# Starving in cyberspace: a discourse analysis of pro-eating-disorder websites

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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Starving in cyberspace: a discourse analysis of pro-eating-disorder websites

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Recently, we have seen the emergence of 'pro-eating-disorder' websites and Internet communities, providing opportunities for girls and women who practise self-starvation and purging to converse and swap 'tips' online. This has generated discussion about the feminist response to this so-called 'pro-eating-disorder movement'. Although a number of studies have focused on online eating-disorder support groups, they have not examined the material posted on pro-eating-disorder websites. The study reported here is an examination of how members of the pro-eating-disorder movement construct their interests, activities and identities. This was done by performing a poststructuralist style of discourse analysis informed by a feminist perspective on the material downloaded from pro-eating-disorder websites. The analysis highlights the discursive work occurring on the sites around the power of beauty ideals and conformity to these. Yet at the same time, this sub-cultural group is engaged in counter-hegemonic work with regards to dominant meanings surrounding self-starvation and purging. Suggestions for future work are also presented.

**Keywords:** self-starvation; binge–purging; femininity; discourse analysis; Internet

## Introduction

### Body modification: feminist understandings

There are a range of feminist explanations related to women's self-imposed restriction of food intake which constitute this in different and sometimes conflicting ways (Malson 1998). However, a number of themes can be detected in the literature. These include the centrality of the 'thin ideal' and wider constructions of femininity that value denial and restriction. In addition, self-starvation has also been characterised as resistance towards feminine roles and the ambiguity associated with these in modern societies.

For example, numerous writers have pointed to the requirement that women must be thin in order to be considered worthwhile and attractive to men as strongly entrenched in Western cultures (e.g. Orbach 1978, 1986, Wolf 1990, Bartky 1988, Bordo 1993), a requirement that has resulted in attempts on the part of women and girls to modify their bodies through weight loss (see Lee 1998). Such practices serve to maintain power imbalances between men and women, keeping women in subordinate positions (Orbach 1986). For example, thinness weakens women physically (Brownmiller 1984) and beauty ideals alienate us from our bodies via objectification (Bartky 1990), thus women come to be seen and experience themselves as objects as opposed to active and agentic members of

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society (e.g. Wooley 1994). Energies are channelled into 'looking good' as opposed to becoming more involved in traditionally masculine arenas and demanding greater equality (see Grogan 2000, Wolf 1994). The widespread promotion of the 'thin ideal', which has become progressively thinner (e.g. via the fashion, advertising and dieting industries) has meant that preoccupation with slenderness in women has become normative (Bordo 1993).

However, it has often been argued that an explanation of body modification practices in terms of the 'thin beauty ideal' alone are insufficient (e.g. Banks 1992, Malson 1992). Wolf (1994) and Wooley (1994) have argued that practices such as self-starvation encompass wider, gendered meanings, and so are not just about the pursuit of physical beauty. For example, characteristics such as obedience, restraint, self-denial and self-discipline are valued and encouraged in women (Lawrence 1979). A failure to eat on the part of women can often be regarded as an extension of attributes such as feminine self-denial and self-sacrifice (e.g. Orbach 1978, 1986, Eichenbaum and Orbach 1983), and as food continues to be regarded as 'women's business' (see Madden and Chamberlain 2004), then control of food intake becomes a readily available means of achieving such virtues (Lee 1998, Lawrence 1979). Similarly, Sied (1994) argued that physical softness (characteristic of female bodies that are not ultra-thin) is associated with moral softness, and because women are regarded as the guardians of moral virtue in many cultures, food restriction is often regarded not only as a way of achieving a hard, finely toned body, but also a way of achieving and maintaining moral virtue.

Yet, girls and women do not absorb cultural, gendered meanings in a straightforward and unproblematic manner. For example, MacLeod (1981) and Orbach (1978, 1986) characterised a refusal to eat on the part of some women as a 'social protest' or form of rebellion against women's experiences of subordination and lack of autonomy (MacLeod 1981), and culturally defined feminine roles (Orbach 1978, 1986). Bordo (1993) presents this as a possible reading of 'anorexia', based upon the revulsion towards hips, stomachs and breasts that is characteristic of maternal female bodies as these physical features are taken to represent women's/mothers' lack of power in patriarchal societies and women's reproductive destiny. Similarly, theorists such as Dally and Gomez (1979) have argued that a striving for thinness represents the rejection of womanhood and femininity more generally, as the result of this is typically the cessation of menstruation and the failure to develop a 'womanly' body shape.

The ambiguity of, and contradictions inherent in women's roles and associated expectations have also been highlighted by a number of feminist writers. Typically here, the restriction of food intake is viewed as a response to the role of conflict and 'identity crises' that result. For example, Orbach (1986) argued that women have to try and make sense of the confusing expectations placed upon them (e.g. wife, mother, successful career woman), and that exercising control over the body (e.g. via self-starvation) is a manifestation of the confusion that results. Similarly, Lawrence (1984) argues that having previously accepted the female qualities of compliance and passivity, at a point in their lives when young women are expected to be independent and autonomous (usually adolescence), they often feel confused and unable to resolve the conflict. The result is that young women may try to impose control in a way perceived to be possible: via food. Lawrence's (1984) work also resonates to some extent with the work of MacSween (1993). She argues that women and girls are subjected to the conflicting ideologies of responsive, passive femininity and of (masculine) independence and success in contemporary patriarchal, bourgeois cultures. Self-starvation often represents a way (albeit a precarious and temporary one) of addressing this conflict, by integrating an impenetrable and independent self (defined by the refusal of food) into a thin, feminine body.

In sum, two main themes can be detected in the literature, as summarised by Malson (1998). First, the elucidation of the importance of social structures and gender power relations in understanding extreme forms of body modification and second, an insistence on the negativity and pathology of prescribed femininity. Within these accounts, those who self-starve are presented as both 'victims' of culturally prescribed roles and expectations and also 'rebels' who are fighting and resisting these in an effort to negotiate a satisfactory feminine identity (Corr 1994).

### Feminist poststructuralist challenges and contributions

The above feminist analyses have contributed tremendously to understandings of body distress and body modification by contextualising these and challenging the individualistic theories that characterise medical and mainstream psychological and psychiatric understandings. However, a number of criticisms have been highlighted by feminists working from a poststructuralist perspective. The compatibility of feminism and poststructuralism (e.g. Derrida, Foucault) has been highlighted by numerous authors, who have located feminism within poststructuralism more generally (e.g. Flax 1987), or have argued that poststructuralism often reiterates long-standing feminist concerns and arguments, such as the problems associated with scientific claims of truth and objectivity (Burman 1990) and the cultural and historical specificity of knowledge (see Gavey 1989, McNay 1992). More specifically, those such as Robertson (1992) argue that feminist critical scholarship on self-starvation can benefit by drawing upon the issues and questions raised by Foucault's work. Such arguments are based upon the problems associated with earlier, typically more essentialist feminist analyses of body distress.

One argument is that more traditional feminist analyses have not gone far enough in deconstructing pathologising categories and individualistic deficiency models that form the basis of scientific and clinical conceptions (Hepworth and Griffin 1995). Although variably acknowledging the problems associated with the categories 'anorexia nervosa' and 'bulimia nervosa', a characteristic of many of the feminist analyses discussed previously is that these have retained such categories and terms, reproducing discourse which positions those who self-starve as passive victims of a disease (Hepworth and Griffin 1995) and indicating an acceptance that 'anorexia' and 'bulimia' are recognisable, definable conditions, which has the effect of immediately separating some women from others (Hepworth 1999). Hepworth and Griffin (1995) argue that a deconstruction of pathologising categories and terms is necessary if we are to see self-starvation and binge–purging behaviours as extreme variations of women's 'normal' reactions to social and cultural forces, as opposed to medical and psychological disorders. Feminists working from a poststructuralist perspective have challenged the treatment of such concepts as scientific or medical 'realities' by exposing these as discursively produced within specific cultural, historical and political contexts (see Hepworth 1999, Malson 1998, MacSween 1993, Robertson 1992). This allows us as feminists to engage more thoroughly with the concepts of 'anorexia' and 'bulimia' as phenomena that are socio-culturally constituted (Malson 1998).

An additional criticism raised is that many feminist analyses of 'anorexia' (e.g. Lawrence 1984, MacLeod 1981, Chernin 1986) have reproduced and inadvertently supported (masculine) bourgeois, patriarchal models of the self (MacSween 1993) that are characteristic of mainstream psychology (Hepworth and Griffin 1995). That is, the self as unitary, internal, and separable from social processes. For example, MacSween (1993) has pointed out that socio-cultural factors are conceived of as 'going to work' on a fundamental, 'authentic' self which is then distorted, fragmented and/or prevented from fully developing. Following from

this, the realisation of a more well integrated (e.g. Orbach 1986) and/or authentic (e.g. MacLeod 1981) self is often presented as the way forward for those experiencing body distress. There are a number of problems associated with this. Firstly, the conceptualisation of socio-cultural factors as separable from individual psychology maintains the idea that self-starvation is a manifestation of psychopathology (see Benveniste *et al.* 1999). Following from this, the individual rather than the wider social context is located as the source of transformation which underplays the need for social change via collective political action (Robertson 1992). In addition, as MacSween (1993) points out, the assumption that women can realise a self-contained and autonomous 'true self' underestimates the power of gender ideologies and is based upon a masculine model of the self which is not achievable for women in patriarchal societies. She argues that adding a feminist perspective to existing psychological and psychiatric orthodoxies, drawing upon concepts such as the 'authentic self' (as well as concepts such as 'anorexia' and 'bulimia') is insufficient and that feminists need to deconstruct and critique these.

Those writing from a poststructuralist or social constructionist perspective, in contrast, transgress the individual – society dichotomy by regarding the construction of identities as inseparable from social processes, as active and dynamic (e.g. Griffin 1989), and as necessarily fragmented since these are constituted by conflicting and competing discourses. Writers such as Orbach, Chernin and McLeod have presented women who self-starve as both rebels and victims (Hepworth and Griffin 1995), which indicates the complexities and contradictions of self-starvation. By conceiving of identities as discursively produced and multi-faceted, those such as Eckermann (1997) have explored this further. Drawing upon the work of Foucault, Eckermann argues that the contradictory discourses surrounding self-starvation serve to constitute the subjectivities of women and girls practising this as both 'super-compliant' (e.g. complying to the demands of the thin ideal) *and* as defiant rebels (e.g. defying the dictates of the medical and health professions). A strength of Eckermann's work (see also Bordo 1988, Robertson 1992, MacSween 1993) is that this brings together many of the arguments previously presented by feminists within a poststructuralist framework in an arguably more comprehensive manner.

Two final, related criticisms of classic feminist analyses are that girls and women who experience problems with food have often been positioned as 'passive victims' of socio-cultural forces and expectations, and have become the silent objects of discourse around this as opposed to its originators (Robertson 1992). Whilst not attempting to underplay the power of gender ideologies and the often damaging consequences of these, we accept Weedon's (1987) argument that the subject is able to reflect upon the discourses and discursive relations that constitute her and has some leeway in choosing from the options available. In addition, analyses that obscure notions of agency can suffer from an over-simplification of processes of power and a pessimistic outlook for transformation, relegating this either to the level of the individual (e.g. realising a more 'authentic' self) or a radical transformation in social structures. A Foucauldian analysis can, again, be beneficial here. Foucault's analysis of power is one that conceives of this as operating in a circular as opposed to a 'top-down' manner, whereby local processes of knowledge production have the potential to subvert and over-throw more widespread and institutionalised discourses. From this perspective, women and girls have the potential to 'rewrite' gender ideologies, their actions and identities in beneficial ways (Eckermann 1997). This opens up possibilities for local, collective action. Recently, writers such as Harris (2001) and Lyons (2000) have identified the Internet as one possible site for such action.

### Young women, the Internet and 'pro-eating-disorder' websites

The use of the Internet by girls and women has been characterised in terms of 'social comfort' (Patz 2003) and as a way to supplement traditional sources of information such as books and magazines (Pandey *et al.* 2003). Further, those such as Harris (2001) and Giroux (1998) have highlighted how, in recent times, young people have found new spaces for expression in which they attempt to construct 'choice biographies' (Harris 2001, p. 130) and in which young people might be 'doing their politics' (p. 132). These often take the form of sub-cultural sites, including 'virtual spaces' on the Internet (e.g. 'gurl' webpages). Harris (2001) argues that in these sites, young women are engaged in counter-hegemonic work, resisting and challenging the dominant ways in which they, their interests and activities are represented.

It is possible that the recently emerged 'pro-eating-disorder' websites, believed to be accessed mainly by girls and young women aged between 13 and 25 (Fraser 2003), might be spaces where this is happening. For example, 'pro-eating-disorder' websites (which typically have names such as 'Starving for Perfection' and 'Dying to be Thin'), often promote 'eating disorders' as a 'lifestyle choice' rather than as a 'disease' (Paquette 2002), thus challenging medical and psychiatric conceptualisations which position the 'sufferer' as passive and helpless. However, such sites are also regarded as a worrying development, and one that is incompatible with feminist politics. For example, women and girls posting on the sites often swap 'tips' on how to achieve and maintain a low body weight via practices such as self-starvation and self-induced vomiting, and thus can be regarded as complicit in the oppression of women by promoting abuse of the female body in pursuit of unrealistic body ideals. It has also been argued by Fraser (2003) that the sites often attract teenage girls seeking advice on how to get thinner, and may even be stumbled upon accidentally. As such, the sites may not solely be visited by those already engaging in such practices who wish to converse with others in a similar situation, and could act as a form of 'initiation' into such ways of living (although the extent to which this is the case is unknown). It is due to this complexity that Pollack (2003), in an article published in *Feminism & Psychology*, puzzled over what the feminist response to the websites (and the 'pro-eating-disorder movement') should be. We hoped that as a result of this study, we would be able to shed some light on this debate.

We argue that pro-eating-disorder websites offer the potential to explore a fairly well-worn topic of feminist concern by examining the 'sense-making' that occurs within these spaces, outside of a therapeutic or 'face-to-face' research context. Adopting a feminist poststructuralist framework, we regarded the sites as spaces where processes of power are played out, and where the active construction of knowledge and identity occurs. We anticipated that an examination of the sites would shed light on the constructive and deconstructive work that young women subjected to gender ideologies and processes of pathologisation are engaged in, and what the implications for feminist understandings and responses to body distress might be.

### The study

Data collection involved searching for 'pro-eating-disorder' websites using popular search engines (e.g. 'Google' and 'Yahoo!'). Some search engines proved more useful than others, as some service providers have attempted to remove all links to the sites. This has only been partially successful. For example, it was found on subsequent searches that sites visited previously had disappeared, only to be replaced by new ones. Indeed, a more recent, follow-up search indicated that none of the websites accessed for the study are now in existence, although new ones have and continue to surface.

Regular searches were conducted by one of the authors (TK), and material downloaded for analysis. Following the ethical guidelines produced by the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR 2002), we decided to use public webpages and chat exchanges in publicly accessible forums only, avoiding 'lock and key' sites where greater privacy is assumed. In addition, steps were taken to ensure that nobody would be identifiable from the analysis, such as the removal of all names (even obvious pseudonyms) and any other information that may lead to personal identification. Further, no attempts were made to deceive those visiting the sites by, for example, TK 'posing' as a self-starver or someone seeking advice on weight loss. Rather, a method of 'lurking' was adopted (reading the messages without taking part).

The websites were formatted in various ways, but most commonly contained links to such subsections as 'Tips': including how to maintain and hide an 'eating disorder'; 'Ana Commandments': the rules that a 'true anorexic' should live by; and 'My Journal': the site's creator's account of her daily life. Some websites contained discussion boards where girls and women discuss their lifestyles with others in a similar situation. Practically all of the websites had links to images of emaciated women, but we decided to focus on the written text as this appeared to be the richest source of multiple discourses around food and its consumption (or non-consumption). All of the material found at each of the 13 websites was included in the analysis to ensure a good variety. On virtually all of the websites, 'anorexia' was referred to as 'Ana' and 'bulimia' as 'Mia'.

The data were analysed using a poststructuralist form of discourse analysis informed by a feminist perspective, following guidelines provided by Willott and Griffin (1997). As with other forms of qualitative analysis, this does not merely represent a step-by-step procedure applied to data, but also encompasses theoretical, epistemological and political viewpoints. Feminist poststructuralist understandings of body distress have already been outlined, but due to the variability within this literature, it is necessary to explicate the standpoint adopted here. Unlike some feminist poststructuralist work in this area, we did not make use of psychoanalytic theory, such as the ideas of Lacan (e.g. Malson 1998). Rather, our analysis was largely conducted within a Foucauldian framework, thus concentrating upon the production of knowledge and the constitution of subjectivity without making recourse to unconscious processes. However, nor were we working with the idea that there is nothing beyond the text [an assertion that has been attributed to Derrida (1976)]. For example, although we agree with those such as MacSween (1993) that the body is inscribed with cultural meanings and that any bodily or physical experience is necessarily always mediated by social processes and discourses, we also regard the bodies described in the data gathered (e.g. as being subjected to rigorous and often punitive regimes) as having a physical reality. However, these bodies are ones that are not directly knowable outside of the discursive realm (Malson 1998).

The language on the sites was analysed with the aim of identifying discourses around issues such as femininity, the body, food and food consumption. We focused on three areas. Firstly, we explored the forms of knowledge both reproduced and subverted on the sites. Secondly, we were interested in the sites as marginal spaces where new forms of knowledge are potentially constructed and where the active construction of identities takes place. Finally, we were concerned with the possibilities that these ways of construing 'open up' or 'close off' for women who experience problems with food, and what the power implications of these are, as well as the implications of these processes of knowledge production and power for feminist debates around body distress.

The material was read repeatedly until we achieved 'intimate familiarity' with it. It was then broken into 'chunks', with each chunk representing a block of text centring on a theme

or issue or, sometimes, more than one theme as these often overlapped. The 'chunks' were then coded using 'in-vivo' themes (see Willott and Griffin 1997) including, for example, 'resistance', 'theology' and 'thinspiration'. All 'chunks' coded using the same in-vivo theme were then selected and the ways in which this theme was represented were documented, noting similarities, differences and contradictions. This process was repeated until the major discursive patterns had been identified in each in-vivo theme. The final stage was to develop a theoretical account of these discursive patterns.

## Analysis

Overall, two major discursive patterns were identified in the data. One constructed self-starvation in terms of conformity to the thin ideal and the pursuit of perfection and virtue. The other discursive pattern constructed this as rebellion and resistance towards authorities such as medical professionals and control over the female body. The notion of self-starvation and binge–purging as diseases was largely subverted on the sites.

### Pursuing ideal femininity: the thin ideal and the secular saint

One of the first features of the material that became apparent during analysis was the description and promotion of disciplining regimes on the female body (see Turner 1984, 1987, 1992). The 'thin ideal', as promoted by wider mainstream culture, was often a central point of discussion as can be seen in the two posts presented in Extract 1:

> *Extract 1*:
>
> If you have a terrible craving, turn on the TV! Most likely, SOME sort of show will be on with skinny, gorgeous actresses/models. (Site 12)
>
> I [Ana] force you to stare at magazine models. Those perfect-skinned, white-teethed, waif-ish models of perfection staring out at you from those glossy pages. I make you realise that you could never be one of them. You will always be fat and never will be as beautiful as they are. (Site 8)

Reference was often made on the sites to the media and 'skinny' celebrities. Such cultural images were constructed as pervasive ('SOME sort of show will be on') and desirable. However, the language on the sites suggests a complex and troubled relationship with such cultural texts. For example, this relationship is constructed as being characterised by feelings of inferiority and inadequacy, due to the ultimate unobtainability of these ideals ('You will always be fat and never will be as beautiful as they are'). By deconstructing cultural discourse (e.g. as promoted in media such as television, women's magazines and health promotion literature) that women can achieve their beauty goals via a careful, healthy diet and exercise (Bishop 2001), the discourse on the sites subverts such ideas, pointing to a reading of these on the part of girls and women as unlikely and improbable.

However, if these ideals are constructed in this way, then how is the continuing pursuit of these justified? There appears to be important discursive work occurring on the sites with reference to this. For example, note in the extract above that 'Ana' becomes personified as the source of feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. The location of 'Ana' in this way may serve the purpose of enabling those contributing to the sites to deal with a central contradiction that arises from idolising such images, but also experiencing these as oppressive. This is negotiated by creating a separate, critical self, a 'devil on one's shoulder', that is the source of negative feelings rather than the images themselves, and by

the suggestion that such 'awareness', as originating from 'Ana', may be momentary. This possibly allows the continued desiring and pursuit of these ideals, as it offers an alternative to directly challenging and rejecting them, or the location of these experiences within a wider socio-political context. In addition, any positive alternatives to such ideals were notably absent on the sites. This is instructive in highlighting the constructionist work that girls and women engage in around cultural ideals and their actions in pursuit of these [for a recent discussion, see also Burns and Gavey (2004)], as well as the barriers that are created in challenging problems around food and eating.

Pursuit of the 'thin body ideal' on the part of members of the pro-eating-disorder movement appears to have significance and meaning that extends beyond simply attempting to achieve a culturally validated look (which is sometimes portrayed as unobtainable anyway, as discussed). For example, this is constructed as a feature of a more general way of living and of being a 'good anorectic'. The 'good anorectic' was characterised on the sites as a super-compliant servant or secular saint (see Eckermann 1997), one who conforms to the rules of the 'eating disorder religion'. Within the religion, 'Ana' and 'Mia' are again personified, often as mighty leaders or Gods, who if followed can offer salvation, but can also be vengeful and punitive. For example, the creator of one site had posted a list of 'Ana commandments' to live by:

*Extract 2*:

Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.

Strict is my diet. I must not want. It maketh me to lie down at night hungry. It leadeth me past the confectioners. It trieth my willpower ...

I believe in calorie counters as the aspired word of God ...

I believe in bathroom scales as an indicator of my daily successes and failures. (Site 11)

*Extract 3*:

Dear Ana: Where did you go? You know I can't live without you. YOU give me life when nothing else can make me feel. YOU make things almost seem real again ... And Ana, if you want me dead, I will gladly give you my last breath so long as you help me to be thin ... P.S.: You can go ahead and invite Mia over whenever you want ... she is welcome to stay as well. (Site 8)

*Extract 4*:

[The voice of Mia] Your fingers will be inserted down your throat and not without a great deal of pain, your food binge will come up ... You fat cow you deserve to be in pain! (Site 8)

Once again in Extract 4 we can see the attribution of negative feelings surrounding a binge (e.g. failure and self-disgust) to a voice (this time 'Mia'), who, as outlined earlier, appears to take the form of a vengeful God. Theological discourse and imagery pervaded the material, as did the themes of self-sacrifice and self-denial. Griffin and Berry (2003), in their discussion of 'holy anorexia' (Bell 1985), describe how throughout the ages, 'fasting' and the demonstration of independence from physical needs has often been regarded as a route to salvation for women. This is perhaps associated with constructions of femininity that closely bind this with nature, desire and the 'primitive', things that have come to be devalued (in preference of rationality and restraint) and which must be kept under control. In addition, many of the regimes on the body described and promoted on the sites are

reminiscent of the practices of physical self-punishment, including self-starvation, amongst latter-day saints (including women) in expiation of sin (Vandereycken and van Deth 1996). Some writers have drawn parallels between the practices of self-starvation on the part of latter day saints and more contemporary instances of 'anorexia' (e.g. Bell 1985, Walker Bynum 1991), for example, as both being characterised by asceticism. However others such as MacSween (1993) and Malson (1998) have cautioned against drawing such parallels because of the very different meanings that food and self-starvation carried in medieval and twentieth-century Europe, such as fasting as an instrument of spirituality. It does appear however that contemporary discourses around food and its consumption continue to be bound up with themes of morality and 'holiness', discourses that women and girls contributing to the sites appeared to be tapping into.

For example, Griffin and Berry (2003) noted, in a study that involved an analysis of messages portrayed through Western advertisements for food, that food consumption (particularly high-fat foods) is culturally associated with debauchery, sin and weakness. This operates alongside recent health promotion campaigns and a Western media concerned with promoting 'healthy eating/living', that are often pervaded by moral discourse (see Madden and Chamberlain 2004). Here, eating certain types of food becomes not just unhealthy, but as a marker of moral weakness and inferiority (Lupton 1996). Due to this, Eckermann (1997) argues that ironically, the self-starving and/or binge–purging woman may represent a victim of health promotion campaigns in creating obsessive concerns about weight, shape and eating [a point raised more recently by Burns and Gavey (2004)]. Further, Madden and Chamberlain (2004) argue that such a discourse has implications for subjectivities which become closely bound with people's eating practices. For example, a failure to discipline one's desires and to eat 'bad' food is to take up the negative position of 'sinner' (Wetherell 1988). Because women are often regarded as the guardians of moral virtue (Sied 1994) and because the denial of bodily needs and the denouncement of pleasure has and continues to be closely bound with images of, and discourse around, normative/desirable femininity (e.g. Orbach 1978, 1986, Eichenbaum and Orbach 1983), then the impact on feminine subjectivities in particular is likely to be more pronounced.

The emphases that are placed on the sites on 'ideal' states such as 'thin' and 'holy' can be read as part of the construction of a collective, positive identity via the sites. For example, statements such as the ones below were littered throughout the material analysed:

*Extract 5*:

This is a place for the elite who, through personal determination in their ongoing quest for perfection, demonstrate daily that Ana is the ONLY way to live. (Site 5)

. . . the best we can be is the thinnest we can be. We will not allow those around us to detour our missions. We will do whatever it takes to reach our goals. (Site 5)

The language of 'struggle' is apparent throughout much of the material analysed. It has been suggested by Cohn (1986) that such struggles represent an effort to assert a female identity in a world dominated by men where, for example, female identities are often denied independence or value or remain hidden. The 'quest for perfection' is the quest for thinness, purity and virtue, which as discussed, is informed by wider cultural meanings around food, food consumption and femininity. The pro-eating-disorder movement's quest for perfection is what gives them a valued, collective identity. For example, note the reference to members of the movement as an 'elite' (Extract 5). In addition, those contributing to the sites often referred to themselves and to each other as 'Ana', where

'Ana' is no longer a spiteful or vengeful voice, or a God that can offer salvation, but a positive and valued form of identity that members of the movement have created for themselves and each other.

### Rebellious femininity: Ana and Mia as resistance

The active work that the girls and women contributing to the sites are engaged in, in making sense of their relationship with feminine ideals, has been previously discussed. Yet, as argued, the ideals themselves remain largely unchallenged which ushers in an analysis of the pro-eating-disorder movement as largely conformist and complicit in promoting these ideals. However, analysis of other material from the sites suggests a more subversive function of the movement in challenging normative discourse and resisting problematic subject positions. It suggests that the contributors to the sites were engaged in the active construction of 'alternative' meanings around extreme forms of body modification and forms of identity constitutive of these that emphasise choice, determination and celebration.

For example, self-starvation and binge–purging were often constructed as 'ways of living' (see Extract 5). Indeed, this has been noted by others as a prominent characteristic of the pro-eating-disorder websites (Paquette 2002). In addition, as previously noted, members of the pro-eating-disorder movement were often portrayed as an 'elite' or even enlightened group (as opposed to a group of 'sick' girls and women needing help and advice), and the practices (e.g. self-starvation) described were typically done so with a clear tone of pride.

This appears to provide support for observations made by those such as Harris (2001) that it is within such sub-cultural spaces that young women are often engaged in counter-hegemonic work, resisting and challenging the dominant ways in which their identities, interests and activities are represented (in other words, it is in these spaces that young women are 'doing their politics'). Here, the girls and women contributing to the sites are resisting and subverting medicalised and psychiatric constructions of extreme forms of body modification in terms of pathology and the positioning of women who self-starve within these discourses as passive victims of disease. Benveniste *et al.* (1999) demonstrated, in a study of what they called 'lay theories' around 'anorexia nervosa', how the idea that this is a manifestation of psychopathology was widespread. Girls and women who self-starve can either 'take up' the subject positions that such discourse offers, or they can rework and resist such discursive positioning (Weedon 1987), which is what appears to be occurring on the sites. There is much at stake for the women on these sites, especially if we consider arguments presented by those such as Laing (1988) that pathologising labels and categories are often used to strip people of their civil liberties. The girls and women here are the originators, as opposed to the objects of discourse (see Robertson 1992) that tell their stories in a different way (i.e. as an active struggle to achieve perfection as opposed to the result of sickness).

In addition, the members of the movement can be regarded as 'doing politics' in other, perhaps more explicit ways:

*Extract 6*:

Our [the anorectic's] authority is our control over our own bodies. (Site 5)

I believe in Control, the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world. (Site 11)

The 'mission' here is one that is being defined as a striving for independence and control over and through the female body. Women's lack of control of their own bodies and the

control exerted over these by the medical and 'psy' professions (as well as socio-cultural forces more generally) has long been a topic of feminist concern (see Introduction) and has been related to a range of issues, including sexuality and sexual reproduction (Koedt 1973, Daly 1978) and 'psychopathology' (Blackman 1996). Medical practices that allow the forced treatment (e.g. force-feeding) of women who self-starve reflect perhaps one of the most direct and violent practices of such control, underpinned by a paternal notion of the state's authority and role to provide 'care'. It appeared from the material analysed that many of the girls and women posting on the websites had been in treatment at one time or another, and accounts of their experiences often described acts of defiance and included 'tips and tricks' on how to resist agents of control, most notably medical professionals, but also others such as parents:

> *Extract 7*:
>
> If you're in outpatient treatment and have to have your blood tested ... there are a few ways you can fool the test ... (Site 12)
>
> Praise fat people and they [parents] will never guess that you're starving yourself into thinness. (Site 12)
>
> Stage a conversation over the phone about how you don't think you need to lose weight. (Site 4)

Those contributing to the sites are thus constructing themselves as engaged in active resistance towards control over their bodies and actions, and as struggling to attain a sense of control and independence in a world where this is often denied to women. Note in Extract 6 that the person posting the message characterises her 'world' as characterised by 'chaos'. A number of feminist writers have portrayed self-starvation as an attempt to gain control in a patriarchal world of confusing and contradictory expectations that are placed on women (e.g. Lawrence 1984, Orbach 1986). At the same time, the discourse on the sites that positions women and girls who self-starve as active and agentic is counter to feminist analyses that feminine ideals (e.g. the thin ideal) and the objectification of women's bodies prevent women from experiencing and understanding themselves as such (e.g. Wooley 1994). MacSween's (1993) analysis of feminine identities in bourgeois patriarchal cultures may be instructive here. She argues that within such cultural contexts, women are encouraged to be conformist and passive, but that this requirement also has to be negotiated in light of the (male) values of independence and autonomy that are also promoted. The girls and women posting on the sites may be faced with the task of negotiating a satisfactory collective feminine identity in the face of potential accusations that they are conforming to cultural ideals and yielding to social pressures. They counter this by constructing their actions as representing an 'active choice', as being about more than just 'beauty ideals' and framing these in terms of rebellious resistance. Although different discourses are being presented, the discursive work occurring here appears to be similar to that described in studies by Wetherell (1988) and Burns and Gavey (2004). In both of these studies, the participants appeared to be faced with a similar task of negotiating their desire for thinness in a cultural context in which independence (from social pressures) is valued. They did this by drawing upon a range of discourses and interpretative repertoires that, for example, portrayed their failure to eat as the result of 'natural' appetite as opposed to pursuit of the thin ideal (Wetherell 1988) and by tapping into a health discourse which constructs thinness as healthy (Wetherell 1988, Burns and Gavey 2004). A health discourse was notably absent in the material analysed here, possibly because of the fairly 'self-evident' health dangers associated with the practices described and promoted. In turn, the angry, rebellious tone of the material posted on the sites was absent in

the data collected by Burns & Gavey (2004) suggesting that their participants were striving to present a more idealised and socially acceptable account of their restriction of food intake.

On the one hand, pro-eating-disorder sites and Internet communities may be beneficial in helping girls and women to deal with their experiences of body distress on a daily level. For example, these offer opportunities to belong to a wider community, where those visiting the sites who self-starve can find a positive identity on offer, in a world where feminine identities are hidden or devalued, and where the activities and lifestyles of these girls and women are highly pathologised. In addition, the sites can be regarded as subversive in ways that are not always incompatible with feminist politics (e.g. reclaiming control over the female body). However, from a feminist Foucauldian perspective, the construction of such practices in terms of 'active choice', whilst challenging much criticised constructions of women who severely restrict their food intake as 'passive victims', may not be helpful. For example, Foucault (1979, 1980) argued that the surveillance of bodies has created the conditions for self-surveillance and self-discipline, and that these processes are all the more powerful when people see themselves as acting out of choice. This, in conjunction with the discursive work that the girls and women are engaged in which enables them to pursue feminine ideals despite an often problematic relationship with these, means that a questioning of wider, oppressive norms and practices such as the thin ideal remains improbable.

## Final remarks

The analysis presented here has highlighted how members of the pro-eating-disorder movement are engaged in active discursive work in cyberspace in making sense of their activities, in constructing alternative meanings around practices such as self-starvation and in 'carving out' alternative subject positions for girls and women who severely restrict their food intake. This fits with a Foucauldian emphasis upon people as active agents capable of meaning and identity negotiation (Foucault 1981), as well as Harris's (2001) contention that young women are engaged in counter-hegemonic work in such sub-cultural spaces. There is also some support here for Eckermann's (1997) argument that voluntary self-starvation and bingeing–purging represents an area in which women can, simultaneously, occupy the positions of 'conformist', 'good, compliant anorectic' and 'rebel'. Drawing upon the ideas of MacSween (1993), it is our contention that the ways in which the practices of the pro-eating-disorder movement are constructed on the sites can be read as an attempt to deal with the pursuit of normative cultural ideals (e.g. the thin ideal), whilst resisting being positioned as a 'conformist' (e.g. conforming to social expectations and yielding to pressures) in a way that retains an emphasis upon valued characteristics such as autonomy and independence.

One notable feature of the sites that has been demonstrated here is the angry and even vengeful tone of many of the posts, for example, surrounding the unobtainable thin ideal and control over the female body. Further, the anger generated by unrealistic ideals appeared quite often to be directed towards the self (e.g. 'You will always be fat and never will be as beautiful as they are') in a self-destructive manner. This emotive aspect of the data is not analysed in great depth here because of the theoretical approach of the study which was mainly concerned with the use of discourse and social construction of identity. We suggest that this could be explored further using a poststructuralist psychodynamic approach (see Hollway 1983, 1989, 1995, Walkerdine 1987, Malson 1998) in order to explore the interrelationship between such lived experiences and the linguistic and social context.

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