



LUND UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences
Graduate School

Master's Thesis (Two Year) in Gender Studies

SIMT16

Spring Term 2011

Supervisor: Annette Hill

‘I am an Anorexic’:

Tensions in Discursive Relationships of Gender, Identity and
Health Through a Case Study of a Pro-Anorexia Website

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Abstract

Despite the vast amount of research done around anorexia nervosa, anorexia as an identity, rather than only a disease, has barely been explored. Within Giddens' 'Late modernity' concept, the growth of technology has caused individuals to use machines as mirrors to evaluate their image within society. This has created an opportunity for women to evaluate themselves with the Internet as a tool, and with this tool women have reappropriated a stigmatized identity from the medical discourse, causing tensions to arise in feminist and identity discourse. The establishment of a theoretical framework that supports the understanding of the body in the late modern age, highlighting the shift that the Internet has caused in learning, and showcasing the establishment of the body as an action system. Critical discourse analysis will be used to show how the development of contextualized truth claims determine whether an online community with a (positive) anorexia identification on the Internet can possibly suggest a position within, or a stand against conventional identity categories. While this research discusses anorexia as a reclaimed identity due to growth in technology and how users understand technology, it is the personal goal of the researcher to have this paper act as a vehicle to understanding the reappropriations of other stigmatized identities regarding feminism and body property as displayed in online social spaces.

Keywords:

Pro-ana, identity, online communities, critical discourse analysis, late modernity

Word Count: 18,108

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Introduction Chapter: 1

1.1 Introduction of Research

The 'late modernity' concept (Giddens:1991) is based upon social changes; it is with the growth of technology that individuals use machines as mirrors to evaluate their image and role within defined, even if at times fluid, space of society. The computer, a machine deemed the 'second self' (Turkle: 1984) because of how it affects awareness of one's self and relationships within the world, is the tool on which users rely to connect to the Internet. It is there, on the Internet, where the phrase of 'second self' fully develops into a social and psychological identifier. Millions of people are linked together "in new spaces that are changing how we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities" (Turkle:1999 pp.643).

It is within the understanding of the Late Modern Age that "the body is not just a physical entity" which individuals 'possess', rather "it is an action-system, a mode of praxis, and its practical immersion in the interactions of day-to-day life is an essential part of the sustaining a coherent sense of self identity" (Giddens:1991 p.99). In an 'open social environment', such as the Internet, women strive "for security in a world of plural, but ambiguous, options" and "a tightly controlled body is an emblem of a safe existence" (Giddens:1991 p.107). It can be extended in thought that the Internet could cause the physical body to change, as the user attempts to control the body in an attempt to have order within in a world that offers the new social and psychological understandings of the self.

However, prior to the Late Modern Age, long before *Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer Company* unveiled the first all-purpose electronic computer in 1946 (Golden:1999), and greater before Simone de Beauvoir introduced women as the 'second sex' in 1949, there was anorexia nervosa. The Internet could not be the cause

of the physical change to the body when Richard Morton first reported the disease in 1694 (Orbach:1993 p.12). It can only be assumed that he was unaware that the disease would later create tensions in popular discourses as it would be used as a metaphor to represent the changing social and cultural times of women centuries later (Orbach:1993); or that it could ultimately be expressed, through the use of computers, as a positive identity.

With the growth of technology, the 'second sex' can use the 'second self' to partake in the self evaluation project of late modernity. Evidence has been found (Bargh *et al*:2002) that suggests people are more able to express 'true' statements regarding themselves on to the Internet, which may involve disclosing information about the self that would normally be socially unacceptable, such as being an anorexic. Online support groups that offer encouragement, acceptance, and 'virtual' companionship have grown increasingly popular for diseases such as cancer, AIDS and Lupus (Rier:2007 pp.1043); as well as, for disorders such as anorexia nervosa.

As the concept of late modernity gained popularity at the turn of the 20th century, focus shifted away from collective identity and towards the individual, creating a critical reflection of the self (Giddens:1991 p.35). The traditional roles of the family and workplace were reevaluated (Giddens:1991 p.146-149), and with it grew tensions in discourses of gender, identity and power. While anorexia nervosa, self starvation, is a serious mental condition affecting thousands of individuals, the disease has also been recognized by psychotherapists as an attempt to negotiate passions and desires in a time of extraordinary confusion and change, specifically seen as a result in women attempting to deal with contradictory requirements of their societal role (Orbach:1993 p.4).

Body image rhetoric is intertwined with the (in)balance of power dichotomies; and it is part of the reflexivity that is brought upon members by the late modern age and its

globalizing tendencies of modern institutions of developed societies (Giddens:1991 p.107). Examples of these dichotomies within such modern institutions that bring about responses to body image are present within the medical community. Society has given the profession of medicine the power to determine what does and does not constitute infirmity, this power has a tendency to reduce the patient to the disease they have (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.86).

Feminist scholars have long argued for a place of narratives to validate the female experience (Haas:2009 pp.78), to reclaim embodied knowledge as gender. The reappropriation of body image on the Internet through personal narratives, while the body battles, succumbs to, or transforms because of disease, could logically ignite a shift from the identity established by the medical community, while simultaneously moving away from masculinist discourse that believes women represent a linguistic absence (Irigaray:1991).

On the other hand, while the Internet can be a place for these shifts in dichotomies, virtual communities can be places of tension and fragmentation (Hine:2000 p.20) for established discourses, such as the aforementioned. And just as online groups supply information on managing diseases, treatments, and effects on daily life (Rier:2007 pp.1043), the Internet has also been a tool in which a user can maintain a disease or 'disorder'. An example of this are the virtual communities that have claimed the identity of 'pro-ana', a term which can be used for individuals or communities that recognize anorexia as an identity, and support the 'disorder' as an identifying tool in the display of their empowerment. These communities exhibit key aspects of a social movement of a 'positive' identity for those that declare anorexia is a lifestyle choice (Downer *et al*:2009) and resist oppressive accounts of their identities and demonstrate the right to self-determination.

1.2. Research objectives

This research aims to address the question of how tensions in discourse relationships of gender, identity and health become prevalent when women use technology, specifically the Internet, as a tool to visualize anorexia. Technology is not a neutral product of imperatives, rather, it is the result of a series of specific decisions made by particular groups of people in particular places at particular times for their own purposes (Haas:2009 pp.78).

The battle between the normative ideal of various spectrums versus the descriptive feature of experience (Butler:2007 p.23) has gone virtual, and will be the core of conventional identity categories. The Internet also draws attention to the growing sophistication of understandings and analyses of such a medium, which creates a difficulty in taking a stance on particular subject matters, such as topics regarding the identity of self, specifically for women, because of the fear that actions and statements of empowerment have become sophisticated to the point of depoliticization (Gill:2007 p.33)? In the last few years, representational practices have entered the public sphere, and while this has created tensions in discourses of identity, feminism and medical health, it also has created new identities for modernity.

The purpose of the forthcoming discussion is to present a theoretical analysis of discourses and key concepts that contribute towards the understanding of the creation of tensions in discourse that arise when any previously stigmatized identity is reappropriated through the use of tools of modernity. First, the establishment of a theoretical framework that supports an engaged approach, highlighting the shift that

the Internet has caused in learning, the display of the body as an action system, and determination of whether (positive) anorexia identification on the Internet can possibly suggest a position within, or a stand against conventional identity categories, rather than only a disease, will be established. This framework, based in social construction, is characterized by the forming of dialogical relations with authors of medical, gender and identity discourses.

Second, the methods that will be used to elaborate the theoretical framework will be defined, highlighting categories of discursive analysis for a specific 'web sphere'. This section will also feature ethical considerations that arise when engaged in analyzing public, online support groups as a researcher.

Thirdly, a display of critical discourse analysis understanding will be applied to specified categories in order to delineate between what CDA is and identify how this method specifically contributes to the study of identity, filling in the gaps of theories in conversation in order to reach the aims of this research (Ainsworth & Hardy:2004 p. 225).

The conclusion of this research paper will tie together the research aims with the theoretical and discursive analysis, hoping to establish an understanding of larger issues regarding feminism and body property in online social spaces.

Theory Chapter: 2

2.1. Introduction of Theory

The fundamental paradox of identity is inherent in the term itself: the Latin root *idem* means ‘the same’, the term nevertheless implies, simultaneously, both similarity and difference (Buckingham:2008 pp.1). Identity can be possessed, through the tangible representations of identification cards and the understanding that identity can be stolen in the form of identity theft; yet identity also implies a relationship with a broader collective or social groups.

In Giddens’ ‘late modern’ societies, people have to make a whole range of choices. Not just about aspects such as appearance and lifestyle, but they must make decisions more broadly about their relationships within, such as entrance and participation, of these collectives or social groups (ibid. pp.9). In order to attempt to understand the ‘self’ within the newly, technologically defined idea of communities, the late modern individual uses the Internet in a ‘self reflexive’ manner which is used to assist in the making of decisions about what they should do and who they should be. The self becomes a kind of ‘project’ that individuals have to work on. Within these communities the user creates biographical ‘narratives’ to share within collectives and social groups, but more importantly these narratives are used to explain themselves to themselves, with the hopes of sustaining a ‘coherent’ and ‘consistent’ identity (ibid. pp.9). On the Internet, these narratives can take the form of personal blogs, information on profiles, posting on message boards.

Simultaneously, the Internet becomes a site for trying out multiple identities, creating fluid boundaries and subverting one’s conceptions of gender (Paasonen:2002 pp.89). Identity play has been a prominent topic of study in online social environments; observations have shown people using text-based environments have often exploited the potential for representing themselves in ways quite different from their offline persona (Hine:2000 p.19). The Internet has an ability to enable people to lead parallel

lives in virtual worlds, and the computer had become the portal to access these less unitary views of self (Turkle:2011 p.xi).

Identity can be seen as fluid and malleable, rather than fixed, due to the format of:

...cycling through virtual environments [...] made possible by the existence of what have come to be called 'windows'. Windows are a way to work with a computer that makes it possible for the machine to place [the user] in several contexts at the same time (Turkle:1999 pp.644).

While the user has the hope of establishing a 'consistent identity,' every new entrance to a social group or collective, through the use of a 'window,' demands a new reflection of self. And it is because of this traveling from window to window that traditional categories of identity no longer apply:

The transformation of time and space, coupled with the disembedding mechanisms, propel social life away from the hold of pre-established precepts or practices [...] The reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science (Giddens:1991 p.20-1).

It is argued by Giddens that this fluidity is a positive development and part of a broader process of democratization; modern culture has offered individuals multiple possibilities to construct and fashion their own identities, and they are now able to do this in increasingly creative and diverse ways (Buckingham:2008 pp.9). Sherry Turkle (1999) continues this thought of multiplicity as a positive notion in proclaiming that "the healthy individual knows how to be many but to smooth out the moments of transition between states of self" (ibid. pp.647).

The Internet is a catalyst for reestablishing the understanding of gender, class and body within identity. As Turkle explains, step by step, users actively, independently, seek membership to new communities:

Life on the computer screen carries theory. People decide that they want to interact with others on a computer network. They get an account on a commercial service. They think that this will provide them with new access to people and information, and of course it does. But it does more. When they log on, they may find themselves playing multiple roles (Turkle:1999 pp.646).

Due to ideas like multiplicity, there is often a shared assumption that the ways in which identity is defined, and what counts as identity, are undergoing far-reaching changes in the contemporary world (Buckingham:2008 pp.11). “Identity play suggests that technology themselves are causing a change in conceptions of identity” (Hine:2000 p.20), such is the suggestion with ‘windows’. However, while the user’s identity may become fluid due to the many possible ‘windows’ of Internet social groups or communities that they choose to be a part of, ‘coherence’ and ‘continuity’ of “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler:2007 p.23) are still important associations. Even though traditional dichotomies for gender, race, and sexuality are being erased for the individual user because of the ability to use technology to create multiple, as well as fluid, identities, conventional categories are still important ways in which some users of the Internet organize their understandings (Hine:2000 p.20). This could be because gender, in a sociological perspective, is “the notion of the person in terms of an agency that claims ontological priority to the various roles and functions through which it assumes social visibility and meaning” (Butler:2007 p.22). With this thought, identity could be understood as a normative ideal, or a descriptive feature of experience, and the Internet is still a place in which normative social practices of gender take place. Even with the multiplicity of identity on the Internet, it is still a display of societal practice to maintain a coherence in sex and gender, which is done through the use of ‘safe’ binaries. This is an example of how technology is being used to recreate hegemony.

The people who inhabit digital space are no different from the people who inhabit the real world, and in terms of gender equality and the understanding of the hegemonic matrix, the same prejudices apply. Neither the Internet nor computers in themselves will not change ideologies about gender (Hatfield:2000 pp.197). The Internet is a gendered institution which effects gender socialization, as it "reflects, constitutes, and reproduces" what is and is not considered to be feminine and masculine (Kimmel:2007). The Internet becomes the surveying arena of what is acceptable. The

ritual historical positioning of humans in relation to cultural objects, in this case the computer as tool to access the Internet, which can be both made and made over is an example of effective social construction. Pfohl (2008) explains that:

This elementary form casts a circle of believability around artificially constructed accounts of the world establishes the Internet as a tool which can ‘ritually positioned’ its users to understand femininity by partially shaping and provisionally organizing the complex ways in which the users are ritually positioned in relation to each other within the ‘imaginary realm’ (ibid. pp. 645-646).

The use of the term ‘imaginary realm’ proves to be problematic to some media theorists, as “research has shown that in many cases users do not perceive their online experiences as ‘not-real’” (Guimaraes, Jr.:2005 pp.145). Additionally, real, physical, responses of the Internet can be seen in the example of women striving “for security in a world of plural, but ambiguous, options”, such as options of multiplicity on the Internet, and the result is “a tightly controlled body [,] an emblem of a safe existence” (Giddens:1991 p.107). It is within these real experiences on the Internet that surveillance of ‘intelligible’ norms are acknowledged, creating an opportunity for the new identities to be discovered, supported and/or reappropriated.

2.2.1. Education of Late Modernity: New Styles of Learning on the Internet

Marc Prensky (2001) refers to those that have grown up with this technology, those ritually positioned in the ‘imaginary realm’ of the Internet, as ‘Digital Natives’. Prensky says that ‘Digital Natives’ have a different style of learning in which they crave interactivity, value graphics before words, and desire access to information at ‘twitch speed’ (Buckingham:2008 pp.13).

In Giddens’ ‘late modern’ societies, these ‘Digital Natives’ have to make a whole range of choices due to their speed of interactivity. While they are operating themselves through the Internet they are offered a plethora of guidance on a variety of matters by experts of various kinds (ibid. pp.9). This section of the research will aim

to highlight how the Internet has shaped learning, and how it has become the destination to gain guidance from the surplus of ‘experts,’ those that supply information on websites. While identity can be fluid for the users, so it can be for the experts. These varying reflections and levels of regulation between the users and the ‘experts’ cause tensions to arise within discourses, especially in areas of previously denied or stigmatized identities.

The impact of digital learning has changed the creation of identity. Advocates of technology have extolled the Internet’s value for encouraging creative, student-centered learning, for increasing motivation and achievement, and for promoting demanding new styles of thinking (ibid. pp.16). As this developed place of learning, the Internet is creating new approaches drawn from social theories such as the situated learning approach. From this perspective, learning is seen to be embedded in social interactions, and it can take the form of a kind of apprenticeship, as newcomers observe alongside ‘old timers’. This theory also suggests that learning entails the development (or projection) of a social identity users hope, or aspire, to take on; an anticipation to become a new role as a member of the community of practice in which they are seeking to participate (ibid.). Social networking sites provide opportunities for social interaction and affiliation that are crucial to the development of such skill (ibid. pp.3).

Additionally, it is there, on social sites, that users regulate one another through practices of commenting on wall posts and photographs, respond to videos and blog posts, administrator authority and apprenticeship. Michel Foucault’s idea of governmentality, the understanding that an individual is an embodiment of subtle power regulations which are diffused through social relationships, is upheld in these regulating learning activities, because individuals on the Internet are encouraged to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms, rather than being regulated by external agencies (ibid. pp.10). It is because of

this ‘public’ regulation in an ‘open social environment,’ that the Internet becomes a catalyst for the creation of new styles of learning, as well as reestablishing the understanding of gender, class and body. The power has shifted, and now all participants are encouraged, as well as even given tools of regulation, such as responding or flagging comments, to make sure behavior upholding the ideal of socially accepted norms.

2.2.2. Education of Late Modernity: Moratorium Under Surveillance

Cyberspace, like all complex phenomena, has a range of psychological effects. “For some people it is a place to ‘act out’ unresolved conflicts, to play and replay characterological difficulties on a new and exotic stage” (Turkle:1999 pp.644). How one participates in the new cyber field of a community is made more important due to the surveillance of all of the other participants, whom may have access to a variety of formatting tools such as archiving or flagging comments. Being aware that one is under surveillance has an effect on how a user participates once they have entered the collective. Users are offered an opportunity to ‘work through’ significant personal issues, to use the new materials of cyber-sociality to reach for new resolutions. These more positive effects flow from what Erik Erikson would have called a ‘psychosocial moratorium,’ a central element in how he thought about identity development in adolescence (Turkle:1999, Buckingham:2008). Although moratorium implies ‘time out,’ Erikson had intended the terminology to represent a time of intense interaction with people and ideas; it is a time of passionate friendships and experimentation. “Experimentation can become the norm rather than a brave departure” for the development of a ‘core self’ (Turkle:1999 pp.644). Users are literally writing their online personae into existence, and these virtual personas can be used by the user to become more aware of what of them is being projected into everyday life. Moreover, cyberspace opens the possibility for identity play, but it is very serious play. Turkle explains:

People who cultivate an awareness of what stands behind their screen personae are the ones most likely to succeed in using virtual experience for personal and social transformation. And the people who make the most of their lives on the screen are those who are able to approach it in a spirit of self reflection (ibid. pp.647).

It could be argued that the Internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might have previously been denied or stigmatized, such as claiming anorexia as an identity, or, at least, the sharing of information on such matters that once remained a private topic of discussion.

It is through these intense interactions with people that regulation arises. A strong pressure to see themselves as unitary actors develops, causing users to take responsibility for their actions, such as with a user and their textual actions (Turkle:1999 pp.646). Users' blog entries provoke comments and responses; the sharing of video or images can cause a member to join or leave a community. These actions are the core understanding to the opposition of the ideal of centered identity, because the sphere of the Internet is not a unitary place. "The notion of a decentered identity is concretized by experiences on a computer screen, cyberspace becomes an object to think with for thinking about identity- an element of cultural bricolage" (ibid. pp.646).

2.2.3. Education of Modernity: Participatory Cultures

"From the start, people used interactive and reactive computers to reflect on the self (and think about the difference between machines and people)" (Turkle:2011 p.2), while offering a substitution for connecting with each other face-to-face. Other uses of the Internet, as previously explored, include the significant opportunity to explore facets of identity, some of which may be recognized as psychological afflictions that were previously denied or stigmatized, as well as the sharing of information or gaining support of such afflictions.

While a previous society may have primarily seen community “as a primary stage of social gathering, ordered by traditional values”, contemporary society “associates with community the ‘good’ values of strong and close social bonds contrasting with the anonymity and looseness of social relationships in contemporary societies” (Guimarães, Jr.:2005 pp.145).

Online communities and support groups rely more upon shared social practices than on physical boundaries (Hine:2000 p.19). Within these communities and groups, one gets to present their identities in various guises to a select audience and to examine themselves in the reflected light of the comments and reactions of the peers within their communities. These guises are not only created “as expressions and explorations of individual identities”, but act as a “way of including others in their own personal ‘identity work,’ extending and linking themselves to others. Through this process, they become part of a collaborative, participatory culture” (Weber & Mitchell: 2008 pp. 39-40).

This participatory cultural ideal is what has caused online support groups to grow in popularity. Such as the growth of users seeking support and companionship in the more intimate arenas, the likes of which include cancer, AIDS and anorexia (Reir:2007). The Internet has come “to serve an important therapeutic role in housing support groups for those struggling with various physical and psychological afflictions” (Walstrom:2004 pp.175). The Internet is radically transforming traditional health care systems, as users increasingly go online for medical advice. Persons struggling with these challenges may turn to one of thousands of online support groups for assistance due to their many advantages:

Relatively inexpensive, 24 hour access to discussions (achieves) with others coping with rare or stigmatized conditions; increased self disclosure, intimacy, a sense of autonomy and recognition of oneself as an expert over time; decreased dependency on caretakers (ibid. pp.175).

Some research suggests that online forums go beyond the above listed advantages, and even offer opportunities for ‘cyberrecovery’ (Walstrom:2000 p.761). In their ‘cyberrecovery’, users are offered encouragement, acceptance, and ‘virtual’ companionship to offset social and spatial isolation. Both observers and participants typically describe these online communities as ‘safe spaces’ in which the latter can voice their hopes, fears, and problems without stigma or censure and hope to be offered guidance from ‘experts’ within the community. These support groups supply information on managing the disease, its treatment, and its effects on daily life. This allows Internet communities to be seen as tools of empowerment, displaying key aspects of a social movement (Reir:2007). The Internet, as the tool which is used to access this support and information, is seen as a technology that provides, a beneficial function (Buckingham:2008 pp.12). An example of the Internet being seen as a vital tool for support is provided by Mary Walstrom (2000), who sees the advantages of online support groups that deal with anorexia, because for the women to seek self-care with their eating disorder there needs to be an absence of real life, physical appearances (ibid. p.761). There are, however, critics who suggest that these formations of support are far from constituting a community, as generally understood. Their concern is with the level of commitment and responsibility which participants associate with online social formations. It is suggested that online formations cannot be considered communities when participants can simply log out or turn off when they choose (Hine:2000 p.19), thus making the level of connection and intimacy insufficient to make participants members of a community, although they may feel as if they are. This type of social formation has been labeled ‘pseudo community’ (ibid.). However, there is a shift in technology as it is becoming more mobile. Through the use of laptops, cell phones and other personal devices, existing in a logged off world is becoming less common as it is easier to communicate portably due to mobile screens (Turkle:2011 p.155).

Regardless of the technicalities within the definition of community, prejudices inhabit digital space no differently than they inhabit the physical (Hatfield:2000 pp.197), thus making it no more 'safe' than a face to face community or support group. The 'bodiless' nature of online support groups may help ensure participants sense of safety, but it cannot be ignored that virtual communities and support groups will prove to have an effect on the real body because these arenas hold the potential for misinformation, increased isolation, and promotion of problematic behavior (Walstrom:2000 p.762).

The occurrence of misinformation comes with communities and social groups being updated continuously, possible by multiple actors at a single time. The user is continuously emerged in what could be called 'new information' that could lead to confusion. An example of this is are "nutritional developments [that] are not so much a science as expressions of current thinking", which are often in dispute with themselves and which play into the panic about food, disturbing ideas about when, what and how to eat (Orbach:2009 p.95).

Turkle expands the thought of isolation with her concern that this new technology will develop a 'holding power' over users. Her fear is that users will not want to be separated from these tools because their compelling ability to foster new reflections about the self, distracting users from facing personal problems in the real (Turkle:2011 p.xi). In fact, being alone can start to seem like a precondition for being together because technology, such as the Internet, makes it easier to communicate, without interruption, on the computer screen (ibid. p.155).

Foucault's notion of disciplinary power notes that when the self is placed in the public, surveillance becomes a form of obedience to patriarch, rather than self reflection; it is woman's consciousness of being under surveillance that places importance to the bodily design to please or to excite (Bartky:1990 p. 80). This

creates a re-examination of feminist issues and the condition of women in a world intimately restructured through social relations of science and technology (Fernandez & Wilding:2002 pp.17).

It is because of this shift into the public sphere that individuals are now encouraged to regulate themselves, attempting to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms (Buckingham:2008 pp.10). This includes socially instituted 'norms' which will cause the user to gain social visibility (Butler:2007 p.22). Media production invites other people's feedback and readings, sparking a dialectic that is inherent to mediating and reshaping how users see themselves and how they think others see them. This becomes problematic due to the public, and at time faceless, forums, like blogs and online narratives, begin to feel as though they are technological representations of a confessional. It is through the act of speech, read as text, dilemmas are being encapsulated and symptoms dissolved because "if one was able to understand more deeply what fuelled his desires", the Freudian theory goes, it "would lead to a new acceptance of his body as it actually existed" (Orbach:2009 p.16). Rosalind Gill's (2007) understanding of the public forums of talk shows can be applied public sphere of blogs and personal narratives online:

Forums like talk shows have contributed to the extension of public life by opening speech from a narrow and restricted class to a more relaxed, sociable and widely represented mode. Speech on talk shows is informal and spontaneous and anyone-regardless of qualifications can join in (ibid. p.164-165).

This idea of the Internet being a form of confession is also a display of the shift from expert discourse to personal testimony, and has come to constitute a new feminized public sphere (ibid. p.151). Filling the linguistic void in dominantly driven masculine discourse (Irigaray:1991), these personal narratives of identity of self, stigmatized or not, are validating the female experience (Haas:2009 p.78). Furthermore, it is within this confessional style arena that users are more able to disclose information about the self that would normally be socially unacceptable. (Joinson:2005 pp.23).

However, the question of *whose* eyes they see themselves through and *whose* language is used to express themselves is not easily answered. A reflexive regard is not necessarily as critical as one might think; it too is shaped by culture and experience (Weber & Mitchell: 2008 pp. 41).

2.3.1. Body of the Late Modern Age: Socially Accepted Norms

Daily life is continuously regulated through description, measurement, the calculation of differences between individuals; causing the norm to be taken over from simple sovereign power and given to the individuals, represent the Foucaultian notion of normalization (Gills:2007 p.64). The idea of normalization is valuable in the analysis of gender and media because “appeal is made to statistical measures and judgments about what is normal rather than absolute notions of right and wrong” (ibid.). These procedures of normalization operate upon every aspect of an individual’s intimate, and entire, life; rendering into norms the frequency and the type of activities that they partake. An example of this is the number of times each year to consult a doctor, the consumption of calories, how much to weigh and body mass index. These normalization discourses are central to an increasing relationship to media and technology outlets (ibid.). Butler continues the thought of normalization, by stating that it is through this performance of regulatory norms, the gendered body is rendered visible and viable in society (Harrison:2010 p.32).

Performance of regulatory norms has an impact on the physical body, and Gill (2007) declares that femininity is a bodily property. She explores how this bodily property has been shaped into women’s key source of identity, and how that is conveyed by surveillance that arises because of new medians:

Instead of caring or nurturing or motherhood being regarded as central to femininity in today’s media it is possession of a ‘sexy body’[...] The body is

presented simultaneously as women's source of power and as always already unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodeling (and consumer spending) in order to conform to ever narrower judgments of female attractiveness.

Surveillance of women's bodies constitutes perhaps the largest type of media content across all genres and media forms. Women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinized and dissected by women, as well as men, and are always at risk of 'failing' (Gills:2007 p.255).

In Butler's book, Gender Trouble, she discusses Simone de Beauvoir's proposal that the female body ought to be the situation and instrument of women's freedom (Butler:2007 p.16). The use of the body as this instrument of freedom becomes apparent when it is suggested that there is a direct link between gained political, social and economic power and the shrunken size of media's portrayal of idealized bodies for women (Katz:1999). Giddens' recognizes that these new freedoms, which can be gained and maintained with the use of technological tools such as the Internet, places new burdens and responsibilities on people; particularly in a world of increasing risk and insecurity, the individual is placed under greater emotional stress (Buckingham:2008 pp.9) and anorexia nervosa is a response to a time of extraordinary confusion and change (Orbach:1993 p.4). The body of woman has been culturally positioned, but what happens when the body takes on this assignment and uses tools of modernity to explain the identity of self?

The female body may represent one of feminism's least touched frontiers perhaps one of its final frontiers; a woman's appetite and her ability to indulge appetite with freedom and entitlement and joy, is both a mark of progress and metaphor for it. How hungry are we? How filled? How conflicted? (Knapp:2003 p.199)

2.3.2. Body of the Late Modern Age: Regulation Attempts

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir had explained anorexic tendencies as a way to disappear from the view of society eyes:

The young girl feels that her body is getting away from her, it is no longer the straightforward expression of her individuality; [...] on the street men follow her with their eyes and comment on her anatomy. She would like to be invisible; ... This distaste is expressed by many young girls through the wish to be thin; they no longer want to eat, and if they are forced to, they have vomiting spells; they constantly watch their weight (de Beauvoir:1989 p.308).

The wishing to 'disappear' by the means of anorexia can be seen as a refusal to accept her culturally defined role, which is not an extremely complicated response to a confusing social identity (Orbach:1993 p.5).

Hegemonic femininity prescribes both appearance and behavior. Women are constantly engaged in a process of regulating body size, and anorexia nervosa is perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the culture's obsession with this regulation (ibid. p.3). Women view their bodies as out of control and must be disciplined, and an attitude that almost everything about the body can be changed by the individual arises (Orbach:2009 p.24).

The importance of 'body type' with respect to achieving femininity cultivates appearance-driven attitudes and behaviors in some females. In her book, *Bodies*, Orbach explains:

Today only a few aspirational and idealized body types which everyone feels enjoined to work towards are taking place of differing forms of embodiment; essentially, doing away with body variety [...] Millions, literally millions, struggle on a daily basis against troubled and shaming feelings about the way their bodies appear. It is not a trivial problem just because it is a personal struggle which might be expressed as, and is sometimes mistaken for, an issue of vanity... This condition of late modernity is not inevitable... The very tools which have given rise to a narrowing aesthetic could be redeployed to include the wide variety of bodies people actually have. (ibid. p.12).

Looking around the world at the many varieties of bodily gesture and decoration, it is easy to see the ways in which bodies have always been an expression of a specific period, geography, sexual, religious and cultural place (ibid. p.7). And the bodies of

the 'Late Modern Age' hold many indications of the relationship the users have with the Internet. Varieties of body types may be, additionally, disappearing due to the relations of the physical and physical work are shifting. "Where working class bodies were shaped by musculature of heavy physical work; low paid jobs in the service industry and computer based jobs across the class spectrum leave no physical indicators" (ibid. p.6). However bodies are not only "recognized by the costumes and the gaits that befit the groups that they come from" but are also examples of groups they "wish to belong to or identify with" (ibid. p.7). For example, the middle class body, a body that is trapped in the aforementioned work sphere shift, shows the most evidence of being worked on, not by labor, but rather through yoga or any number of bodily adjustments, which could include anorexic practices, which aim to display what the individual has achieved (ibid. p.5). And while the practices may not be regarded as purposeful, they nevertheless show that the "taken-for-granted body is neither natural nor pure but a body that is inscribed and formed by the accretion of myriad small specific cultural practices" (ibid. p.7). "The 'right' size signifies one's membership in modernity", and the body is becoming the visibility of class, and failing to get one's food and size right can signify shame, failure or a rejection of the values we are presumed to aspire to (ibid. p.11). However, the relationship with the computer, as the tool to reach the Internet, has become, unavoidably, a part of the user's physical body in the era of modernity.

According to Orbach, "the fallout from these changes is visible in the consulting rooms of psychotherapists, psychologist, counselors, psychoanalysts and doctors" (ibid. p.6) because this shift is resulting in the rise of cases of 'bodily instability' and 'body shame' (ibid.). It has become ever more evident "that our understanding of bodies needs new explanation and theories" (ibid. p.7). In the discourse about self-created identity, the body is central. It is central because "it is a vehicle to assert one's place as a member of a class, a group, a sexual practice, an aspiration" (ibid. p.142). Just as de Beauvoir said it could lead to freedom, it can also lead to anxiety; as

Orbach explains, “we live in an age of anxiety in which choice and self invention offer identities that are more fluid than those circumscribed by the categories of class, age, status and ethnicity that held such away not so long ago” (ibid. p.141).

The hypocrisy of this ‘anxiety’ caused from ‘body shame’ comes with the paradigm of the general public seeming to be at ease with anorexia, having thin and very thin as two of the few remaining body types, and all of the contributing factors, such as media imaging, that leads to the attainment of those ideals. However, when women and girls respond not only in self starvation, but use the tools like the Internet to claim ownership of their actions, the public then grows troubled by it. “Society at large is not as troubled by conditions that help to create anorexia or with anorexia itself or else we would be working as actively to prevent it as some do to remove the web sites [that are hosts to pro anorexia voices]” (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.95).

Pro- anorexia identities are a response to a world that is reluctant to discuss the historical and the cultural significant material that results in ‘bodily shame’:

The hypocrisy of our culture is entirely represented in the reactions to pro-ana Web sites. First we bombard teenage girls (and everyone else) with images and expectations of what their bodies should look like. We add to that pressures from school, family and relationships that create demands. Then when the girls respond in a way that seems appropriate (do whatever you can to *look* ideal), we judge their response as inappropriate. When they claim the label pro-ana and throw our mixed messages back into our collective faces, we accuse them of being extremely ill and pathologized to the point where we, as a society, must step in and make decisions for them (removing their websites, forced therapy, etc) in an effort to protect them (ibid. pp.95-6).

And as participants of modernity, users seek out the tool of the Internet to gain information on how to change the body, attempting to reclaim an action, which was once used to disappear from society’s eyes, as an identity. “Finding their way through a world that both demands bodily perfection but rejects their methods for achieving it” (ibid. pp.97) is the foundation of a pro-anorexia identity.

2.3.3. Body of the Late Modern Age: Power Given to Professionalized Medicine

Tensions in the medical discourse also lead to anxiety for the body. Few proclaim anything other than that fat is bad and thin is good. Critical attention to social constructions of body size link “thinness to moral worth...while equating fatness with immorality, low self-esteem, illness and self-indulgence: constructions which have profound social consequences, especially for women” (Throsby & Gimlin:2010 pp.105).

Today, those who have the willpower to diet are the principled- thin has once again become moral. But to ‘willfully’ choose extremes of either thin or plump is once again immoral. Anorexia demonstrates the quandary of the female in a society that cherishes thinness and a media that depicts the ‘ideal body as extremely thin’. And – it would appear that the medical profession has accepted and cherished the role of ‘keeper of the morality’ through the medicalization of this disease and the labeling of women who do not act the way society expects of them as deviant (read immoral). In short, sociality has given the medical profession the power to determine what does and does not constitute illness (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.90).

Women are constantly engaged in a process of regulating body size, due to the importance of ‘body type’ with respect to achieving femininity, and anorexia nervosa is perhaps the most dramatic outcome of the culture’s obsession with this regulation (Orbach:1993 p.3).

Society has given the profession of medicine the power to determine what does and does not constitute infirmity. This very power has had a tendency to reduce the patient to the disease. “The patient”, said Michel Foucault (1994), “is the rediscovered portrait of the disease; he is the disease itself, with shadow and relief, modulations, nuances, depth” (ibid. p.15). In other words:

The effect of the power of professionalized medicine has been to dehumanize the patient. Despite this power and perhaps because of the dehumanizing factor, the last decade has seen an inquiry into this paradigm, an attempt to

delineate what constitutes illness and how identities are formed by the medical community (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.86)

Thus, personal identity has been determined and affected by medical discourse:

The classic personality profile of the anorexic personality characterizes ‘patients’ with such words as *impulsive, willful, unstable, desire* and *dominance*. And both sets of criteria and physical and mental health professionals use rely heavily on terms rich with moralistic, volitional connotations: *refusal, failure, intense, fear, disturbance, self-induced, avoidance, excessive, distortion, self-imposition*. Empirical criteria are scarce. Evidently, these criteria are subjective as best, left to the ‘expert’ health care provider to interpret (ibid. pp.92).¹

Participants of modernity are using tools, such as the Internet, to express the complicatedness of their ‘condition.’ “They are telling the medical profession is not just about eating [...] It is part of who they are- how they define themselves” (ibid. pp.89). By authoring, creating and participating in pro-ana web sites “many anorexics attempt to (re)conceptualize themselves beyond the discourse of the medical and psychiatric fields” (ibid. pp.90) It is within these spaces that they refuse such labels as ‘pathological’ and ‘diseased,’ and ‘patients’ begin to use the Internet to examine and question the authority found within medical and cultural dichotomies (ibid. pp.93). It is with this understanding that displays the not extremely complicated act, read as refusal, of the anorexic to a confusing social identity (Orbach:1993 p.5).

Acting as a space of confession, the Internet is home to sites that foster the reappropriations of identities that were once stigmatized; such is the case with pro-ana websites. Partaking in these sites is a representation of a new strategy for politician action. Pro-ana sites simultaneously use, incorporate, revise, attack and depoliticize feminist themes and ideas. The concept of articulation is useful for understanding this process, bringing together elements from different discourses and connect or repression them ideologically.

¹ Italicizes added for emphasis by researcher

2.4.1. The Politics of Identity: Choice Biography versus Disguised Surveillance

Author of the book Growing Up Digital, Don Tapsott (1998), says individuals who fall under the 'Net generation', a term which can be used interchangeably with the previously introduced concept of Prensky's 'Digital Natives', are "hungry for expression, discovery and their own self-development [...] Technology is the means of their empowerment, and it will ultimately lead to a generational explosion" (Buckingham:2008 pp.13), and sites such as pro-ana sites are the results of such discovery. Roxanne Kirkwood, an author who has analyzed arguments between anorexics and professionalized medicine as it occurs in popular media, supports the thought that identifying as living a pro-ana lifestyle is *not* promoting anorexia but, rather is reclaiming an identity from medical discourse:

Outrage to pro-ana Web sites seems to stem from the boldness with which these girls claim their identity and share it, although not necessarily promote it. No site I have seen yet actually promotes beginning the lifestyle, but rather how to operate within it once it has begun (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.92).

Using this understanding, pro-ana sites not only reclaim 'anorexia' from the medical discourse but also acknowledge that not all physical practices are freely chosen. This is an example of women in the 'Net generation' attempting to act in ways, as Gill says, to 'please themselves,' using pro-ana sites as a place of 'moratorium' to declare actions of empowerment, and a flexing of personal decisions. It is hard to separate out the ways bodies are seen and talked about from the user's wish for a more perfect body (Orbach:2009 p.3).

Gill says:

The notion that all our practices are freely chosen fits well with broader postfeminist discourses which present women as autonomous agents no longer constrained by any inequalities or power imbalances whatsoever. This pendulum shift to the notion that women just 'please themselves' will not do as a substitute. It present women as free agents, and cannot account for why.

What is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous post feminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism. At the heart of both is the notion of the ‘choice biography’ and the contemporary injunction to render one’s life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy- how constrained one might actually be (ibid. p.260).

Choice biography is individuals declaring that what they choose to do with their lives and their bodies is of their own free will, it represents an ideology that a person’s individual body is their maximum tool and gateway to participation in society . This idea of ‘choice biography’, ‘empowerment’ for ‘Digital Natives’ and individuals of the ‘Net generation’ could actually be seen as a form of surveillance, in disguise, and act as a response to confusion of societal demands. In doing so, the Internet provides the users a tool to reclaim these oppressions with a positive understanding of self reflection. This positive connection upholds the idea of the Internet being used as place for ‘psychosocial moratorium’ to occur.

The acting out of ‘choice biography’ with the use of technology is an example of intra-action. Intra-action, versus the idea that separate individual agencies precede the interaction, recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede but rather emerge through (Barad:2007 p.33). Users could not have reappropriated the identity of anorexia without the tool of the internet, regardless of the psychological or social constrictions that caused their anorexia in the first place. The medium theory of Marshall McLuhan implies that specific media necessarily create or promote particular forms of consciousness, and hence particular forms of social organization (Buckingham:2008 pp.12).

While the term ‘identity politics’ “refers primarily to activist social movements that [...]have struggled to resist oppressive accounts of their identities constructed by others who hold power over them, and claimed the right to self-determination” in

more obvious aspects of identity such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability (ibid. pp.7), the definition, in the case of this research, will focus on the bodily property of identity politics and will recognize pro-ana sites as the location for the activist social movement. This is validated through the thought that identity politics entails a:

Call for the recognition of aspects of identity that have previously been denied, marginalized or stigmatized. Identity politics is very much about transformation at the level of representation- about who has the right to represent, or to speak and for whom- are therefore also crucial here (ibid. pp.7).

Debates around identity politics suggest some quite different ways of understanding young people's relationships with digital media. It could be argued that the Internet provides significant opportunities for exploring facets of identity that might previously have been private, especially the sharing of information on such matters. With the Internet as the user's tool, "modern consumer culture has offered individuals multiple possibilities to construct and fashion their own identities, and they are now about to do this in increasingly creative and diverse ways" (ibid. pp.9).

While tensions in feminist discourse arise as feminists "want to support technological innovation by young women but are appalled by some of the pro-ana sites being created" (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.88-9), a celebration is still present due to the growing number of spaces in which women have created an online culture which seem to invoke feminist acts of gaining agency through voice which have been "resulting in virtual spaces of community in which pro-ana authors challenge oppressive power relations within and without" (ibid. pp.92). It is identity construction that is vital to feminist action, and because of this, it is hard to deny women a platform to explain how they wish to be communicated with, even if they cannot change their choice biography. They do not want to be considered incapable of making decisions:

In fact, these young women are fully acknowledging the consequences of their actions on themselves and the possible effects on other lives. With this in

mind, it is startling to see how not only mainstream media is reacting to these Web sites, but also the reactions of the self-proclaimed medical experts on anorexia (Downer *et al.*:2009 pp.89).

The ability to make choices is a core value of feminism, “especially with the language we use to describe ourselves and about the bodies we inhabit” (Downer *et al.*:2009 pp.94).

Gill’s understanding of body property, the key identifier that a woman has in order to gain value in society, is connected with Orbach’s understanding of body instability and shame of living in fear of getting one’s size right; this connection allows the terminology of ‘pro-ana’ to be contender in ‘identity politics.’ By using the tool of the Internet as the place for personal narratives to be shared, it allows researchers and analysts a place to gain information which will hopefully lead to the desperately needed new explanations and theories of bodies in the Late Modern Age.

2.5.1. Theoretical Understanding of Critical Discourse Analysis: Reproduction of Social Knowledge

To properly explore the depths of Giddens’ concept, in regards to social change being based upon the growth of technology, critical discourse analysis (CDA) will be the preferred method of analysis to evaluate how technology is used in defining participants’ image and role within modernity. It is partly through discursive practices, such as the processes of text production and consumption, that social and cultural reproduction and change take place (Jørgensen & Phillips:2008 p.61). The theoretical understanding of CDA and other theories of text will be established before embarking on the methods chapter, which will outline the use of CDA in this research.

Norman Fairclough is one of the founders of CDA. He introduced it as the study of change, placing weight on the active role of discourse in constructing the social world (Jørgensen & Phillips:2008 p.61). The application of CDA focuses on language and grammar, and uses examples from life (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.61). Discourse is a form of social practice which both constitutes the social world and is constituted by other social practices which are and historically situated and in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social (ibid. p62). CDA approach involves bringing together critical social sciences and linguistics within a single theoretical and analytical framework, setting up a dialogue between them (Chouliaraki & Fairclough:1999 p.6).

With emphases on the role of change in language created by Fairclough, CDA explores how concrete language builds on previously discursive structures. The literary theories of the Bakhtin Movement appear to be the foundation of Fairclough's understanding of discursive structures. Mikhail Bakhtin, Russian philosopher and literary critic, considered that the author of a text and its reader are connected and that each text is connected to other texts (Phoenix:2010 pp.161). Fairclough upholds Bakhtin's dialogism, which suggests that thought and language are dialogic:

All language is produced in relation to things that have been said before and in anticipation of a response. In turn, what has been said produces responses. This means language and thought are part of the process of re-describing the world and are always in dynamic interaction with previous and future thought and language; rather than standing alone as new and disconnected (Maybin:2001 pp.65).

According to Gill, analysts of discourse see "social life as being characterized by conflicts of various kinds". As such, "much discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions" (Gill:2007 p.59). In this approach, discourse becomes an important form of social practice that both reproduces and changes knowledge, identities and social relations. At the same time, discourse is being formed by other practices and structures.

With CDA methodology, the desire of this research is to see how pro-ana has become an identity, how anorexia as disease has been framed and established, what type of assumed knowledges of outside discourse structures should be had prior to entering this text and where the presence of gender is im- or explicitly placed; theoretically establishing discourses that are in tension when the Internet, as a tool, is used to (re) establish stigmatized identities, such as pro-ana.

Methodological Chapter: 3

3.1. Introduction of Methods

Technology reshapes the landscape of users' emotional and, as the previous chapter outlined, physical lives. Virtual environments on the Internet propose themselves not just as places for reaction, but as new worlds to coexist in. And it will be in these new living spaces where education is received, self projections are displayed, surveillance is active and discourses are found in tensions due to the impact that the technology has had on establishing and reappropriating previously controversial identities.

It will be the goal of this chapter to show the appropriateness of the methodological approaches employed. References from literature will be used to show the understanding of data collection techniques and methodological implications. Such references will establish the methodological understanding of the Internet as a virtual environment of discourses to be critically analyzed. Secondly, the 'web sphere' unit of analysis for this cyber-cultural study will be defined as a collection of digital resources, spanning multiple web pages of a chosen pro-ana site, which relate to a central theme or object (Foot:2006 pp.1), such as what is classified as part of a pro-ana lifestyle. After these perimeters are established, highlighted categorizes of

analysis will be determined for the application of critical discourse analysis. Lastly, the section will then conclude with ethical considerations.

3.2. Methodized View of the Internet

Hine (2000) explains that there are two distinct methods of viewing the Internet. Firstly, it can be viewed as a place where culture is formed and reformed. Secondly, it can be seen as a cultural artifact (ibid. p.9).

To understand the Internet as a place where culture is formed and reformed, it must be accepted that the Internet is a place where the following happens:

A flux of facts embedded in a web of meanings that flow through time simultaneously supporting and creating social relations. Culture, therefore, is not homogeneous or fixed as the upshot of established traditions, but is continuously in motion and subject to change (Guimarães, Jr.:2005 pp.144). The constant posting and sharing of information, a medium on to which users can project occurring ideas and fantasies (Turkle:1997 p.9), furthers the idea of how this (re)formation happens.

The Internet is a culture where the uses people make of the technology available to them can be studied (Hine:2000 p.9); and as technological uses made available and understood by the users change, so will culture. While a vast majority of girls and women are being left out of the technology revolution, there are media theorists (Cooper & Weaver:2003) that believe men and women equally use the computer as a tool (ibid. p.5) to access the Internet. There has been a call of arms that “women need access to empowering knowledge and tools” that are not dominated by a despicable ‘virtual class’ (Fernandez & Wilding:2002 pp.26), and by sharing experiences and critiquing hegemonic values, further represents the female experience (Haas:2009 pp.79). For this research, the Internet is viewed as place where a culture is formed knowing that technology and access to knowledge is ever changing, therefore causing

the cultural positioning of women in society, using the understanding of ‘choice biography’, to not be fixed; which leads to such questions as: Without the tool of the Internet, would the identity of pro-ana exist?

When the Internet is viewed as a cultural artifact, it becomes a product of culture: a technology that was produced by particular people with contextually situated goals and priorities (Hine:2000 p.9). When a site is viewed as a cultural artifact, display of how goals and priorities are implemented can be studied. Each of these goals, with this methodological view, is reached based on the situated arenas of the users and the gatekeepers. “Embedded within locally specific routines of daily schedules and the ‘place ballets’ of individuals, Internet has been shaped by its users” (Hine:2000 p.30).

Using the theoretical understanding as established in the previous chapter, this research will methodologically view the Internet as both a place where culture is formed and reformed and a cultural artifact.

3.3. Establishing the ‘Web sphere’

For this research to be successful, the web sphere (Foot & Schneider:2005) must first be established. This is to understand the Internet boundaries in which the analysis of a pro-ana site will be applied, because with the use of hyperlinks, digital resources can span multiple websites. Secondly, I will state the point in time and the way in which the web sphere has been observed, because this researcher recognizes that the web is not a static being, but rather a growing collaborative production (Foot:2006 pp.2).

With the following understanding, it has been decided to choose one pro-ana site:

Although the complexity of the coding- and therefore the displays- radically differs from site to site, most pro-ana sites follow the same conventions and structures. Most offer navigation among sections like Thinspiration (pictures and quotations), Ana Creeds (letters to and about anthropomorphized

anorexia), Tips and Tools (for getting and staying underweight), Poetry and Artwork, and weblogs/diaries (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.91).

In choosing one site that recognized anorexia as an (positive) identity, it had to meet several personal requirements of this researcher. Firstly, the site had to have existed for about 2 years or longer. This length of time represents several important facets, such as displaying a sense of a dedicated and active community. Additionally, this time allows for outsiders to have discovered its existence and create possible tensions for the community, which the site would have hopefully acknowledged, responded or adapted to. Finally, it shows that the site is maintained often with a gatekeeper and/or administrators whom dedicate time to keeping the site running.

The website this researcher has chosen is www.prettythin.com. According to archived information, the site has existed in this format at least since summer 2009, which is when the current gatekeeper/designer/site owner has taken over from the previous site owner. As of Monday, May 9th, 2011 at 15:03, the PrettyThin member forum declared there were 41708 members, and according to 'about PrettyThin' page, there are 10,751 daily [prettythin.com](http://www.prettythin.com) visitors. PT, as it is referred to throughout the site, is a site that can be found through the use of search engines like Google and Yahoo.

Found in the 'About PrettyThin' page, the gatekeeper writes that:

There was a time when I stated that PrettyThin is not a pro-ana website. I have come to realize that PrettyThin is Pro-Ana, but not in the way many might look at the topic. We do not condone a certain lifestyle, but we encourage others not to condemn it... In a way, PrettyThin is a silent advocate for those with an ED [Eating Disorder].

To access the parts of the site that allow postings of personal narratives, such as the PrettyThin Forum and PrettyThin Blog, a membership is required. A membership can be obtained by clicking the 'Register' link, which is under the 'Welcome' box of every page. An active email address is all a person needs to gain a membership; the user is then required to create an original display name and password of their choice.

After these easy steps, a notification is sent to the email address that was supplied, and within the body of the email is a hyperlink that must be clicked to activate the account. For this researcher, a membership and access were granted within 10 minutes of registering for the site.

As Foot & Schneider (2005) addressed, “the hyperlinked and multilevel nature of the web makes the identification and demarcation of unit of analysis a critical but difficult task” (ibid. pp.157). PrettyThin is site with hundreds of hyperlinks, which can take a member quite deep into (and away from) the site. The number of pages connected to PrettyThin grows daily due to constant membership activity. It is because of this that specific areas of the site were chosen to explore for the analysis. Chosen pages within the site had to specifically display a conversation among the community members, which will display an understanding of the social aspects of Internet behavior; behavior which will hopefully showcase the ways tensions in discourses are established through the use of authoritative voices, experts, and personal narratives, as well as other community roles. These pages include the topic categories found within the ‘PrettyThin Forum’ page. Informational pages in regards to how pro-ana is defined and eating disorder realities are included in the web sphere in order to explore how this particular community sees themselves and what other discourses are related. These pages are found within the ‘Pro-Ana’ page. Additionally, the homepage is included in the ‘web sphere’, as it is part of the site that introduces members and non-members to the site and represents the PrettyThin community’s projected first impression into the Internet. Moreover, due to the impact that formatting has on the access to and presence of information, it is important to explore the hyperlinks located on the permanent, static, layout of every PrettyThin page. This exploration will display what kind of discourses are constantly in the user’s view, and how the user is lead to specifically highlighted information.

The Internet has enabled social scientists to create a virtual laboratory where data can be collected 24 hours a day across the globe, without the cost (time, transcription error and financial) associated with more traditional methods of research (Joinson:2005 pp. 21). PrettyThin member forums were observed April 28 until May 13th. However, the homepage was only observed during April 28, 29, and 30, due to the immediate archiving of this material when a new month is entered.

Having declared the web sphere, highlighted descriptions of specific categories of discursive analyses will be applied to the identified web pages. These categories of analysis were chosen based on the goal to understand how anorexia as a disease has been framed, what constitutes a pro-ana identity, how that identity is maintained within this web sphere, and what active discourses are present within a pro- ana community.

3.4. Description of Categories of Analysis

Formatting:

Web pages are seen as the expression of the designer's identities, both in design choices made and in the use of tools to take action (Hine:2000 p.93). Web page development is made meaningful through orientation to the audience, a category which consists of imagined information seekers and potential aesthetic or technical critics (ibid.).

The website's format will allow or deny the exercise of shifted power in which individuals are now encouraged to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms (Buckingham:2008 pp.10).

(Floating) Signifiers:

The use of accepted signifiers within the community is a formation of an action which is socially and historically situated and a representation of a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.62). Accepted style of text is based around strength, which assists the writer/community to create a monopoly for agenda setting; this discursive form of social practice constitutes both the social world and social practices by representing knowledge of the community, displaying new formations of gained education, and showcasing agreed upon terminology within the pro-ana site. It is through communication, on the likes of member forums and blogs, that the semiotic process, “that is the linking of signs and signified through meanings” (ibid. p.126-127), emerges. It is equally important to examine “the competing ascriptions of context to the floating signifiers” in order “to identify the struggles taking place over meaning” (ibid. p.30).

Presence of Active/Passive Discourses:

CDA will be used to explore how the theoretically discussed feminist, health and identity discourses are presented within the pro-ana site, and how tensions arise in their representation of ‘truth claims,’ which ultimately shape a user’s social life. As such, much discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions (Gill:2007 p.59). Discursive accounts are produced from an awareness that any account is potentially in competition with alternative versions (Hine:2000 p.122), as is the case with online communities.

3.5. Critical Discourse Analysis as a Methodology

Discourse, which is a form of social practice constituting of both socially and historically situated actions and representing a dialectical relationship with other aspects of the social (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.62), is an ideal way to attempt to understand how social practices reproduce and change knowledge, identities and social relations.

In the case study *Critical discourse analysis and identity: why bother?*, researchers Susan Ainsworth and Cynthia Hardy (2004) “demonstrate the value of adopting critical discourse analysis (CDA) to study identity” (ibid. pp.225) because CDA can “be used to understand the process whereby fluid meanings become institutionalized and reified”(ibid. pp.243). While feminist, medical and identity discourse may not argue that anorexia is an identity, accepting it as a reappropriated, positive identity is to explore alternatives to current arrangements and institutions (ibid. pp.238). Critical approaches to discourse analysis will be used to “emphasize the contextually contingent nature of truth claims, to show how they develop in relation to particular circumstances” (ibid. pp.238).

Using CDA will provide this research with a “critical framework with which to explore material effects” (ibid. pp.236). This framework will hopefully lead to a greater understanding of what conceptual tools may augment the presences of social powers, exploring linkages between tensions in favored discourses when attempting to define a social identity.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Pro-ana sites, like other community support sites, are relatively inexpensive, if not free, to join and offer 24 hour access to current, as well as archived, discussions; moreover, users tend to have increase self disclosure due to the sense of autonomy (Walstrom:2004 pp.175). This autonomy is created with the constant connectivity that is offered, which leads users to feel an assumed privacy when they develop a position within a community. While there “currently exists no general agreement over what constitutes public and private space in online environments” (Roberts *et al*:2004 pp.161) the easy access to this revealing information creates new ethical issues that are inherent to this medium.

With choosing to use CDA as my methodology, this researcher has become what is known as a lurker: “a participant in a chat room or a subscriber to a discussion group, listserv or mailing list who passively observes” (Whitty:2004 pp.209). This role has been acknowledged, and to off balance the role of lurker, this researcher will take on the responsibility of an analyst. “An analyst viewpoint brings empirical insight to the systematic patterns occurring within support group exchanges, drawing on theoretical and methodological tools” (Walstrom:2004 pp.175).

Knowing pseudonyms/usernames themselves gain reputations over time, and that screen names, or nicknames, may be recognizable by others who know them offline, this researcher will conceal participant identities by keeping names, subject headings, dates, email address, and nick names anonymous. “Given the need to protect both pseudonyms and offline identities, the greatest protection to the identity of research participants is afforded by keeping both ‘real life’ and online pseudonyms confidential” (Roberts *et al*:2004 pp.166).

While this researcher is aware of the possibility of privileging the author of a post, rather than the community, this researcher will “recognize that the community also has a stake in the ownership of the message”, and the member’s “preference may be to not be identified” (Roberts *et al*:2004 pp.167).

3.7. Reflection of Methodology

In order to make the analytical choice of CDA work, the proportions of the categories of analysis have needed to be shifted. CDA provides the researcher with tools to attempt to understand the importance of formatting and (floating) signifiers within the creation of an identity. And while these categories will be examined, greater attention will be paid to the analysis of active and passive discourses, because it is the goal of

this research to attempt to answer if reappropriating anorexia is a stand against conventional identity categories, causing the identity of self to become sophisticated to the point of depoliticization, or rather it is the result of tensions in discourse that arises from the use of tools of modernity.

Due to limitations, such as deadlines and word count, this researcher had to choose to omit other categories of analysis which were more textually based, and less formatting orientated. Such categories of analysis, which could hopefully be developed in the future, were the use of personification, style of writing, and common displays of expressions. While these categories of analysis would hopefully provide a systematic understanding to personal narratives and other text present on the site, it was the goal of this research to display how discourses came in to tensions when the Internet, highlighting one pro-ana website, is used as a tool to visualize anorexia as an identity. The chosen categories of analysis uphold the primary goal.

Analysis Chapter: 4

The following will be a theoretical and analytical dialogue between the previous chapters and the application of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to the website of www.prettythin.com.

4.1. Category of Analysis: Formatting

This format section of analysis will address the structure of features found on the pages within the site, the designer's presence, the information which is present, where it is placed within the hierarchical ordering of pages, and what importance this has with creating a pro-ana identity.

The functioning and aesthetic layout of the site is important to address first. Each page of the site has a fixed, static frame of left, top and right margins. This permanent display on every page allows the user of the site to be reminded of just what this site is about and how the site builds a community. A banner across the top of the page with a picture of an eye reads: 'A Site About Beauty in Our Eyes', which seems to reinforce the idea that this site does not encourage one to become anorexic, but is it is rather a community for those that acknowledge that their bodily property maintenance does not always fall under acceptable norms in other realms. On the right column of the frame is a list of informational sections which provide a display of PT in macro and micro views. With sections like 'About PrettyThin' and 'Top Links,' a new user is able to gain information of what this site is about. Additionally, the right column has sectionalized information that provides the user with titles and times of 'recent forum posts' and 'recent blog posts,' an active member of the site can frequent the site daily and be made aware of growing discussions or new points of interests.

The links that are provided permanently to the left of the site are the tools of navigation for the site, and are displays of the wide range of topics and interactivity that this pro-ana site has to offer. There are the PrettyThin member forums and chat rooms for the members to create and continue discussions on a variety of topics to the pages of other alternative communities that a member of pro-ana may find supportive. When the user scrolls over these navigational links, new boxes of information appear that can lead the user deeper in to the site. However, if the user clicks on the navigation link of the title, instead of the boxes that are created, the user is directed to a brief introduction of each of the sections with a greeting from the gate keeper/designer/site owner and with the reason the gate keeper feels as though this section should exist. It is because of this formatting style that the power that the designer/gatekeeper/site owner has over control of content is displayed; this authoritative voice is unavoidable when it greets the users on each page.

Web page development is a craft practice which becomes embedded in the lives of designers as a meaningful project of self expression or self improvement, a skill to be proud of and as an activity that can be fitted into the biographies they tell about their lives. Web page development is made meaningful “through orientation to the audience”, an imagined category consisting of information seekers and potential aesthetic or technical critics (Hine:2000 p.93).

While PrettyThin is continuously declared a community, and forum posts happen several times an hour, the designer of the site has developed a site that allows for self expression of the designer because, besides the opportunity to state the importance of each section, the homepage acts as the gatekeeper’s personal blog. The format of the home page as the designer’s personal blog represents several societal aspects. First, it anticipates the emergence of other web spheres in response to specific events focuses on themes of the community. Such an example is the discussion of Kate Middleton’s bodily preparations for her globally viewed wedding to Prince William. Stating that Middleton was going through a physical fitness boot camp and that “just as there is someone hired to make sure she stays in shape, there is someone there to make sure she doesn’t get too in shape.” A reoccurring tagline of the gatekeeper is that there is ‘- and they say this isn’t disordered.’ Secondly, the personal blog acts as a reminder of the hegemonic dichotomy. James, the gatekeeper/designer/site owner and a declared mal, writes about his views of nudity in advertisements as ‘a social fascination’, but naked girls (with strategically placed jewelry or specialized camera angles) litter the homepage. It is the gatekeeper of this site that gets to share his opinions, on the main page, on how women’s bodies should look, be presented, and how women should feel about themselves. It is made unaware of to the user if others hold similar views to his, because no commenting is allowed on the personal blog entries on the homepage.

The control of this site, filled primarily with young women’s personal narratives of confused societal roles, controlled by a male figure who states his views on the

homepage of the site seem to uphold hegemonic values. Feminists have long argued for a place of personal narratives to validate the female experience, and, while this site offers a blog and forum to present these narratives, the absence of women represented linguistically is still absent. The authoritative voice of the gatekeeper continues to create a place in which normative social practices of gender take place. The presence of “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (Butler:2007 p.23) are not only experienced in the text of the website, but also in the choice of photographs that are displayed throughout the site.

Each membership offers the user a profile in which they can upload a profile picture, however members cannot freely post pictures in threads, comments or elsewhere on PrettyThin. Rather, the “Member’s Photos” section is a page of chosen photos that have been emailed to the designer. An email address is provided to which members can send photographs of themselves or images of ideal body sizes, also known as ‘Thinspiration’. It is then to the gatekeeper’s discretion as to which pictures are uploaded in to the ‘Member’s Photos’ section, only after the image is stamped with a PT logo.

The member’s forum is divided into topical sections, where the designer has highlighted conversational ideas and suggested ways of posting. Within each of those sections, members can start new discussions. As a new thread is created, it gets added to the top of the list of threads, and pushes other topics down, eventually leading to new pages. Within the thread, posts are saved from oldest to newest, with the newest post being pages deep into the site, depending on the popularity of the topic.

The posting of a message to a member forum such as PrettyThin, implies an understanding of the online content in which the interaction takes place (Hine:2000 p.94). The very structuring of postings plays out ideas about the audience. Having the individual threads read from oldest to newest comment allows the members to be

made aware of the creation and the development of an entire story, which allows a balance between experts and ‘noobies’; as well as, daily and infrequent visitors. In responding or posting to a thread topic, a user has the chance to highlight a particular sentiment from another user with the ability to ‘Quote & Reply’, which allows there to be a screenshot of the quote that is in discussion, text accompanies this screenshot stating the date, time and username of the original quote. The stylization of these posts performs a number of different tasks. It creates set of expectations about what the audience should or should not be able to remember from previous postings, establishes moral statements about the ownership and attribution of works and operates as turn taking. (Hine:2000 p.94). An example of what is expected of a member to remember is seen in a special formatting tool.

The designer’s power to control how information is displayed, within the member forum, is seen by the use of a tool known as a ‘sticky.’ ‘Sticky’-ing a topic makes it remain at the top of that particular section of the forum. This is a display of the designer’s voice giving power to authority of what is deemed worthy and important information. While democratic motions in certain threads, by members campaigning for a particular thread to be ‘sticky’-ed, have happened, there are also topics that are placed with a ‘sticky’ that are written by the gatekeeper, or given power to other administrators of the site, to declare a certain way of acting on the site and then are void of the ability to comment. Such as an example with an administrator post telling users how to use the site:

There is a whole community of buddies on here so I'm not sure why people join and look for a random buddy. Better to get to know people on here, then exchange data if you seem to get along...

This thread was labeled with a ‘sticky’ and then did not allow replies. “The apparent impact of the technology depends on users being taught to use the technology in

appropriate ways which is contingent on the successful performance of sets of social relations established between the designer and the users” (Hine:2000 p.8).

What makes the posting of a newsgroup message meaningful encompasses both a basic understanding of what technology is for, and an understanding of what a specific forum is for. Understanding what groups are for enables participation in the social world of a particular news group (Hine:2000 p.94). However, a member who participates in posting also has to realize their acceptance of participating in active surveillance.

There are several formatted interactivity possibilities on the member forums. Members can flag comments, reply to any new thread created by another member, and, as mentioned above, they can ‘Quote & Reply’. Including these interactivities is a display of individuals being encouraged to regulate themselves, and others that participate in this created social world, to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms. This is a demonstration of the Foucaultian assertion that there has been a shift in the way in which power is exercised, diffused through social relationships encouraging users to regulate themselves and to ensure that their own behavior falls within acceptable norms (Buckingham:2008 pp.10) .

However, the designer has also limited some of the regulation that other members can apply. This can be seen in the member’s photo section in which members cannot upload or freely comment on the photos.

4.2. Category of Analysis: (Floating) Signifiers

This category of analysis will look at the (floating) signifiers that exist within a pro-ana community.

While "the concept of 'semiotic' relates to any sign [...] that according to social convention is meaningful" (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.20). "Communication consists of semiotic processes that is the linking of signs and signified through meanings" (ibid. p.126-127). It is because of the communication within a community that the display of words, colors, images gain their own representations; these representations can be a display of a community's authorial meaning, as well as an expression of all in agreement, disagreement.

"Discourse theory has a term for those elements which are particularly open to different ascriptions of meaning, and that is floating signifiers" (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.28). Claude Lévi-Strauss coined the term floating signifiers "to represent an undetermined quantity of signification, in itself void of meaning and thus apt to receive any meaning" (Mehlman:1972 pp.23). The notion of floating signifiers can be applied to concepts such as race and gender, as a way of asserting that the word is more concrete than the concept it describes; whereas the concept may not be stable, but the word becomes recognized as something that is constant. The existence of a community, such as PrettyThin, has to constitute an agreement upon such a floating signifier from the beginning. The understanding of being involved with a community that uses pro-ana recognizes the need to be seen as a community, and not specifically as an individual.

"That a signifier is floating indicates that one discourse has not succeeded in fixing its meaning and that other discourses are struggling to appropriate it" (Jørgensen & Phillips:2008 p.148). The idea that a term like pro-ana is a floating signifier further represents the confusion of the culturalized body and the fluidity of identity. "[B]y examining the competing ascriptions of context to the floating signifiers, we can begin to identify the struggles taking place over meaning" (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.30).

The presence of other signifiers that are less arguable, such as height and weight, still represent struggle between what is considered normative, lead to an understanding of how floating signifiers are created. An example of this is when new members are encouraged to partake in ‘noobie’ type of activities. ‘Noobieness’ is a section in the PrettyThin member forum, and it is in this section they can post statistical information and look for a partner to text or chat with, even find pro-ana friends that are local, in order to monitor one another and support. The use of statistics, specifically height, weight and goal weight, are a stylistic uses to finding a ‘buddy’ within the PrettyThin community. These tools are representations of users’ hopes and aspirations to become a member of a community of practice in which they seek participation (Butler:2007 p.16). Members want to find partners with similar ‘stats’ in order to meet goals. While starting weights vary, the similar goal weights represent an attitude that almost everything about the body can be changed by the individual (Orbach:2009 p.24). These similar goals also symbolize the few idealized body types that are left (ibid. p.12).

Understanding the style of writing, including the use of abbreviations and terminology, is an important signifier to gaining knowledge of how the community operates. This knowledge is mandatory in order to become an ‘expert’ within the member forums. Knowing and using abbreviations and terminology on the site leads to building an identity and access to education on how to maintain a pro-ana lifestyle. Below is a post made by a PrettyThin Administrator in the member’s forum section entitled ‘Using PrettyThin.’ It was marked with a ‘sticky’ to inform users of agreed upon site slang, acronyms, & abbreviations: (The researcher has structured the posted text in to a table*)

PT = PrettyThin	ED = eating disorder	Ana / AN = anorexia nervosa
Mia / BN = bulimia nervosa	EDNOS = eating disorder not otherwise specified (basically, someone who doesn't fit all the	BED = binge eating disorder

	diagnostic criteria for either anorexia or bulimia)	
COE = compulsive over eater	HW= high weight	LW = low weight
CW = current weight	GW = goal weight	UGW = ultimate goal weight
IP = inpatient	OP = outpatient	BMI = body mass index (can look up here: http://www.nhlbisupport.com/bmi/)
B/P = binge and purge	BDD = body dismorphic disorder	Recovery = get healthy, work on getting rid of the ED
Relapse = redevelop the ED after recovery or attempted recovery		

This example of the use of ‘sticky’ notes acts as instructional guide on how new members can become ‘expert’ members of PrettyThin. And as "[o]ne can analyze how myths as floating signifiers are invested with different content by different social actors in the [discursive] struggle" (Titscher *et al*:2007 p.40), this can represent, that for a site which has been formed around a floating signified use of a stigmatized identity, that members want to feel like an expert immediately due to the desire to not have to feel like an outsider anymore.

The relationship with the computer, as the tool of the Internet, has become part of the users’ physical body in the era of modernity, and “the ‘right’ size now signify one’s membership in modernity” (Orbach:2009. p.11), and this can be seen in users’ signatures which accompany each post they make. A member can have a permanent text display attached to each post, also known as a signature. This signature can be any variety of fonts or colors, hyperlinks to personal blogs or charts supported on other sites can connect other members to another ‘window’ of the users life. These signatures represent a discourse about self-created identity, and the body is central. Numbers, which represent weights, are listed, with past weights crossed off, current

goals highlighted somehow, and goal weights remaining to be achieved. An example of a frequently syndicated style of a signature:

~~165~~ ~~164~~ ~~163~~ ~~162~~ ~~161~~ ~~160~~ ~~159~~ ~~158~~ ~~157~~ ~~156~~ ~~155~~ ~~154~~ ~~153~~ ~~152~~ ~~151~~ ~~150~~ ~~149~~ ~~148~~
~~147~~ ~~146~~ ~~145~~ ~~144~~ ~~143~~ ~~142~~ ~~141~~ 140 139 138 137 136 135 134 133 132 131 130...
120... 110...nothing...

"...What doesn't kill us makes us who we are..."

Height: 5'7

And sometimes the signature represents not only statistics, but also rewards for meeting self imposed goals:

Height - 5'3

BMI: 19.1

CW: 108 lbs - 49 KG

LW: 92 lbs - 42 KG

GW1: 100 lbs - 45 KG - Book - 31st April

GW2: 95 lbs - 43 KG - Perfum - 10th May

GW3: 90 lbs - 41 KG - £10 worth of make-up - 20th May

GW4: 85 lbs - 38 KG - £10 iTunes - 30th May

UGW: 80 lbs - 36 KG - Hollister size 0 jeans - 8th June

There are also very unique, and defining, expressions which signify an understanding of pro-ana identity. 'Food porn', which is the posting of pictures of food members would like to eat or food that is "too pretty to eat", is an act some members do to distract themselves from eating. Members have pages of threads on such topics, supporting one another by fulfilling 'fantasies' of eating. One member has written:

For some reason looking at food porn makes me less hungry. For me it's like pseudo-eating.

And another PrettyThin member posted:

i just spent HOURS on the food porn thread and i feel like i could spend hours and hours more. amazing.

These comments represent not only an agreement on what is understood as 'food porn', images of food that can be looked at to reduce hunger or the desire to literally eat it, but also the purpose of which this symbolic practice represents in the identity of pro-ana.

There is also an identification term for outsiders of the site, 'Wannabe', which carries a negative connotation and is used to create a distance from them and the users of PT that understand the importance of a pro-ana identity is. As a PT member writes:

It is so hard to distinguish the real thing from the 'wannabes' (I hate that word but it's the best description), when a real ED has so much in common with a wannabe, just the reasons behind the thoughts are different. Like, for me I want anorexia to destroy myself in what I see as a less shameful way than dying of an obesity induced heart attack (I hate myself for seeing anorexia as less shameful, but I do, or rather, the thing inside me does). Whereas I think people who are able to eat normally and are trying their hardest not to, so that they can have an 'ED', believe that it will simply make them look good.

While defining what exactly is a 'wannabe' is hard to answer, there is an understanding of what is considered *not* pro-ana within the community; which proves to be just as valuable in the formation of reclaiming an identity.

More than textualized indications, membership of this community can also incorporate tangible signifiers. Members have asked for simple and causal reminders of their, perhaps, ‘secret’ membership in this stigmatized community, and the site owner responded with making bracelets that could be purchased. The following is a description of the PrettyThin Unity bracelet:

This site has always been about *you* - these bracelets are too. I did the easy part; the rest is up to you. Before you buy this bracelet, please reflect on what the bracelet means to you. Think about what this community means to you. A chapter in your life, a thread woven in your existence, a vibration that resonates through your soul. What is this community to you, and what does this bracelet reflect and remind you of when you wear it... This bracelet embraces the unity of our thoughts, and combines the strengths of those who wear it. It is a reflection of the strength of the community, and the proceeds help maintain this community.

4.3. Category of Analysis: Presence of Active/Passive Discourses

The coproduced nature of the web, evidenced in the joint production by multiple actors of many features and much content, makes the attribution of authorship to producers of specific bits problematic. Also the often rapid and unpredictable evolution of the web is one of the greatest challenges scholars face (Foot & Schneider:2005 pp.157).

Discourse analysts see social life as being characterize by conflicts of various kinds. As such, much discourse is involved in establishing one version of the world in the face of competing versions [...]The emphasis on the rhetorical nature of texts directs our attention to the way in which all discourse is organized to make itself persuasive (Gill:2007 p.59).

It is through an active competition of discourses presented on PrettyThin that truth claims, discourse that are attempting to establish themselves as the one, true version of the world, are used in the construction of a pro-ana identity.

Understanding what groups are for enables participation in the social world of a particular news group (Hine:2000 p.94). Members know that PrettyThin acknowledges the lifestyle of an anorexic as an identity, which makes this website a place of competing alternative versions of what is defined as an acceptable identity. The existence of competing discourses “suggests that descriptions are oriented to produce the impression that they are factual” and whether they are explicitly challenged or not... “all accounts are produced from an awareness that any account is potentially in competition with alternative versions” (Hine:2000 p.122).

Competition is noticed when information is dispensed. An example of this is what is seen as accessible, read as valued, knowledge with the use of hyperlinks within the site. The ‘Recovery’ information section on the static frame of every page links, not to the ‘Recovery’ section with medical links and therapy location finders, but to the recovery discussions in the member forum. This is a display of giving power to members, and also shows what/who members find more trust in, which appears to not be the medical community. Participants of pro-ana sites are using the Internet as a tool to express the complicatedness of their ‘condition’; seemingly telling the medical profession that this is not just about eating, but more about defining themselves (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.89).

Continued distrust in the medical community can be found in the thread that is ‘sticky’-ed at the top of the ‘Recovery’ discussion forum of the members. It is titled ‘Why is this category here?’. The topic is closed, meaning no additional posts or comments can be made in this thread. The text of the post is as follows:

This is a website about eating disorders. It's important than we embrace all angles of it, to ensure everyone has a home, and has a home at all times. If this section is for you, then here it is for you. If it is not, then it's not.

PrettyThin recognizes that society has given the profession of medicine the power to determine what does and does not constitute infirmity, this power has a tendency to

reduce the patient to the disease they have (Downer *et al.*:2009 pp.86). PrettyThin supports the humanization of the members by stating in its ‘About PrettyThin’ page:

PrettyThin is not a recovery site, although it supports recovery should the individual seek it. We don't wish to make anyone feel like a patient, but we all understand that there are times in our lives when we need help; [...] There is more complexity, and it exists. It is a part of the lives of those who use this site.

Between individual discourses there are tensions as well. For example, in the medical/health discourse there is an understanding of what is considered ‘ordered’ eating (versus the concept of an eating style that is ‘disordered’), and on these threads users can obtain tips on how-to follow certain diets. However, in the ‘General Discussion’ section of the member forum, there are specific rules of use for the forum from an administrator:

Here are the rules:

NO HARMFUL TIPS ARE ALLOWED ON PRETTYTHIN. Not on blogs, the forums, comments...anywhere.

Tips are anything that can encourage or support negative eating disordered behavior. This includes how to avoid eating with others, how to hide your ED from friends/family, how to purge, how to lose weight fast, or asking things like how fast someone lost weight and how they did it. Just because it doesn't say "tips" doesn't mean it can't be one.

Why? First, Webs does not permit them. If Webs got wind of any tips being provided, PrettyThin will get shut down in a heartbeat with no questions asked [...] Second, and most important, no one wants to be responsible for your physical damage or death.

The above quote is a display of the understanding that the “medical profession has accepted and cherished the role of ‘keeper of the morality’ through the medicalization of this disease and the labeling of women” (Downer *et al.*:2009 pp.90). If PrettyThin wants to continue operating, they must recognize that there have been discourses that have identified them as diseased.

And while there is a section under ‘Recovery’ that cites professionalized health information, the gatekeeper’s voice in the introduction to this page creates an ‘expert’ role in identity discourse, which generates tensions within medical discourse:

This system seems to be based on fear. A process of having you surrender who you are to the notion that you fail by giving into your obsessions. It looks backwards, seeking to define how you have failed and who you have hurt, rather than looking forward to who you wish to be, and how you may find comfort and happiness within yourself as who you are, and not who you are ashamed of.

The following steps are as presented as I found them online. Here is the 12 Step program for addiction which many therapists apply to those with an Eating Disorder.

The medical discourse within the PrettyThin community has also been used in support of the reappropriated identity. An example of this is found on the page dedicated to 'ED Realities' when the gatekeeper speaks of obesity being a greater cause of illness or death:

There is no question that an eating disorder can kill you. Driving recklessly in your car can kill you, and so can driving recklessly with your body.

Here are some numbers:

- about one out of every 50 deaths in the UK is thought to be a result of excess fat in the diet. This is about 50% more than in France, but that's still a high number.

- 400,000 deaths are linked to obesity in the European Union (EU) each year.

Identity discourse finds itself in strain with itself within PrettyThin as well. An example of this is on the page 'Pro-Ana, by Pretty Thin':

There has been a lot of debate on this site about what the term really means. Can Pro-Ana ever have a positive connotation? There are those - even those on this site - who will say that anorexia is not an eating disorder. There are others who see it simply as that, and something that they wish to work through and treat through a process of recovery. There are people who see out the term pro-ana in order to find people that can give them dieting tips. In their view "we" are the experts on diets and tips to lose weight.

In the above quote, it is recognized that there is a difficulty in defining what a pro-ana identity is. The gatekeeper does address that the use of 'pro' does not necessarily mean a positive connotation. Moreover, the gatekeeper seems to find the role of the expert within the community problematic, due to the fighting discourses and the battle to identify what is truth in each of the discourses.

The language present in pro-ana websites is nearly always in an active action in order to motive change, and active action is used in order to activate the audience and give birth to their enthusiasm. How this action is displayed in each of the categories of analysis, as well as how CDA is an important part to the theoretical understanding of how a stigmatized identity can be reclaimed will be explored in the conclusion.

Conclusion Chapter: 5

5.1. Conclusion

The critical discourse of this research makes a contribution to existing knowledge in fields that have individually dealt with topics of gender, identity and health discourses. With the growth of technology and with the Internet being used as a tool of evaluation, users attempt to make sense of the truth claims and tensions that arise when intersections of discourse collide by reappropriating once stigmatized identities. CDA has provided the researcher with the tools necessary for attempting to understand the reappropriation of the identity of the ‘anorexic’ on the Internet. Moreover, it has been an exploration of this claimed ‘choice biography’ and the assumption that women are doing such acts as to ‘please themselves’ which has lead to a new thought that pro-ana is perhaps not so much an identity, but used as an identity to create collectives, places of ‘moratorium’, to gain support and understanding as to how they have been effect by the intersection of such powerful discourses.

A critical approach was used to “emphasize the contextually contingent nature of truth claims, to show how they develop in relation to particular circumstances, and to explore alternatives to current arrangements and institutions” (Ainsworth & Hardy:2004 p.238), and this can be seen in each of the categories of analysis.

In the category of analysis of formatting, a display of the gatekeeper's power and control in the development of the relationships users have to gaining specifically highlighted information was seen. Also displayed, was the shift in power that individuals are asked to display in surveying other participants' abilities to present themselves in socially acceptable norms, with the use of comments and 'flagging' posts.

Through the use of (floating) signifiers, agreed upon terminology and acceptable displays of goals, which are also a masked form of surveillance for maintaining what is considered acceptable praxis for this particular style of online community. The use of signifiers also attempts to establish a clearer definition as to what a pro-ana identity is in its words, style, expression and use of semiotics.

The aim of this research was to address the question of how tensions in discourse of feminism, identity and health arise when the Internet is used as a tool to visualize anorexia. Participants of pro-ana sites are using the Internet as a tool to express the complicatedness of their 'condition'; (Downer *et al*:2009 pp.89), and through the conscious decision to join a pro-ana online communities they attempt to reclaim anorexia from the medical discourse, and use it to define their anxiety and confusion in societal roles. In reclaiming stigmatized terminology, like anorexia, they are recognizing how bodies grow to be disciplined through this confusion. And even though discourses arise in tensions by the decision to join, create and maintain web communities such as PrettyThin, these users feel more adequately represented in these forums.

The Internet is not the reason why individuals are anorexic, but rather it is a cultural artifact which represents the reappropriation of this term through the use of multiplicity in attempting to understand the self within modernity. The exploration of

multiplicity through the use of “windows” makes traditional categories of identity null and void, and allows individuals multiple possibilities to construct and fashion their own identities (Buckingham:2008 pp.9). This fluidity has been seen as a positive development (Giddens:1991, Turkle:1997, Turkle:1999), and has even been seen as empowering through the declaration of ‘choice biographies’ (Gill:2007).

The body, as has become the Internet, is an action system which is socially and historically situated and exists in a dialectical relationship with other aspects of social and psychological identification. The presence of discourse:

... thus creates identities that individuals must take up to make sense of the discourses, and, in so doing, individuals subject themselves to its disciplinary effects [...] rather than autonomous subjects using discourse to construct identities, it is discourse that produces power-knowledge relations within which subjects are positioned, identities are constructed and bodies disciplined (Ainsworth & Hardy:2004 p.238).

CDA assisted in the interrogation of this reappropriation of ‘anorexia’ by bringing together critical social science and linguistics within a single theoretical and analytical framework (Chouliaraki & Fairclough:1999 p.6), a critical perspective of conventional identity categories resulted in a realization that depoliticized identities are created when tensions in discourse arises through the use of technological tools of late modernity.

5.2. Reflection of Research

The process of this paper was a long and daunting one. Every researcher submits a paper wishing they could have had just a few more weeks, or finds themselves cursing that student that had misplaced that one library book that would have *perfectly* legitimized the entire purpose of the thesis. Alas, this is the finalized version, but hopefully not the only version. It is the hope of the researcher to be able

to expand the section of analysis and go in depth greater with the analytical tools of critical discourse analysis, creating a more balanced case study.

Moreover, while this research discusses anorexia as a reclaimed identity due to growth in technology and how users understand technology, it is the personal goal of the researcher to have this paper act as a vehicle to understand the reappropriations of other stigmatized identities regarding feminism and body property as displayed in online social spaces. The scope of this research has been pro-ana websites, but the theme is reappropriation of identities, that deal with the body as a property with the use of tools of the late modernity, specifically the Internet. Furthermore, this work has made this researcher understand that identity seems to be able to be reappropriated if tensions intersect at a specific time and place.

During the writing and research of this thesis there has been a reappropriation of the term 'slut,' incited by the remarks that were made in January by Toronto Police Constable Michael Sanguinetti when he warned a personal security class at York University that "women should avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimized" (CBC News:2011). While he de-victimized the victim of sexual assaults by inferring that rape victims were 'asking for it', he also ignored the cultural positioning of women and how femininity is understood in the social sphere.

While both examples of reclaiming a stigmatized identity, 'slut' and 'anorexic,' address problematic issues with the historical and cultural positioning of women's bodies and showcases the important role that bodily property has within identity politics, this researcher is not attempting to say that the current events in the reappropriation of slut supports any sort of maintenance of sexual activity or inactivity.

As PrettyThin can be seen as a place for users to display their ‘choice biography,’ to render anorexia as an act of empowerment and a narrative of free choice, no matter how constrained one might actually be (Gill:2007 p.260), so can the dress and bodily display of an individual. No matter if such acts are indeed a disguised form of surveillance of bodily regulation, the choice to reclaim oppressions with a positive understanding of self reflection is indeed a powerful reappropriation.

With the use of technology of modernity, ‘slut’ was reappropriated virally in the formation of slut pride forums, blogs, SlutWalk events and social networking sites, providing a place for women to have personal narratives displayed. The growth of these sites showcased the Internet as a place in which culture can be formed and reformed, a constant result of adapting with real life cultural happenings. It is because of this technology that Slut Walk, parades of sorts that reclaim the word slut, have been formed globally² and immediately, in a display of reappropriation. As found on a website titled *Slut Walk Toronto*:

...whether dished out as a serious indictment of one’s character or merely as a flippant insult, the intent behind the word is always to wound, so we’re taking it back. “Slut” is being re-appropriated. We are tired of being oppressed by slut-shaming; of being judged by our sexuality and feeling unsafe as a result. Being in charge of our sexual lives should not mean that we are opening ourselves to an expectation of violence, regardless if we participate in sex for pleasure or work. No one should equate enjoying sex with attracting sexual assault (“WHY | SlutWalk Toronto”:2011).

While it has been a difficult task to attempt to create a conceptual thought process that involved the span of several fields of study and controversial topics, it is reminders of current events, such as the aforementioned, that makes this researcher certain that identities are not fixed, and that studying the presences of discourses in

² To read the list of countries and dates that are hosting their own ‘Slut Walk’ go to <http://www.slutwalktoronto.com/satellite/satellites-list-dates>

tension will lead to a greater understanding of the reasons behind the fluidity of identity.

Reference Chapter: 6

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