider. Using BMI also helps to categorize the group in order to understand exactly who belongs in the group. There is a small difference between being emaciated and being Ana, as well as being underweight and being Ana. It is thus suggested that exclusivity is what allows the pro-ana members to set up boundaries excluding people from the in-group. Maintaining purity (Giles, 2006) on the websites seems to strengthen the pro-ana bond, as not just anyone can be an in-group member. Weight is a defining characteristic of AN, and basing the Ana identity on BMI seems to indicate that the members are acting out their in-group membership by adhering to the weight they need to be, to be part of the group.

Being a pro-ana insider or an outsider is delineated on the grounds that many of the members feel excluded and isolated from society, as AN is not understood, and viewed as a disorder. There is also a sense of feeling misunderstood in interpersonal relationships as others cannot fully grasp the internal world of those with anorexia and what they go through having an ED. In response to these feelings of being isolated, the pro-ana community has appeared to form their own in-group identity based upon their AN. The pro-ana identity holds meaning and value for the in-group members on the websites. By having an in-group identity, the members are given the opportunity to acknowledge what it means to be anorexic. It is implied that individually they feel judged in society for being different, whereas on the websites they find others who are just like them. In addition, the pro-ana websites portray exclusion as they view anyone who is not anorexic or has another ED, as an outsider who does not belong, or might potentially damage the meaning of in-group membership. As a way to protect this in-group identity, boundaries are set up on the websites which help to discriminate between who belongs on the websites and who does not. These outsiders who fail to fit the criteria for being an insider, and who are perceived as a threat to the pro-ana community, are excluded from the websites. People who are not pro-ana or have a different ED are viewed as polluting the pro-ana identity. In this way in-groups and out-groups are delineated on the websites as a way of protecting the meaning and value placed in being a pro-ana member.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

5.1) Introduction

This study aimed to explore how social and interpersonal relationships are portrayed on pro-ana websites. The discussion section will first explore how past research has addressed individuals with anorexia and their ways of relating, by comparing this to how interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites. Second, it will consider how in-groups and out-groups are presented on the pro-ana websites while examining social identity theory. Throughout the discussion, it will consider how a sense of community and identity is portrayed with the use of McMillan and Chavis' theory. This will be done by attempting to include and draw together the themes which have been examined in the analysis. This will then allow for certain implications to be considered, as well as the strengths and limitations of the research. Finally, this section will look at recommendations for future research before summarising the findings with a conclusion.

5.2) Discussion of the Analysis

The analysis of the three pro-ana websites revealed how social and interpersonal relationships are portrayed by the members. When considering how interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the websites it was found that many of the members talked about retaining a level of secrecy. Pro-ana members can be described as secretive and belonging to a group which is more like a religion of AN (Warin, 2006). A common narrative concerns lying about eating as a way to avoid eating as well as a way of keeping their AN a secret. The members use the websites to consciously depict how they will lie to people about their eating as a way to avoid eating and as a way of avoiding conflict which might arise from other people discovering their AN. This coincides with research that depicts the anorexic individual as conflict avoidant. Goldstein (1981) and Latzer and Gaber (1998) postulate those with AN tend to come from families which withdraw from conflict. Minuchin et al. (1978) also highlighted that families of anorexics struggle with confrontation and have difficulty in dealing with issues. By the members keeping their ED secret they are presenting a compliant external demeanour (Geller & Cockell, 2000) as a way to avoid disrupting the quality of interpersonal relationships through any conflict that might arise. One excerpt revealed how the websites promote secrecy by telling the members not to become angry if they are confronted about not eating. The websites appear to be helping the members starve themselves in secret so the people in their lives do not find out about it. This coincides with

the debate that depicts pro-ana websites as a dangerous source that encourages unhealthy eating habits (Norris, 2006), while the members remain secretive about it.

Another way secrecy is portrayed on the websites is when the members describe how they inhibit their self-expression. The members describe keeping their feelings a secret by inhibiting themselves and appearing more submissive, which also helps to avoid conflict. The websites promote a non-confrontational stance when relating to people who inquire into the members' disordered patterns of eating. Some members describe conflictual or emotional situations with family or friends where they inhibit their thoughts and feelings. There is a common narrative on the websites of members feeling that they hide behind masks as a way of hiding their emotions. In addition, one member even described feeling that there is a side of her that she keeps hidden and that other people do not know about. This suggests that some members feel that because they remain secret and inhibited, this means that they are hidden from others. This coincides with the findings of Geller and Cockell (2000) which suggests that those with AN have high levels of negative emotions and inhibited expressions in their ways of relating with others. Silencing the self is a way of presenting a more amenable self as a way of avoiding conflict and not losing the relationship with the person.

The members also reveal that because of their secrecy they feel intense loneliness and that others fail to understand what they are going through with their AN. They reveal feeling excluded from the rest of society, and within their interpersonal relationships, due to having an ED. Many of the members express feelings of isolation and of being judged. Other members describe feeling lonely and isolated due to having difficult life experiences where they have felt abandoned and unloved. This can be viewed in light of Dias (2003) who emphasised that those with AN do not feel understood by those around them. They feel a lack of control, isolation and pain, and as a result use the ED as a way of coping. Particularly in the early stages of AN, they feel disconnected from others (Dias, 2003). In addition, Dias (2003) also explained how people with anorexia feel that they cannot confide in family members, peers or people in the professional world due to fears of being misunderstood. Chassler (1994) also describes how people with anorexia feel extremely isolated and alone. Stern et al. (1989) indicated that anorexics tend to come from families who do not have supportive attitudes.

As a result of these feelings of loneliness, the pro-ana members point to the websites as a space where they feel understood and supported in their AN. They seem to acknowledge how they found the websites so appealing because they offered an opportunity to interact

with others on the websites, who share the same experiences, goals and beliefs. Many of the members describe that they feel more understood and supported on the websites because they do not feel judged, precisely because of the commonality between themselves and other pro-ana members. In addition, the members experience developing relationships on the websites which serve the purpose of alleviating their loneliness. They portray the websites as a place of sanctuary where their feelings of isolation become transformed as a result of the relationships which they have created. This appears to fulfil an emotional need as they describe feeling understood and cared for. The members describe their relationships with family and friends in their everyday lives as isolating and lonely as they do not feel understood in their struggle with AN. They then compare this to how they make friendships on the websites which allow them to feel both understood and supported. McMillan (1996) stresses how the community can take on its own spirit due to the friendships that develop through being a group member. Hence it is suggested that the friendships created within the social realm of the pro-ana websites have become valuable and take on an important meaning for the members. This correlates with the debate that portrays pro-ana websites as a lifestyle choice where the members get the opportunity to communicate with one another (Dias, 2003) in a way that they feel is lacking in their day-to-day experiences with others.

This can be considered in light of an article by Dias (2003) which suggested that pro-ana websites are a safe space where people with AN can express themselves as they may feel they cannot communicate with people in their lives. When individuals with AN are in the public sphere they tend to feel criticised and under surveillance. It is suggested that the websites act as a sanctuary where there is the opportunity for these people to interact with others who share in the same experiences as they do. The members' portrayal of the loneliness in their everyday lives with family and friends coincides with Dias (2003) who states that is this reason they turn to the pro-ana websites in search of acceptance and friendships with people who are supportive.

Another interesting sub-theme which emerged during the analysis was how openness was portrayed. It has been discussed how the members retain their secrecy and repress their self-expression (Geller & Cockell, 2000). This concurs with past research which described the anorexic individual as conflict avoidant. The members point to these ways of relating in their real life relationships with family and friends. However, the members interact in a very different way on the pro-ana websites. That is, the members are open and honest on the websites in a way that they explain they feel they cannot be with family and friends. Many of the members feel comfort in knowing that there is a space where they can talk about their AN and know that how they think, feel and act is not being judged, but rather accepted and

acknowledged as normal. Members feel that being able to talk about their AN on the websites is a gift, as it allows them to feel mirrored by others who share the same beliefs and experiences. One member describes being able to express the “real me”, which suggests that the members themselves are distinguishing between their need to be secretive in their everyday lives and how they feel now they have the freedom to be open and honest on the websites about their feelings.

Dias (2003) describes how the pro-ana users come to the public space of the internet to discuss private and secretive experiences of their bodies and relationships. The members on the websites may feel that it is safer to be different on the websites, in comparison to how they are in their interpersonal situations. This suggests that the secretive lives those individuals with AN live are far more secretive in comparison to how they portray themselves on the websites. This is contradictory as the websites are a public domain where anyone can access these personal stories. There may be some comfort for the members to gain some kind of open and accepting relationships in cyberspace, where they feel more protected than what they do in their day to day real life experiences with others. The websites appear to be offering the members a sense of identity which belongs in the safety of anonymity which cyberspace provides (Dias, 2003). In cyberspace ways of interacting and communicating are different than when people meet face-to-face (Kollock, 2005). Dias (2006) states that cyberspace becomes a vehicle of transforming those who use it into fantasy selves.

One way to consider why pro-ana members feel that they can be honest and open on the websites in a way that they feel they cannot in day-to-day interactions, is that they feel safe with the anonymity that cyberspace provides. Another reason may be due to the understanding and support the members feel they get from the relationships they build on the websites. They appear to feel safe enough to share the secretive parts of themselves that they otherwise might not have been able to share with others in their interpersonal lives. Cunha et al. (2009) highlighted those with AN are less likely to trust and communicate with their close family members and peers. This suggests that research indicates dysfunctional ways of communicating within the relationships of people with AN. However, the websites portray a communication through cyberspace where the members interact and form relationships with other members which allows them to feel accepted and understood.

There is another route that the analysis embarked on which also portrayed how the members appear to relate differently on the websites to how they do in face-to-face interactions with family and peers. It has been noted how past research emphasises the anorexic individuals as having conflict avoidant styles of relating, and inhibited expressions

of emotion. A different way of relating was portrayed on the websites as the members appear to use them as a vehicle of expressing their aggression in a confrontational way. This appeared to be portrayed in two ways. The first was when members would express acrimonious aggression. One member used the websites to talk about the aggressive feelings she felt towards her mother who was trying to interfere with her AN. Another way that acrimonious aggression was evidenced was when the members would voice their beliefs about the websites and what they stood for. One member argued for the right to control her own body and the desire to confront anyone who went against pro-ana websites.

The second way that the members portray confrontation is through using the websites to express anger and aggression purely for the sake of doing so. This appears to be an emotional outlet where the members can rebel against society and use their anger to explore their own identities. This suggests that where anorexic individuals cannot find self-expression and the ability to be confrontational, they can find their voices on the pro-ana websites. As society stigmatises and marginalises ED's, the websites portray a need to go against these social values by expressing the value of controlling one's own body and forming one's own opinions.

An extensive body of literature on AN has described the dynamics within the anorexic family as avoiding conflict (Minuchin, Rosman, and Baker, 1978; Latzer and Gaber 1998). Ways of relating on the websites are in opposition to this body of literature as the attitudes on the websites are highly conflictual, and confrontation appears to be a norm. This coincides with Lattimore et al. (2000) who proposed that anorexics will find a covert way of communicating aggression. This is based on the need for the anorexic individual to rid the self of the escalating emotions arising from feelings of unresolved conflict, that becomes embedded in their real life interpersonal relationships. It is suggested that there is a lack of communication existing in the interpersonal relationships of those with AN. This correlates with findings by Stern et al. (1989) which indicate families with an anorexic individual have difficulties in expressing emotion. If individuals with AN are brought up with interpersonal relationships which have taught them to be less expressive, then their escalated feelings are likely to be released in another way to that which the people in their lives display. In addition, Lattimore et al. (2000) found that girls with AN are more likely to communicate in a destructive way. The websites depict a lack of knowing a healthy way to communicate conflictual feelings (Geller & Cockell, 2000). Instead these feelings grow inwardly as they continue to present a suitable outward appearance. This builds up and as a result they find a covert way of communicating their aggression (Latzer & Gaber, 1998) on the websites.

In addition, certain possibilities around the dynamics of relating in cyberspace can be discussed. Wallace (1999) explains that an on-line environment encourages people to become disinhibited, as their anger can become more robust in an environment where they can create a persona that is different to their own. The anonymity provided by the internet allows the pro-ana users to express themselves more freely and openly than they can in their interpersonal interactions. Dias (2003) describes the pro-ana websites as a therapeutic community. This suggests that the use of the websites is a way of letting out aggression and being confrontational in a way that the members feel they cannot outside of the websites, which allows them to feel more like a therapeutic space. It is suggested that it is important for the members to have this opportunity that should not be taken away from them, while keeping in mind that the websites are also seen as a dangerous space that helps to maintain disordered eating (Norris, 2006).

It will now be discussed how a sense of community is portrayed on the pro-ana websites. It has already been considered how the members seem to relate on the websites in a different way to the way they relate to family and friends. It is suggested that this might be a result of the websites being a powerful resource which provides the members with something that they do not get in their real life interactions with others. It has been noted throughout the discussion how important it is for the members to feel a sense of commonality on the websites. This will now be explored in more detail with the use of the idea of belonging and personal relatedness (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), which is to be found on the websites. The members describe feeling that they can identify with and share common experiences with other members on the websites. One member reveals that feelings of safety and acceptance on the pro-ana websites, allows her to feel that she belongs to the group. The feelings of loneliness which have been previously discussed seem to make the members feel that belonging to a group has meaning and value for them. McMillan and Chavis (1986) talk about sense of community in terms of how it affects the quality of human relationships. In order for someone to feel like they are part of a group they must feel like they belong to that group. This allows them to feel that they matter to the group and that the group matters to them.

The members also describe their feeling of belonging as a result of them being able to relate to the other members at a personal level. One member describes how important it is for her to come to the websites where the other members are like her which allows her to feel that she can relate personally on the websites. Sense of community theory also describes membership as a feeling of belonging or having the ability to share a sense of personal relatedness. This seems to allow the members to define themselves and their group identity

through a sense of meaning that is created from belonging to a group. The members describe this meaning as a result of being part of the pro-ana community. A group bond is formed when the members of the pro-ana websites can share in a common secret identity (Gavin et al., 2008). The pro-ana identity appears to have become normalised and strengthened due to the pro-ana thoughts and behaviour which are acted out on the websites. In accordance with McMillan and Chavis (1986), an emotional connection is made when members of a particular group can share both time together and similar experiences. The pro-ana community are a group of like-minded people who share a sense of goals and beliefs. The bond between the pro-ana users appears to be portrayed on the websites through belonging to and being a part of a common sense of community.

The discussion has focused so far on a comparison of how individuals with AN are portrayed in past research and how they relate in face-to-face interactions, with how the members on the pro-ana websites portray their ways of relating in cyberspace. Social identity theory and sense of community theory was considered to be important, as these theories allow us to understand why the websites have come to have value and meaning for the pro-ana members. They relate differently on the websites in comparison to how they are in past research as well as how they perceive themselves in their everyday relationships with others. The possible reasons for this variation in ways of relating will now be discussed. This will allow an exploration of what appears to be happening in the social realm on the websites and how these interactions have come to affect the member's ways of relating. This can be discussed in light of Warin (2006) who highlighted the change that happens for individuals with AN in their everyday relationships when they enter into a relationship with AN. New meanings and experiences are created when people relate in terms of their AN, which means that they create a whole new way of relating in a social context (Warin, 2006). This affects both their relationships with themselves and their everyday lives.

The websites differentiate between those who belong to the in-group and outsiders who are excluded. Being considered an insider means that a person has to fit into very specific criteria which are based on the commonality of having AN and the experiences that come with it. The main criterion which must be met for someone to be considered an in-group member is that they must have AN. Being diagnosed with AN does not seem to be a necessity. However, members do need to follow certain steps to be in the in-group. These appear to range from having an obsession with thinness to having the willpower to restrict food intake. It has already been discussed how many of the members describe feeling isolated and alone. It is suggested that based on the members feeling like they were marginalised as a result of their AN, they feel that a strict criteria needs to be put in place so

that their membership is exclusive. Bos et al. (2004) suggested that those who become excluded from an in-group are likely to form their own in-group based on being excluded from others. The pro-ana in-group has shared beliefs and attributes which distinguish them from other people (Hogg, 2006). This allows the members to act out, agree to and acknowledge what it means to have AN with others who share common beliefs and experiences. The in-groups dynamics on the websites are important but it cannot be ignored that the criteria for group membership is dangerous as it promotes self-starvation. However, the websites also hold emotional importance for the members that goes beyond disordered eating, and allows the members to interact with others and in a group.

In addition, the members portray an insider identity which they believe allows them to feel emotionally attached to the in-group. The members describe how valuable the websites are to them as they perceive the websites as helping, accepting and understanding them. Tajfel (1972) defines social identity as the acknowledgement by an individual that he/she belongs to a certain social group as well as having an emotional and valued attachment to this group. Social identification is happening on the websites as the members describe being part of the group as having personal significance to them. One member portrays how finding meaning and value in the group has enhanced her feelings of being able to identify with and therefore be included in the group. It has been suggested that group membership affects an individual at a cognitive level. It can be seen that the pro-ana members conceive of themselves through their group membership, which has developed due to the meaning (Hogg, 2006) which they feel has developed as a result of them being insiders. Forsyth (2010) has also noted that if a member can identify with a particular group then she is more likely to accept the group as an extension of herself. A sense of belonging and personal relatedness has already been explored. It is now suggested that being able to personally relate allows a member to identify with that group and in so doing they are more likely to accept the group as a part of themselves. This results in group members acknowledging others who have a similar identity which qualifies them as part of the group (Forsyth, 2010).

The pro-ana members describe the in-group as a family which helps them feel that they belong. In addition, the members categorise who belongs to the group by calling themselves “pro-ana” and acknowledging the group as a family. Turner (1982) describes how group norms are constructed through in-group memberships and behaviour which become internalised and acted upon as part of their group identity. Members who feel their social identity is threatened become motivated to protect and maintain a positive sense of social identity (Lee & Ottati, 1995).

Another important factor of being an insider is that members reveal feeling emotionally safe as a result of their in-group status. In accordance with McMillan and Chavis (1986), emotional safety provides structure and security at an emotional level. A host of one of the websites highlights the importance of making members feel welcome, respected and appreciated as a way of allowing the members to feel cared for on the sites. This is an in-group privilege and the members acknowledge this by describing how they feel protected and looked after. As has been noted, many members feel scrutinised for having AN. Hence they show appreciation for being emotionally looked after on the websites. It is suggested that being an insider on the pro-ana websites allows the members to gain a feeling of being accepted due to a common social identity, of being cared for and emotionally safe. This is in contrast to how the members have described feeling lonely and isolated in interactions with family and friends. It is a possibility that as a result of being an in-group member, they are provided with emotional resources they otherwise might not have had. It may be for this reason that the pro-ana's ways of relating are more open and confrontational in the safety of cyberspace than how they depict themselves in other social interactions.

Being an insider on the pro-ana websites appears to become important for members at a cognitive level (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It will now be discussed how in-group identity becomes strengthened as a result of being personally invested in the group. McMillan and Chavis (1986) define personal investment as the belief that one has earned one's place in the group due to one's personal investment in the group. One member talks about the general values of the group in a way that makes her feel she is speaking on behalf of the whole group. There is emphasis being placed on this one member making a difference to the whole by standing up for what the community believes in. Another form of personal investment is that of members posting photographs of themselves for the purpose of thinspiration, as well as a way of allowing an interaction with other group members where a discussion of their bodies takes place. Emphasis is placed on contributing to the community and in so doing a feeling that their membership is strengthened. The websites also appear to be used for advice-giving where the members help each other to stay strong in their disordered eating. There seems to be an internal process where the members feel they are making a difference to the group while the group matters to them (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). By feeling that they have earned their place in the group, the meaning and value of their group membership seems to be enhanced. Personally investing in the community appears to contribute to the growth of the community.

It has been discussed how the pro-ana members categorise themselves into an in-group, as well as what they do to strengthen their in-group sense of community. However, it is also

portrayed on the websites how outsiders are excluded as a way to protect the in-group identity and sense of community. It has been discussed that the members themselves have expressed feeling lonely and isolated, which they feel caused them to turn to the websites for acceptance and support. It might be for this reason that excluding people who are non-disordered or eating disordered is important on the websites, as it allows them to form their own in-group away from the perceived scrutiny of others whom they believe do not understand the struggle of AN. Research suggests that people who are excluded from a group are more likely to form their own in-group based on being excluded by others (Bos et al., 2004). In-group bias (Tajfel et al., 1971) is apparent on the websites as the members discriminate against non-anorexic people who enter the website. The members own the anorexic lifestyle and reject anyone else who does not. The members react strongly to hate mail and form a resistance which helps to strengthen the nature of the community (Giles, 2006). Hate mail heightens the members' need to exclude those who do not belong on the websites. When people are perceived as possibly causing damage to the community or hurting the members, they are excluded from the websites. This appears to make the pro-ana members feel like they are being protected and looked after.

In addition, even individuals who have other eating disorders are excluded, as they do not fit in line with the criteria of being a pro-ana member. Giles (2006) suggested that the pro-ana members place value in their discipline and purity of self-starvation. Other eating disorders blur these boundaries. Curley (2009) describes the "over exclusion effect" where people tend to view more people as outsiders than categorise them as members of their in-group. People who fail to have a 'likeness' to the pro-ana in-group are more likely to be excluded (Curley, 2009). One member on a website spoke about the medical community as being distinct outsiders. The websites portray medical professionals as outsiders who fail to understand the true nature of what it means to have AN.

The final part of this discussion will consider how the websites portray a delineation between those who are part of the in-group and those who are excluded and perceived as outsiders. This appears to be done with the use of boundaries created to differentiate between who gets to be seen as an insider and who may not. Tajfel (1974) highlights how being part of a group encourages people to maximise the differences between the self as an in-group member and others as outsiders. The disclaimers are the first part of the websites which are seen when one initially enters into them. The disclaimers make it clear that anyone seeking to become an anorexic person or who is not anorexic may not enter. It must be noted that even though the websites want to exclude outsiders from the websites, this cannot actually be done as the pro-ana websites are a public domain which are open to all. However, the

importance of demarcating who belongs and who does not seems to have emotional value placed on it, as it allows the members to feel that they are exclusively accepted because others are not.

Another way that boundaries are portrayed on the websites is through the use of common symbols or dress codes (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It was seen on one website that the members encouraged the use of bracelets worn in the different colours that are used to represent either AN or bulimia nervosa. This helps to emphasise who is part of the in-group but also who is part of the out-group, as people who are bulimic individuals must wear a different colour bracelet. In addition, the website emphasises that the bracelets are for a true anorexic individual and not just someone who wants to be thin. This links with how BMI is used on the websites as a way to show who is a true anorexic individual and who is not. This boundary allows a fine line to be set up between someone who is pro-ana, and someone who is emaciated or underweight. This helps to allow a real pro-ana to feel accepted in the in-group as well as showing others that they do not belong. The debate that describes pro-ana websites as harmful (Norris, 2006) may consider this as dangerous as it means that pro-ana members who meet this criteria are very close to being considered emaciated due to self-starvation.

It is important to note that boundaries provide in-group members with emotional safety which is important for the development of strong intimate relationships. It appears that the meaning and value gained from being an in-group member as someone with anorexia is important for the pro-ana members. Having a sense of community seems to allow them to feel that they can be more open and honest when they feel safe and supported within the pro-ana community. This also appears to make the members feel that they can relate in a different, more free and confrontational way to how they behave in their day-to-day interpersonal interactions.

5.3) Implications of the Research

This study looked at how a certain quality of interpersonal relationships are portrayed on the pro-ana websites, and how these are influenced and strengthened by inter-group processes of social identity theory and sense of community. At times this research found that when looking at the data it was clear that people are gaining something from the in-group identity, which allows their quality of interpersonal relationships to be different to what they feel they are experiencing in the outside world. In this way, the websites are like a sanctuary (Dias, 2003), where the members feel safe and protected and can communicate in a more open

and honest way. However, this research also indicates that there is a kind of emotional acting out on the websites where in-group pressures become immense. There are very clear boundaries around the pro-ana philosophy and with it comes low body weight, self-starvation and punishment for eating. Therefore, on the one hand this research portrays the pro-ana websites as a place of safety that is used for expression. On the other, some expressions are dangerous and tend to uphold harmful eating behaviours. Perhaps there needs to be a third perspective in order to balance these two perspectives. This research does acknowledge how the members view the pro-ana websites as a sanctuary but also how the websites give them permission to perpetuate dysfunctional behaviours. By considering these two stark perspectives, this research emphasises a third position. The members should be able to engage through language on the websites and accept the language about relationships without buying into in-group pressures. This way, the members can use the websites as a way to express themselves in a way that they feel they cannot in face-to-face interactions. It will also allow them to interact and form relationships on the websites which will help to illuminate the loneliness and isolation that they express. The group dynamics will also help to enhance the meaning and value that they have gained from the websites, and have described as so important to them. At the same time they will need to not engage in the disordered and dangerous behaviours that are at times endorsed on the websites and can be harmful to them.

This study also found that portrayals of loneliness, isolation and not feeling understood were main concerns of those with anorexia, who use the pro-ana websites. They are using the websites as a way of alleviating loneliness and to find understanding and support. By trying to get help, even though it might be different to what the usual treatment provides, suggests that the members have some kind of hope. This study ascertained that those with AN tend to engage in dysfunctional ways of relating. If they are using the websites to reveal their loneliness and also as a way of expressing themselves, then the pro-ana websites may have opened a door to understanding how to treat the anorexic person. The pro-ana members' voices are uncensored and they feel they can be honest and open on the websites in a way that they feel they cannot be in face-to-face interactions with others. This study has allowed for an exploration of what these individuals feel are their problems and symptoms rather than what the medical profession and literature might state. This could be used to treat those with anorexia at their level, while understanding their needs.

Furthermore, this study found that the pro-ana identity becomes strengthened when anorexic individuals feel excluded and isolated due to their AN. Feelings of loneliness may prompt them to seek out the exclusive realm of the pro-ana websites. It is suggested that if AN were

less stigmatised and they were still included in society as someone who has an illness rather than an abnormal disorder, then this could stop the anorexic identity from becoming so attractive and exclusive to the members. The secretive doors of the pro-ana community might be widened to allow outsiders a chance to understand these individuals as well as allow the pro-ana members to feel comfortable to discuss, be open and interact more in terms of their AN with others who are not eating disordered.

It should be emphasised that this research found that the ways of relating socially and interpersonally, both on the websites and in every-day life, appeared to be more strongly portrayed on the websites than any need to maintain AN or even promote it as a lifestyle choice. Instead, these were used as a way for the members to engage as a group by acting out and acknowledging their group identity. It is thus suggested that understanding those with AN and their ways of relating at both an emotional and a cognitive level, might help to treat them holistically rather than at a symptomatic level. Interpersonal and social relationships, both on the websites and off, were found to be an important factor for the pro-ana members. In addition, Warin (2006) suggested that when an individual begins to relate in terms of AN then their ways of interacting with themselves and the world transforms. It is suggested that treatment could be done at two levels. The first is with the individual person through psychotherapy, which might allow a shift in their perceptions of their relationships and what they mean. The second is by inviting their family and friends to come into their world of AN to stop them from feeling isolated and alone. These two may need to run simultaneously as this research suggests that it is within the individual person, as well as their ways of relating to others, that the problem lies. In addition this study has found that the sense of identity and commonality is important for the pro-ana members. Hence their loneliness needs to be treated, not by having the medical profession as the face of treatment, but rather by those who have overcome their AN. In this way the identity and sense of commonality which is so important to the members, can be translated into a drive for recovery.

5.3) Recommendations for Future Research

There is only a small body of research which has examined pro-ana websites. Therefore there is space for further research on this topic. From this study future research could be conducted as a way of furthering the knowledge about those with anorexia and the implications for treatment. Future research could look at what the exact criteria are in order to be a 'true-ana'. Future research could consider if there are websites which have very strict criteria and how that influences the community. More can be considered about how devoted

the members are. At times some people who know they have disordered eating behaviour use the websites for support and thinspiration, but do not actually meet the criteria for AN. Therefore future research could use participants who have been diagnosed with AN and a check could be done to ensure that they do not possibly fit the criteria for other disorders which may influence their involvement on the websites. This is seen as important because the pro-ana identity excludes individuals who have other eating disorders. Therefore future research could take this into consideration. It would also be interesting to have face-to-face interviews with those with anorexia who use the websites. It would be useful, if there was a diagnosis of AN , to be certain that the research was understanding the participants cognitively as real anorexic individuals. It would also be interesting to contact the hosts of some of the websites to explore what the meaning and purpose of the websites mean to them. This would allow an understanding of their experiences of the pro-ana community and its members.

5.5) Limitations of the Research

When considering the limitations of this research, not having face-to-face participants must be considered as this study looks at members' narratives through the lense of the websites. These might be different to how they would wish to be portrayed in an interview or questionnaire situation. There was no real way of knowing if all of the members accessing the websites have AN, as there was no proof whether they had been diagnosed. This might have caused problems with standardisation. In addition, cutting was seen throughout the website texts and this study did not consider other possible disorders, such as depression or personality disorders, as a possible reason for group membership. This was also a qualitative study which presents limitations of its own. Such as the small sample size as only three pro-ana websites were used which causes limits for generalisability. However the limits were clear throughout the analysis so limits to generalisability possibly did not create any problems.

5.6) Conclusion

With the use of a thematic content analysis, this study has explored three pro-ana websites in order to understand how social and interpersonal relationships are portrayed. Two overarching themes stood out which looked at relationships on the pro-ana websites and how in-groups and out-groups are delineated. Interpersonal relationships were found to have a different quality on the pro-ana websites in comparison to how past research indicates and how the members portray their ways of relating in ever-day interactions with others. This was

found to be strengthened by social processes on the websites which involved inter-group relating and sense of community dynamics. The members portray the websites as a sanctuary where they feel the freedom to communicate with others and as a vehicle of expression. This research depicts this as a positive outlet as the members feel like they belong and are cared for on the websites due their feeling that there is meaning in in-group membership and social identity. However, there are also dangerous expressions on the websites as the members become influenced by the pro-ana philosophy that embodies disordered eating. This research takes up a third position that appreciates the websites as an outlet for lonely, conflict avoidant individuals who use the websites as a mode of expression and an opportunity to engage in interpersonal relationships that make them feel understood and supported. These need to be participated in without the influence of in-group pressures that influence dangerous eating behaviours.

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