"Thin is what we're supposed to be, not what we're supposed to talk about": a qualitative study of pro-eating disorder blogging communities

Andrea M. Weare
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“Thin is what we’re supposed to be, not what we’re supposed to talk about”:
A qualitative study of pro-eating disorder blogging communities

by

Andrea M. Weare

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Major: Journalism and Mass Communication

Program of Study Committee:
Lulu Rodriguez, Major Professor
Dennis Chamberlin
Leslie Rebecca Bloom

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2008

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES**

iv

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

v

**ABSTRACT**

vii

**CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

A Troubled Subculture 1
Expanding Beyond Causation 7

**CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The Institution of Thinness 8
Disordered Eating “Goes Online” 10
The Third-person Effect Theory 13
The Spiral of Silence Theory 15
The Future of Pro-ED Blogging 16
Research Questions 17

**CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

Qualitative Communication Research 18
The Snowball Sampling Technique 19
Telephone Interview Procedures 20
Collecting and Analyzing Data 21
Strengthening the Inquiry 23

**CHAPTER 4: RESULTS**

The Participants 25
Alyssa 25
Lilly 27
Michelle 28
Ella 29
Daisy 30
Agynees 32
Marie 33
Alexis 34
Autumn 35
Monika 37
Mass Media and the Thin Ideal 38
Pre-Internet Journaling 38
The Influence of Television 44
The Influence of Magazines 47
The Influence of Books 48
The Use of “Thinspiration” 48
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Communication and the Thin Ideal</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patterns of Mothers and Daughters</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight and Dieting Among Siblings</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Friendly” Competition</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silenced by the Taboo</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varying Definitions of Being Pro-ED</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking Through Isolation</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic and Career Pursuits</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blogging and Online Interaction: Helpful or Hurtful</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantages of Pro-ED Blogging</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advantages of Pro-ED Blogging: A Community of Care</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Freedom of Speech</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</strong></td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 1</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 2</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 3</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question 4</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Future Research</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>REFERENCES</strong></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL</strong></td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT</strong></td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX C: PHONE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>APPENDIX D: E-MAIL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE</strong></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1. Magazine covers displaying the “thin is good” belief. 3

FIGURE 2. Negative mass media coverage of female celebrities accused of having an eating disorder. 3

FIGURE 3. Eating disorder signage (purging, toilet bowl) seen in fashion photography, and other images of famously thin celebrities. 6

FIGURE 4. Self-produced images of “thinspiration.” 6

FIGURE 5. From right, actor Ashley Olsen, model Giselle Bündchen, and actor Mary-Kate Olsen. 43

FIGURE 6. Path of influence leading to the creation and perpetuation of the thin ideal. 86
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how and why an “underground” group pro-eating disorder bloggers formed a covert community on the Internet to share their emotions, offer each other support, and indulge in discussions of taboo eating practices and body image. Using the tenets of the third person effect and spiral of silence theories, the following questions were posed during in-depth interviews with 10 participants: To what extent do these young women think their eating disorders/dieting habits were driven by mass media portrayals of the thin ideal? To what extent do they think their habits were driven by interpersonal pressure? To what extent do they feel silenced by the taboo of being too thin? Is this what prompted their creation of a blog? And to what extent do they see their online interaction as helpful or hurtful?

The results show overwhelming agreement that the thin models the participants see in the media inspired them to lose weight. These media images became even more influential when they perceived that family and peers found in those images the “model” body types to emulate, a clear case of the third person effect. Mother and daughter relationships, as well as sister and friend interactions, played a significant role in the development and continuation of disordered eating. Their blogs provide a safe haven where they feel welcome and can freely discuss concerns they know are considered unhealthy, taboo, and even “weird” by mainstream society. Going “underground” through these blogs is a manifestation of the actions those with minority opinions take following the premise of the spiral of silence theory. However, while many bloggers seek thinness at all costs, they do not wish their condition on others and do not encourage others to join this online realm.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A Troubled Subculture

Thin female celebrities are readily perceived these days as suffering from either anorexia or bulimia. The mass media’s remarks do not seem so far-fetched following a brief glance at these celebrities whose bodies, many comment, are “barely there.” But when the same dangerously slender personalities are idolized and paraded as the “thin ideal” in the mass media, women and girls are understandably confused. Society, in their estimation, seems to expect the impossible from them: Be thin, but not too thin.

The result, health experts are quick to point out, is a female culture plagued by eating disorders. The National Eating Disorders Association (2005) estimates nearly 10 million women and girls suffer from anorexia and/or bulimia nervosa and other eating disorders, but unreported cases hide the real extent of this figure. “Researchers have found that exposure to the thin ideal increases the risk of body image disturbances and eating disorders, as measured by self-esteem, weight satisfaction, body esteem, body dissatisfaction, drive for thinness, attitude toward eating, concerns about body shape, self-objectification, and symptoms of anorexia and bulimia” (Park, 2005, p. 597). And, as Bordo (2003) notes, the thin ideal seen in Western media appears equally influential abroad:

Because of their remote location, the Fiji islands did not have access to television until 1995, when a single station was introduced. It broadcasts programs from the United States, Great Britain, and Australia. Until that time, Fiji had no reported cases of eating disorders, and a study conducted by the anthropologist Anne Becker showed that most Fijian girls and women, no matter how large, were comfortable with their bodies. In 1998, just three years after the station began broadcasting, 11 percent of girls reported vomiting to control weight, and 62 percent of the girls surveyed reported dieting during the previous months. (p. xvi)
While my current study highlights some of the media’s contribution to the growing number of individuals in the quest for the ideal body, it is important to note that there are other possible causes for such maladies. As eating disorder experts Polivy and Herman (2002) note, “exposure to the media is so widespread that if such exposure were the cause of EDs (eating disorders), then it would be difficult to explain why anyone would not be eating-disordered” (p. 192).

Unhealthy eating habits, experts say, result partly from interpersonal pressure to obtain and maintain thinness. Park (2005), for example, argues that interpersonal interaction with thin-conscious parents, siblings, friends, and peers may all contribute to the development of an eating disorder. Park investigated how women and girls “are affected by their perceptions of how others are influenced by the media” (p. 598) more so than how they themselves are influenced by images of thinness, a clear case of the third-person effect. Park elaborates:

Female college students who read beauty and fashion magazines perceived that idealized thin images were prevalent in mass media. The perception of a prevalent thin ideal in mass media in turn created an assumption that other women and men are influenced by this prevalent image and prefer thin body types as a result. This presumed influence on others then reinforced the influence of the thin ideal on the female students themselves, adding to the pressure to conform to the norm of ideal thinness. Finally, the perceived media influence on self enhanced the desire to be thin in these women. (p. 606)

The pressure to be thin, then, can come from how women and girls think their interpersonal acquaintances are affected by media messages, among others. If a woman assumes that friends and family desire the thin ideal as portrayed in media messages, she is also likely to subscribe to that perceived “group think.” As a result, many end up thinking over-critically of their bodies regardless of what they themselves think about the images.
A cursory examination of media content attests to the extent to which the mass media perpetuate the thin ideal. Just glancing at magazine covers, women and girls quickly learn that “thin is good” (Figure 1), but being “too thin is bad” (Figure 2). Personalities who have crossed an imaginary line of thinness are ultimately vilified. Suddenly, what used to be “beautiful” is now considered “sick,” “abnormal,” “diseased,” “anorexic,” or “bulimic.”

![Figure 1. Magazine covers displaying the “thin is good” belief.](image1)

![Figure 2. Negative mass media coverage of female celebrities accused of having an eating disorder.](image2)
As the volume of eating disorders rise, so has their coverage in the mass media. Yet, that coverage is episodic and seldom deals deeply enough with the causes of such disorders. Only a few stories expound on prevention. The “fear factor” in reports is preferred over the reality: “Health news gives most attention to the most feared medical conditions and to new cures rather than prevention” (McQuail, 2005, p. 358). For example, as people witness the accusatory coverage of the overly thin on the front covers of magazines, the latest advertisement for Weight Watchers® is a mere page away. As Freedman (2002) notes: “In order to appeal to a wide audience, media usually deliver mixed messages. Love yourself, but change yourself. Look natural, but make over” (xiii). And these mixed messages are everywhere. While the Dove Campaign for Real Beauty® poses as being female-friendly with “average-sized” models in its advertisements, its products are ultimately sold to fix something – be it dimpled thighs or wrinkled eyes. Bordo (2003) claims that these new advertisement approaches are not fooling most young women: “Generations raised in the empire of images are both vulnerable and savvy. They snort when magazines periodically proclaim…that in the ‘new Hollywood’ one can be ‘sexy at any size,’” because these stories are covered just as frequently as “cover stories about ‘Starving Stars’” (p. xxvii).

While the media enumerate which celebrities are “too skinny” and “too fat,” the health concerns of those in these categories are rarely discussed. Media critics argue that this type of sensationalist coverage only heightens the diseases’ taboo factor, forcing those with the disorders to remain quiet in order to avoid social isolation. As the praise and criticism for being thin overlap, females suffering from full-blown eating disorders and those with tendencies to develop them find themselves without an outlet to discuss their afflictions
without fear of being stigmatized. As women and girls have begun to realize, they are quite literally “damned if they do” and “damned if they don’t” want to be thin.

As the spiral of silence theory suggests, ridiculing the afflicted can silence an already troubled subculture. In fear of isolation, socially unpopular individuals generally choose to keep quiet, letting those holding the popular view dominate social conversation on the topic (Noelle-Neumann, 1993). The rising accessibility to the Internet, however, has offered a new location for such individuals to “speak out” publicly without fear of being directly ostracized. One of these groups has been using the Internet for more than 10 years to build an online society for “safe” discussion (Cicero, 2006), where both self-identified and clinically diagnosed women and girls with disordered eating can discuss their feelings and concerns with those who share them.

These females are finding community online in pro-eating disorder Web sites where they maintain their own blog, encouraging fellow bloggers to not eat, work out, and think thin. Some write tips on how to keep family and friends unsuspecting of their starving and purging, and many post photographs of their favorite models (Figure 3) and other images supporting weight loss (Figure 4) for personal “thinspiration” or “thinspo.” Most of these young women and girls refer to themselves and each other in their own vernacular with nicknames like “pro-ana” (pro-anorexia) or “pro-mia” (pro-bulimia). While not all bloggers identify as “ana” or “mia,” they do share the practices of disordered eating and the search for friends like them. As Shade (2003) notes, “anorexia and other attendant eating disorders are secret and shameful practices that elicit shock and concern from parents and other authoritarian figures. Before the Internet, how else could anorexics relate to each other and seek solace?” (¶ 13). This growing line of communication has solidified the pro-eating
disorder movement online and created a foundation for expression and community for those who have never before been able to speak out honestly.

Figure 3. Eating disorder signage (purging, toilet bowl) seen in fashion photography, and other images of famously thin celebrities.

Figure 4. Self-produced images of “thinspiration.”
Expanding Beyond Causation

This study investigates how and why this underground group of pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) bloggers has covertly formed a legitimate, notwithstanding minority, community on the Internet to divulge their emotions and indulge in discussions of taboo topics related to eating practices and body image. In doing so, it critically examines how the current mode of mass media coverage that promotes a “spiral of silence” among women and girls leads to their attempts to evolve a community that welcomes their collective ideology. The topic is an important agenda item in feminist research because the pro-ED community can be considered a reaction to the demands of the male-gaze in Western culture: “A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty, but an obsession about female obedience” (Woolf, 2002, p. 187).

A qualitative examination of this community’s creation, which began as a reaction to the media’s “thin ideal,” as well as its ability to maintain and even increase its following, will add a new dimension to a topic that has been repeatedly discussed in risk and health communication literature. My in-depth interviewing with these bloggers has attempted to coax this subculture from its hiding place online by allowing their words to surface on what prompted and what continues to motivate their discussions. A deep assessment of the views of those practicing the characteristics of eating disorders will no doubt expand others’ understanding of these diseases.
The Institution of Thinness

Obtaining the “thin ideal” is not a new trend in Western culture. As far back as the 15th century, women were depicted in art with long and slender bodies (Seid, 1994). Women in the 1800s sought small midsections “immortalized in Gone with the Wind, when Scarlett O’Hara’s stays are tightened to achieve a 17-inch waist” (Seid, 1994, p. 5). But never before have women “desired a body so close to the bone” (Seid, 1994, p. 4) as seen among females today (Chronicle Books, 2006). Even women of past centuries “had not a bone or muscle showing; they were sweetly and fully fleshed. Women of the Romantic period may have wanted tiny waists, but they also wanted their shoulders, arms, calves, and bosoms ample…Indeed, thinness was considered ugly, a woman’s misfortune” (Seid, 1994, p. 5).

As Seid observes, however, the public’s perception of the ideal female body changed following World War II:

Fashion continued to value a slender (if curving) form, and the health industry, finally convinced by insurance companies, launched massive campaigns to persuade Americans to lose weight. Key ideas that would take full force in subsequent decades began to emerge. Chief among these was ‘fatphobia’…The perception developed that Americans were too fat and getting fatter; that they ate too much, ate the wrong foods, and were sedentary and therefore flabby. Americans’ self-perception shifted to that of a diseased, unhealthy group, even though they enjoyed the best health and greatest longevity ever known in American society. (p. 6)

In subsequent decades, the desire for thinness increased with the growth of the “health food” industry that validated female obsession with dieting (Seid, 1994). These goals of obtaining and maintaining thinness remain top priority for many women and girls in the 21st century.

It is no surprise that the thin ideal has led to an increase in eating disorders among women and girls. As Bordo (2003) notes, women and girls “know, no matter what their
parents, teachers, and clergy are telling them, that inner beauty is a big laugh in this culture” (p. xxvii). It seems “we have elevated the pursuit of a lean, fat-free body into a new religion. It has a creed: ‘I eat right, watch my weight, and exercise.’ Indeed, anorexia nervosa could be called the paradigm of our age, for our creed encourages us all to adopt the behavior and attitudes of the anorexic. The difference is one of degree, not of kind” (Seid, 1994, p. 4).

Health experts agree that currently reported eating disorder incidences barely skim the surface. According to the Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders, Inc. (2007), “physicians are not required to report eating disorders to a health agency, and people with these problems tend to be secretive” regarding their illness (¶ 24). With a higher mortality rate than any other mental illness—20 percent or higher, and decreasing only two to three percent with full treatment—eating disorders warrant greater research attention (Social Workers, 2007). Diet-obsessed women and girls do seem willing to do anything in the name of thinness. Seid (1994) notes: “Like any religion worthy of the name…it has its damnation. Failure to follow the creed…produce[s] hell on earth. The fat and flabby are damned to failure, regardless of professional and personal successes” (p. 4).

As Seid explains above, the difference between the anorexic and the average dieter truly is a mere degree. It is not just the disordered eaters who understand the importance of thinness in Western culture. Nearly all young women do. According to Bordo (2003):

In their world, there is a size zero, and it’s a status symbol…[the] ‘epidemic of eating disorders’ is old stuff; being preached to about it turns them right off. Their world is one in which the anorexics swap starvation diet tips on the Internet, participate in group fasts, offer advice on how to hide your ‘ana’ from family members, and share inspirational photos of emaciated models. Full-blown anorexia has never been the norm among teenage girls; the real epidemic is among the girls with seemingly healthy eating habits, seemingly healthy bodies, who vomit and work their butts off as a regular form of anti-fat maintenance. These girls not only look ‘normal’ but consider themselves normal. The new criterion circulating [is]…: If you get rid of it
through exercise rather than purging or laxatives, you don’t have a problem. Theirs is a world in which groups of dorm girls will plough voraciously through pizzas, chewing and then spitting out each mouthful. Do they have a disorder? Of course not—look, they’re eating pizza. (p. xxvii)

Many young women of the pro-ED blogging community manage their weight in similar ways, believing that exercise makes good sense in an attempt to maintain the semblance of not being “disordered.” As these young women can attest, eating disorders go beyond the initial labels of “anorexia” or “bulimia.” Overexercising, abusing laxatives, and manipulating diabetes are all uneasily detected methods of obtaining thinness. As new disorders continue to develop, so do their means of communicating their effectiveness, most recently with the Internet.

**Disordered Eating “Goes Online”**

Aware of the risks of eating disorders but afraid of public ridicule, females with such afflictions have “gone online” where they seek the support of others who desire to be thin and successful. Desperate for thinness, pro-ED females have created their own cyber-niche where others do not attempt to stop their behavior or treat their illnesses. As one site claims, “This is a pro-ana website. That means this is a place where anorexia is regarded as a lifestyle and a choice, not an illness or disorder. There are no victims here. If you regard anorexia exclusively as a disease, see yourself as the ‘victim’ of an ‘eating disorder’ in need of ‘recovery,’ or are seeking ‘recovery,’ it is strongly suggested that you leave this site immediately” (oOo…ana’s underground grotto…oOo, 2007).

Pro-ED sites came into existence in the mid-1990s following the spread of Internet use (Cicero, 2006). Nearly 544 million people worldwide were Internet users in 2002 (Rogers, 2003), of which young women comprised a large proportion. Studies report “higher
use among 13- to 19-year olds than any other age group” online (Wilson et al., 2006, p. 1636). Of these Internet users, as much as two-thirds search for health information on a regular basis (Brodie et al., 2000), and half look for weight-loss tips and information regarding eating disorders (Rideout et al., 1999). “While bloggers of both genders and all ages create personal journals, females and teens create them somewhat more [often] than do males and adults” (Herring et al., 2004, p. 6). By 2003, approximately 500 pro-ED sites were active online (Chelsey et al., 2003).

Examining adolescent girls’ Web home pages in the late 1990s, Stern (1999) observes that these sites are often “spirited, somber, and self-conscious” (p. 22), attributes which are common in today’s pro-ED blogs. Stern surmises that “the growing number of girls’ home pages lends credibility to the notion that the Web may present a new and much-needed forum for girls’ ‘safe’ self-expression” (p. 23). Such is the function of contemporary pro-ED Web pages.

Wilson et al. (2006) caution, however, that such sites may not be the helpful outlets some may think they are. In a study of these sites and their users, they found that “pro-eating disorder (ED) Web site use was correlated with a longer disease duration and also with less time devoted to school-related activity,” as well as “more hospitalizations and an overall negative impact on the quality of life” (Wilson et al., 2006, p. 1641). Freedman (2002) theorizes that “like a communicable disease, body-image obsessions and eating disorders can be spread through Internet contacts” (xii). In short, these ostensibly safe spaces may be more harmful than helpful. Online visits to pro-ED blogs can at times prompt women and girls with body image issues to start their own blogs.
To many women and girls who suffer from eating disorders, however, these sites serve as a virtual lifeline simply because of the anonymity they allow. Sites encourage fellow bloggers to stay strong and avoid eating for the day, encouragements the bloggers might never receive offline. These females post poems, art work, and detailed accounts of their calorie intake. In this sense, their blog postings are quite similar to diary entries. However, because the pro-ED bloggers are aware of an audience and blog specifically to readers like them, their sites are, as Nardi et al. (2004) note, “more like radio shows than they are diaries” (p. 222). In a study of 19- to 60-year old female and male bloggers, Nardi et al. (2004) found that their bloggers posted comments offering “salutations, advice, and invitations” (p. 223) unlikely to be found in diaries.

However, in contrast to what Nardi et al. (2004) thought, the bloggers themselves saw their blogs more as diaries than public soapboxes: “The blog was almost a kind of preserve, a refuge from the intense interaction of other forms of communication. Some bloggers used the limited interactivity of blogs to say things to others they would not say to their face” (p. 228). The very personal and self-divulging nature of pro-ED blogging reflects this need to express online what cannot be expressed offline. Stern (1999) claims bloggers have good reason for doing so, as “adolescent girls learn from friends, media, and personal experience that speaking up can get them into trouble with teachers, worry their parents, and endanger their friendships…The process of self-silencing and subsequent missed opportunities for self-validation can be cyclical, driving girls further ‘underground!’” (p. 22).

Most social discussion on blogging seems to “exaggerate the extent to which blogs are interlinked, interactive, and oriented toward external events, and underestimate their importance as individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression” (Herring et al., 2004, p. 1).
In their study of current blog genres, Herring et al. (2004) found that personal blogs are the most popular. While “blogs in which authors link to and comment on the content of other Web sites are assumed by researchers, journalists and members of the blogging community to be the prototypical blog type, the blogs in our sample are overwhelmingly of the personal journal type (70.4%) in which authors report on their lives and inner thoughts and feelings” (Herring et al., 2004, p. 6). Similar to Herring et al.’s sample, nearly all blogs within the pro-ED subculture are also more concerned with personal feelings and less with external events.

**The Third-person Effect Theory**

Many studies have provided evidence supporting the notion that exposure to mass media content contributes to eating disorders. For example, working with a sample of nearly 3,000 12- to 21-year-old females, Martinez-Gonzalez et al. (2003) found that reading magazines targeted to young women was significantly related to the development of eating disorders. Other studies have also shown that the thin ideal portrayed on television and cinema negatively influences body image (Field et al., 1999; Tiggemann & Slater, 2004).

Aside from the mass media, however, other factors have been examined as potential determinants of eating maladies. For example, Park (2005) submits that the “perceived influence of others” might also cause disordered eating among women and girls. Park found that women and girls “are affected by their perceptions of how others are influenced” by images of thinness in the media more so than how they themselves are influenced (p. 598). The desire to be thin, then, may come from one’s perception of the value others place on being thin. “In most pro-ED sites, thin models and even severely cachectic individuals are featured positively for the purpose of maintaining disordered eating” (Wilson et al., 2006, p.
Such images become more damaging if bloggers think the images depict how their fellow bloggers think they should look.

Park’s (2005) premise is derived from Davison’s (1983) theory of a “third-person effect” of the mass media in which “individuals who are members of an audience exposed to communication (whether or not this communication is intended to be persuasive) will expect the communication to have a greater effect on others than on themselves” (p. 3). More specifically, the “greatest impact will not be on ‘me’ or ‘you,’ but on ‘them’”—the third persons (Davison, 1983, p. 3). Perloff (1983) provided further support for this when he noted that heavily political viewers exposed to war media coverage assumed that the others (“third persons”) watching the same coverage would be more influenced by biased reporting favoring the opposing viewpoint than they would.

Scholars have also found that third-person effects are greater when mass media content is considered dangerous or harmful, such as with rap music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997), pornography (Gunther, 1995), and violent television (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999). In these three studies, respondents believed others would be more negatively impacted by rap music, pornography, or violent television than they would, giving them reason to desire censorship not for their own sake, but for the sake of everyone else.

According to Perloff (1993), the third-person effect hypothesis shares a similarity, although a very general one, with other contemporary theoretical models of mass media effects, such as uses and gratifications (Katz, Gurevitch, & Hass, 1973), sense-making (Dervin, 1981), and information-processing (Graber, 1988), emphasizing that “what a person brings to [the] mass media is frequently more important than the content that appears on the screen or on a piece of paper” (p. 168). By extension, then, eating disorders can be an
outcome of “extra-media” influences as well. The likelihood of developing a poor body image may come from several areas of pressure including, but not limited to, mass media content.

**The Spiral of Silence Theory**

The spiral of silence theory, proposed by Noelle-Neumann (1993), claims that when discussing a topic of controversy, individuals holding the perceived popular viewpoint will dominate social conversation, while those with the unpopular viewpoint will remain quiet. She adds that men are more likely to speak out than women, younger people are more likely than the older, and the higher educated are more likely to voice opinions than the lower educated. Pro-ED bloggers, who are mainly females with a high school to college education, are therefore more likely to remain silent on controversial topics, such as thinness.

Testing these propositions, Bergen (1993) found that being female was a great influence on outspokenness about abortion, mainly because abortion is traditionally seen as an issue with a greater impact on women than on men. This might also be the case with the pro-ED movement whose members deal with an issue that almost exclusively affects females. According to Lasorsa (1991), who speaks out and who remains silent depends on individual attributes, such as the strength of a person’s involvement with an issue and their confidence in their opinion:

Those interested in politics (and attentive to political news) tend to speak out, regardless of the climate of opinion. Those who feel self-efficacious—who believe that what they say and do can make a difference—are also more likely to speak out, regardless of the climate of opinion. And even in the face of an inhospitable climate of opinion, those who feel certain that their position is the right one are more likely to speak up. It would appear, then, that it is possible for a person, suitably armed, to fight the spiral of silence. (p. 140)
Foucault (1978) hypothesized that since the 18th century, public reaction to sexuality has been similar to the predicted consequences of the spiral of silence theory. His “repressive hypothesis” explains that because sex was considered socially acceptable only between husband and wife, other acts of sexuality were labeled deviant and, as a result, went underground to avoid social ostracism. Such a hypothesis foreshadows the path of influence that led to pro-ED blogging. Because being too thin is considered deviant, it too has gone underground onto the Internet. While many pro-ED blogs exemplify an enormous sense of involvement and confidence in pro-ED living online, the taboo behind such a belief system offline has long appeared to be too strong to successfully maintain this group’s stamina beyond the Internet.

The Future of Pro-ED Blogging

Being thin is highly admired in today’s culture, but becoming too thin is strongly criticized. Because positive desires and opinions regarding eating disorders are considered taboo, it is understandable that pro-ED bloggers do not feel comfortable expressing their thoughts offline. In an effort to avoid social isolation, they have taken to the Internet to discuss their beliefs privately but with confidence, as Lasorsa (1991) indicates.

Most young women in the pro-ED subculture find themselves in a quandary. While they want to be thin, they also want to talk about their situation and hope to be accepted by society. To avoid being “damned to failure as fat and flabby” (Seid, 1994, p. 140), “Ana,” “Mia,” and others have kept their silence. While threats of censorship have caused some pro-ED Web sites to shut down and relocate, the women and girls involved in this underground movement appear to have no intention of relinquishing their only method of social expression. According to Chelsey et al. (2003), these “sites are better organized,
comprehensive, and more numerous than sites based on recovery or professional services” (p. 124). Indeed, the pro-ED movement is possibly one of the most tenacious subcultures ever seen on the Internet.

**Research Questions**

Considering the above literature, as well as the tenets of the third person effect and spiral of silence theories, the following four research questions were posed:

**RQ1**: To what extent do pro-ED individuals think their eating disorders and/or dieting habits were driven by mass media portrayals of the thin ideal?

**RQ2**: To what extent do pro-ED individuals think their eating disorders and/or dieting habits were driven by interpersonal pressure, online or offline?

**RQ3**: To what extent do pro-ED individuals feel silenced by the taboo of being *too* thin in Western culture? Is this what prompted their creation of a blog?

**RQ4**: To what extent do pro-ED individuals see their blogging and online interaction as helpful and/or hurtful?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Pro-ED blog users are a difficult group to study. Their underground Web sites are hard to penetrate, and their subscribers are highly protective of their anonymity. They see society as generally encouraging the thin ideal, but that wanting to be too thin is outside its limited norms. As a result, those who desire to be too thin are pushed into the relative safety of these underground sites. My study aims to give voice to this “fringe” group of young women by applying the qualitative research method of in-depth interviewing.

Qualitative Communication Research

As noted by Lindlof (1995), qualitative research methods are effective for communication projects seeking to paint a picture of a given social issue and to interpret that picture with the words and experiences of the individuals involved. Lindlof (1995) defines the key concepts involved in this type of research:

> Qualitative approaches try to bring us close to the performances and practices of communication. The qualitative inquirer seeks somehow to get inside this action. The research ‘instrument’ is the human investigator who reflexively becomes part of both the action and the ensuing description. The ‘human subject’ is the other, whom we respect and from whom we learn much. The ‘data’ are texts, which change over time as the researcher’s interests, knowledge, and abilities change. The ‘products’ are typically full of voices, stories, events, interpretations, hypotheses, and claims. (p. xi)

Such an approach was taken in this study to arrive at a holistic view of how young women develop their concept of the “ideal” body, the interpersonal and mediated sources of their conceptions and how these sources contribute to the eating disorders with which they now struggle, the communication habits they evolve to deal with these afflictions, and what they believe communication technology use has in store for them as they go through these struggles. In short, my study aims to better understand the growing online movement composed of pro-ED bloggers.
The Snowball Sampling Technique

While the population for this study includes all young women participating in pro-ED Web sites, I interviewed a small sample of these individuals to gather data that address the four research questions posed in Chapter 2. The stigma attached to these sites has sent their bloggers into hiding, making any blogger difficult to contact. Scholars note that getting a hold of hidden populations has long been a problem in academic research: “Groups such as criminals, prostitutes, drug users and people with unusual or stigmatized conditions (e.g., AIDS sufferers and welfare recipients) post a range of methodological challenges if we are to learn about their lives” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 1).

The snowball sampling technique can remedy this issue. As defined by Vogt (1999), snowball sampling is a technique in which a potential participant gives the researcher the name of another, who then provides the name of a third, until a sufficient sample size is formed. Although this technique has received criticism for its informal approach to obtaining a sample, it is appropriate for this study’s purpose. Atkinson and Flint (2001) note:

> While some may seek to characterize the topics for which snowball strategies have been used as being trivial or obscure, the main value of snowball sampling [is that it ] is a method for obtaining respondents where they are few in number or where some degree of trust is required to initiate contact. Under these circumstances, techniques of ‘chain referral’ may imbue the researcher with characteristics of being an insider or group member, and this can aid entry into settings where conventional approaches find difficult to succeed. (p. 2)

In order to build a sample of the highly stigmatized pro-ED population, I first contacted one blogger. This person was asked to refer me to another blogger who might be open to participating in the study. I then asked this blogger to identify another member to contact, and so on. Being able to use another pro-ED participant’s name as reference helped ease any respondent’s initial skepticism about participating. This technique served to build a
sample without intruding on the anonymity that is so important to this group. By gaining “insider” access from other participants, bonds of trust with each new participant were forged. The goal was to arrive at a sample of 10 self-identified pro-ED bloggers who produce their own blog and read other blogs.

To minimize the bias inherent in snowball sampling techniques, Atkinson and Flint (2001) recommend asking for many referrals from each participant. Thus, I asked each participant to provide one to two names of potential participants in hopes of widening the circle of self-identifying pro-ED individuals. Most importantly, “the real promise of snowball sampling lies in its ability to uncover aspects of social experience often hidden from both the researcher’s and lay person’s view of social life” (Atkinson & Flint, 2001, p. 9).

**Telephone Interview Procedures**

My in-depth interviewing with participants was done by telephone. Interviewing is considered the foundation of qualitative research:

In qualitative research, one interviews people to understand their perspectives on a scene, to retrieve experiences from the past, to gain expert insight or information, to obtain descriptions of events or scenes that are normally unavailable for observation, to foster trust, to understand a sensitive or intimate relationship, or to analyze certain kinds of discourse. (Lindlof, 1995, p. 5)

Because this study sought the opinions of those who indulge in blogging as an online activity, an online message was sent to each participant, introducing myself and the study. Once the targeted blogger agreed to participate, I asked for her preferred way of receiving the informed consent document (Appendix B). Any information requested by the blogger was also provided.

I then arranged a telephone interview with individuals who returned the informed consent document. The conversations were digitally recorded with the participant’s
permission. A casual and conversational tone with detailed prompts was used to ease the participant’s natural interview anxieties. I also explained to the participants that they could request to stop the recording and/or end the interview at any time. They were also told that they could refuse to respond to any question they were uncomfortable answering. For the purpose of the study, telephone interviewing was the most cost-effective way of reaching a population with access to a cellular and/or land line connection.

**Collecting and Analyzing Data**

This study aimed to arrive at a deeper understanding of the role the mass media and interpersonal relationships played in the development of disordered eating habits as well as the communication behaviors the participants developed to cope with their disorders. I asked participants to provide personal background information, their concept of the ideal body type, the image they hold about their own bodies, the history of their dieting and eating practices, and their personal Internet use and exposure habits. I then asked them to evaluate the extent to which mediated messages and interpersonal pressures have contributed to their habits, if at all. Their assessment of the personal impact of being active subscribers to pro-ED blogs was also solicited.

The four research questions posed at the end of Chapter 2 guided data collection. However, these four major questions invited other sub-questions. I used secondary inquiries and probes to clarify points, ask for elaboration, and establish more trust. As Esterberg (2002) notes,

> even if participants do agree to an interview, they may not be willing to talk honestly or discuss intimate details about their personal lives if they do not feel some level of trust. This is especially true in attempts to research those who are different from you or those from stigmatized groups. (p. 91)
Esterberg (2002) adds that maintaining some distance between researcher and participant, which is often an objective of quantitative research, is ineffective in these cases: “Traditional interview texts suggest you should develop enough rapport to get people to talk to you, but not so much that you actually develop friendships with your participants or disclose too much about yourself. The image is almost one of ‘tricking’ research participants into talking to you” (p. 92). Critical to interviewing, according to Esterberg (2002), is maintaining the balance of power in self-disclosure: “Many feminist researchers have stressed that being similar in crucial ways to their interviewees was important in gaining access to them” (p. 90).

As Seid (1994) observed, the difference between the thin-aspiring female and the one with an eating disorder “is one of degree, not of kind” (p. 4). As someone who grew up with an acute awareness of the thin ideal, I was open to participants about my own bouts of dieting and disordered eating as an adolescent in an effort to build common ground if they inquired. But most importantly, “conducting an in-depth interview entails sending out the message that what your interviewee has to say is important” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 103).

Each in-depth interview was digitally recorded and fully transcribed onto a word processing document for analysis and referral throughout the study. Notes from each interview, combined with the transcripts, created a data set for each participant. Data analysis began immediately after each interview. After compiling a participant’s data set, the transcripts were coded for the most prevalent themes found in the participants’ discussions. “Procedural memos” (Esterberg, 2002, p. 165) were also written to keep track of the evolving coding plan as well as any ideas or key words that characterized a specific theme.
**Strengthening the Inquiry**

“Internal and external validity,” “reliability” and “objectivity” are terms often used to describe the strength of quantitative methodologies. However, terms such as “credibility,” “transferability,” “dependability,” and “confirmability” are more relevant in determining the strength of a qualitative study (Turpin, 2001, p. 55).

Credibility, in this study, was achieved with the assurance that the interpretations of responses were reflective of the participants’ intentions. To enhance credibility, a running consultation with the thesis committee was conducted to discuss interpretations of emerging themes. If an interpretation was in dispute or was suspect, the participant was contacted again for clarification. Since I began reading pro-ED blogs in September 2006, this activity was continued in order to remain familiar with the concerns of bloggers who participate in this virtual social network. This type of on-going engagement with the topic helped ensure credibility. By reviewing the data sets frequently and visiting the pro-ED blogs regularly, I gained more insights into the issue of disordered eating. The participants needed to be aware that I demonstrated familiarity with the topic in order to be assured of my ability to interpret their points of view appropriately.

The intent of qualitative research is not to generalize findings but to describe and develop explanations or interpretations of a unique issue. Transferability in qualitative inquiries is achieved by being able to compare an issue under investigation with other communication issues, in this case. Writing rich descriptions and carefully handling the narratives of my participants helped shed light on these growing maladies to offer suggestions for future study.
Dependability was enhanced with greater accuracy in data collection and analysis. In qualitative studies, dependability is measured by keeping in mind factors of change due to the open method of this type of analysis. For example, the aim of qualitative research can change depending on the direction indicated by the participants and their data. To ensure dependability, a “paper trail” was maintained, which organized data and the method of collecting and analyzing data.

Confirmability was the final standard. All qualitative inquiry is value laden. As Esterberg (2002) notes, the goal of qualitative “social research is to work toward human emancipation” (p. 17). Confirmability can be compromised if participants perceive a wide social distance between them and myself. In this study, this distance was bridged by my own sharing of my experiences if asked and by remaining open to personal friendships with the participants throughout and after the study.

Because the variables in qualitative research may not be as easily defined as those in quantitative studies, the above process of collecting and analyzing data was implemented to strengthen the validity of my findings.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This study explores how and why the online subculture of pro-eating disorder bloggers has created a community where they divulge and share thoughts and emotions, and where they discuss topics related to eating practices and ideal body image that others find taboo. By coaxing this group from its “hiding place” online, it is expected that their reasons for engaging in their current communication behaviors and eating practices can be explained through their own words.

Ten females, 19- to 23-years-old, who write pro-eating disorder blogs participated in in-depth interviews. Participants were identified through snowball sampling, and were interviewed over the phone and via e-mail. The phone interviews lasted approximately an hour and a half, and e-mail interviews amounted to six to 10 pages of written questions and answers. Phone interviews were digitally recorded, and all MP3 sound files were transcribed into word processing documents.

The Participants

To best understand the position of each participant, an introduction will be made for each blogger, detailing demographic information and other characteristics pertinent to the study.

Alyssa

Alyssa is 20-years-old and currently studying nursing at a college in Orlando, Florida. She describes herself as “half Korean and half American” and lives in a house off-campus with two roommates. Alyssa is also a part-time nanny for a family with four children. Originally from Jackson, Florida, Alyssa grew up with her father (who recently passed away), mother, and her older sister. She describes her mother, a sales associate, as “one of
those power women who dresses up each and every day, and can pretty much conquer any feat given to her.” She notes that her sister, who is in the Air Force, shares very similar attributes.

Alyssa’s screen name on her weight-loss blog is “H2OmakesMEpure.” With wireless Internet at home, she goes online every day. Alyssa discovered the pro-ED blogging community when she was searching for friends online and came upon a pro-ED blog on the blogging host Xanga.com. Although she has visited pro-ED blogs and updated her own blog less often in the past few months, Alyssa checks out the pro-ED community “maybe once a day…But before, I was probably on at least once an hour.” Alyssa typically blogs in her room at night because she feels uncomfortable blogging in the presence of others. “When I was in the dorms, I had to, but it’s not like we could see each other’s computers.”

Alyssa recalls that poor body image “wasn’t really an issue” for her until high school, when she started to gain weight. Since she began college, she has been diagnosed three times with three different eating disorders: anorexia with bulimic tendencies, EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified), and anorexia, her current diagnosis. For her, “it wasn’t really a body image thing. It was more [because] my dad had passed away [as well as all the] stress [I had to deal with].” Alyssa has been eating disordered for four years and is going through stages of recovery with the aid of a therapist, psychiatrist, and medicines. Her recent health problems resulting from years of habits, however, are making recovery more difficult:

…These bowel problems and stomach cramps [make] a great excuse for not eating and [for] throwing up. [When my doctor] asks me how many times [a day] I threw up, I say, ‘Oh, six times.’ But that doesn’t mean that three of those times weren’t unintentional [vomiting]. I have been avoiding my therapist…because I don’t want to deal with that.

Alyssa’s family and friends are aware of her eating disorder and habits.
Lilly

Lilly is a 21-year-old college student. A Caucasian Canadian, she currently lives in Vancouver and studies makeup artistry. Before moving to Vancouver, Lilly lived on a farm until she was 15. Her family moved to a large Canadian city before she left home for college. She currently lives alone in a house off-campus. Lilly’s father is an auto body mechanic; her mother has not worked since she was diagnosed with cancer. She has two brothers, ages 23 and 19.

Although she did not want to share her screen name, Lilly said she chose it because she wants “to be a perfect doll…just a beautiful girl who[m] you need to be careful with [because] I suppose I break easy.” Lilly first came across the pro-ED community when she “was lonely” and looking for online friends: “I googled a community that wasn’t MySpace[.com] or Facebook[.com], and [Xanga.com] came up. It was the best day of my life!” She has access to the Internet at home and goes online daily to update her blog and to check readers’ comments: “I used to spend a few hours [blogging] because I had a lot of spare time. Now, with school, work, etc., I can get on for 15 minutes to half an hour.” Lilly prefers to blog at home and at night because “I’m not [comfortable] with someone reading over my shoulder.”

In elementary and middle school, Lilly felt unattractive, but “it didn’t bother me to any extreme.” When she reached high school, she began to “hate” herself and “constantly thought about killing myself.” Her dissatisfaction continued into college: “Now, it’s not just my face or my disgusting fat everywhere. It’s every little stupid thing on my body I wish I could change. I can’t even look at myself in the mirror anymore because I just keep crying and having anxiety attacks.” While Lilly has not been diagnosed with an eating disorder, she
see her eating habits as similar to others with this disorder. These habits include restricting (cutting calories), purging (vomiting), bingeing (over eating), using diet pills and laxatives, and exercising. “It all started in April 2005. I’d just turned 18 and seen a picture of myself. [I] couldn’t stop crying because of how disgusting I looked. That was the first day I began purging and taking diet pills.” Lilly’s parents and friends think she tries “to eat healthy, which is true [because] vegetables and fruits are healthy, but they don’t know [my dieting] extremes.”

Michelle

Michelle is a Caucasian 23-year-old college graduate with a B.A. in English and a concentration in writing. She attended college in Spokane, Washington, but now lives in her hometown of Santa Rosa, California. She currently works in a temporary job for Alcohol and Other Drug Services (AODS). Michelle hopes to find an apartment with her boyfriend as soon as her job becomes permanent. In the meantime, they both live with her parents. Her mother works in accounting; her father is a lawyer. She has a younger sister who is 21.

Michelle’s screen name, “luvskinnyxx,” was inspired by her desire to “be skinny” and maintain her anonymity. She has Internet access at home and at work, and goes online daily. Michelle first came across Xanga.com while “looking for thinspiration.” She connected with a blogger and from then on widened her reach across the blogging community. She visits up to 30 other weight-loss blogs daily. With her own blog, Michelle spends approximately half an hour each day posting and updating: “At home, everything is a secret because I don’t want anyone looking over my shoulder…I post my daily blog at work in the morning, update it throughout the day, and then update it the next day before I post another.”
As an adolescent, Michelle felt overweight but admits she was not. In high school, she continued with her diet of “super processed, unhealthy” foods: “I loved chicken nuggets, hot dogs, Fruit roll-ups, cookies…and lots of bread.” She became a vegan last year “for health reasons, and because I disagree with factory farming…I do my best to stay away from processed foods and sugars…I admit I often crave fatty, non-vegan foods, and it takes real willpower to stay true to my veganism.” While Michelle’s eating habits include a low-calorie diet and fasting, she does not consider these habits similar to those of an eating disorder: “I think there’s nothing wrong with it. Fasting cleanses the body.” Tracking weight has been a conscious goal and a means of taking control of her life:

I lost weight on purpose because I was fat…Now, I know I can control what I look like with what I eat…I’m back to my pre-college weight, and I’m still not happy. I think the advantage of dieting is the sense of accomplishment [it brings]…The other things in my life—no permanent job, living with my parents—kind of suck. My weight, [on the other hand], is something I can control and improve on.

Michelle’s parents, especially her mother, have observed she is “too skinny” and that she “better not lose anymore weight.” Her boyfriend is a vegan as well and is “very supportive. He wants me to be happy with myself.”

Ella

Ella is a Caucasian 21-year-old junior in college, majoring in physical therapy. She is married and shares a house with her husband in Texas. Ella grew up in a small town 10 minutes from her current home: “My dad works shifts at an oil refinery; my mom is a cafeteria lady.” She has two younger brothers.

Ella’s screen name for her weight-loss blog is “Anabella22187,” which she created because “it sounded pretty and it literally translates [to] ‘beautiful grace’ or ‘beautiful ana,’ whichever way you prefer to read it.” Ella discovered several links to “thinspo” on
Xanga.com when she was searching for “pictures of models and super skinny celebs.” She gets online once a day through Internet access at home and on her cell phone. She visits other blogs in the pro-ED community and checks her own for five to 10 minutes each day: “I keep up with mine and then I [check] the ones I subscribe to. I only visit and comment on a few, [about] three to six [blogs].” Ella visits the community on her laptop at home in the evenings.

Ella reports she “felt pudgy” during her elementary and middle school days. In high school, she felt better about herself but was never completely satisfied with her body. Today, Ella still has low self-esteem, a negative body image, and has lost weight as a result: “When I was 20 to 30 pounds heavier than I am now, I remember people telling me I looked good. They even called me ‘skinny.’ I was actually borderline overweight and looked disgusting.” Ella’s dieting and eating habits include restricting, bingeing, crash dieting (severe short-term dieting), taking laxatives, occasionally purging, and taking diet pills, but she reports these habits did not become “bad” until two years ago. Ella has not been diagnosed with an eating disorder, but she sees her habits as similar to those who suffer from disordered eating: “The point is to have control over yourself and to have enough willpower to turn yourself into something else. But if you let it control you, then it becomes an eating disorder.” Her parents and husband are not fully aware of her habits: “I like to think they assume I’m just very health conscious…They know I obsess over food and nutrition…but sometimes I feel they’re smarter than that…My husband won’t tolerate purging, but [he] doesn’t really notice if I stop eating for short periods of time.”

**Daisy**

Daisy is a 20-year-old Caucasian who works full-time at a Victoria’s Secret store. Taking time off from school, she lives at home with her parents in a North Carolina college
town. Daisy has two younger siblings, a 17-year-old sister and an eight-year-old brother. Her mother is a nurse; her father works as a landscaper.

Daisy’s screen name, “anorexiaISmyLOVE,” was coined because “I love anorexia like I love my family, but I hate it just as much.” Daisy first discovered the pro-ED community in high school when researching for a school project on eating disorders: “We wanted to find some pictures of emaciated girls…[When] I found some pictures that were on a pro-ana site, [I thought,] ‘There’s Web sites like this?’” She has wireless Internet access at home and goes online daily, accessing the community three times a day. Spending about an hour on her blog each day, Daisy works on her laptop in her bedroom at night for privacy.

In elementary and middle school, Daisy described herself as “always extremely thin…In the summer between fifth and sixth grades, I kind of filled out, gained a bunch of weight…so I got a bunch of teasing…” Once in high school, Daisy was introduced to Hannah, who had been diagnosed with bulimia, by a mutual friend. “Hannah and I just got into that whole thing together because she had the same sort of issues as I did; it just escalated.” These days, Daisy feels “like a lot of things haven’t changed,” except that her eating practices have narrowed with time:

Before, I would have one slice of pizza instead of two. Now [I think,] ‘Oh my God, pizza?’…People say eating disorders are not about the weight; they are about control.’ [But] sometimes I think, it is about the weight. Look at me—I’m huge. I need to lose some weight!

Daisy has been diagnosed with an eating disorder twice, once for anorexia and most recently for EDNOS (eating disorder not otherwise specified). She has been eating disordered since she was 11. Due to her insurance coverage’s inability to cover two therapists at once, Daisy is not in recovery and is visiting a therapist only sporadically. She is
ambivalent about recovery: “There are days when I wish I could just go and get rid of all this. And then there [are] days when I’m like, ‘No, this is what I need to do’...Right now, if I went to treatment I would just mess around and just lie and be manipulative...” Her family and friends are aware of her eating disorder and habits.

**Agynees**

Agynees is a 21-year-old “half Asian, half Australian” who works as a server and bartender in a restaurant. After a year at TAFE, Australia’s largest vocational education and training school, Agynees returned to the hospitality industry. She lives in an apartment with her brother in a large city in the state of Victoria, Australia. Her parents are computer programmers.

Agynees’ screen name is “pessa_ana,” chosen after a nickname: “My family calls me ‘Pessa,’ short for ‘Principessa,’ which is ‘princess’ in Italian. And [I chose] ‘ana’ because of the whole pro-ana thing.” Agynees first found out about the pro-ED community when she searched for thinspiration online and came upon a Xanga.com pro-ED blog. With wireless Internet access at home, she goes online everyday. Although she has not blogged for a few months due to a busy work schedule, Agynees typically updates her blog daily to “visit my ‘friends’ and the people who comment on my page.” She checks up to 10 other blogs per day. Agynees has spent up to three hours a night on her blog in the past “when I get home from work late and can’t sleep.”

As an adolescent, Agynees had “pretty low self-esteem. I was picked on by my brothers and his friends, and called ‘fat’ all the time...” When she reached high school, Agynees joined the swim team “and toned up, so I [felt] pretty confident with myself.” Today, Agynees reports she “feels pretty slim,” a result of her dieting and eating habits the
past three years: “I don’t eat some days. [I] binge other [days]. [I] restrict [calories] most
days to really small meals. I’ve done diet pills, laxatives, detox kits, meal shakes—pretty
much the whole lot.” Although Agynees has not been diagnosed with an eating disorder, she
feels that if she were to see a doctor, “I would be classified as having an eating disorder.” She
thinks some of her friends and family members are aware of her eating habits, “…but [they]
ever have confronted me.” Agynees doesn’t think she

chose to have one (an ED) or the habit. It just sort of happened. I have accepted it and
sometimes even want it…When I feel skinny, I am happy. When I restrict and control
my eating, I feel happy…But when I lose control, I hate myself.

Marie

Marie is a 19-year-old English Caucasian who is a first-year college student majoring
in French. She lives on campus with four roommates in Leicester in the United Kingdom.
Originally from a small town, Marie grew up with her mother (a teacher), her father (an
engineer), and a brother who is 16.

Marie’s screen name, “indie_jessi,” represents her desire to be unique: “‘Indie’ means
original and different. I guess that’s how I want to be seen—I like to stand out.” She first
found out about the pro-ED community when she “stumbled across another girl’s site one
day…[when] I typed something like ‘skinny girls’ in Google…I thought she was fabulous.”
With Internet access at school and at home, Marie goes online everyday for several hours.
She visits the pro-ED community several times a day, checking out approximately eight
blogs. Marie spends at least an hour a day writing and updating her own blog. Due to a need
for privacy, Marie gets online “whenever I have free time and am alone. This varies from day
to day, depending on my flatmates and my boyfriend.”
Marie recalls having low self-esteem in elementary and middle school; her self-esteem sank lower in high school. Now, “it is still very low, but I am finally acting on it’’ by increasing her diet habits, which include fasting, restricting, bingeing, and purging. She has been doing so for more than a year: “I want to feel in control; I want to be thin. Fasting does both of these for me.’’ Her parents are not aware of her habits, but Marie’s boyfriend is: “He doesn’t like it…He knows I am unhappy [but]…he doesn’t know how to deal with that.’’

Alexis

Alexis is a Caucasian 20-year-old college sophomore majoring in psychology and human sexuality in a large Georgia town. She lives in an apartment off-campus with a roommate. Originally from Northwest Oregon, Alexis grew up in a small town with her parents and her 23-year-old older sister. Her parents are teachers.

Alexis’s screen name, “littleannie17,” was created to maintain her anonymity online: “I was worried about people finding out who I really was, so I used my nickname ‘little Annie’—Ann is my middle name—and my favorite number, 17.” Alexis initially heard about the pro-ED community when she met her best friend at college: “She showed me other girls’ weight-loss blogs and eventually her own.” Alexis has Internet access in her apartment and goes online several times a day, visiting blogs in the pro-ED community “usually every time I get online, as long as I am in [a] private [setting].” She checks 30 to 40 other blogs and spends several hours on her own blog: “If I have enough time before class, I will post a blog. And then after school and in the evenings, I will check it several times to edit and respond to comments.”

In elementary and middle school, Alexis became weight-conscious when she discovered she was heavier than her best friend after individual weights of her classmates
were taken in a PE (physical education) class. But Alexis “never really started dieting until seventh grade.” In high school, she was active in sports and weight lifting, and was “toned and muscular, but there was never really a time when I was not self-conscious or worrying about my weight.” Today, Alexis is still active in sports, playing softball in college. She has lost about 30 pounds and is starting to feel more confident, “but I feel like I have a long way to go.” As part of her weight-loss routine, Alexis practices restricting, bingeing, purging, overexercising, and has taken laxatives. She believes “these habits are very similar if not exact [to] those with an eating disorder” and has been practicing these for a year and a half. Alexis’ parents do not know the full extent of her eating habits, but she suspects they are becoming more aware:

I live 3,000 miles away from my family, so when I went home for Christmas break, they had definitely noticed I lost weight. But I ate in front of them—and purged it later—and I usually ate healthy to show them I was losing weight the right way…I am pretty close to my parents, but I have not told them [about my habits]. Every time they call, they ask if I am ‘being healthy,’ and I, of course, say ‘yes.’

At this point, Alexis thinks her eating habits are outside of her control: “It started off as the only way I knew to actually lose weight, but now it’s just part of my life. I know it’s not ‘healthy’ and that I probably need help, but I tell myself I will get help when I am thin enough.”

**Autumn**

Autumn is a 20-year-old Caucasian. A junior in college, she is majoring in psychology, media, and sociology and works part-time at a university gym. Originally from Cleveland, Ohio, Autumn now lives alone in New York City in an apartment. Her father is a lawyer and her mother is a librarian. Autumn has three younger siblings: a sister, 17, and two brothers, 15 and 16.
Autumn’s screen name, “collide_iscope,” was chosen to represent her view of the world:

I feel like I look at everything through a kaleidoscope because I’m constantly changing my views—nothing ever seems to be constant. I wanted to twist it somehow, so I changed the first part to ‘collide’ because I tend to collide into things, literally and figuratively… I was [also] in a Beatles mode, and I loved the song ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.’ I like the image of ‘the girl with kaleidoscope eyes.’

Autumn first heard about the pro-ED community after reading “an article on the pro-ana movement somewhere when I was researching EDs. I googled some sites out of curiosity.” She has Internet access in her apartment and at school. She goes online “constantly, at least four to five hours during a typical weekday, more on the weekends.” Autumn checks two pro-ED blogs regularly and updates her own blog for 10 minutes to an hour daily. Because she lives alone, Autumn visits the pro-ED community when she pleases, but finds herself online more often at night during her downtime.

Autumn did not remember having body image issues when she was in elementary and middle school, although for some reason she felt “ugly and awkward.” Once in high school, she gained “the normal puberty weight and started eating fruit for lunch, avoiding grease and fat, etc.” As Autumn aged, the severity of her eating disorder “really hit me when I was recounting my caloric intake for the day, and [I] realized I had added wrong and was 100 calories over what I had thought I had consumed. I burst into tears and wanted to die, convinced I was going to gain five pounds overnight.” Autumn has been diagnosed with three different eating disorders at different times: EDNOS, bulimia (non-purging subtype), and bulimia (purging subtype), her current diagnosis. She has been eating disordered for four years. She has been through treatment once and has recently relapsed. Although she believes her eating disorder is no longer a lifestyle choice, Autumn is not ready to re-enter treatment:
“I want to go back into treatment; I want to recover. But fear is holding me back…It’s a coping mechanism. I don’t know how to deal with emotions—positive or negative—in normal, healthy ways.”

**Monika**

Monika is a Caucasian 19-year-old college sophomore. She is studying environmental studies and lives in the Silicone Valley of California with her boyfriend. Originally from San Jose, California, Monika grew up with her self-employed parents and a 16-year-old sister.

Although she did not want to share her screen name, Monika created it to mark her recent weight loss. She heard about the pro-ED community from her best friend who “used to read these blogs for amusement.” With Internet access at home and at work, she goes online everyday to visits three pro-ED blogs. In order to keep her pro-ED blogging private, Monika blogs when she is alone:

[I blog] on my laptop or I use my boyfriend’s computer. I will delete the [browser] history so he can’t get back to it… I can’t blog in front of anyone. The layout [of my blog] alone is pretty obvious, [and] then there is my weight ticker and my calorie intake [on the screen]. [They] would be dead giveaway[s]. I usually do it in the morning before people get to work, when the office is dead, and at home when my boyfriend isn’t around.

How long she spends updating her blog depends on her mood: “I might spend [from] half an hour up to two hours because I try to respond to all the comments. If someone is going to take the time to encourage me, I want to reciprocate.”

Monika gained weight in elementary school after her family moved to a new town. Into middle and high school, she continued to struggle with her weight and often felt peer pressure to be thinner: “[During] freshman year, I had my first boyfriend…[who] told me he wasn’t physically attracted to me. [He] told me I needed to work out, and [he] would check
everyday to see if I had worked out.” Now, Monika feels her body image and self-esteem are much better. Having recently lost a significant amount of weight, she hopes to keep it off so she can get into modeling: “I never want to be fat again. Once I lose weight, I am tattooing my rib cage. That way, I won’t gain weight and ruin the tattoo!”

While Monika has not been diagnosed with an eating disorder, she believes she would be categorized as having EDNOS for her eating practices of restricting, bingeing, fasting, overexercising, and use of laxatives and diet pills. She has had these habits for three years, but “I know when I should stop. I am not going to get Mary-Kate [Olsen] status. I do not don’t think that is attractive” (Figure 5). Her family and friends are aware of her dieting, but have told her not too lose too much weight.

The Mass Media and the Thin Ideal

The first research question posed in this study asks to what extent pro-ED individuals think their eating disorders and/or dieting habits are driven by mass media portrayals of the thin ideal. In the process of interviewing these 10 women four themes continued to surface, which fully suggest these bloggers believe their eating disorders and/or dieting habits are directly driven by their desire to be as thin as the women they see in mass media.

Pre-Internet Journaling

One such theme was the desire to express admiration for thinness in the journals they kept before these women became regular bloggers. All 10 participants kept journals or collected images and collages of the thin ideal before turning to blogging to express and communicate their thoughts about weight and eating practices. These journals were used for years as outlets for frustration, admiration, and inspiration. As many of the women describe, these journals served as “lifelines,” a way of keeping their sanity before they had blogs.
For Alyssa, having a place to release her thoughts that build from disordered eating and her desperate attempts to emulate the thin ideal is essential:

It’s more of a—and I’m going to sound crazy—voice…a voice in your head that is constantly talking. So I put [that voice] in a book, along with images of [what I thought] I should look like. I’ve taken them out maybe twice in the past three months. Each time I do, I am reminded of how sick I’ve been. I wrote things like, ‘You’re fat and ugly,’ ‘You’re a stupid whore,’ ‘You need to do this many hours of exercise,’ ‘Don’t eat!’—stuff like that…I have books and books full of magazine clip-outs of that and the whole Mary-Kate [Olsen] thing (media coverage of her eating disorder).

With many female celebrities receiving coverage in mass media for being too thin, Alyssa admits it is difficult not to stay up to date with the latest weight “scandals”: “I hate admitting this, [but] I do follow all that…to see their progress.” This type of print media coverage encourages Alyssa to write and paste clippings on her journals. Even in the midst of recovery, Alyssa finds herself comparing her body with those of the “too thin” celebrities and other personalities pasted in her journals:

I hate to admit it, but I still compare myself [with those in the clippings]…I don’t know why. I still want to see my ribs and the bones in my back. I would like to think I’m on the path to recovery, but I know that in the past couple of weeks I’ve relapsed pretty bad.

Alyssa believes her eating habits were and continue to be driven by the skinny types glamorized in the media.

Lilly agrees, noting that she “works to achieve a body similar to the models [seen] the media. My personal favorite is Alessandra Ambrosio of Victoria’s Secret. She has my [idea of the] perfect body.” Lilly, too, kept journals before creating her blog and still refers to them every so often. But Lilly prefers the online journal because of the isolation she experiences when she is unable to communicate with others. Online,

...you can ask a question, and others will [provide] their opinion without judging you. They are the perfect friends. You can ask anything, even boy problems or school
problems. It’s the ultimate stress reliever—being able to talk to people without the ‘Oh my God!’ expressions…I can type out my frustrations instead of having to get a hand cramp.

The models of Victoria’s Secret also embody Daisy’s thin ideal:

Working at Victoria’s Secret, we put up all [the] marketing. We have this gigantic picture of Giselle [Bündchen] (Figure 5) or Adriana [Lima] with their long skinny legs. They also have long thin arms and really flat stomachs…I see it everyday—that’s why I can go through work without eating anything. On the way down to the cafeteria, there’s Kate Moss modeling a watch. [Just] as you’re going down [to eat], there she is, staring at you, [saying] “Don’t eat those French fries!”

The pressure to be thin is so palpable in the Victoria’s Secret store where she works that Daisy feels

a lot of people there [are affected]…I had a cinnamon bun one day and [one of my managers] said, ‘Do you really need all that fat?’ A lot of the girls there are extremely, extremely thin. I don’t know if they have eating disorders; I haven’t really asked them, but oh my gosh, they must be smaller than [size] double zero!

The pressure to emulate such models initially sparked Daisy’s journal-writing years ago:

I had my very first thinspo page in [one of those journals]. Have you ever heard of the clothing company Alloy? [Their catalog] has a bunch of pictures of girls in bikinis [that]…I cut out [and pasted in] my journal. On the pictures, I [wrote] the weights I thought they were, like 100 pounds or 99 pounds. My first journal entries [were about] what I was going through or feeling. It was just a big scrapbook. I cut out words in magazines that would say things like ‘Gorgeous,’ ‘Perfect,’ ‘Yes, you can change!’[together with] pictures from magazines and the Internet. I even have a clothes tag that said ‘XS’ (size extra small) [that I included]…My second journal has entries like, ‘Yesterday I saw my therapist’ and ‘I had coffee for breakfast, yogurt for lunch, and a sleeping pill for dinner.’ Now, I do the same things online [on my blog].

Agynees places Victoria’s Secret supermodel Giselle Bündchen at the top of her list of thin bodies to aspire to as well. In general, her aspirations mirror those she gleaned from media messages: “The perfect female body is something thin, but not too thin like…Calista Flockhart’s. They have to have some flesh, but still show off nice collarbones and
hipbones—shapely but thin [like] Gisele Bündchen before she quit smoking or Gemma Ward before she put on weight.” What purpose do these journals serve? According to Agynees,

Sometimes [they] help me keep on track or get back on track [when] I grab a handful of magazines and flip through the pictures, cutting out thinspo. Then I’ll put [them] together like a collage…I would start [a journal], then fuck up, and start a new one. [I] had to start anew each time. I think I ended up with about seven journals.

Although she still peruses her journals “from time to time,” Agynees moved her photo collecting and writing online “because it became too much of a hassle [to] keep up with the [journals] I had.”

Before turning to blogging, Marie also maintained a journal and still updates one in which she collects images: “I kept a paper-and-pen journal which I used as a food diary to track the number of calories I took in. I still use a thinspo journal and collect magazines to cut pictures from.” Marie said she “definitely” works to achieve a body similar to the thin ones she sees in the media: “I strive to be like the people I see. They inspire me…Most successful women are thin. Being thin seems to be a necessity.”

Autumn recites what constitutes the ideal female body type, examples of which are not lacking in the media:

The idealized female form is pretty much thin, boyish, with large breasts stuck on the front, tall, leggy, not much in the way of hips or butt. The ‘ideal form’ has so saturated our society that I think it’d be impossible for [this] not to influence you some what. Who hasn’t looked at a picture of Gisele [Bündchen] and wished they could look more like her?

Autumn’s journal attests to the media’s influence on her eating habits and her desire to share these habits with others through blogging: “I’ve always kept a paper food diary, [and I] still do…Paper is easier for food tracking because I don’t always have my computer with
me…[Journaling] online is easier; more convenient for writing thoughts. Sometimes it’s nice to have someone else read what you wrote and give you feedback.”

Michelle’s idea of the thin ideal is representative of what many women hold in the pro-ED community:

The perfect female body in our culture is super thin, of course. I do want to look like the models and actresses I see in the media. What’s funny is that I know they aren’t real. I’m not stupid. I know I’m being manipulated and that the media’s narrow idea of beauty isn’t the truth.

Michelle understands the false expectations media depictions impose on women, but her desire “to be able to wear whatever I want and look good” outweighs this consideration. Michelle kept journals to reflect on the topic and to visualize her personal thin ideal with photographic collages cut from magazines. These are supplemented by detailed accounts of her calorie intake. The journals do more for Michelle than just track her weight. Her journals, she confesses, contain “more personal stuff…than my Xanga[.com page because] no one can find it.” Although Michelle still refers to these collections, her choice to go online was mainly for convenience: “I think it’s part of the electronic age; everything’s going paperless.”

Although she did not keep a journal, Alexis did use her bedroom walls to vent her desires and admirations:

I never kept a weight-loss journal before Xanga[.com]. I did decorate my room with magazine pages of pretty, thin women, mostly for decoration [but also] to remind me of what I wanted to look like. I still decorate my room with fashion pictures which, of course, [feature] all beautiful, thin women…

To Alexis, “the majority [of females in the media] are very thin…Ashley Olsen has the perfect female body.”
Before joining the pro-ED community, Monika did start writing on paper…I specifically remember writing an entry one day after my mom and I had a fight over my weight. I was up in my room writing how much I hated her, and my plan to lose weight and get skinny—really skinny—and then kill myself. It was really hard for me to deal with this because not only was [weight] a problem in my social life at school, [but I had to come] home to it…So my entries were very teen ‘angsty.’ They were mostly filled with comments about me being fat, and wishing I could be skinny…very little caloric intake records and stuff.

Monika still looks at her journals at least once a month. She moved to the Internet because “it’s easier and more accessible. I don’t have to carry anything around with me.”

Ella kept journals as part of her weight-loss plan. In the past, she “cut out magazine pictures and occasionally kept food journals. [Today], I usually keep a food journal to track calories. [My] online journal is a communication network rather than just a personal record.” Ella said she “absolutely” works to achieve a body similar to the thin bodies she sees in the media: “Most celebrities are very thin compared to mainstream Americans. I love to see the little frail, delicate celebrities.”
What specific media channels bolster these women’s notions of the thin ideal?
According to these young women, they are mainly television, magazines, and books.

**Influence of Television**

What these women consider to be ideal body types are seen mostly in nine favorite prime-time TV programs mentioned by the participants. These are *America’s Next Top Model*, *Family Guy*, *Gossip Girl*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *House*, *Law & Order*, *Nip/Tuck*, *The OC*, and *The Office*. Of these, *America’s Next Top Model*, *House*, and *Grey’s Anatomy* were characterized as favorites. *America’s Next Top Model* is a reality TV series that selects 10 to 14 contestants to compete for the title of the country’s top model with an opportunity to start a modeling career. *House* and *Grey's Anatomy* are both medical drama series involving personal and professional situations among doctors, nurses, and patients.

*America’s Next Top Model* has been criticized for its ambivalent stance on what makes the ideal body shape. At times, it has asked contestants to mimic the stereotypical bulimic and anorexic model in photo shoots. At other times, the show parades it’s well known plus-sized model Toccara Jones in media outlets (Stevens, 2004; iFit&Healthy.com, 2006). *Grey’s Anatomy* star Ellen Pompeo has earned criticism for being too thin. The show itself has been labeled “demeaning to women” for portraying female characters as “weak, needy, and oversexed” (Stanley, 2007, ¶ 7).

Lilly, Michelle, Ella, and Monika chose *America’s Next Top Model* as one of their favorite shows on television. Also on Lilly’s list was *CSI*. Michelle mentioned *Project Runway*, *The Office*, and *Law & Order* as favorites of hers. Ella chose *Nip/Tuck* as her other most often watched television show. Autumn also listed *The Office*, *Law & Order*, *30 Rock*,
and OZ as some of her TV choices. Monika prefers Gilmore Girls, John & Kate Plus 8, and The Simpsons.

Daisy, Marie, and Lilly all chose House as a favorite show. In addition to her favorites, Daisy also watches Gossip Girl, Monk, and Futurama. Marie included The OC, Desperate Housewives, and 24.

Alyssa, Agynees, and Alexis all chose Grey’s Anatomy as a favorite television show. Alyssa also mentioned watching Jon & Kate Plus 8 and Little People Big World. Agynees includes Gossip Girl, Family Guy, The OC, and Gilmore Girls on her list. Alexis’ favorites are Seinfeld, Family Guy, and Nip/Tuck.

Aside from these shows, the women also report getting inspiration to be thin from watching Lifetime movies, after-school specials, and other “made-for-TV” films on the topic of eating disorders. To Alyssa, these films, which are produced to create awareness, are really serving the opposite of their intended purpose: “[These] movies show [that having an eating disorder is] a bad thing. But…I still watch those and they fuel me. [For example], I downloaded [the HBO documentary Thin], and I still watch it, [and] it makes me want to lose more weight.”

Alyssa is not alone. Eight other women also watch eating disorder-related shows and “made-for-TV” films. Marie included the documentary Thin on her list as well: “Yes, I have watched [it], and I have read ED[-related] books like Thin by Grace Bowman…I am not sure what it is that draws me to them, but it is probably [giving me] inspiration in some twisted way. [It gives me] tips and guidance.”

Although she does not normally watch eating disorder-related shows, Lilly has seen the documentary Thin out of curiosity, but she limits her general television viewing to avoid
becoming “addicted.” Agynees has a similar outlook: “[I] don’t really watch them because I don’t have cable [TV]. If there is a documentary on eating disorders and I happen to [see] it, then I’ll watch. But, otherwise, I don’t go out of my way.”

Michelle has watched the documentary Thin, too, and views it as a means to track her health:

Oh yeah! I’ve watched Thin on YouTube[.com] maybe a dozen times. I’m not sure why I like that kind of thing so much. I guess it’s comforting to see I’m not ‘in trouble’ yet, that I’m still ok. It’s like having something to compare yourself to. Something to point at as proof that I’m not sick.

Ella, too, visited YouTube.com to watch Thin.

I’m very drawn to movies and documentaries on eating disorders. I’m intrigued by them because I want to see how other people are affected by self-esteem issues and eating disorders. I didn’t have HBO when the Thin documentary aired, so I went so far as to look it up and watch the whole thing on YouTube[.com]. Occasionally, I’ll stop by YouTube[.com] and watch bits and pieces of it again.

Daisy began watching Gossip Girl solely because she found an article online about a new plotline in the show involving eating disorders:

I started [watching] because I was…online searching for [ED-related topics], and I [learned that]…one of the characters has bulimia. So I watched it because [I watch] anything with eating disorders…I watch all these specials from Lifetime. I know when they’re all coming on.

Alexis can relate to this media exposure habit:

[I watch or read] anything that…deals with anorexia and bulimia, whether it be [TV] shows, documentaries, or books…It started off mostly [out of] curiosity…Now, I like to see what the girls have gone through and how they relate to me in any way. Another somewhat twisted reason why I like to watch or read them so much is the fact that I can get new ideas and tips.

The few eating disorder-related films Autumn has watched tended to upset her rather than inspire:
Some are more well-done than others. I like most of them. The anorexia ones sometimes make me really mad at myself because I failed at anorexia, and I hate myself for not being able to do what the girls in the movies [did], which sounds really dumb. It is, but it’s true.

Monika has seen some eating disorder-related shows on YouTube.com, but has not watched any on television.

**Influence of Magazines**

The participants also report that they thrive on the thin images they see in magazines. While a variety of magazines were mentioned as favorites, three publications appeared as the most read: *Vogue, Cosmopolitan,* and popular culture tabloids in general. *Vogue* was listed by seven of the 10 women as their favorite magazine. *Cosmopolitan* was named by five, and popular culture tabloids were chosen by four as a favorite reading material.

*Vogue* is a high fashion- and high society-themed magazine aimed at female readers ages 18- to 30-years-old. *Cosmopolitan* is a fashion-, beauty-, and sexuality-themed magazine targeting female readers 18- to 24-years-old. *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan* receive regular criticism for valuing low body weight and airbrushing front-cover models, respectively (Rowland, 2005; Darnton, 1996). The genre of popular culture tabloids generally contain reported and/or speculated “news” stories surrounding the personal lives of celebrities.

Daisy, Alyssa, Ella, Lilly, Michelle, Alexis, and Monika all listed *Vogue* as one of their favorite magazines. Daisy peruses *Vogue* “mostly just for the pictures. It’s pretty good thinspo,” but she also mentioned *Seventeen* and tabloids as favorites as well. Alyssa reads *Cosmopolitan* and what she calls “those tabloid, trash magazines.” Ella, too, included tabloids as favorite reading material. Lilly’s other favorite magazine is *Fitness.* Michelle’s
are Vegetarian Times, Self, Shape, and Cosmopolitan. Nylon, Cosmopolitan, and Flaunt were Alexis’ other favorites. Autumn also chose Cosmopolitan and Elle, as did Monika. Agynees regularly reads the Australian magazines Gossip and Fashion, while Marie prefers the European tabloids Heat and Closer.

**Influence of Books**

From novels to memoirs, books are popular culture outlets that address thinness and can also serve as a means of emotional expression and escapism for these participants. Four titles were repeatedly mentioned: Wasted (an eating disorder memoir), Skinny Bitch (a diet how-to book), White Oleander (fiction) and the Harry Potter series (fiction).

Alyssa, Ella, Alexis, and Autumn all listed Wasted as a favorite book. To Ella and Lilly, White Oleander and Skinny Bitch are also important reading. Harry Potter was a favorite choice for Agynees and Daisy, who also read Stick Figure (an eating disorder memoir). Marie listed Thin (an eating disorder memoir) and the Gossip Girl book series as good reading material. Michelle prefers books not related to eating disorders and enjoys the authors Barbara Kingsolver, John Steinbeck, Chuck Palanuik, and David Sedaris. Although she has time these days only for her textbooks, Monika looks forward to reading a few books that touch upon eating disorders in the near future.

**The Use of “Thinspiration”**

From these outlets, the participants derive thinspiration or “thinspo,” the online manifestation of this visual obsession with thin female bodies and eating disorder-related practices. Thinspiration, according to them, serves various purposes, but the overall message remains the same. As Lilly notes,
It inspires you to be thin. It doesn’t just have to be skinny girls. Everyone has a different perspective of thin... Some girls [post] ‘healthspo,’ [images of] all ‘muscley’ girls. It gives you that extra boost to work out in the morning. [When] you’re about to take a bite of that giant apple pie smothered in whip cream and you look at thinspiration, you realize, ‘Wow, this pie has as many calories as a [McDonald’s®] Big Mac® meal. I highly doubt this beautiful girl can stay beautiful if she eats this many calories in one sitting. I think I’ll put the food down.’

Thinspiration, however, is not always encouraging. To Lilly, thinspiration can become more of a source of frustration than a weight-loss mechanism because “there’s always a thinner ‘thinspo’ girl you can find. So, even when you reach your goal, it’s never enough.”

Alyssa understands the struggle:

It’s just like looking at a fashion magazine and saying, ‘Oh, I like that dress’ or ‘Oh, I like that bracelet’ or ‘I like that pair of shoes,’ but you know you can’t afford [them]. You know you’re not going to get there, and you don’t want to spend all that money, but it’s still something you aspire for... In the unhealthy mindset, [thinspiration] helps [you lose weight]. But the other half of me who wants to be healthy and okay with the way I look [knows] it’s very hurtful.

For Michelle, thinspiration is no different from other socially acceptable means of losing weight:

I love thinspiration. It gives you an actual visual to aim for. It’s like posting an affirmation on your mirror or fridge—a constant visual reminder of why you do what you do... It’s what I look at or think about instead of... thinking about or eating something that’s bad for me.

However, Michelle acknowledges that “it isn’t realistic to want to put your face on someone else’s body.” Ella agrees, noting that thinspiration is “often unrealistic.” But its ability to help her reach her weight-loss goals keeps her actively posting thinspiration on her blog: “If you really want something, seeing it is going to make you desire it that much more.”

Agynees understands the negative effect of posting such images but claims that comparing herself with other female bodies enables her to keep track of her progress:
I think [the images] just make me feel fatter and want to get skinny…I get depressed and would start bingeing. I sometimes compare myself to them, and when I see they have put on weight, it makes me feel better. Like, ‘Ha, they have put on weight and look fat, and I’m still skinny.’ I think the media just makes girls like us think that if we aren’t thin, we aren’t going to get anywhere in our lives…[as if] you have to be thin to achieve greatness. You don’t see many fat models or fat actresses trying to start in the business.

Marie sees thinspiration as a tactic to reinforce dieting:

Thinspiration is a method of inspiring us to do better. It shows us what we can become…If I am feeling weak, I look at thinspiration to inspire myself back into fasting and/or restricting.

For Alexis, admiring thinspiration is natural:

Everyone thinks the women in these pictures are beautiful and perfect. Naturally, you’d want to look as much like them as possible…I collect pictures of beautiful thin women on my computer. Some are celebrities, some are models, and some are just real girls. I look at these pictures every day as ‘thinspiration.’ I know I don’t have the body type many of these women have, but I still feel I can work for it.

Although Autumn chooses not to post thinspiration on her blog, she does visit other blogs to view it:

I don’t really like the idea, in general, that you need to be ‘motivated’ to continue your ED. My ‘motivation’ for doing what I do is intense self-hatred. I guess thinspiration adds to that, though…Occasionally, I visit [thinspiration] not really for ‘inspiration’…I just like looking at it sometimes to compare myself to those girls.

Daisy, too, has a difficult relationship with thinspiration:

I don’t necessarily enjoy looking at the pictures, but it’s more like an obsession…If I find pictures that I really like…then I’ll post [them]. Like if somebody has really thin legs or shoulders…[But] sometimes it has a negative effect [on me] because when I look at them, I give up on losing weight because I feel like I can’t do it…It’s unachievable. Then I’ll go and binge or something.

Daisy’s visual obsession with size and weight is not limited to just photographs. She finds herself with the urge to touch the thin body parts of women she encounters in real life:
I was in choir with this really, really thin girl, and I would just go up and touch her arm and say, ‘I love your shirt!’ You know? Just so I could touch her. I’d find anything I could say…just so I could pretend to hug her or something.

Daisy also finds she can lose weight by removing excess body hair: “I feel that if I take a shower and shave everything, [I’ll lose about] half a pound [as if] that hair has weight that I need to shave off.”

Monika posts thinspiration on her blog. She feels pressured to look like the thin ideal she sees in the media because she believes others expect this from her:

The media is where most of the inspiration comes from…[The media] brainwashes everyone…about whatever ‘sexy’ is…Men see a hot girl on TV, and then their girlfriends don’t seem to compare. So the girlfriends start working their ass[es] off to [be] close to [what they think men want]…Thinspiration just reminds you that this is what you could be. All you have to do is work for it...Who wouldn’t want to put in a little hard work for big rewards? My goal is to get a body like Jessica Alba’s—talk about Hollywood’s effect on people—so I definitely have another 20 pounds to go.

**Interpersonal Communication and the Thin Ideal**

While mass media exposure has an obvious effect, these women’s admiration for and imitation of thinness are reinforced by interpersonal interactions. The second research question considers to what extent pro-ED bloggers feel their eating disorders and habits are driven by interpersonal pressure, specifically from mothers, siblings, and online or offline friends.

*Patterns of Mother-Daughter Interaction*

In Alyssa’s household, being thin was always valued due to her family’s deep interest in weight loss:

My mom and even my mom’s family are very tall and really gorgeous [people]. I don’t know why they want to lose weight—that’s just always been a big thing…My sister and I complain that my mom is in her 50s and has these amazingly gorgeous legs. And we don’t. My mom…[takes] diet pills, exercises and eats right…I want to say my mom has had an eating disorder her whole life…probably EDNOS because
she doesn’t throw up. I know that for a fact. She does have a tendency to go on huge binges, or not eat for two days, or eat [the] minimum, like [just] candy, throughout the day. That has affected her metabolism…No one has questioned it because of the way she looks. When she was my age, she was 90 pounds…[But she’s] 5’7, [so] that can’t be healthy.

While her mother never denied Alyssa certain foods or placed her on diets, her mother often comments about Alyssa’s body: “[She never said], ‘You can’t have that candy’ when I was younger, but definitely throughout high school, there were a lot of comments, such as ‘Oh, you have some fat here. You still need to work out.’” Even today, with her family aware of her four-year eating disorder, Alyssa does not feel the atmosphere has changed much when she visits home: “Even though they (her mother and sister) know stuff [about my eating disorder], they still point things out.”

Lilly’s mother has a history of dieting and disordered eating as well, and dinnertime in her family changed as she aged:

We always ate at the table…I always had to eat everything on my plate no matter how much I hated it—spaghetti squash comes to mind…Then, when I was 12, my mom stopped cooking dinner because she was always at bingo. [She] and my dad were also fighting a lot. [As a result,] I ate a lot of Ichiban® and Kraft® dinner[s].

As Lilly grew older, her eating habits reflected those of her mother:

I learned from the best. In fact, funny story, I never even considered being bulimic or anorectic until one day [when]…she was having a garage sale. I lifted this skirt and just couldn’t stop laughing. [I asked], ‘Mom, what the hell is this thing? It could barely fit my thigh!’ And [she said], ‘That is a skirt I wore at your age. I was anorexic. I didn’t puke or anything, I just didn’t eat.’ That’s where I got the idea to purge. It was genius!

Lilly feels her disordered eating is a reflection of her mother’s struggle with body image and self-esteem:

We all know my mom is [the reason] why I would ever be [considered] fucked up…Hating my body is a direct result of hearing my mother say she hates herself almost everyday…My mom’s terrible. I can’t remember a single time growing up
when my mother said ‘I look good today’… She was always crying and screaming about how disgusting she was. [She was] always on a new diet pill… When I turned 15, I really wanted to help her, so we got gym memberships. We went for one month. She stopped going because ‘it wasn’t working.’ We tried a new gym, Curves®. But I hated it, so I quit. She went there for about four or five months. I was so proud of her. Then she quit because, again, it wasn’t working. I talked her into [joining] another gym. Yet, again, she quit after a couple months. I would try to get her [to] walk every evening. I’d drop all my plans just so she would go for a walk [with me]; just to get her moving. I would cook her meals… so she would eat healthy. But whenever my back was turned, she would eat a million chocolate bars! I tried all my life to help my mother lose weight so I could finally hear her say ‘I look good today,’ So, not only did I fail myself [because] I’m fat again, I [also] failed her. I can’t even make my own mother feel beautiful.

Michelle recounts that “every day as a kid, all the way through high school, I ate until I was full…I hadn’t quite made the connection between what I ate and how I looked.”

Michelle’s mother was heavy when I was younger, but when I was about 18, she lost a ton of weight. Now she and my sister go to the gym all the time. My mom is really interested in being healthy… I don’t know if my mom currently keeps track of her calories, [but] I know she did when she was losing [weight].

Michelle now feels she and her mother can “relate on the level of living a healthy lifestyle [because] both of us went through a period of being overweight and eating junk.” Now that Michelle has lost weight, her mother has begun to comment that “I’m ‘too thin,’ but she’s not big, either.”

In Ella’s life, there were—and still are—“a lot of overweight people” in the family and “some with diabetes.” In Ella’s home, dinner was “either a huge home cooked meat-and-potatoes meal or fast food shit, and we always had to clean our plates. We [were allowed] snacks and sodas… as we pleased.” Ella’s mother openly dieted and struggled with other personal issues: “My mom was always a yo-yo dieter and was always overweight. Still is, actually… Nothing ever works for her… She also has clinical depression and has battled low
self-esteem for years…I don’t want to end up like her.” Ella confides they “always had a stressful relationship…I didn’t like to talk to her about anything, or even see her for that matter. I think—on top of her own issues [that] affect[ed] our relationship—she resented me for that.”

Daisy’s mother was open about losing weight, too. The anecdotes her mother narrated while Daisy grew up now stick in Daisy’s mind as signs of her mother’s own disordered eating:

…sometimes she’ll tell me, ‘When I was in high school, my dad said to me ‘You barely eat enough to keep a bird alive’—things like that. She talks about how her friend used to be anorexic, and how when she was on the track team, her coach said she must not be a good enough runner if she still has her period.

These stories continued after Daisy was diagnosed with an eating disorder:

She just kind of shared more information with me, like [how] her friend used to go get a Mars® bar and a Diet Coke®, and then go throw it up everyday after school. She would tell me stories I hadn’t heard [of] before until after she found out about [my eating disorder].

Daisy’s mother desired being thin, something Daisy naturally followed as an adolescent:

In sixth grade, I was on a Slim-Fast® diet by the first week of school because my mom was on it. I would always steal her Slim-Fast® and take it to school for lunch. I think she knew because her Slim-Fast® kept disappearing…Looking back now, Slim-Fast® cans are like cans of lard. It’s like a whole entire meal swished into a can. Why would you want to eat less with more calories?…but I [thought], ‘Diet! Oh, yay!’

Daisy said dinner at home was always whatever. You ate [what] was cooked, but you didn’t have to finish it. Now the older girls eat whatever whenever. We could have ice cream for breakfast if we wanted [to]. Our eight-year-old brother gets to pick his own breakfast and lunch as long as it’s a breakfast or lunch food.

Today, Daisy said her mother remains body conscious and regularly diets:
She [says], ‘Oh, I don’t want my fat rolls hanging out’ when we go [buy] bikinis, so she gets the tankini. I look at her honeymoon pictures and she’s fairly thin. Now, she’s not necessarily large or fat, but her midsection is kind of hefty from having kids and everything. So she’s always going on diets and this and that. The first diet pills I tried, I got from her stash. [Whenever she sees] commercials for pills [on TV, they will appear] in the cabinet all of the sudden.

Agynees experienced a similar relationship with her mother. “Growing up, she never told me I was fat or shouldn’t eat things. It was the other way around, really. When I was most comfortable with my body image—from ages 14 to 17—I would tease my mum for being fat and flabby.” In Agynees’ family, dinner was strictly eaten at the table, but as she got older, “it was always in front of the TV [or] wherever.” Agynees describes her mother as having gone “through a tough time. She lost heaps of weight to the point where she didn’t eat. We thought she was anorexic, but she is fine now, I think. She has put on weight and eats regularly, so I suppose she is fine.” Agynees now feels she and her mother have “the same frame of mind—we both have issues with our body but aren’t actually fat.”

Although Marie assesses her family as “normal with weight issues” and has no eating disorder history, her relationship with her mother has, at times, felt convoluted: “She never said I should put on weight, even when I was quite thin. [Yet] she tends to agree when I say I should lose weight.” Marie thinks her eating habits resulted from some additional complications in her family as she grew older: “When I was quite young, we used to sit around the table [to eat]…Meal times were quite strict…But then I became vegetarian, my mum remarried, and everything changed. I made my own food and decided what I ate.”

Alexis felt tense toward her mother about food selections and weight as an adolescent:

I think she got concerned when I was bigger than most of the girls in my ballet class around the time I was 11 to 13…It was usually hard to find a proper time at night
when the four of us could be home to eat together. Dinner was very informal. I usually ate sitting in front of the TV and...[I ate] what I wanted. I would usually get a second helping of something, usually my favorite dish...Although [my mother] never told me to watch what I ate or that I wasn’t thin enough, I could always sense [her] disapproval when I ate junk food or took seconds at dinner...Now she is worried about me wanting to get too thin. She thinks I am ‘battling with throwing up’ and asks me about it almost daily. I live 3,000 miles away, so it doesn’t really affect me as much as it would if I still lived at home.

Alexis’ mother “was very thin all of her life, until after she had kids. [Then] she filled out a bit.” Thinness remained a topic in the family growing up: “My dad’s younger sister used to have some sort of eating disorder, but I have never learned much about it. I don’t even know if she was actually diagnosed. I just remember everyone worrying about her being too thin.” Today, Alexis is the one pointing out her family’s poor eating habits: “It disgusts me when they don’t buy [products that are] reduced fat, sugar free, soy, or meat alternatives. It makes me sad that there are healthier alternatives they completely ignore.”

Autumn’s mother did not exert any pressure to be thin:

She was always positive about [my weight], telling me I was beautiful as I was, encouraging healthy eating and exercise...She taught me and my siblings that weight was a personal thing, not something you judge someone on...We usually ate dinner together as a family probably four to five days a week, at least. My mother would cook, and it was very organized. Sometimes my parents [said] we would have to go to bed without dinner, but I can’t remember that actually happening.

Although her mother encouraged her to feel good about her body, Autumn’s mother followed a strict dieting regimen for herself:

I sensed that [weight] was an issue for her even though she never discussed it with me...[She] has always been slightly overweight and constantly on a diet...She mostly restricted, eating low-fat or diet version of everything. [She] very rarely ate sweets or desserts. I don’t know of any use of diet pills or fasting, but that doesn’t mean it didn’t or doesn’t happen. She’s been exercising a lot lately and has lost some weight from it. She bought low-fat everything when I was growing up. We never had junk food or soda in the house. I internalized the attitude that sugar and fat are bad. I would go over to friends’ houses and basically binge on the ‘forbidden foods’ I wasn’t allowed [to eat at home]. Now, I have the same feeling: Get as much as you
can and eat them all, but [later] feel guilty because it’s bad and you have to get rid of it [by purging].

Autumn’s aunt practices similar habits: “She’s known on that side of the family as ‘the one with the issues.’ She’s very, very thin, easily in the anorexic range. She eats very slowly, and always complains that she took too much food. She smokes like crazy, too.”

Although Monika’s family has no history of eating disorders, weight and body size were large issues in her household growing up. Her family ate only during mealtimes, and there was “no eating numerous snacks [after] school.” As Monica grew older, she struggled with her mother’s demands:

It was terrible [during] late middle school and early high school. She would tell me I wouldn’t get [an] allowance until I worked out. [I] couldn’t watch TV [unless] I worked out. [She] wouldn’t let me eat junk food I wanted. So I would sneak it to my room when she was at work at night. I would stuff my face really fast so I could [eat a lot in] less time. The whole time [I was doing this,] she knew. We talked about it later. She just didn’t know what to do. She did try the best she knew how. She was overweight [for] most of my childhood. When I was 15, she lost a lot of weight. She weighed what I do now, and walked around in short shorts, all proud of it. I secretly hated it because I was mad my mom had a better body than me. [It was] around [that time] when I [started] kickboxing.

**Weight and Dieting Among Siblings**

While Lilly, Agynees, Ella, and Marie experienced no pressure from sisters to lose weight, their relationships with their brothers were a different story. Lilly often felt distant from her brothers:

I have two brothers. My little brother would beat me up all the time and mentally abuse me…My older brother watched most of it happening, just laughed and stayed in his room. Sometimes he would join in. His nickname for me was ‘Big Bertha’ because of my huge ass, even though I was [only] about 100 pounds. Today, we all get along fine, but I live 15 hours away, [so] it’s easy to be nice when we [seldom] see each other.

Agynees was teased by her brother growing up: “He used to call me fat all through
my childhood, up until the age of 13…[Now,] he says I’ve lost heaps of weight and that I’m not fat anymore.” Ella, too, had a strained relationship with her two brothers due to their age differences: “They always played together, but I never really had much to do with them. We’re closer now that I’m married and don’t live at home, if you can consider occasionally speaking to one another ‘close.’” Marie has no sisters, but her brother “always tells me I don’t need to lose weight, [although] he’s very thin himself…I just want them (my family) to think I am thin.”

Autumn, Monika, Michelle, Alyssa, Daisy, and Alexis grew up with younger or older sisters. Autumn always felt competitive with her younger sister: “[She] was larger than me for several years. I always got some kind of delight at being thinner even though I was older. Now we’re about the same [in weight], and I hate it. I want to be smaller than her, as dumb and petty as that is.”

Growing up, Monika and her younger sister were both overweight. Monika has recently inspired her sister to lose weight as well:

My sister was [overweight] until the end of elementary school, like myself. I think it may be a mixture of genes and bad eating habits in the family…Going through high school is hard enough. Going through it fat is even worse…I think my sister got fat because I was [too]. I’m happy she is losing [weight] because I have. I am a big role model to her and I am flattered by it, which is why I try to keep her from finding out when I make wrong decisions, like how I restricted.

While Monika does not want her sister to mimic her habits, she does encourage her to diet and has suggested friendly competition:

I told her she has to eat at least 1,200 cals to successfully lose weight…She has lost some weight and is more active and healthy now, so I just hope she keeps it in mind and doesn’t lose control or anything…My sister and I were going to compete to see who would lose more weight, but that had nothing to do with ED or my blog.
Because Monika’s mother’s efforts to get Monika’s sister to lose weight by restricting eating were unsuccessful, her mother now encourages her sister to be active:

She did try to encourage my sister to work out with her for a while by asking her to go on walks and do Tae Bo® together. I even tried [to encourage her], too. She was very resistant. Then one day, something must have happened [because she suddenly] realized she wanted to lose weight. She started playing tennis with friends, riding her roller blades, and using the elliptical [machine] at my parent’s house.

Michelle believes her sister just wants to be thin, but her eating habits are really bad…My sister is younger than I am, but I’ve always been smaller than her. It’s the same now, just more pronounced. That is, I’m thinner than I used to be while she’s bigger than she used to be. I’m always trying to get her to eat healthier, but she has some really bad habits. Sometimes I’m tempted to feel superior, but she does really well in a lot of areas that I wish I had talent in, and being skinny isn’t really a skill people will pay you for…

Alyssa’s competition with her sister stems from her longstanding label in the household as “the skinny one”:

My sister [was] heavier, but [recently] she’s dropped a lot of weight, and she is fitting into size five jeans. Now I see her eating only one serving. I’m not talking [about] American servings, but actual nutritional servings. I’m very [quick] to jump to the conclusion [that] she has an eating disorder…because I am competitive, especially with my family. I have to be the smaller one. Hearing them say ‘Oh, you look so skinny’ or ‘Oh, you can gain some weight’ makes me feel good.

Daisy speculates that her sister also has an eating disorder. As a child, Daisy recounts that her younger sister dealt with severe anxiety and experienced a period of weight loss:

I remember seeing her come out of the shower one day…She was literally just skin and bones. And [she was] looking at [herself thinking], ‘That’s scary!’ but [also] looking…with [admiration].

Today, Daisy observes that her sister’s anxiety has lessened, but her fascination with body size remains:

Now [she says,] ‘Oh, my butt looks so huge in these jeans!’ or ‘I don’t fit in my size zeros anymore. I have to wear a size two now.’ She really hardly eats…I’m sure it could be classified as an eating disorder if you go with what the DSMIV [Diagnostic
and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV] says specifically [about] weight requirements. But I’m not sure…[because] when she [does] eat, she eats enough…Sometimes [I tell her], ‘Carrie, I know you throw up.’…Sometimes I think I might just be crazy because I have all these suspicions that other people are purging…because that’s what I do.

Daisy suspects her habits may have had an impact on her sister’s interest in losing weight: “There are times when I’m in the kitchen and I’ll [say things like], ‘You know, that banana’s probably about 105 calories, and that peanut butter you’re putting on there…’ I’ll just start spouting out calorie information.” Now, Daisy hears her sister make similar remarks, and her sister’s growing infatuation with weight loss has sparked jealousy: “There [are] times when she [says], ‘I’m not going to eat that,’ and I get so furious. I [want to say], ‘No, that’s my thing! You can’t do that!’ It’s really strange.” Yet, Daisy continues to comment on her sister’s food choices in an attempt to influence her sister to diet like she does: “I try to press, to make her want to diet. I want someone to be with me doing this…I’ll be there when I hear her throwing up for real.”

Alexis feels the need to be smaller than her sister because of a similar family label:

I was always considered the ‘skinny one’…I have an older sister, 23, who has always been slightly overweight her whole life. She has always been very self-conscious about her body, never able to lose weight. We never really discussed weight issues…[We talked about them] only recently…when we went off to college [and gained weight]. [But] even [those were] pretty nonchalant [comments, such as] ‘Oh, my thighs are huge!’ or ‘Yuck, my arms jiggle,’ or ‘I hate my belly!’ We never really talk about each other’s weight.

To many participants, sibling competition is triggered by being tagged the “little one,” “skinny one,” or “small one.” Alyssa, Michelle, Daisy, and Alexis felt obligated to remain thin because of this. The label became a self-fulfilling prophecy, in a sense, which eventually carried into their friend relationships.
"Friendly" Competition

Alyssa frequently has competitive feelings with her offline female friends. Most of her offline friends are interested in losing weight because “we’re all females. It’s just natural to think that, ‘Oh, I could lose a couple of pounds.” Recently, the competition has intensified:

My roommate has gotten really sick lately, not with an eating disorder, but just in general. She’s lost a lot of weight, and that’s what made me relapse actually. Unfortunately, I am a very competitive person…I can see her shoulder blades and each vertebrae in her back…I do beat myself up about it.

Alyssa is certain, however, that her roommate does not feel the same competitiveness toward her: “For me it’s competitive. For her it’s not. She doesn’t want to be like that, although she does comment about calories, which kills me. I hate hearing about that because I’ve finally been able to escape [that recently], you know?”

Lilly does not feel competitive with her closest offline friend, but she does notice a desire in her friend to want to lose weight:

I only have one friend outside of this computer. She went up to 220 pounds, went to Herbal Magic® (a supplements and weight-loss center), and lost 75 pounds. Yes, she’s preoccupied with losing weight, yet she’s doing it the ‘healthy way.’ [But], I can already tell she’s turning into me because it’s all she thinks about now. They trained her to lose weight, to think of her calories, to exercise constantly, and she has to go in once a week for a weigh-in. If she doesn’t lose weight, they take away her privileges. It’s always on her mind.

Lilly feels the two of them are confidants, but only to an extent: “I’m someone she can talk to about her weight, and she’s the only person I know I can [confide in that] I hate myself. Yet I can’t tell her I throw up or she would, of course, think I’m a freak.” Online, however, competition exists among Lilly and her friends, mainly as an incentive: “We try to compete…to motivate ourselves even more. [But] mainly, we’re all just happy to be friends with each other.”
According to Daisy, however, these online competitions are frequent:

…there [are] these little sites, [such as] ‘Summer Weight-Loss Challenge’…[where] you have to [log] your height, weight goal, what you ate, and all your stats. I participated in one two summers ago. The person in charge had to go to rehab so…I took charge of [it only for] four weeks because I just got really annoyed and bored with it. One girl, one day, said she weighed this much, and then later said she had lost 10 pounds in two days. [I knew] that was a huge lie. If you did that you’d probably be dead!

Competitiveness with friends offline has worked well for Daisy. She thinks her friends share her interest in dieting:

[My friend will] say, ‘Oh, I’m so huge today’ although she’s pretty thin. But she’s gained weight since ninth grade. I’m not sure exactly what she does [to lose weight], but she’ll just have salad for lunch and pick off the croutons. Whenever I talk to her about my eating, she’ll [say], ‘You need to eat!’ [Then] she’ll give me the whole lecture that everyone always does. It kind of annoys me…I’ll get the same thing she gets for lunch, but usually I’ll make it a point to eat less than her. Sometimes, I’ll [make plans] like, ‘I’m going to lose five pounds before I go see Callie for lunch on Wednesday’…I’m not sure what’s happening on her side…Does she notice? Does she even care? I really have no idea.

Ella feels “there is a certain level of competition” among female bloggers “because when you’re obsessed with your appearance, you’re constantly comparing yourself to others…How are they doing? How much do they weigh? I compare myself along those lines.” Ella notices a stronger desire to be thin when she is among her female friends offline as well: “It can be very competitive. If my friends weighed less than me, I would feel really inferior and probably jealous.” She recognizes that her competitive dieting and eating practices have rubbed off on her closest friends: “I’ve noticed that when my two best friends spend more time with me, they’re more preoccupied with their eating habits. [But], I don’t think they ever take it as far as I do.”

Agynees acknowledges she is also competitive with her friends regarding weight: “Sometimes I need to be the skinniest. When people around me put on weight, I feel great
about myself. So, yes, there is competition mainly on my part.”

Marie’s friends are generally concerned about their weight as well:

One has suffered from an ED in the past. They are all thinner than me, but one in particular always wants to be thinner…I would like to be thinner than my friends. It is not an open competition, but definitely one in which I engage.

Online, the atmosphere is the same for Marie: “Mainly, it is a support network, but we constantly engage in competitions to see who can lose the most.”

The same is true in Alexis’ situation:

I think it’s a healthy and friendly competition [online]. I seek out girls with similar heights and weight [as me] so we can motivate and relate to each other. I can’t let them lose more weight. It pushes me to work harder to lose more weight than them.

Offline, her friends appear equally interested in losing weight, but they lack the discipline to do so, in Alexis’ opinion:

Most of my friends say they care about their weight. They complain about the size of their thighs, the rolls on their stomachs, and the double chin they think they’re getting. They complain about it all the time, yet they stuff their faces with candy and pizza, and guzzle down beer most of the time…I feel so strong and in control when I can sit there and sip on water or coffee while my friends stuff their faces with junk. It’s a bit of a competition in my mind—every time they eat something I think, ‘Hmm. She’s gaining. Oh well, I’m losing.’ To me, it’s always a competition of who can eat the least or the healthiest.

While Autumn’s offline friends are not as interested in dieting and weight loss as she is, she is fairly confident they have these desires: “It’s become so normal to worry about ‘looking good’ and ‘eating right’ that I feel most people [think about] that.” When Autumn learns about someone—friend or family member—who is attempting to lose weight “even if [that person is] dieting in a healthy way, I get very competitive. I feel this is my thing; it’s not fair that they are better at it.”

Online, her sense of competition is even more heightened:
Some girl will post pictures [showing] she’s smaller than you, and I hate that. Someone will post stats…mention weights or caloric intake…it’s all very competitive. There’s a little part of us (bloggers) that wants to be the sickest, the thinnest. It’s just a very negative atmosphere in general.

With her close online friends, however, Autumn observes less competition: “Silently, everyone competes with each other. Explicitly though, there’s very little competition between my friends anyway.”

The majority of Michelle’s offline friends “are preoccupied with their physical appearance. One of my best friends used to be bulimic and still struggles with those tendencies…[Who] hasn’t had some kind of body image issue? I have another friend whose weight fluctuates a lot.” Michelle feels more competitive, however, with a friend who was diagnosed as bulimic: “I feel really competitive with her because we’re around the same height and body type. I want to be thinner than she is.” Michelle feels jealousy is common with offline friends: “I think a lot of people outside the community are jealous in a way or want company being fat. This sounds mean, but if being thin is unusual, it makes you special. It makes you [feel like you’re] worth something.”

Online, however, Michelle observes that the competition is less apparent:

I think there’s some competition involved, but not as much as you’d think. People are so varied in their current sizes and weight-loss goals that it’s hard to get very competitive. I still encourage those who are heavier or lighter than me. I just don’t think competition is that big a part of it. It’s more about solidarity.

Monika has been competitive with her best friend offline in the past, but feels that their competition is likely “over with.” Recently, however, Monika noticed her friend becoming more conscious of her caloric intake “ironically, after I lost a good deal of weight and started having some photo shoots. Before that…she stuffed her face constantly with anything and everything and has always been a size triple zero.” Monika thinks these feelings
are largely due to her childhood experiences: “I need to catch up on all the attention I never got throughout my teenage years.”

Monika believes the competition is worse online: “Some blogs can trigger [competition]. Reading about how little someone’s intake was or how they’ve lost two pounds a day can be discouraging. I think that’s what I should be doing—they are winning.”

Overall, Monika feels she is not good with competitions. I never last a day when I fast, so I don’t really try that anymore…Half the girls I’m friends with in the community already [weigh] less than me and [have] better bodies.

**Silenced by the Taboo**

To most of these women, the sense of solidarity discovered in their online community fosters continuous incentive to blog. The third research question posed in this study asks, to what extent pro-ED bloggers feel silenced by the taboo of being too thin in Western culture? And, is this what prompted their blogs? First, it is important for these women to explain how they define the terms “pro-ana,” “pro-mia,” and “pro-ED.” Weight-loss bloggers do not universally identify with these terms. Many have varying definitions of the blogging community to which they belong. Only by comprehending what these terms mean can we fully understand why a blogger turns to the Internet to join an underground community like the pro-ED movement.

**Varying Definitions of Being Pro-ED**

Alyssa does not identify as being pro-ana or pro-mia and dislikes the negative connotations that surround the community:

I avoid [those] terms because they have different connotations. Some people…refer to themselves as pro-whatever because they’ve had an ED for a period of time, and they feel they know a lot about it. There are…Web sites that call themselves pro-
whatever…to give tips, foods that have negative calories, [for example]. I don’t really associate with those because I don’t want anybody else to be in this position. It sucks…I wish a whole new word was used for it…[‘Pro’ suggests] that [someone is] a ‘professional’ on eating disorders, a professional at [being] anorexic, [for instance]…they’re the best at it. Some people do use those terms, and I think it’s ridiculous [because they are basically] trying to kill people…I wish [the sites] wouldn’t be called pro-ana because the term does have such a bad connotation now.

Daisy says not all sites offer tips and inspiration:

For the most part, the whole pro-ana/pro-mia thing means…for example, [that] someone who’s pro-mia would give people tips on how to purge: ‘If you do this, it will work really well.’ I don’t want to be out there showing all these girls how to starve…Some use [the sites to offer tips of] which diet pills will help lose weight. [Others] use the sites [to get] a comforting feeling, to [be able to] express themselves and not really for thinspiration…[Blogging and pro-ED] kind of go together.

Lilly does not identify as pro-ana or pro-mia, but she does see similarities between herself and the women who do:

It means you want to help girls become ana or mia, I suppose. You want them to know its okay, that it’s not a disease, and it will help you become thin. Personally, it’s fucking retarded. If all those girls who are ‘pro’ were to sit down and think ‘Hmm, now would I really want someone to be going through what I do?’…I highly doubt they would be ‘pro.’ Those girls and boys just don’t think about it enough…I know it’s not a good thing. Yet, it’s all I have…Girls see it differently. And yes, I’m similar to other girls [who do identify with these terms]. We all hate our bodies and just want to be thin.

Michelle does not identify as pro-ana or pro-mia and often sees those who do as merely aspiring to be eating disordered:

“I don’t have an eating disorder nor do I think my behaviors are similar to [those who are] eating disordered. A lot of blogs I run into are those [of] ‘wannarexics.’ Some are people with a genuine problem while some [don’t have] any disordered behavior at all. I just do my best not to judge anyone…I don’t know any pro-ED person who doesn’t blog, but that doesn’t mean he/she does not exist…”

Ella sees those who identify as pro-ana or pro-mia as women who attempt to be eating disordered. She calls herself pro-ED:

To me, ‘pro-ED’ or any term along those lines…refers to a group of people who may
or may not have eating disorders, but I know the vibe of the group isn’t going to be recovery. Pro-ana groups are, in all honesty, made up mostly of young girls who have issues but not necessarily eating disorders. If you don’t have an actual eating disorder, recovery isn’t going to be as dire an issue, you know? I guess if I had to fall into a category, it would be [under] pro-ED because I don’t have any interest in changing my habits, and I have no prejudice against others who feel that way.

Agynees does not identify as pro-ana or pro-mia, but she is not against it. I don’t really classify myself as anorexic or bulimic, so I can’t be pro-them. I do think I am pro-ED though… I do know I can associate with most people there. I can even offer [healthy] advice—not that I would follow my own advice…I don’t know of any other pro-ED person [offline]. It’s an anonymous thing.

Marie offers the same insight: “I am not pro-ana or mia, but I do encourage people [who are] on fasts. I would never encourage someone to get into it, but I do encourage those already involved…I think blogging makes you more pro-ED, but being pro-ED doesn’t make you blog.”

Alexis does not consider herself to be pro-ana or pro-mia mainly because she has not been diagnosed as anorexic or bulimic:

I hate when I see pro-ana/mia stuff online. To me, girls that claim they are ‘pro-ana/mia’ are just wishing they were. They don’t understand that being this way isn’t something you beg or ask for. It just happens. I don’t claim to be pro-ana or pro-mia because I have not been diagnosed as either of the two. I do, however, provide others with tips and inspiration. Everyone in the ‘pro-ED’ online community is there to lose weight…I am similar [to them] in that I post my weight, my caloric intake, my screw-ups, and bits of my personal life. But I am different in that I never post pictures of myself or my progress…I don’t think all people with EDs or who are pro-ED have weight-loss blogs, but I wouldn’t really know if they do or [do] not because it’s not something people talk about in the open.

At some point, Autumn was a member of “a lot of pro-ana communities, although I didn’t ever completely agree with them. Near the beginning, I did think it was something I could control.” Now, she believes she is still pretty similar to other people online who write personal journals and suffer from eating disorders, but not very similar to the more mainstream weight-loss bloggers. I
don’t list what I ate or what exercise I did that day. I just talk about what’s going on in my life, which is often related to my eating disorder…I think a lot of the pro-ED thing is online. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t blog or at least visit them regularly who considers themselves pro-ED…The Internet serves [this function] well because it breaks geographical constraints.

Although some women do not define pro-ana/mia bloggers as those in search of and looking to share tips, Monika said “reading others’ tips and help[ing] others with tips” is a definite part of her online activity. She does not consider herself pro-mia.

**Breaking Through Isolation**

This desire to be thin but the lack of ability to express it due to the taboo of being too thin drives these women and their ED ideology into the cyber-underground. Alyssa’s experience with a prolonged illness created isolation from her peers, particularly from her sorority:

The disadvantage of [having] an ED is [the potential to] become so isolated, which has been very hard for me to deal with on a daily basis. In college and especially in a sorority, everything revolves around food: ‘Do you want to go to lunch?’ ‘Do you want to go to dinner?’ ‘Do you want to go to the movies?’ You know? Everything revolves around eating…I don’t want to sit there and not eat and be obvious…So if [the activity] revolves around food, I won’t go…I went from being social, everybody knowing me, to I had to take a year off from school because I’d gotten so sick. I came back and now it’s awful. Nobody knows me anymore…

Lilly isn’t comfortable talking offline about her thinness beliefs or eating practices because

if we tell a friend [offline], we’re [considered] ‘freaks.’ They’ll look down on us or feel sorry for us. You tell a doctor, and he shakes his head, thinks you’re an idiot. Tell a family member, it’s the same thing, but with some tears. We have no one we can [talk to offline]. I wouldn’t talk [to] anyone about an ED…[Although,] one time I almost told everyone. Almost went to the doctor to ask for help. [It] was a stupid three-second thought…Sometimes, [the urge to talk to someone] is so immense you feel like your heart will explode.
Even though she had no one to discuss her feelings with, Lilly knew it was “better to talk about it than to be silent,” so she joined the pro-ED community: “I wanted to finally belong somewhere…The girls in the community don’t judge you. They don’t make fun of you. They know what you’re going through! I don’t want [society] to know about this community because I love this community; I don’t want it taken away.”

For Michelle, “the biggest” reason for blogging is being able to communicate with someone after a long period of never doing so:

[I like] getting support from people who are going through the same experiences, people [you may miss out on] without the already-established connection of your blogs…I don’t think anyone in the community can say that connecting with others isn’t an important part of blogging because if that were the case, they [would keep] a journal at home, hide it under their bed, and not show it to anybody. The very nature of the blog is [that it is] communicative.

The ability to be honest online about her eating practices and pro-ED beliefs helped Michelle break the offline isolation she experiences:

People can hide [in] the anonymity of the Internet, and that gives them the ability to be more honest than they would otherwise be…Being able to talk about the forbidden subject of wanting to be thin is refreshing and can help when dealing with the stress of that constant pressure to be thinner.

Ella is uncomfortable talking about thinness with “everyone” in her life: “I’m not exactly proud of the things I do behind closed doors; my friends and family wouldn’t understand how I feel about myself and my body. Having a blog that’s available for feedback from people with similar feelings and circumstances is comforting without being too invasive.” She uses the pro-ED community as “a place to get my thoughts out rather than keep them bottled up.”

Daisy was desperate to talk to someone who could relate to her personal struggles: “[I felt] lonely; no one understood me. I feel I can really connect [in the community]. I’ve made
a couple of friends there…We e-mail and instant message back and forth. [There,] I can [tell others,] ‘Oh, my gosh. I have a doctor’s appointment coming up. I’m really nervous.’ They understand what I’m going through, instead of yelling at me and saying, ‘Well, stop doing this! Stop being psycho!’ I think they [have] a basic understanding of what I’m going through. When I say things like, ‘I cannot eat this. I just can’t,’ they know what I mean. It’s not like I can’t physically put it in my mouth; it’s just emotionally, I can’t handle eating. They understand [that].”

While Daisy uses the pro-ED community as an outlet for her beliefs, she wishes she could be completely honest with everyone in her offline life:

I wish I could say to everyone, ‘This is how it is, okay?’ But I have to be quiet because people are uncomfortable about it…I was [even] uncomfortable about it at first. [I get] choked up when I try to talk about it. I wish everyone knew what’s going on, and I could just do it and not have it be a big catastrophe every time I mention something about it…Even though I know there are other people out there doing what I am doing, [sometimes I feel as though] no one understands. I’m completely alone…I get so frustrated, and they get so frustrated with me. They get mad at me because they don’t understand. I’m alone…

Agynees is afraid of talking to “everyone” about her pro-ED beliefs, so having a community that listens is crucial:

You can open up to them and know they won’t judge you because they are going through the same thing…It gives you the worst feeling when you see in people’s faces that they are judging you, but don’t have the guts to confront you…Most don’t know how to react if you tell them.

Agynees blogs “to feel like I’m not alone.” Blogging enables you to “get loads off [of] your chest and have people going through similar issues give you advice, or just offer comments, which makes you feel not so alone.”

Marie is uncomfortable talking to her family and friends about her pro-ED interactions: “I hate having to keep it a secret.” Without this outlet, she has little reprieve
from the isolation: “I feel I can connect to people like me [through the blogs].” Online, she gets “the truth and the support. They understand me…I feel accepted and welcome rather than a freak and an outcast.”

Alexis’ isolation is rooted in her fear of family and friends discovering her pro-ED beliefs: “[They would] think I’m weird and out of touch with reality for putting so much trust in strangers over the Internet.” The need to please her immediate circle of friends and family keeps Alexis quiet about her online activity: “I keep the blog a secret. I don’t want my friends and family to know what I am going through. I try to show them I have control and that I am perfect on the outside.” The pro-ED community and its anonymous bloggers is her only communication outlet:

Everyone is supportive…It’s nice to talk to people who are going through the same things you are. It’s not something typically discussed in reality, so it’s nice to let it out to people who understand, even though they are complete strangers…I like to see I’m not alone in my habits.

Autumn, too, is afraid of talking to “mostly everyone” about her beliefs. But expressing her feelings online has been helpful:

I like writing about weight or EDs because it’s something that’s really hard for me to talk about in real life, and because you can’t really talk about it with people who [do not have these issues]. They can’t understand. Belonging to a community of like-minded people and being able to get things off my chest has helped me many times, and makes me feel less isolated.

Communicating with pro-ED bloggers gives Autumn “an outlet for all the craziness in my head—a place where people wouldn’t judge me or just shove me in a hospital.” Still, Autumn desires to be open with her friends and family:

I would love to sit down with everyone and say, ‘Look, here’s what’s going on with me. This is a struggle. I’m trying to cope with it. Please help me.’ [But] I’m way too afraid that…I’d get put in treatment, which I’m not quite ready for at the moment.
Monika’s fear of her parents’ and boyfriend’s reaction to her pro-ED beliefs is what perpetuates her isolation: “They would probably assume the worst about me…” She is also afraid of talking with many of her offline friends, specifically those who are “jealous” of her recent weight loss: “Sometimes you can’t even trust your so-called friends.”

**Academic and Career Pursuits**

The desire to be thin is evident even in the academic and career paths these women have chosen. Their school and work interests focus on disciplines related to physical and mental health, psychology, and industries of image, among others. Ella, for example, is a junior in physical therapy and works at a fitness center and an animal hospital. In the future, she sees herself “in a career that allows me to help people in need…I plan on going into physical therapy, but if that doesn’t work out, I’m sure I’ll stick with something that allows me to help people who are either physically or emotionally in need.”

Alyssa aims for a physical and mental health career. Currently majoring in nursing and minoring in psychology, her experience with eating disorders and the pro-ED community has driven her to help others:

> I read what other people vent [online] and try to give them advice because I want to be a therapist…more of a neonatal nurse. [I would like to run a] therapeutic practice because I just love my therapist. She’s amazing. I’ve always wanted to help people. I feel everything is handed to people for a reason; challenges aren’t given to people just to be a pain in the ass. I feel I could help get the word out [about eating disorders].

Autumn is majoring in psychology, media, and sociology and seeks an academic career in any of these disciplines:

> [I am] definitely going to grad school. Long term, I want to get my PhD. I want to research or teach social and personality psychology, particularly media’s impact on both, and then write a book about the awesome things I’ve found out. I would love to write my memoirs…but I think you have to be somewhat famous to do that.
Alexis has interests in psychology as well as human sexuality, with hopes for a career involving both. Currently working at a Victoria’s Secret store, Daisy is familiar with the image industry, but hopes “to be a pediatric psychologist.” Lilly wants to pursue a career in the image industry. As a first-year student in makeup artistry and special effects, she became interested in the field due to her mother’s dislike for her own appearance: “I guess that’s why I took the makeup artist course. It’s an instant ‘feel better about yourself’ type of thing. I know my mom will feel beautiful when I do her makeup over the holidays. I just know it.”

Agynees hopes for a career in “hospitality, possibly event management.” She sees herself “in clubs and restaurants. I could move into hotel work. I’m not quite sure yet. I have only really worked in clubs and restaurants, so I may need to branch out a bit and gain some experience before I set a definite goal.”

With a degree in English, Michelle wants “to have a career in writing, or nutrition, or both.” Marie also hopes to have a writing career: “[I would] love to be in advertising or journalism… I would love to be a fashion advertiser or [in a profession that has] something to do with sociology, dealing with, for example, eating disorders, obesity, or psychological disorders.” Monika believes her interests in the environment will lead her to do “something benefiting the environment, though that probably won’t bring in the money.” While her academic and career interests do not relate directly to her eating habits and health beliefs, she thinks her aspirations may have budded from her interest in organic foods.

**Blogging and Online Interaction—Helpful or Hurtful?**

The final research question asks to what extent pro-ED bloggers see their blogging and online interactions as helpful, hurtful, or both.
Disadvantages to Pro-ED Blogging

Alyssa believes the pro-ED community has negatively affected her recovery attempts. Initially, the pro-ED blogs served as a “how-to” guide for her; she believes her habits continue because of this exposure:

I did get a lot of tips, and I still use a lot of information from those sites…That’s how my bulimia started—[from] sheer curiosity. I [thought to myself], ‘I just ate a sandwich and I shouldn’t have. Let me go try this.’ [I learned tips, for example,] throwing up in your room so you don’t have to go to the bathroom and make it obvious. Or, turning up the TV or the music in your room [so people can’t hear you throwing up]. Using a gallon-sized Ziploc® bag [to vomit in]…Those are all [tips] I found through the sites…[But] I’m not blaming them because someone is going to find out that information somewhere [anyway]…

The pro-ED blogs continue to appeal to her as she tries to recover:

I thought I had recovered and was okay with being at a normal, healthy weight…I was able to stop looking at the pro-ED blogs. But now, they fuel me [again]. I feel I’m falling back into the old routine…People do see this as a lifestyle…I guess it is, but it’s more of a bad habit. You wouldn’t call smoking a lifestyle. [Disordered eating] is something I chose to do. But now, it’s something I’m caught in. I don’t want to be in college forever, but I am struggling with this. I can’t focus on school 100 percent, and you don’t have a social life.

Alyssa’s health suffers due to her involvement in pro-ED blogging:

Right now, [I’m suffering from] this whole irritable bowel syndrome. I’m not 100 percent sure…if it is related to the abuse I’ve put my body through in the past couple of years, [but] after two months of diarrhea and not being without pain, trying to recover and maintain a healthy weight, and trying to be good, you just reach a point [when you think] ‘Ok, I’m done’…I was on such an upward hill of recovery, and now I’m just like ‘Fuck it, I don’t want to do this anymore.’

The frequent sense of negativity on many of the pro-ED blogs is what Lilly finds so disadvantageous: “Everyone is so negative. You can’t help but get caught up in it. Even if you try to be positive and lose weight the healthy way, you read their blogs and get sucked back into it again.”
Michelle finds it difficult to not be drawn into the pro-ED community: “I don’t want an ED, but I am interested in girls that have them. For some reason, it’s fascinating…It’s hard to browse through all the other Xanga[.com blogs] without having one yourself…People assume I’m part of the ‘pro-ED problem.’ Perhaps I am.” She is unsure if she needs help but worries about some bloggers she communicates with: “Some people in the community need help, real help, but how do you get help for someone through a blog?”

Ella understands that pro-ED bloggers may not always be effective in helping each other: “[The pro-ED community] gives people a chance to talk to others they can relate with, but that may or may not be a good thing…I’m pretty sure it can encourage some unhealthy habits…It isn’t a very healthy movement.” She also notes that attempts to keep pro-ED individuals silent are not limited to the offline world. Within the community “not all feedback is positive,” either.

The biggest disadvantage for Daisy is her weight obsession, which she has passed on to her eight-year-old brother. Growing up, Daisy consistently asked her brother about her body because she relies on a child’s honesty: “I’ll [ask him], ‘How do I look in these clothes? Do I look a little bit fat? A little bit skinny? Or just right?’…He doesn’t tell me what I want to hear. He just tells me the truth…ever since he could talk.” Recently, Daisy has noticed her brother’s own obsession with weight, appearance, and fear of getting “sick”:

I hear him say [he looks] fat and needs to go on a diet, or that he’s too big and can’t eat this [or that]. Or, he wants my sugar-free candy. [He thinks,] ‘Sugar-free—that’s a diet!’ I try to keep everything about dieting away from him…He [also] washes his hands compulsively and rubs them raw. He’s very afraid of germs. He says it is because of me. I ask him why, and he says it’s because I got so sick. That made me feel really guilty. I’m not sure how the dieting plays into that, but I feel that somehow they are all connected.
Daisy also recognizes that the pro-ED blog tips are harmful to those in the community:

There are those sites [that say], ‘Oh yeah, take Ipecac® because it will make you throw up.’ But really, it’s something you should use only if you’ve ingested poison because [it] in itself is a poison that will make you throw up and could kill you…There is a whole bunch of bad advice going around. Things that could really hurt you, such as ‘tie a piece of floss to a lifesaver, swallow it and pull it back up [to induce vomiting]. That could just slice your esophagus right open. Craziness! I tried that before and never really [thought] about how very dangerous it is…It’s really bad advice. That’s partly why I don’t want to do the whole pro-ana/pro-mia thing; nine times out of 10, they give you extremely risky advice…You know how they have those little bubblers in a fish tank? Those little clear tubes? I’ve tried to stick one of those down my throat [once to] suck out the food from my stomach. I wouldn’t want to post that and give someone else that idea…That’s just not good.

As her online interaction continues, Daisy’s habits have created serious health problems:

Of course I have IBS (irritable bowel syndrome) because when you don’t eat, nothing goes through, and you just shut down in that area…When I lost a bunch of weight during my first [college] semester, my heart rate dropped too low. When I gained the weight back, I wasn’t supervised…I gained weight too fast, so now my heart rate is extremely high. I walk…just eight little steps to the bathroom, and I clutch my chest because I can’t breathe, and my heart is pounding. I’ve been on heart monitors and everything…I have tachycardia, which is basically [a condition of having] an extremely high heart rate…I’ll be somewhere and you can see my heart beating through my shirt like I’m going to pass out. And it’s not as if I haven’t eaten that day. It could be a totally regular day with not too much, not too little [food].

Agynees feels the main disadvantages of being part of the pro-ED blogging community are the physical effects: “I think it just messes up your brain. Mood swings…I suppose it hurts me in a way that I can’t get too close to people.”

For Marie, rapid changes in mood and feelings of failure are the most detrimental part of remaining active in the community:

There are lots of disadvantages, [such as finding] ways [in which] I can screw up my body, and the mood swings…You feel disappointed in yourself even more than when you screw up by eating too much or by not doing what you said you’d do that day…I
tend to feel like a failure; sometimes I think, ‘I’ll never look like that. Why do I bother?’

Alexis feels her pro-ED blogging is “almost as addictive as my weight-loss habits. I check it constantly in hopes of [receiving] new comments or messages. It consumes a big chunk of my time…I feel bad if I am unable to write for a day or two, as if I am obligated [to the community].”

Autumn’s fear of what her friends and family would think is a large disadvantage for remaining active in the pro-ED community: “They’d probably be disappointed, maybe even a little angry because it does perpetuate the disease to some extent…Sometimes reading about someone else’s binge or their recent weight loss will trigger me to binge as well.” The health effects of her online interaction have become more problematic. Autumn harbors suicidal thoughts: “It consumes my mind. It makes me hate myself. It makes me hate my life. I have numerous health problems. I’m always cold, always tired. Sometimes I get really dizzy and shaky, and I think I’m going to die right then. Sometimes, I hope I do.”

Monika finds the negative comments made by outside bloggers hurtful: “[They] assume I’m just like all the other girls on the site. Granted, we have things in common, but generalizing isn’t the right thing to do.”

**Advantages of Pro-ED Blogging: A Community of Care**

Although there are disadvantages to being active pro-ED bloggers, the advantages gained are abundant. While many seek thinness at all cost—including poor health and near death experiences—none of them wish this lifestyle on others. Several refuse to influence others to join the community. Alyssa writes her own blog to prevent others from taking their eating habits as far as she has:
I would love for people to read it and [think], ‘I know where you’re at, [and] I don’t want to do this anymore.’ I can help others; I just can’t help myself…If anybody gets anything out of your paper, I would love that.

She stopped associating with a specific pro-ED group because of some questionable tips it disseminates. She does not encourage her experiences onto others:

I [disassociated from] a blogring (group-written blog) because some girls [were asking] for tips like, ‘How do I hide this?’…It’s not like I don’t want to help anyone; it’s just that I know it’s not healthy…I’d feel guilty if I were to help someone who isn’t too far into her eating disorder; I’m afraid I’d make it worse. I would feel really guilty…It really pains me to see girls wanting to get into it because it may seem like the quickest way to lose weight. But it’s a death wish.

Michelle, the oldest in this sample of bloggers at 23, feels obligated to keep younger bloggers in the community from becoming too unhealthy in her eyes:

I’m older than a lot of the other girls involved in this community, and I’ve done a lot of eating disorder research that might be helpful…My goal is to share with people that you can eat and lose weight at the same time. You just have to eat the right things. Being in the community gives me that opportunity.

Daisy has noticed that when a blogger chooses recovery, the community supports their decision: “I know there are people [who] go into recovery. Everybody is really supportive of them…They really help them no matter what they want to do.” Daisy does her share to encourage her friends to be healthy:

[I say], ‘Make sure you’re getting enough water’ and ‘Take a vitamin.’ If someone’s losing weight fast, we [say], ‘Be careful! Don’t forget to watch out for yourself. If you need to, have a cracker or something because we don’t want you to die.’ [The message is], ‘We understand what you’re going through, but don’t kill yourself!’

And this support system is not exclusive to pro-ED thoughts: “There’s a girl whose parents were getting a divorce. [I comforted her by saying], ‘It’ll be ok. It’s not your fault.’ [It’s] not [always] about the weight issues [in this community]. Somebody got raped once,
and I tried to help her through that.” Daisy wishes pro-ED could be publicly accepted, but does not wish for other women to take up pro-ED habits:

I think it would be good for [those] already suffering…but it could increase the number of people with eating disorders who might have gone on with their lives without even knowing about [the pro-ED community]. They’d [be able to] live their life instead of this craziness…I don’t want to be out there showing all these girls, ‘Oh, this is how you starve.’

Agynees thinks her fellow bloggers have formed a caring community that reaches out to its peers. She hopes her “comments are helping somebody. I like to be needed, I guess. Just knowing they are there to support you is good, especially when you are going through a tough time.” Autumn finds that her online friends pull her through difficult moments, too: “I can post [messages] like, ‘I want to binge because I’m upset,’ and sometimes all it takes is one positive comment to get me into a different mindset.”

Like others, Marie does not encourage this type of blogging: “I would never encourage someone to get into it.” But for those who are already involved, “it gives support and guidance [from] people [who] are looking out for you. If someone is going too far, they tell [her] to get help.”

Fellow bloggers gave Lilly the friendship she had been searching for:

I’ll always have someone there for me even if I gain a shit load of weight. Those girls tell me I’m beautiful, and it’s just a stage, and [that] I’ll be back on track in no time…[They say] they love me and know things will get better soon. Who doesn’t want to hear those when everything is going down the toilet?

Lilly stresses that regardless of intent, these women care for each other’s well being and make ethical suggestions when necessary:

Here, you can tell people, ‘I don’t know if I should get help or not.’ And you know what? Even though you may think we’re messed up and screwed up, every girl will say, ‘Yes! Go get help before it’s too late!’ If we had no one to talk to, we would ask ourselves that question, get scared, and push it to the back of our minds. Just because
we have eating disorders doesn’t mean we’re stupid; we just need someone to talk to. We will still encourage each other to do the right thing...We don’t want [others] to wither away because they are our friends...I would read health books and tell them about [what I’ve learned]...I guess I’m weird, but I really don’t want my friends to die.

Lilly reinforces why there is a need for this type of heart-felt support, which she feels they can only get online:

Imagine having a diary where you could write your feelings, no matter what they are, and have people read it and not judge you; to [have people] on ‘your side’ [who] think you’re beautiful even though they have never met you. People who love you as best friends and not care how fucked up you are. I don’t know what I would do without these girls. They are my friends, my only friends, my best friends. I love them with all my heart. Whenever I have a problem, whether it be about food, family, school, stress, weight gain, weight loss—anything—they are there to tell me everything will be okay.

For Monika, the pro-ED community creates a safe environment: “You make friends who help you get out of those bad days when you feel you’ve just reached the end of the line...I can say what I want [in this community]. Nobody knows who I am or how to find me.” She feels obligated to remind her blogging friends to stay safe in their practices, which she knows from personal experience. Last May, after a period of restricting her calories, Monika “fainted and split my head open. I had a concussion, amnesia, and got seven staples on my head.” She said,

Lecturing girls who are fasting for weeks won’t do any good. So, I wish them luck and tell them to be safe, [and that] if they feel faint, they really should eat something because cracking your head open isn’t fun...I believe many girls and women die from anorexia. I am not pro-starving yourself, especially if you are underweight. Anyone underweight should just be working on toning herself and not exposing more bones.
Web Freedom of Speech

Some politicians and experts, aware of the existence of these underground cyber communities, have urged their banning. Alyssa believes only the most destructive types of sites should be banned:

Politicians and celebrities think the [sites give unhealthy] tips, but some of those that have been shut down are good ones that help girls get out of this mess…I could see why they want to ban them, but I feel they’re making this equivalent to a 50-year-old man who [solicits] a 16-year-old girl [online].

Daisy agrees not all pro-ED Web sites should be banned:

[People] shouldn’t make judgments based on what they’ve heard so far, but [should] see what the sites really are about. Yes, some of them really are inappropriate. They should not be giving people ideas about [practices] that can kill them…But others that just [post] people’s opinion, they should [not be banned]…If people would just be more accepting of differences, it will be better.

Lilly doesn’t believe any pro-ED Web site should be banned. For her, these are necessary safe places for pro-ED individuals to talk about their concerns:

Society doesn’t like talking about problems, not real ones anyhow. They see an anorexic girl talking to another anorexic girl as a problem because they think we’re forming a group that will take over the world, for all I fucking know. They don’t know what it’s like to have a problem and not have anyone in the world to talk to without them thinking you’re a freak. They should think [about] when they [were] in sex education. If it wasn’t for that class, they wouldn’t have anyone to talk to; they would just be scared. No one to ask [a question]; no one to say it’s okay. That’s us—we just want someone who understands. All those stupid celebrities and politicians should get their heads out of their asses and leave us alone. They can’t ban something they don’t understand. They should take the time they’re wasting trying to shove us back in a hole and spend it to stop slaughter house practices [or] feed the homeless with their billions of dollars…Let people talk whatever they want to talk about. Why does it matter? We’re not hurting anyone. We’re not planning to sabotage the government. We’re not scamming people. We’re just girls who need a friend. Why is that bad?

Michelle feels site banishment is representative of the hypocrisy in Western culture:

It’s the Catch-22 of being a woman: be thin, but just thin enough, and for God’s sake, don’t let anyone know you have to make an actual effort to be that way. Not everyone
is naturally slender. Some people have to work at it, and people don’t like seeing the standard they themselves reinforce hurt people. The topic is taboo because it makes people feel guilty. People want to feel good about themselves, and these communities force people to look more critically at the culture they’re a part of. People would rather shut that shit down than deal with it.

Michelle also sees an infringement of freedom of speech if the sites were to be banned:

Neo-Nazis, homophobes and pornographers are allowed to post what they want on the Internet. Why can’t I? If children are being corrupted by my blog, it’s because responsible parenting isn’t being practiced, and there are much worse things on the Net than my weight-loss blog. No one has to read it.

Ella agrees that pro-ED bloggers have a right to express themselves as they please:

“People think these online communities turn girls into anorexics or cause them to have eating disorders, but I don’t think that’s the case…A blog is a personal journal. I don’t think anyone has the right to say you can’t post your thoughts and experiences online.”

Agynees believes those opposed to pro-ED blogging “…don’t want to have to deal with it: ‘Ban the sites and it won’t go on.’ [That] will never happen.” She claims these blogs deserve their freedom [of speech]. Most of these blogs are made by people to express themselves, to get what’s in their heads out and not [keep it] bottled up inside. You come across the occasional sites that tell you how to hurt yourself, starve, fast, etc., and they probably aren’t the best. But you can search for pretty much anything and everything on the Internet. If you ban these, you have to ban a whole lot of other sites too.

Marie understands what makes pro-ED blogging worthy of banning: “I think [some] consider it to be unhealthy for people to encourage each other to lose weight.” She believes, however, that pro-ED blogs deserve the same freedom to exist as other Web sites: “From a human rights point of view, free speech has to be considered…I would defend it as a way to express myself, to get help, to feel more normal.”

Alexis believes the taboo surrounding pro-ED explains the interest in banning:
Society sees a problem when girls as young as 13 in this blogging community ‘learn’ how to be anorexic or bulimic. What they don’t realize is that [the community] is mostly there for support and not for advocating and encouraging anorexia and bulimia…I think everyone has a right to have their own blog. It is [part of] freedom of speech and expression. Having an eating disorder or wanting to lose weight is not against the law; therefore, I think these blogs should be left alone.

Monika feels that politicians want to ban the wrong type of pro-ED blogs:

I think the focus is on the pro-ana-starve-yourself blogs. Barnes and Noble® sells little, pocket diet books where you record your intake, exercise, calories, and weight loss. That’s the same as a blog, but [those are] not being…[banned]. It’s the tips [and] comments that promote unhealthy ways that are getting such a bad rap.

She feels her freedom of speech is important:

Everyone deserves their freedom. Banning [people] from writing what they want to in their blog is bullshit. If they want to make it mandatory to put a rating or ban minors from reading specific topics, [that is] totally understandable…But saying, ‘No. This topic can’t be written’ is going against our rights.

Autumn feels that ignorance of what pro-ED promotes explains the interest in banning: “People often assume [I advocate for] everyone to get anorexia or bulimia, which I’m not [doing] at all. They would realize that if they read any of my blogs.” Autumn notices the hypocrisy in Western culture as well:

Pro-ED is taboo because it’s evidence that our ideals are fucked up. They say ‘This is how you should look, but don’t do unhealthy things to get there!’ Or better yet, ‘Do unhealthy things but just don’t tell us about them.’ It’s pointing to a major flaw that people don’t want to acknowledge…We have First Amendment rights to express our beliefs. I don’t think anyone is trying to hurt anyone—or get anyone involved in this who isn’t already. [Although there] is a danger, I don’t think banning all sites is the answer.

While the First Amendment significantly limits the government’s power to restrict speech like pro-ED blogging, it does not hold the same power over the private Internet service providers. As of May 2008, there are no laws preventing these providers and blog hosts from shutting down or censoring blogs that discuss controversial topics. Yahoo, for
example, refuses to carry such sites (Mueller, 2004, ¶ 7). Some eating disorder experts think banning these sites would do an even larger disservice to the women involved, as Mueller (2004) notes:

While she believes these sites are ‘a dark force,’ Ms. Goldhamer (eating disorder specialist, Bellwood Health Services) believes that censorship can also be dangerous. ‘It furthers severs the trust.’ Ms. Davis (program coordinator, National Eating Disorder Information Center) is also unsure about the way the backlash is being carried out. ‘Is this actually pushing the people who are involved in these sites further away from treatment and support and from professionals who are trying to reach out to these individuals?’ she wonders. ‘We don’t know. I think more research has to be done. I’m not sure censorship is the right way to go.’ But she points out that pro-ana/mia Web sites do have something positive to contribute: ‘They can show you a great deal about what is going on in the mind of an individual who’s struggling with this illness’ (¶ 9).

As Head (2007) notes, allowing the blogging communities to continue may actually help women with their struggles regarding thinness and culture: “The impact of these groups is not entirely negative—and if properly regulated, they can be used for positive means.’ For example, they can mirror group therapy, an important part of treatment, and help draw people out of isolation” (¶ 28).
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study explored how and why an online pro-ED subculture emerged, in which bloggers can openly express their feelings and opinions, communicate with others similar to them, and offer each other support. These explanations were gleaned from the discourse of 10 women who maintain their own blogs. I intensively interviewed participants either over the phone or via e-mail. Their answers reveal insights into the following research questions:

**RQ1: To what extent do pro-ED bloggers think their eating disorders and/or dieting habits were driven by mass media portrayals of the thin ideal?**

The responses from participants echo themes that a “hierarchy of effects” led to their eating disorders and blogging habits. A rough diagram of this path of influence is shown in Figure 6. The testimonies of these women strengthen the argument that those who suffer from eating disorders develop their sense of what is beautiful or what is the ideal body type from images and textual messages to which they were exposed mainly through the mass media. The media content directly drove their decisions to diet and, at times, to the development of full-blown eating disorders. When asked if the thin models they often see in media messages inspired them to lose weight, the response was a resounding “absolutely, yes.” Obsessions about the thin ideal first spurred the creation and continued use of journals loaded with media clippings of emaciated bodies these women try to emulate. These journals that existed before their online blogging serve as archives of images, slogans, and textual accounts that reinforce their admiration for thinness. They also serve as written and visual expressions of their thoughts and feelings about weight.
What specific media channels bolster these women’s notions of the thin ideal?

According to the participants, they are mostly television, magazines, tabloids, and books. On TV, these women watch shows and movies ostensibly produced to create awareness of eating disorders, but which really serve the opposite of their intended purpose. According to Alyssa, “[These] movies show [that having an eating disorder is] a bad thing, but they make me want to lose more weight.” The participants read Vogue and Cosmopolitan magazines for “thinspiration” and follow the exploits of thin personalities featured in celebrity-oriented tabloids. They also read books on dieting and weight loss as well as eating disorder memoirs, including one memoir in particular, Wasted.

Interestingly, these women use online sources, especially YouTube.com, to determine what to watch in “traditional” media. As Daisy reports, “I started [watching Gossip Girl]
because I was…online searching for [ED-related topics], and I [learned that]…one of the characters has bulimia. So I watched it.”

The discourse of these participants echoes the conflicting media messages they get on a continued basis: Be desirably thin, but not too thin.

**RQ2: To what extent do pro-ED individuals think their eating disorders and/or dieting habits are driven by interpersonal pressure, online or offline?**

While media exposure has an obvious effect on these women, their admiration for and imitation of thinness were reinforced by interpersonal interactions, specifically with mothers, siblings, and friends—online or otherwise. Unhealthy eating habits seem to have resulted from complications in family relationships while they were growing up. To many participants, weight-loss competitions often resulted from the desire to remain the “little one,” the “skinny one,” or the “small one” at home.

Based on these women’s accounts, interpersonal pressure adds to the motivation to achieve the thin paradigms they see in the mass media. Many participants say their mother openly dieted and encouraged dieting and commented on the body shape of their daughters as well. As a result, the mother and daughter relationships played a significant role in the development and continuation of disordered eating in the lives of almost every participant. Sister and female friend interactions increased their competitive desires to lose weight. A few participants also found their relationships with their brothers to be a significant contributor to their eating afflictions.

**RQ3: To what extent do these women feel silenced by the taboo of being too thin? Is this what prompted the creation of their blogs?**

The participants agree that the media disseminate conflicting messages that promote the ideal body. By constantly reporting on who is “too skinny” and “too fat,” the media
reinforce the Western mantra that women need to “care about their weight,” but should do so privately. It is this type of dualistic thinking that, according to Taylor (2002), blatantly justifies the existence of the pro-ED movement:

Perhaps the true challenge to pro-ana sites would be to explode the myth that dietary restrictions are the only fair measure of a person’s capacity for self-control. If we continue to equate fat with laziness and thinness with strength and morality, even subconsciously, then the pro-ana movement cannot be blamed for effectively taking this train of thought to its logical conclusion. As long as it is considered normal to speak of food in dualist terms—sinful, wicked, good, pure—then the quasi-religious philosophy of the pro-ana movement can be justified. (Taylor, 2002, ¶ 25)

As Michelle noted, “thin is what we’re supposed to be, not what we’re supposed to talk about.” The growing misconceptions about what types of dieting are acceptable have intensified the isolation and loneliness of these confused women, leading them to establish their own community online:

Pro-ana sites force us to confront these preconceptions by forcing them into our faces. Why is eating only fruit for a week dangerous if it’s a diet but ok if it’s a detox? Why is the Atkins diet a safe and healthy way to ‘slim up for summer’ when it causes acne and constipation? We should be glad of the insights that pro-ana Web sites offer us into the anorexic psyche. Not only do they allow non-sufferers a new perspective on eating disorders, but also they reveal signs of the delusions and hypocrisies that underlie accepted attitudes toward food and dieting. Perhaps it would be more constructive to tackle our own preconceptions about weight before publicly condemning pro-ana sites for their encouragement of delusional and dangerous aspirations. (Taylor, 2002, ¶ 28)

The participants report that their “secret” blogs mainly help them cope with the isolation they feel from being unable to express their feelings to friends and family members who may find their eating practices “weird” and who may brand them as “freaks.”

The Internet continues to stand as the only means of self-expression for these women, but while they develop friendships and feel camaraderie as active participants in this cyber-community, many recognize the danger in the unhealthy tips some of these blogs offer, and
do not want to encourage new participants to join this blogging world. Their nagging desire to be thin and to help others in need of advice is evident even in the academic and career paths these women have chosen. Their areas of interest focus on disciplines related to physical and mental health, psychology, and industries of image, among others.

**RQ4: To what extent do pro-ED individuals see their blogging and online interaction as helpful or hurtful?**

The participants agree that the members of this community genuinely care for each other and are generous in the support they offer. In effect, these blogs provide a safe haven where they feel welcome and can freely discuss concerns that may seem alien to those without these afflictions. While many bloggers seek thinness at all costs, they do not wish their condition on others and do not encourage others to join this online realm.

Aware of the benefits they derive from blogging, the women were also upfront about the negative impacts of this communication behavior. While these women actively diet in hopes of losing as much weight as possible, many of them show a definite awareness of the damaging physical and mental effects their habits have had. A major disadvantage of being a part of the pro-ED community, based on their accounts, was the addictive nature of the act of blogging itself, which keeps them entangled in their habits. For many, continued exposure to and interaction in the blogging community heightens their desperation for thinness, which, on some days, a few participants claimed they wished to escape. Many also blog in secret and fear family members will discover their online activities. These bloggers suffer from deep anxieties about what their families might say if they were to discover their participation in the blogging community. Many described how they wish they could “come clean” to family and friends about their problems, and not keep them hidden in cyberspace discussions. Their
obsession to lose weight combined with fears of being labeled “crazy” by loved ones keeps them silent.

The major advantage derived from being a member of the pro-ED community was the anonymity and the camaraderie this space accords. For some, the blogs serve as a platform on which to describe their experiences if only to prevent others from developing serious eating disorders. For other bloggers, blogging relieves their isolation and loneliness. As Lilly feels, these bloggers are the only friends she has in her life.

Blog tips that harm unsuspecting members have prompted legislators to consider shutting down sites that provide them, a move that angers many participants. Although they acknowledge that some sites may be downright dangerous, many sites serve as important sources of useful tips and needed support. As evident by the journals they still keep, the secret desire to be thin existed long before Internet blogging. This will likely continue even if these Web sites are shut down by government or Internet regulation.

Limitations of the Study

The spiral of silence may have had a stronger impact on the pro-ED community than initially expected in the beginning of data collection. In several attempts to interview women over the phone, many were hesitant in offering their opinions or requested to be interviewed via e-mail instead. The women retreated online partly because their afflictions have forced them to. This anti-social attitude extends even to peer researchers. According to Alyssa:

I probably wouldn’t have [agreed to] this [interview] six months ago. An eating disorder is such a [secret] thing…It’s not something people really want to admit or talk about. I’m just starting to recognize I have a problem. I’m at a point where I feel I can talk to you; others may not [be at that stage yet]. Whether or not they remain anonymous, [people develop] this whole anti-social thing—it’s really, really hard.
The timeline of the study also encompassed the academic winter break of most U.S. universities, which placed many participants back with their families and unable to speak freely about their online interactions. To avoid losing valuable participants, e-mail questionnaires (Appendix D) were created from the original phone interview schedule (Appendix C). Although changes in methodology and research intentions are expected in qualitative studies, e-mail responses may lack the candor and spontaneity of phone conversations.

This study may also be somewhat limited by its racial homogeneity as eight of the 10 participants were Caucasian. And while the study intended to be representative of the female experience in Western culture, eight of the 10 participants were Americans.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study kept the integrity of individual personal accounts of dieting, eating, and online pro-ED practices—many insights which may have surfaced because of the qualitative methodology I adopted. This information may be different from those gathered by doctors from their patients, parents from their children, or significant others in relationships from each other. These insights can thus be triangulated with other findings of medical and social research to further our understanding of one of the most commonly hidden diseases in our culture.

Future research into the First Amendment rights of pro-ED bloggers and attempts at banning these controversial Web sites would also benefit the shaping and formulation of mass media law. Communication campaigns aiming to address the thin ideal and the spiral of silence among women and girls with disordered eating may use my findings to formulate more effective campaign strategies that target a very unconventional audience segment.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

DATE: 20 November 2007

TO: Andrea Weere
171 Hamilton Hall

CC: Lulu Rodriguez
214 Hamilton Hall

FROM: Jan Canby, IRB Administrator
Office of Research Assurances

IRB ID: 07-554

Approval Date: 20 November 2007
Date for Continuing Review: 15 November 2008

The Chair of the Institutional Review Board of Iowa State University has reviewed and approved the protocol entitled: "Thinspired Into Silence: A Qualitative Study of Pro-Eating Disorder Blogging Communities." The protocol has been assigned the following ID Number: 07-554. Please refer to this number in all correspondence regarding the protocol.

Your study has been approved from 20 November 2007 to 15 November 2008. The continuing review date for this study is no later than 15 November 2008. Federal regulations require continuing review of ongoing projects. Please submit the form with sufficient time (i.e. three to four weeks) for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study, prior to the continuing review date.

Failure to complete and submit the continuing review form will result in expiration of IRB approval on the continuing review date and the file will be administratively closed. All research related activities involving the participants must stop on the continuing review date, until approval can be re-established, except when necessary to eliminate immediate hazard to research participants. As a courtesy to you, we will send a reminder of the approaching review prior to this date.

Please remember that any changes in the protocol or consent form may not be implemented without prior IRB review and approval, using the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form. Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office of Research Assurances website or available by calling (515) 294-4566, www.compliance.iastate.edu.

You must promptly report any of the following to the IRB: (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office of Research Assurances, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: “Thin is what we’re supposed to be, not what we’re suppose to talk about”: A qualitative study on pro-eating disorder blogging communities and the spiral of silence

Investigators: Andrea Weare

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to learn how and why the underground group of pro-eating disorder bloggers has made a community on the Internet to talk about their feelings and to discuss eating disorder-related practices and body image. It examines how media discusses eating disorders and dieting, and how this has led these females to create an online community to discuss their eating disorders or their eating practices and body image. The study aims to understand the role media, family, and friends have in developing eating disorders and dieting, and to understand how the Internet is used to express feelings about eating disorders and dieting. The study hopes to allow these women’s voices to be heard on why they wanted to create their online discussions. By listening to these voices, we can gain a better understanding of this issue in the academic areas of mass communication, feminism, and women’s health. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a female blogger who is 18-years-old or older and who writes your own blog on eating practices and body image.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will include one approximately two-hour telephone interview, which may be split into two sittings if necessary. Following the interview, you may be asked follow-up questions via e-mail over the next four months until the research paper written for this study is submitted to Iowa State University for publication. During the study, you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: You will participate in a phone interview with the researcher discussing the topic. The conversation will be recorded for analysis and referral for the written thesis. Your recording will be erased when the paper is submitted to the university in April. You do not need to answer all of the interview questions to participate. You may skip any question that you do not wish to answer or that makes you uncomfortable. You can also end the interview at anytime without being penalized. You may be asked follow-up questions via e-mail following the interview.
RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: First, you may feel uncomfortable discussing your eating habits and body image. Second, you may feel inconvenienced using your landline or cellular phone for the interview.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be a direct benefit to you. You may benefit from discussing your feelings about eating disorders, eating practices, and body image, which you may not be able to do with others in your life. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by allowing your words to be heard so we can better understand what encourages this group’s eating habits and body image and how the group has been able to create such a large and growing community using technology.

COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. There is no compensation for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide not participate in the study or if you leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken. The researcher will be the only person with access to your name and contact information. You will be referred to in the thesis paper by a pseudonym. Your data set will consist of a digital MP3 sound file of your recorded phone interview and any hand-written notes made during your interview. Your data set will be stored on the researcher’s password-protected personal laptop computer, and will be destroyed upon the submission of the thesis for university publication. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.
QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Andrea Weare at (402) 670-9564. If you would like to discuss the study with Andrea’s advising faculty member, contact Lulu Rodriguez at (515) 294-0484.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office of Research Assurances, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

***************************************************************************

PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document, and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) ____________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________

(Participant’s Signature) (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of their questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits, and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

______________________________________________________________________

(Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent) (Date)
APPENDIX C: PHONE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION. School/Work/Home

1. How old are you?

2. If in college, what year are you? What is your major?

3. If you are not in college, what do you do for work?

4. Do you live in dorms, in an apartment, or in a house? Do you have roommates or live by yourself?

PART 1. Personal Background and Development of Disordered Eating Habits

1. How would you describe your self-esteem and body image in elementary and middle school? Throughout high school?

2. How would you describe it at this time in your life?

3. Have you been officially diagnosed with an eating disorder? What is the name of the eating disorder? OR What habits do you have that are similar to those who have an eating disorder, or when were you confronted about it?

4. How long have you had this eating disorder OR the habits that are associated with an eating disorder? Can you describe your experiences and feelings leading up to the moment you knew you had an eating disorder?

5. How were you diagnosed? What led to you or your family setting up an appointment with a doctor?

6. If you have the habits of someone with an eating disorder, does your family know about this? If yes, how do they feel about it?

8. Do your friends know about your eating disorder or the habits of one? How do they feel about it?

9. Do you personally want to be treated and go through recovery? Or do you see this as more of a lifestyle?

10. Why have an eating disorder or the habits of one? What are the advantages for having one? Are there disadvantages for you?
PART 2. Being Pro-ED

1. Do you identify yourself as pro-something, specifically, “pro-ana” or “pro-mia,” or have you ever in the past? (Is there another term that you’d rather use for the type of blogging you do?)

2. When did you become a pro-__? What was the path that led to being this kind of blogger?

3. How long have you identified as pro-__?

4. Do you see pro-__ the same way as others? Are you similar to other pro-__ or are there several ways of being pro-__?

5. Why be pro-__? Why did you decide to be one OR why do you think others decide?

6. What are your goals for being pro-__?

7. How can being pro-__ be a good thing? What are the benefits?

8. What disadvantages that come with being pro-__?

9. Do you think people your age, in general, know what pro-ana and pro-mia are? Where have they probably heard these terms before?

10. Do your friends offline know you are pro-__? How do they feel about it?

11. Do your family members know you are pro-__? How do they feel about it?

PART 3. Internet Use

1. How often do you get online?

2. What kind of Internet access do you have at home? At school? At work?

3. How did you first find out about pro-ED blogs?

4. When you’re online, how often do you visit pro-ED blogs?

5. How many pro-ED blogs do you check regularly?

6. What do you use these other blogs for mainly?

7. When did you first create your pro-__ blog?

8. What inspired you to create it?
9. How much time do you spend on your own pro-__ blog a day?

10. At what times during the day do you usually work on it?

11. Where do you work on your blog (at home, school, work, public library) the most? Where in your home are the computers or computer?

12. Do most of your friends offline know about your blog? How do they feel about it?

13. Does your family know about your blog? How do they feel about it?

**PART 4. Blogging as Helpful and/or Hurtful**

1. What is the name of your pro-__ blog?

2. What can people find there on there (i.e., pictures, written posts, poems or short stories, art work, weight goals)?

3. What benefits are there for being in the pro-__ community online?

4. What are the disadvantages of being in the community?

5. Specifically just for your blog, what is positive about having a blog to write in?

6. What is negative about having your own blog?

7. What are the intentions of your blog? Is it more like a private diary or a public way to communicate with others? Or maybe both?

8. Which is more important to you, using it to express your feelings or being able to communicate your feelings to others?

9. Do you know other pro-ED people who don’t blog? Or does being pro-ED and being involved with the group online go together?

**PART 5. Mass Media Portrayal of the Thin Ideal**

1. What are your favorite magazines?

2. What are your favorite TV shows right now or in the past?

3. Do you think most of the females depicted in the media are thin? How would you describe the perfect female body in the media?
4. How do you think your eating disorder or your habits were driven by seeing pictures of thin girls and women in the media? Do you work to achieve a body similar to the thin bodies you see in the media?

5. What is the purpose of “thinspiration” in general? Do you post thinspiration? What are the goals of “thinspiration” on your blog?

6. Do you think “thinspiration” helps you or hurts you in terms of reaching your personal goals?

**PART 6. Interpersonal Pressure, Online and Offline**

1. Think of a few of your closest friends outside of the pro-ED group. Would you consider them to be preoccupied with thinness and weight? Do they constantly assess their body appearance and size? Do they keep track of their weight and calories? Do any of them have eating disorders or even eating habits that could be considered unhealthy?

2. How does this affect your own eating disorder or habits?

3. What was your family’s attitude about thinness and weight growing up? Do your parents or siblings constantly assess their body appearance or size? Do they keep track of their weight or calories?

4. How does this affect your own eating disorder or habits?

5. Is there any kind of history of eating disorders or even strict dieting in your family? Does anyone in your home or in your extended family have an eating disorder or the habits of one?

6. Now, think of your friends online in the pro-ED group. Do you think they compete with each other to have the “best” body? What is the atmosphere like?

7. Is being in touch with other pro-ED people helpful or hurtful in reaching your weight goals?

8. Whose opinion would you value more when it comes to your body—a fellow pro-ED or a friend from offline who is not pro-ED? Why is that?

9. Why have pro-ED friends? What do you get from them that you can’t get from friends who are not pro-ED?

**PART 7. The Silencing Effect of the Taboo Surrounding “Too Thin”**

1. It seems clear that American society is not very open to the idea of pro-ED sites. Politicians and other celebrities have even said that these sites should be banned. Why do you think the topic is taboo? What makes pro-__ so unacceptable in our society?
2. What people in your life (at school, work, home, with friends) are you uncomfortable talking to about the issue of pro-__ with? Are you uncomfortable taking about wanting to be thin with family and friends offline?

3. Has being pro-__ helped you to find others who you can you talk to about being thin? How does being a blogger specifically help you with that?

4. How do you cope with wanting to be thin but fearing that you’ll be discovered or ridiculed for being too thin by family and friends?

5. If you were to defend your blog from people who want to ban these Web sites, what would you say, if anything?

6. Recently, my parents were on vacation in Colorado and they saw a young woman driving her car with her license plate reading PRO ANA. Do you think that this type blogging and communication online will soon be brought into the open with women and girls feeling confident about being this way? Or do you think it’s likely to stay online? Is one way better than another? What’s the likelihood that this type of living/dieting/blogging will become mainstream in the future?

**Post-Interview Follow-up Questions**

1. What is your ethnicity?

2. What part of the US are you from and currently at for school? What is the population in these two places?

3. Are you working anywhere at the moment? For school? Outside of school? If so, where do you work?

4. What type of career area do you see yourself involved with in the future?

5. What are a few of your favorite books?

6. What do your parents do for work?

7. Before you created your blog online, did you ever keep an actual physical journal (either in pen and paper, or computer word documents) that incorporated the same activities as blogging (journaling, cutting out magazine photographs, tracking food/calories)?

   **If YES,** do you still use them, and why did you move to having an online journal?

   **If NO,** did you have another form of expressing your weight-loss goals before your blog, or was it your first method?
8. What is the meaning behind your login name?

9. What was your relationship like with your mom growing up regarding body image, weight, and thinness?

10. Do you have any siblings? What was your relationship with them growing up regarding body image, weight, and thinness?

11. What was dinner like in your household growing up?
APPENDIX D: E-MAIL INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION. School/Work/Home

1. How old are you?

2. If you are in college, what year are you? What is your major?

3. If you are not in college, what do you do for work?

4. Do you live in dorms, an apartment, a house? Do you have roommates or live by yourself?

PART 1. Personal Background and Development of Disordered Eating/Dieting Habits

1. How would you describe your self-esteem and body image in elementary and middle school?

2. How would you describe it throughout high school?

3. How would you describe it at this time in your life?

4. Have you been officially diagnosed with an eating disorder?

IF YES, what is the name of the eating disorder?

   How long have you had an eating disorder?

   Can you describe your feelings leading up to the moment you knew you had an eating disorder?

   How were you diagnosed—what lead you, your family, or your friends to setting up an appointment with a doctor?

   Do you personally want to be treated and go through recovery? Or do you see this as more of a lifestyle?

IF NO, What dieting habits do you have?

   How are these dieting habits similar to those who have an eating disorder?

   How long have you had these habits?

5. Does your family know about your eating disorder/your dieting habits? How do they feel about it?
6. Do your friends/significant others know about your eating disorder/your dieting habits? How do they feel about it?

7. Why have an eating disorder/dieting habits? What are the advantages for you? What are the disadvantages for you?

**PART 2. Being Pro-ED**

1. Do you identify yourself as pro-something, for example “pro-ana” or “pro-mia,” or have you ever in the past? (Is there another term you’d rather use for the type of blogging you do?) (The term pro-ED will be used in some of the following questions to refer to this overall community of blogging)

2. When did you become a weight-loss blogger?

3. Do you see weight-loss blogs the same way as others? Are you similar to other weight-loss bloggers? How are you different?

4. Why be a weight-loss blogger? Why did you decide to be one or why do you think others decide?

5. What are your goals for being a weight-loss blogger?

6. How can being a weight-loss blogger be a good thing, what are the benefits of being in the pro-ED community?

7. What disadvantages that come with being a weight-loss blogger in the pro-ED community?

8. Do you think people your age, in general, know what “pro-ana” and “pro-mia” are? Where have they probably heard these terms before?

9. Do your friends offline know you visit these types of blogs online? How do/would they feel about it?

10. Do your family members know you visit these blogs? How do/would they feel about it?

**PART 3. Internet Use**

1. How often do you get online?

2. What kind of Internet access do you have at home? At school? At work?

3. How did you first find out about this pro-ED blogging community online?
4. When you’re online, how often do you visit other blogs in this community?

5. How many pro-ED blogs do you check regularly?

6. What do you use these other blogs for mainly? To get inspiration from others, diet tips, companionship?

7. When did you first create your blog?

8. What inspired you to create it?

9. How much time do you spend on your own blog a day?

10. At what times during the day do you usually work on it? For example, are you kind of forced to blog when others aren’t around or when you can have some private time at home?

11. Where do you work on your blog (at home, school, work, public library) the most?

12. Do most of your friends offline know you have a blog yourself online? How do/would they feel about it?

13. Does your family know about your blog? How do/would they feel about it?

PART 4. Blogging as Helpful and/or Hurtful

1. What is the name of your blog?

2. What can people find there on there (i.e., pictures, written posts, poems, art work, weight goals, food logs)?

3. Specifically just for your blog, what is positive about having a blog to write in in this community?

4. What is negative about having your own blog in this community?

5. What are the intentions of your blog? Is it more like a private diary or a public way to communicate with others? Or maybe both? Is one more important than the other?

6. Do you know other pro-ED people who don’t blog? Or does being a weight-loss blogger and being involved with the group online kind of go hand in hand?

PART 5. Mass Media Portrayal of the Thin Ideal

1. What are your favorite magazines?
2. What are your favorite TV shows right now or in the past?

3. Do you think most of the females depicted in the media are thin? How would you describe the perfect female body seen in the media?

4. How do you think your eating disorder or your dieting habits were driven by seeing pictures of thin girls and women in the media? Do you work to achieve a body similar to the thin bodies you see in the media?

5. What is the purpose of thinspiration in general, what does it do for bloggers in this community? Do you post thinspiration? What are the goals of thinspiration on your blog, or on other blogs that you read?

6. How does thinspiration help you to reach your personal weight-loss goals?

7. How does it hurt you in reaching your goals?

PART 6. Interpersonal Pressure, Online and Offline

1. Think of a few of your closest friends outside the online community you blog in. Would you consider them to be preoccupied with thinness and weight? Do they assess their body appearance and size? Do they keep track of their weight and calories? Do any of them have eating disorders or similar dieting habits?

2. How does this affect your eating disorder or your own dieting habits? Are there any feelings of competition among friends?

3. What was your family’s attitude about thinness and weight growing up? Do your parents or siblings assess their body appearance or size? Do they keep track of their weight or calories?

4. How does this affect your eating disorder or your own dieting habits?

5. Is there any kind of history of eating disorders or strict dieting in your family? Does anyone in your home or in your extended family have an eating disorder or the habits of one?

6. Now, think of your friends online in the community you blog in. Do you think they compete with each other to have the “best” body? Do you? What is the atmosphere like?

7. Is being in touch with other bloggers in this community helpful in reaching your weight goals?

8. Is it every hurtful in reaching your goals?
9. Whose opinion would you value more when it comes to your body—a fellow blogger in your community or a friend from offline who is not in this community? Why is that?

10. Why have friends in the pro-ED blogging community? What do you get from them that you can’t get from friends who are not in the community?

**PART 7. The Silencing Effect of the Taboo Surrounding “Too Thin”**

1. It seems clear that American society is not too open to the idea of these types of diet blogging communities. Politicians and other celebrities have even said that these types of sites should even be banned. Why do you think the topic is taboo? What makes being involved in this community so darn unacceptable in our society?

2. If you were to defend your blog from people who want to ban these Web sites, what would you say, if anything? Do you think some blogs should be banned while others should be left alone? Or does everyone deserve their freedom to express themselves openly online?

3. What people in your life (at school, work, home, with friends) are you uncomfortable talking to about the diet blogging community with? What people in your life are you uncomfortable talking to about wanting to be thin?

4. Has being involved in the pro-ED community helped you find people who you can openly talk to about wanting to be thin? How does being a blogger specifically help with that?

5. How do you cope with wanting to be thin but fearing you’ll be discovered or ridiculed by family and friends? How do you deal with not being able to talk to your friends and family about being in this community? Do you ever wish you could just be open about the whole thing?

6. Recently, my parents were on vacation in Colorado and they saw a young woman driving her car with her license plate reading PRO ANA. Do you think that this type blogging and communication online will soon be brought into the open with women and girls feeling confident about being this way? Or do you think it’s likely to stay online? Is one way better than another? What’s the likelihood that this type of living/dieting/blogging will become mainstream in the future?

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