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## "Triggering" Clothes?: Fashion and the Pro-Anorexia Community.

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## “Triggering” Clothes?: Fashion and the Pro-Anorexia Community.

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**Introduction.** Pro-Anorexia is a subculture of mostly women who are suffering from Anorexia Nervosa. Community members sentimentally vary from rejecting treatment to embracing the disorder as a lifestyle choice. Connecting online, they share support, tips and encouragement to reach weight loss goals through drastic calorie reduction (Social Issues Research Center, 2014). **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework.** Anorexia nervosa is consistently related to a number of risk factors, including body dissatisfaction (National Eating Disorders Association, 2016). In accordance with socio-cultural theory, the internalization of the Western female thin body ideal is positively related to body dissatisfaction (Jefferson & Stake, 2009). One of the main disseminators of socio-cultural appearance pressure is the media, which has depicted a gradually thinning body ideal for women since the 1920s (Grogan, 2008). These ideals affect individual body image sentiments and subsequent appearance management via appearance-based social comparisons. As competitive creatures, human beings are driven by a need to compare themselves to others, gauging their relative standing in society (Festinger, 1954). Recent research found a higher frequency of appearance-based social comparisons contributes to thin ideal internalization and subsequent body dissatisfaction (Vartanian & Dey, 2013). Part of this idealization may be derived from the observable social consequences that have been linked to being considered physically unattractive. For example, overweight and obese youths are often victims of weight stigmatization and bullying, which can result in suicidal ideation, depression, anxiety and body dissatisfaction (Puhl & King, 2013). As anorexia typically develops during adolescence, those observing such treatment of their heavier weight peers may develop an intense fear of gaining weight. This fear may be reinforced by their peers, family and the media through the idealization of thinness, making thinness a desirable trait for youth who are sensitive to appearance-based social feedback. Some support for this process can be seen in the pro-anorexia community descriptions. They write of engaging in anorexia as a way of achieving perfection and mastering the body and those who do so successfully are a part of an elite group (Social Issues Research Center, 2014). Pro-anorexia emerged on websites and spread to social media forums including MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, Pinterest and Tumblr. A common content element in the pro-anorexic community is “thinspiration,” or media used to promote weight loss which often idolizes extremely thin actresses or models (Families Empowered & Supporting Treatment of Eating Disorders, 2014). Even women in mass society report body dissatisfaction, higher levels of which can result in greater disordered eating and higher clothing appearance management behaviors (Trautmann, Worthy & Lokken, 2007).

**Purpose and Methods.** The purpose of this piece was to investigate themes in the body ideals and clothing of thinspirational images used by the pro-anorexia community on social media. Publically available pro-anorexia pages of Facebook and Pinterest were searched and followed for seven months. A content analysis of the pictures and select text posted on these pages was

performed. The source of the content, individual characteristics of those featured in the content, body-part focus and types of clothing were analyzed. Cohen's Kappa inter-coder reliabilities ranged from .665 to 1.000.

**Results.** A majority of the content examined was user instead of media generated. In almost all of the thinspirational images examined in this study, the bodies were of non-media figures who were thin, Caucasian females under the age of 30. In terms of body part emphasis, hip bones were the most commonly emphasized type of bone picture and stomachs were the most commonly emphasized body part, followed by legs and thighs/thigh gaps. When the body was not the central focus of an image, clothing was the most common object focus for both Facebook and Pinterest. Prominent clothing styles observed on Facebook ranged from body hugging to body part revealing. Specific clothing items observed included tight tee shirts and dresses, loose tops, sweaters, short shorts, mini dresses, skirts, tight pants, leggings and bikinis. One picture portrayed a link between the fashion industry and pro-anorexia was observed in a picture with extremely thin fashion model illustrations with the text "It's not a diet. It's a Lifestyle." On Pinterest, clothing was less body revealing and included an additional style of workout clothing. Both sites portrayed tight fitting pant styles that would emphasize the presence of a thigh gap.

**Conclusion.** Thinspirational images observed most commonly centered around body parts or clothing. A majority of clothing was tight or body part/bone revealing. This study shows that unique body and clothing appearance ideals exist within this community. Additionally, this study revealed that these pages were unlikely to remain active for six months or more.

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