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Identity construction in online eating disorder communities: A discourse analysis

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Abstract

The present study focuses on online spaces centered on eating disorders. I conducted a discourse analysis using public posts under hashtags related to eating disorders on Twitter and Tumblr. My analytical process was guided by the assumptions of the self-categorisation theory of identity. It attempts to elucidate how the discursive trends and common repertoires used by the members of these online communities perform the functions of constructing and maintaining the social identity of the eating disorder sufferer. The analysis revealed four major discursive themes: *Imagining the perfect ED life*, *Metaphors of sickness*, *Right to the ED identity*, and *Inseparable from one's ED*. The themes demonstrate how the identity of the eating disordered individual online is constructed and performed via discursive actions of imagination, romanticisation, competition with other members, and defining oneself by one's disorder. As minimally mediated glimpses into the users' naturally occurring communication, these findings can promote a deeper understanding of the eating disordered experience. Consequently, they can be useful to clinicians working with ED clients, as well as social media policy makers debating the merits and drawbacks of censoring ED websites.

Keywords: eating disorders, discourse analysis, social media, identity, self-categorisation

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Introduction

The past few decades have marked a continuous increase in the prevalence of eating disorders. Data obtained in 2019 reveal that approximately 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have experienced symptoms indicating the presence of an eating disorder at one point in their lives (Ward et al., 2019). The onset of ED is often between the ages of 15 and 25, and they have one of the highest mortality rates among mental illnesses (Arcelus et al., 2011; Smink et al., 2012; Schmidt et al., 2016). Despite the high prevalence, especially among teenagers and young adults, eating disorders and their symptomatology are often surrounded by stigma (Ebner & Latner, 2013; Puhl, 2015).

The emergence of online forums and social media has led an increasing amount of ED sufferers to seek solace in cyberspace communities, where they can discuss their lived experience with other users who relate to their struggles. Examining this organically occurring talk in its natural setting and outside of an experimental design can offer insight into the unique perspective of this particular group and its members, without their descriptions of their experiences being affected, for example, by the instructions of an interview on the same issues. Reporting on the experiences of ED websites' users can also inform the dialogue around policies pertaining to online spaces, namely whether or not such sites should be censored. A lot of coverage of the subject is presented with a tone of shock, warning the public about the potential harm their usage can cause and urging for them to be banned, while others defend users' right to self-expression, highlighting the support that unstigmatised discourse can offer (Cobb, 2020). Some are also concerned that users validating each other's ED identity, as predicted by the self-categorisation theory, might lead to them becoming more reluctant to recover, due to the normalisation of disordered behaviour (Arseniev-Koehler et al., 2016).

History and Characteristics of Eating Disorder Websites

Even though popular outlets sparsely reported the existence of eating disorder-focused websites until the mid-2000s, some of them have existed as early as the 1990s, and their numbers only increased alongside the appearance and popularisation of new social media platforms (Norris et al., 2006). During the early 2000s, researchers and clinicians alike became aware of these websites' emergence, which brought about both quantitative and qualitative research aiming to discern their characteristics (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Giles, 2006; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006). During that time, platforms such as MySpace and Yahoo housed the majority of ED content in the form of forums and bulletin boards, where each user posted

diary-like snippets of their experience. Based on thematology or format, namely on whether they included “inspirational” images, diary entries, or simple text, posts were organised into so-called “threads” (Bates, 2015; Norris et al., 2006).

The users of these early forums coined many of the terms that members of online ED communities use to this day, such as “ana” and “mia”, short for Anorexia Nervosa and Bulimia Nervosa, and “thinspo”, short for “thinspiration”. This jargon is still part of the discursive repertoires available to users (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012; Pater et al., 2016). Those spaces were also responsible for coining the term “pro-ana”, short for “pro-anorexia”, which refers to content that encourages disordered eating. “Pro-ana” has been used as a descriptor of ED communities both by non-disordered social media users and by numerous researchers on the matter. For the purpose of this study, the use of this term to refer to ED spaces in general was not deemed appropriate, since not all the content they host promotes unhealthy behaviours (Juarascio et al., 2010). Furthermore, the effort to strictly distinguish the different types of content that would be required in order to use the term in good conscience would be beyond the scope of this study.

Alongside the popularisation of new social media, such as Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr, ED websites have undergone changes in both structure and content. Platforms like these, which put more emphasis on personal profiles rather than standalone posts within a shared space, facilitated a focal shift from the group to the individual (Pater et al., 2016). Furthermore, by introducing algorithms and follower counts, they have made relevant the matters of popularity and engagement among users (Bert et al., 2016). This adds a new factor to the subject of identity that this paper discusses, since they allow for popularity, and thus validation, to be measured in numerical terms (Ging & Garvey, 2018).

A degree of similarity has been maintained across ED websites throughout the years, despite the changes in format and range. In fact, there is surprising consistency in terms of both thematology and jargon when it comes to the content posted in them. The vast majority of sites host “thinspiration”, often represented by pictures of underweight female-presenting people, whose bodies the users idealise. Common across sites are also slogans like “Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels” and “Hunger hurts but starving works”. One of the most criticised types of content is “tips and tricks”, including weight loss recommendations, unhealthy dietary advice, as well as tips on hiding disordered behaviours from loved ones (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Sharpe et al., 2011; Branley & Covey, 2017; Ging & Harvey, 2018).

Other than the similarities in regards to terminology and format, qualitative research exploring ED websites has highlighted some narrative repertoires and metaphors that are commonly evoked by their users. For example, Bates (2015) noticed that eating disordered individuals tended to construct meaningful descriptors of their experience through metaphors of self, space and weight. He also observed that members of ED sites are also frequently fixate on the idea of being perfect, a fixation that they often express by metaphorically equating it to being nothing at all, being invisible, disappearing alongside their body weight. Another commonly employed metaphorical construction is that of anorexia nervosa being personified and assigned human traits (Forsén Mantilla, 2018). Overall, there seems to be an available dictionary, fairly consistent across time and websites, which doesn't stop in terminology, but encompasses metaphorical narratives through which users conceptualise themselves.

Discourse analysis

Discursive psychology is heavily based on Potter & Wetherell's work on discourse analysis. Its object of focus is how people talk, be it through speech or text, in situ. It assumes that the dichotomy between words and actions is false, and instead takes interest in how discourse and its patterns are oriented towards action within natural settings. Potter & Wetherell posited that discourse is constructed, as well as constructive, and its building blocks, consisting of what people say, are used to produce versions of the world. They noted that social settings incorporate structured discursive "resources", referred to as "repertoires". These usually take the form of groups of terms that are organised around a centerpiece metaphor, which is available to be used by members of a social setting in order to perform actions, for example to construct a term, justify a stance, put blame, or present a situation or group in a positive or negative light (Willig & Rogers, 2017).

The framework of discourse analysis favours a constructionist view of phenomena and processes that are traditionally classified as internal, such as emotions, motivations and, as is relevant to this study, identity. Instead of placing them *within* an individual, discourse analysis posits that such phenomena are under constant negotiation *between* individuals, and that their features aren't fixed, but rather agreed upon within a certain sociocultural context (Bamberg et al, 2011). Accordingly, and for the purpose of this study, identity –here, the online identity of the person who has an eating disorder– is not seen as something the person *has*, but as something that the people in the shared space when they and said person belong *make*.

The past few decades have produced a substantial body of literature that links discourse

to identity construction. Some of these theoretical approaches focus on the assumption that people construct their identity by integrating discursive repertoires that are widely but not universally available, while others highlight smaller-scale interactions as the ground where broader identities are being constructed (Foucault, 1987; Smith, 2003). Despite the difference in the assumed direction of identity-constructive processes, namely whether they are predominantly top-down or bottom-up, both kinds of analytical lenses postulate that social identities emerge in discourse and through it. They assert that social realities, including social identities, are under constant intersubjective negotiation. This negotiation is most often understood as a movement between dilemmatic positions, with the individual constructing and performing their identity via their “answers” to such interpersonally available dilemmas (Bamberg et al, 2011).

Online discourse

Traditional discourse analysis was conducted using primarily spoken word, be it two-way, face-to-face interactions or content broadcasted via television or radio. As interactive networking became available to the general public, linguists and sociologists alike started to develop an interest in computer-mediated communication. While early attempts at characterising online communication occasionally fell victim to generalisations and failed to grasp its nuances, subsequent research provided insight into the varying kinds of computer-mediated interactions and their linguistic, as well as sociocultural particularities.

Many researchers have focused on the unique characteristics of online communication that tell it apart from both face-to-face and written interaction. Others, especially in older studies, have posited that, since computer-mediated communication is achieved only through text and lacks the tonal and gestural cues of a real-life conversation, it is ill-suited for productive social interaction (Tannen et al., 2015). However, research into different types of online discourse, which showed nuance and variety in both linguistic and social norms depending on each website and its features, highlighted what my research takes as an assumption: that digital spaces where communication takes place are, in themselves, social settings. As such, they demonstrate their own norms, as well as linguistic particularities. Frequenters of a site often share structured discursive patterns and repertoires of terminology and metaphors that can be used to construct meaning and perform actions. Online communication can therefore be analysed using the principles of discourse analysis (Recuber, 2017; Tannen et al., 2015). My study focuses on the ways in which the discursive patterns of ED websites’ construct, negotiate

and perform facets of the social identity of the person who has an eating disorder in the online sphere. Since online membership is voluntary, meaning that users assign themselves an identity by joining and participating in their online communities, I deemed the self-categorisation theory as a fitting framework for my analysis.

Self-categorisation theory

Tajfel & Turner introduced the self-categorisation theory as an explanatory framework for a broad range of inter-group phenomena. They drew inspiration from Turner's social identity theory, which distinguishes between individuals' personal and social identities. The SCT accounts for the importance that a particular identity has for the way a person defines themselves, hence the focus on *self*-categorisation. A variety of social phenomena, such as self-stereotyping and in-group bias, can be explained by identification with a group (Trepte & Loy, 2017). According to the theory, strong identification fosters in-group favouritism, which not only directs behavioural preferences, but also often encourages cognitive distortions. For example, group members might stereotype themselves in order to resemble what they perceive to be the "prototypical", ideal member of their group. Similarly, they might overestimate the similarities between group members, as well as the differences between members and non-members. Tajfel & Turner believed that the need for a positive self-image is the motivating force behind such phenomena. The regularities in discourse that can be seen across ED websites can be interpreted from the perspective of the SCT as the discursive building blocks of a social identity, followed by the self-categorisation of members as bearers of that identity. Users often go beyond merely mentioning these subjects and incorporate them into how they define themselves. With that in mind, my analysis explores how users' posts contribute towards actions attempting to define the eating disordered identity and the posters themselves as eating disordered via their discourse.

Research question

Conducting a discourse analysis that stays true to its aim to uncover the actions behind words is, largely and by definition, a bottom-up process. Even though there are some themes that arose multiple times across different qualitative analyses of online spaces centered around ED, there is no guarantee that those same themes will be present in a new corpus of data. Not only that, but, as Abraham Maslow wrote, "it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, it is tempting, to see everything as a nail" – comparably, an analysis that's overly guided by previously elaborated on themes imposes onto its data a set of categories that might not stem

organically from said data. In other words, my methodology is incompatible with specific hypotheses. Similarly, the theoretical framework of the self-categorisation theory that informs my analysis does not imply a focus on identification as an internal process with a fixed end product, but, instead, has to do with the discursive *actions* of constructing and claiming an identity through interaction. Keeping these in mind, my research question is as follows: how do users of online spaces centered on eating disorders construct, assign themselves and perform the eating disordered identity?

Method

My corpus of data was collected from two social media platforms: X (previously known as Twitter) and Tumblr. These platforms were chosen for more than one reason. First of all, literature on the subject, along with previous research of mine, indicate that there are active ED communities within these social media (Paggioro, 2022; Sukunesan et al., 2021). Secondly, the content housed on X and Tumblr is readily accessible through keywords and public hashtags. Viewing it requires neither friend requests nor any other type of communication with the platforms' members, which facilitated data collection while simultaneously preventing privacy violations. Another reason that I chose X in particular lies in the fact that posts on this platform have a character limit. On one hand, I was interested in the nature of the discursive trends that would emerge from such a collection of short posts, as well as the strategies that users employ in order to get their message across given this limitation. On the other hand, I wanted to examine whether the difference in format between X and Tumblr, which allows for long posts, would also manifest in discursive and/or thematic variability.

The participants were the website members behind the posts that were included in the analysis. Since this study concerns discursive patterns that emerge among numerous users and is on the lookout for consistent patterns of identity construction, who exactly is behind each post is, in this case, of little interest. As a matter of fact, demographic data such as participants' names, ages, gender identities and ethnicities, were not specifically sought for and are not reported. Similarly, identifying information, for example usernames, are omitted – what matters is that the individuals in question have classified themselves as struggling with an eating disordered by taking part in the online ED communities in question. The exact amount of participants was not deemed relevant, given that the data was collected based on popularity, and it is thus possible that multiple posts were made by the same person. However, I did keep

in mind that the emergence of a discursive strategy, subject position or thematic consistency across posts made by one individual would, naturally, not suffice for its classification as an available repertoire.

Prior to data collection, there was a brief survey period regarding the relevant hashtags and keywords on each of the two platforms. Initially, this helped determine the amount of total posts that would be included in my corpus, since their exact number would depend on average post length, keeping in mind that they would have to be thoroughly analysed by a single person. Moreover, members of online spaces that are considered controversial, such as ED communities, frequently alter the hashtags they use, getting creative when it comes terminology and phrasing, in order to evade censorship (Gerrard, 2018). Thus, and even more so since online terminology and linguistic patterns in general are subject to rapid changes, pinpointing the most popular tags at this specific point in time was necessary, in order for my results to accurately reflect the current discursive trends. The specific keywords and hashtags that were surveyed are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Twitter	edtw, anatwt, anamia, thinspo, thinsp0, ricecaketwt
Tumblr	edblr, ★rving, ed not sheeran, 🦋 as a feather, pro for me not for thee, ana trigger

The analysis ended up including 250 total posts, half from X and half from Tumblr respectively. These posts were collected as the most popular in each of the hashtags included. While both platforms provide the option to view the most recent posts, it was deemed that popularity is a relevant issue to this study. A large amount of interactions with a post in the form of likes and replies indicates that other users not only have access to the discursive repertoire(s) and subsequent action(s) employed by the original poster, since they have read the post in question, but that those initial actions were effective to the extent of inciting either agreement or contribution to the discourse via opposition. Furthermore, like counts and algorithms have fostered a connection between popularity and validation, which in turn relates to the issue of establishing one’s identity that is relevant to this study. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: each post had to be related to eating disorders, instead of, for example, simply using ED hashtags in order to reach out to the community and/or gain popularity; each post

contained at least one unit of meaning, defined here as a whole, comprehensible sentence in English; the posts were either wholly in textual format, or, if they contained pictures or videos, such media were only complimentary to the focus of the text and could thus be omitted without changes in meaning; the posts did not contain information that could be traced back to the poster. The posts on X were gathered ten at a time across ten days, since X's algorithm favours rapid updates when it comes to the "top posts" feature. The Tumblr posts were gathered in only two sessions, because the website's "top posts" tab remains relatively stable for longer.

Potter & Wetherell did not include in their writing a series of exact steps that need to be followed in order for someone to conduct a discourse analysis, since they believed that the exact procedure should be determined based on the research question and available data, as well as guided by the analyst's intuition (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Alongside the evolution of DA and qualitative research in general, numerous handbooks have attempted to elucidate its principles, as well as provide general guidelines for their application. Nevertheless, most seem to agree that discourse analysis does not lend itself to detailed instructions, and that parts of a final report utilising this method will always be attributed to the analyst's intuition and willingness to adapt to their data. As I am not yet an experienced analyst, I started my analysis using steps recommended by Goodman (2017) as a general guide, proceeding with an open mind and altering the proposed procedure as necessary in accordance to my data.

I began the analysis by familiarising myself with my corpus of data, in a preliminary search for action orientations – that is, for a first idea of what is generally accomplished by this online content in relation to my research question regarding the construction of the online eating disordered identity. Although my considerations during that early stage did not make it into this report, they were noted and routinely elaborated on as guides for subsequent, more informed observations. Familiarisation with the content was followed by the more deliberate search for *discursive devices*. These, also referred to as *interactional resources* or *rhetoric strategies*, are the ways in which the actions accomplished by the posters are being performed. Since this particular analysis is guided by the SCT, it focuses on discursive devices that contribute towards identity construction.

Ethical considerations

This paper concerns a subject of particular sensitivity. An issue that had to be kept in mind throughout the conduction of the study was the nature of the data – namely, that the participants were unaware that their posts would be collected, and thus could not consent to

their use for the purpose of this study. As a result, I had to, first of all, be very careful not to include in my data set any information that might breach their privacy. In fact, no demographic information was collected at all, and posts whose content could point towards such information were omitted. The data collected were already publically available. Furthermore, the analysis excluded the visual content hosted on Tumblr and X. In addition to the fact that including images in the analysis would broaden the study's scope, making it harder to be thorough given the time constraints, visual content such as "thinspiration" pictures was mainly excluded for ethical reasons. Keeping in mind the nature of eating disorders, using the posters' pictures of their own bodies to extract any sort of commentary was deemed ethically questionable. When it came to users posting other people's bodies, there was also no way to ensure that the individuals being posted gave permission for their pictures to be circulated, and I opted not to contribute to that either. Particularities of procedure aside, I took great care to avoid adding onto the stigmatisation of ED behaviours and to approach the users' experiences with the compassion that every individual, including the visibly and decidedly disordered, is deserving of.

Analysis

The data demonstrated an expectable degree of heterogeneity in terms of formatting and tone, as well as varying stances on the matter of disordered behaviours. While some users adopted a positive and encouraging tone, be it to offer emotional support to the other members or aid with their weight loss goals, others' language carried a lot of anger and bitterness, directed both at themselves and other in-group or out-group members, with the occasional downright hostility. Despite that, there was surprising consistency across the data set when it came to the interpretative resources and discursive practices employed by the users. As is true for every analysis of this kind, identifying themes and expanding on each of them separately requires a kind of compartmentalisation that isn't inherent to naturally occurring talk. A different analyst, given the same corpus of data, would likely pin down a different set of major themes, attesting to the fact that thematic categorisation is always, to some extent, arbitrary. With that in mind, this analysis aimed to identify themes that would account for as much of the users' communicative repertoires and actions as possible, while not straying far from its research question. The resulting discursive themes offer insight into the specifics of the identity negotiation and performance that community members achieve through their words. These four

major themes are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Discursive themes	Imagining the perfect ED life
	Metaphors of sickness
	Right to the ED identity
	Inseparable from one's ED

Imagining the perfect ED life

A discursive device that permeates online ED spaces was observed to be that of imagination. Users share their fantasies that pertain to how their lives will look like, if only they manage to stay consistent at their weight loss efforts. The tone that characterises the majority of such posts can be described as a mixture of wishful and motivational. The “perfect life” that users imagine for themselves and each other covers both the personal and interpersonal sphere. To begin with, numerous of their imagined scenarios pertain to romantic relationships, as demonstrated in the following excerpts:

Excerpt 1:

10 reasons to be skinny in a relationship:

he's surprised how light you are when he lifts you / you look really small in his big clothes / when he hugs you, you feel super small he carries you a lot because it's so easy / he's so surprised comparing sizes (wrists, waist, thigh) / he's cares if you've eaten or not / he buys you dresses & cute jeans and tops - he just knows it'll look good on you / he tells you 'you should become a model' because of how beautiful you are / he's always taking pictures of you / you'll look so good when you guys take pictures together

Excerpt 2:

things that my bf has said/done that fuel my ed + couplespo

disclaimer !! this thread is meant for edwt ONLY. it contains dangerous content and ideas. some nsfw too. please avoid if you're in recovery! - my bf is not

knowingly doing this! he believes that i have recovered a long time ago, this is all unintentional! ♡ “your wrists are really getting thin, are you sure you haven’t been losing weight?” ♡ “i got you this bracelet, custom made. since you weren’t there, i just did it based off of what they felt like...” ♡ “you’re so light, i can pick you up like you’re nothing! like a little doll” ♡ “when we were in front of that mirror, all i could think about was how tiny you were compared to me” ♡ “you’re like the perfect weight. so little and cute, but not unhealthy” ♡ “sometimes you eat like a little bunny. it’s cute” ♡ he constantly picks me up, and carries me around!! bridal style, piggy back rides, etc etc are all so easy! ♡ he’s mentioned how noticeable my ribs are, and how visible my ribcage is (and that he doesn’t like other people looking at it lmao)

Excerpt 1 plays into the comparison between the disordered subject and their partner, next to whom they are disproportionately petite, which is portrayed as a trait that inspires his attraction and affection. A linguistic strategy that deserves to be noted is the use of the second person “you”. The poster does not merely share a fantasy of theirs, but invites the reader to picture themselves in place of the imaginary subject. This can contribute to identification processes in a dual manner. On one hand, the poster paints the picture of an idealised version of the disordered self, by using “you” as a general pronoun. On the other hand, through this extension of “you” towards the reader, they entice them to take part in their fantasy, making it into something they have in common.

Excerpt 2 focuses more on the poster’s own experience with their boyfriend, presenting instances where the smallness of their body was actually recognised and complimented on. The imaginative nature of this post owes itself to its inspirational aim: by using the word “couplespo” (short for “couple inspiration”), as well as the disclaimer that their words might affect non-disordered people stumbling upon them, the poster is again bidding the reader to imagine receiving similar treatment by their significant other. Once again, the use of “you”, in this case to quote someone addressing the poster directly, encourages such fantasies of the reader in the poster’s place. This and the previous excerpt’s discursive action of establishing a shared construction through second-person language, which is, in turn, reciprocated through interactions with the original posts, is seen numerous times in the data.

Another category of fantasies relate to imaginary victories in the social sphere. Some of these scenarios are positive in nature, describing the abundance of positive impressions and admiration that their thin bodies will inspire in friends and acquaintances, while others' undertone is antagonistic and spiteful, channeling a need to prove themselves to people they envy or feel wronged by:

Excerpt 3:

Imagine you're walking down a street, when the streetlights are shining golden light on the brown, red and yellow leafs that are lying on the street floor. You're freezing because you are so petite and skinny. Not even leg warmers are able to make your legs warm cus ur just too skinny. Heads turning when they pass you, people just cant believe that this pretty girl is also skinny. They all wanna be your friend just to get tips on how to get THIS skinny. Now look in the mirror and think about what you can do to be this girl in autumn.

Excerpt 4:

imagining: [...] my old friends being so jealous and seeing me as thinspo. my friends being worried but not brave enough to say anything. feeling envious eyes on me. being someone's crush. to be envied by the girls who I was jealous of. feeling my clothes becoming baggier. being light and untethered by my rolls of fat. to be feminine and dainty, careless of anyone else. in my own little perfect world. untouchable.

Excerpt 5:

oh the urge to be skinnier than the girls who made my life a living hell

There is a noticeable shift in tone between these excerpts. Excerpt 3 calls the site visitor to envision and work towards an idealised self, whose very low weight will attract positive attention and incite people to treat them in a friendlier manner. Similarly to Excerpts 1 and 2, the tone is wishful, and the second-person discursive technique can be seen here as well. Excerpt 4 taps onto the emotion of jealousy, and depicts weight loss as the key to a role reversal: having been used to envying others, the eating disordered person will now be the object of envy. This

role reversal is observed in Excerpt 5 as well, with the angrier tone painting a picture of dropping weight as an act of revenge. These three excerpts all indicate the construction of an image of the eating disordered person as admired, socially successful, and now able to avenge their past selves. Among the data, there are also numerous instances of fantasies that pertain to the aestheticisation of every-day life and draw heavily from fashion and body image projected as outward confidence. These are the posts that employ the technique of romanticisation the most, including scenarios of the person's success at their goals spreading to any and all aspects of their life, rendering it virtually perfect.

Excerpt 6:

Thinspo Imagine - for me - You wake up early, because you got plenty of sleep last night. You're on schedule of course, and you wake up just minutes before your alarm, since your body is used to the new routine. On your bedside table sits your phone and a glass of water, which is all you need through the night. You go down to breakfast. Normally you don't eat in the mornings but you're going to need some energy, so you fix yourself some low-GI fruits and a coffee. As you eat you check your socials. Your instagram has tons of new followers and your recent post has new likes. People are fighting over themselves in your comment section asking about your fitness routine and product suggestions. [T]o get dressed for the day you want to pick something that shows off your toned abs and flat stomach. Shirts sit so comfortably on you now, never too tight, but rather hanging down from your collarbones. You could fit into kids sizes if you wanted, and you know it. You pick out a pair of pants and your favourite top. As you do your makeup in the mirror you wonder in amazement at how many products you no longer need. Your face and body is weightless, without all the chub it used to carry, and you are unburdened and stunning, ready to face the day.

This poster constructs an image of the ED sufferer's life as it would look once they lose enough weight. They paint a picture in which meeting one's disordered goals will cause the rest of the individual's life to fall neatly into place. Here, the imagined "successful" ED identity spreads to include effortless beauty and aesthetic pleasantness, productivity, easy performance

of tasks, and social recognition. This construction is achieved through chronological narration, thus calling the reader to immerse themselves in that scenario of newly found happiness and success. Immersion is also attained through the specificity and details provided in this imagined day-in-the-life, as well as, once again, the use of the singular person “you”. Although the poster proclaims that the scenario is meant for themselves, their intention to share their vision of the future is evident in both their language and their classification of the post as a “thinspo imagine”, which, by definition, reveals a desire to inspire others.

Generally speaking, the posts under this theme often act towards romanticising the experience of having an eating disorder. Using discursive devices akin to those of descriptive storytelling, alongside a combination of very positive and dramatic words, they construct an image of the *ideal* ED identity, as embodied by the imaginary near-perfect young subjects of their posts, whose thinness and subsequent beauty grants them a newly found yet pervasive happiness. Even though this identity is often constructed as something to be desired rather than descriptive of the users at the moment, the motivational tone that is often observed implies that these experiences are seen as possible, even certain, as long as the person in question continues to engage in disordered behaviours.

Lastly, an additional repertoire that aids romanticisation is that of describing the experiences associated with losing weight that would normally be unpleasant as gratifying and enjoyable, as is exemplified in the following posts:

Excerpt 7:

soooo hungry,, nothing feels better than feeling your stomach shrinking. i love hunger, it's so comforting, so warm and soft.

Excerpt 8:

hunger isn't that bad, kind of comforting isn't it? feeling your stomach shrink yk? pants falling off, shirts getting bigger. find peace in it.

Narratives falling under this theme, that construct idealised versions of the ED experience, be it currently present yet coloured by romanticisation or entirely imagined, are prevalent in my corpus of data, especially keeping in mind the relevant posts' length, therefore comprising the largest theme of this analysis. They are particularly prevalent on Tumblr, since

the absence of a character limit allows for story-like means of expression. The popularity of the posts in question reveals that such fantasies are, to a considerable extent, agreed upon among users. Thus, they can be classified as available discursive repertoires pertaining to how users view the ideal yet attainable ED identity.

Metaphors of sickness

The second theme that arose from my data set comprises repertoires pertaining to common metaphorical ways in which users of ED websites conceptualise their illnesses and themselves in relation to them. A cluster of metaphors that is frequently encountered has to do with sickness being conceived in terms of inhumanity and/or non-existence. The users drawing from these repertoires seem to liken their disorder to a path towards either transforming into an inhuman being, or disappearing completely:

Excerpt 9:

i'm a perfect angel living in a girl's body. angels do not eat. angels don't need food! eating is simply a chore forced upon me by others, but i never willingly do it! because i'm a perfect angel with control. i always have control. i never ever binge. i will always be a small, pretty angel girl

Excerpt 10:

daily reminder that dolls do not eat

Excerpt 11:

I just want to curl up and hide my unwanted grotesque body under the covers for the rest of my life. Weightless, invisible, gone.

The poster behind Excerpt 9 describes herself as an angel that merely takes the form of a human being. She then uses this construction to assert that she is devoid of the inherently human need for sustenance, resulting in a conceptualisation of her eating disorder as a kind of immunity to imperfections such as loss of control and (over)eating, which allows her to ascend to perfection. The user behind Excerpt 10 evokes the concept of dolls in a comparable manner. It can be gathered that the term “dolls” refers to those with eating disorders that the poster addresses, since the phrasing of their post as a “reminder” not to eat gives the impression of

advice that they, the “dolls” in question, should not forget to follow, if they are to be fit for this characterisation. Across the data set, users often refer to inhuman creatures, such as fairies, alongside adjectives befitting these creatures, for instance “dainty”, “airy” and “pure”. With the aid of such language, their metaphors construct images of the ED subject that are frequently associated with femininity of the soft and ethereal kind.

In a different tone, the poster of Excerpt 11 does not attempt to paint a romanticised picture of their struggle, but rather expresses a desire for their disorder to allow them to be nothing at all, considering it preferable than having to live with their body. The contrast between the strong descriptors of “grotesque” and “invisible, weightless, gone” attests to a need to be rid of themselves that comes across as desperate. Similar pleas to enter a state of non-existence are strewn across the data and reveal the discursive repertoire of an eating disorder as a disappearing act.

Numerous were also the posts relying on another metaphorical narrative: that of sickness meaning worry, and worry meaning love. For these people, having an eating disorder is closely intertwined with its physical consequences, which branch beyond just being thin and into the territory of being physically and identifiably unwell. For example, they express desires that include looking pale, bruising easily, passing out, or even losing their menstrual cycle due to malnutrition. This fixation on symptoms of physical weakness appears to stem from the anticipated feelings of worry they would inspire in those around them, thus inciting them to extend gestures of care:

Excerpt 12:

i wanna be hospitalised again i need to be in pain i need drs n nurses to be shocked i need people to fucking care man

Excerpt 13:

ed core is wishing you had a disease like long covid or diabetes just so you could lose weight in a worrying way

The person behind Excerpt 12 expresses a wish to be sick enough to warrant a hospitalisation, alongside an arguably bitter-toned plea for people to care as a result of their shocked reactions. Excerpt 13 takes this further and includes the wish to receive such worry

through a physical illness in addition to the mental one that they do have, implying that such wishes are partly responsible for maintaining their ED. The poster seems to be aware of this, as revealed by the description of their lived experience as “ed core”, with the ending “-core” being internet slang for something that is recognisably representative of a person, group or activity – here: eating disorders.

Excerpt 14:

”i want to be skinny to look good” nah i want to regain the feeling of be[i]ng small and fragile and worthy of love and protection that was stolen from me as a child

Excerpt 15:

i want to be so starved that my dad will hold me

Excerpt 16:

i think i played with baby dolls so much when i was little, not so much cause i wanted to be a mom or even envisioned myself as one, but cause i so desperately wanted that attention and gentle care more than anything. i wonder if i developed anorexia because i still want that. too bad i’m not in therapy anymore

The above excerpts include direct connections between sickness on one hand and love and affection on the other. The users who wrote Excerpt 14 and 15 believe or hope that, if they starve themselves into a state of fragility, they will finally deserve to be granted these gestures that were missing from their lives. Similarly, the person who posted Excerpt 16 directly refers to their need to be treated gently. It is interesting to note the self-awareness that this user seems to possess: they aren’t merely aware of their tendencies and what life experiences preceded them, but have also developed a theory in regards to how those tendencies could explain their eating disorder, resulting in the conceptualisation of their ED as a possible result of their unmet interpersonal needs.

In general, the users for whom the concepts of having an eating disorder and being physically sick overlap significantly seem to believe that displaying their ED identity on their physical body would make them more loveable through worry. Their posts often carry a tone

that is more confessional than inspirational. Because of that, there are less linguistic devices attempting to reach outwards to include other users in their conceptualisations or encourage them to agree with their thoughts. On the other hand, that tone, which attests to the perceived importance of the matter in question, in combination with the prevalence of such lines of thinking in the corpus of data, highlights that narratives of sickness as closely related to love can be considered as building blocks of the ED identity as it is constructed online.

Right to the ED identity

This theme touches on a struggle that is common among individuals with eating disorders: that of earning the right to their identity as ED sufferers. Across ED websites, one can frequently witness members attempting to prove to themselves and other members that they are truly disordered. This struggle manifests as competitiveness between members, or as attempts to starkly differentiate between in-group and out-group and exclude those who are not “truly sick”. Furthermore, it is evident in the doubts many members express regarding the validity of their own disorder, which they deem dubious after comparing themselves with those whose symptoms appear to be more severe.

Excerpt 17:

i wanna be edwtw skinny not irl skinny

Excerpt 18:

when i hear normies say “that body is unrealistic and unattainable” but i’ve seen it on edwtw a million times (it is very attainable)

Excerpt 19:

it bothers me when people are so open about their depression, eating disorder, etc online. it seems like they’re making it up for attention, like they’re quirky personality traits. most of us have struggled for so long that atp we just don’t want our irls to know we’ve still haven’t gotten over it

Statements like those of Excerpts 17 and 18 rely on differentiating between “normal” and disordered people. According to them, a person who would be considered thin based on real-life (“irl”) standards would not be thin enough to be seen as thin by “edtw” (short for

eating disorder Twitter). Similarly, thinness that is seen as abnormal by regular standards is considered a viable goal by their in-group. By highlighting these perceived different standards, they establish the separation between the groups of disordered and non-disordered people, while also claiming or expressing the desire to claim the former identity. In Excerpt 19, one can see another attempt to characterise and simultaneously claim the ED identity, as seen through the poster's annoyance for those who openly talk about their issues, instead of, like themselves, being secretive about them, as befits someone who they believe has actually struggled. Such comparisons are often linguistically supported by the creation of terms in reference to each group. One instance of this technique is Excerpt 18's use of "normies", while perhaps the most prevalent example is the derogatory term "wannarexic" that was devised to refer to those regarded as wanting to develop anorexia instead of actually having it. Mentions of how long one has had their disorder for, like the one in Excerpt 19, are also seen alongside references of new users as "newbies" or "first-timers".

Excerpt 20:

[i']m embarrassed to be on edtwit bc here everyone is way skinnier than me and i feel like my ed isnt that much serious

Excerpt 21:

it honestly feels like i'm impersonating an eating disorder ?? like ?? i've never been rushed to the hospital, never fainted, never lost my period... none of that. i'm just faking it lol

Excerpt 22:

Me: my Ed is so fucking fake / Also me: *gets lightheaded and has stomach pain and knees almost giving out walking in hot weather with no food*

The other side of the coin when it comes to grappling with the right to define oneself as eating disordered is the doubt many individuals cast onto their own struggles as a result of comparing themselves to the "correct" way to have an ED, as it is constructed in other users' discourse. For example, the person behind Excerpt 20 admits to feelings of embarrassment over not meeting the low weight they perceive to be standard for someone having an ED, while the

user behind Excerpt 21 is afraid that they are merely impersonating their illness, since they don't think they are physically unhealthy enough to really be ill. Excerpt 22 notably contains both a negotiation and resolution of this dilemma: the user angrily points their finger at themselves for faking their ED, only to follow that with physical evidence of the contrary, therefore concluding that they are indeed disordered, despite their doubts. Interestingly, these discursive patterns reveal that the criteria used to confirm or dismiss the existence of one's ED and the defining traits of the ED identity as constructed in these online spaces seem to be one and the same and feed from one another. The users construct an image of the disordered individual as, among other things, struggling for a long time, having an exceptionally low weight and experiencing physical health symptoms, and then assign themselves or others the right to identify as eating disordered based on whether they fit this construction, in a competition that, in turn, serves to reinforce the construct through its continued application.

Excerpt 23:

Here it is!! how I lost 50 lbs ~ Thread for edwt ☺ Okayyy first things first, the stats: My height: 5'9 / 176 cm My weight before was: 175lbs / 79.3 kg My weight now is: 128lbs / 58kg From BMI 25.6 to BMI 18.7 This took me a little over a year!! Winter '23 was where I was at my heighest weight. [...] My goal weight is 99lbs, so I still got a long journey ahead of me lol, but I'm still very proud of how far I've come! Here is my body as of recent [picture]. Okay there are a lot more tips I could give, but it relates to pvrting. Idk if I can talk about that here without being cancelled lol but all I'm going to say is that yes pvrting is very unhealthy and I DO want to quit !!

Excerpt 24:

the reality of being at a low bmi — a thread for edwt ☺/♥ appreciated !! first of all I want to say that this is my experience being bmi 12, everyone is different and that's okay. I just think is important to talk about this because often people don't really know what is like living like this, they think is a dream but it's a total nightmare. [...] the less I weight the fatter I feel. if you think that your dysmorphia will go away once you reach certain bmi I guarantee you it will not. in fact, it will get worse. this is the end of the thread ! now you know that having

a low bmi comes with a price and not everything is rainbow and sunshines.

These excerpts demonstrate a more indirect way in which users categorise themselves as representative of the ED identity by providing tips to others. On the surface level, posts of this kind express no competitiveness, and their tone is advisory and very rarely hostile. However, their discourse often reveals a need to present themselves as “in the know” regarding eating disorders. This is achieved by sharing credentials about themselves, notably their weight or Body Mass Index, the amount of weight they have lost and the length of their journeys, which grant them the qualification to advise others who wish to achieve what they already have. It is noteworthy that not all such posts present ED as something that the reader should want to achieve – on the contrary, many of them act as warnings regarding the dangers of disordered behaviours in order to discourage others from engaging in them. Regardless of intent, both kinds of tips come from a place of establishing oneself as having earned the right to speak as representatives of the ED experience. At the same time, the tips provided, not quoted in the excerpts for the sake of both brevity and personal ethics, act as repertoires that help construct the community’s norms in regards to what a person with an eating disorder looks and acts like.

Inseparable from one’s ED

Another common repertoire I observed within the data set is that of users clinging onto their disorder and conceptualising it as a primary trait of theirs. It pertains to users that present themselves and their ED as inextricably intertwined for better or for worse, to the point where they struggle to imagine themselves without it. In other words, these individuals’ disorder comprises a large part of their perceived personality, resulting in the ED identity functioning as a primary social identity via which they understand and define themselves.

Excerpt 25:

i feel like i was just born to have a eating disorder. when i was forced into recovery i wanted to die even more and didn’t get better even in six months the voices just got louder. like having some sort of control is the only way i can live w myself. pro recovery but not for me

Excerpt 26:

you guys are beautiful the way you are, and nothing anybody ever says or does will ever change that. remember that gaining weight is totally normal, and you

can always lose weight, too, but please, do it in a healthy way. if you ever need anyone to talk to, and this isn't just for eds, i'm here, and you can reach out. if not, there are people who care about you and love you. not me though. i've had this ed for so long that it's simply who i am.

Excerpt 27:

Im slowly recovering but im desperately trying to cling to my ed, im so scared of losing it and I dont even know why.

The writer of Excerpt 25 characteristically confesses their belief that they were only born with the purpose of developing an eating disorder. In order to better illustrate their point, they mention how they were only forcefully made to recover, and describe how unfitting and unpleasant that state of recovery was for them, to the point where they found it unbearable. As a result, and with the help of strong statements such as “i wanted to die” and “the voices just got louder”, they attempt to prove that being actively disordered is their only viable state of existence. This post contains an example of the discursive pattern of separating between oneself and other disordered individuals by proclaiming that they support recovery for everyone else but oneself. While such rhetoric is often presented as a disclaimer to avoid judgment, it also acts as further proof of being “too far gone” to recover. This also apparent in Excerpt 26, in which the user adopts a supportive tone and encourages other users to seek help from either their loved ones or the poster themselves, only to follow that up by stating that, due to the long duration of their journey, they and their disorder are one and the same. Such depictions of oneself as beyond help attest to the strength with which disordered individuals cling onto their identity as such.

In a comparable manner, the poster behind Excerpt 27 shares their fear of untangling themselves from their illness in the face of recovery. This excerpt illustrates a common feature of the posts under this theme: ambivalence. Users frequently appear torn between wishing to get better and being fearful of it, wanting to leave disordered behaviours behind but not knowing what to replace them with in the mosaic of their personalities. This is often accompanied by recognising their ED as a mechanism that helps them cope with aspects of their life that otherwise seem chaotic and uncontrollable. Discourse of this type demonstrates that ambivalence is characteristic of the eating disordered identity.

Excerpt 28:

4n4 is the only reason I'm still going on with life. I have lost hope in everything other than her

Excerpt 29:

4n4 loves you, and she makes others love you more !! don't you think you should reciprocate, and give her the importance she deserves?

This theme is, arguably, the one among my data that best demonstrates the discursive device of personification that is prevalent across ED websites. This personification refers to conceptualisations of eating disorders, most often anorexia, as separate entities that are given traits of a human being, such as agency, the ability to guide, advise, accept, or admonish, as well as the commonly used name “Ana”. This is exemplified in Excerpts 28 and 29, alongside the assignment of a gender through the use of the pronouns “she/her”. From the perspective of identity construction, the technique of personification is of particular interest: the subjects, whose discursive actions towards identifying as eating disordered this paper is trying to shed light on, assign an identity to an eating disorder in itself. I would like to argue that, in studying the traits bestowed upon the personified version of anorexia, one could uncover many of the traits that characterise the ED identity as it is constructed through online discourse. The construct of “Ana” is multifaceted, being presented at different times as the ideal example of being disordered, a figure offering guidance, or a judgmental entity that hates its subject. The discursive actions that this rhetorical device performs often correspond to the traits that the individuals using the device assign to the personified Ana. Regardless of particularities, which seem to differ based on the extent to which the individual in question matches their appearance and behaviour to that of “Ana”, and thus deserving to be praised, motivated or shamed, the availability of the construct as a repertoire is apparent.

Discussion

The degree of internal consistency regarding the online ED community's repertoires and narratives was surprising even to me as the analyst. What is perhaps even more interesting is that the observed themes remained recognisable with relative ease, while simultaneously containing a variety of sub-themes, each characterised by distinct linguistic devices, means of

expression, as well as tone. For example, under the theme *Imagining the perfect ED life* one can find posts that are clearly meant to be read and related to by others, alongside those that don't appear interested in inspiring fantasies other than one's own, without this variety undermining the fact that both kinds of posts are tied together by the discursive techniques of imagination and romanticisation. On the other hand, the entire theme regarding *Establishing expertise through tips* demonstrates a degree of "extraversion" that is generally higher than, for example that of being *Inseparable from one's ED*, which appears overall more confessional than outward-reaching. The theme pertaining to *Metaphors of sickness* appears to fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum: while some individuals simply admit their thought processes, others extend them outwards to include others, an extension that is evident keeping in mind the commonalities between not only the metaphors themselves but also the kind of language used around them.

It should be mentioned that this intra-thematic consistency and inter-thematic differentiation does not mean that the themes are meant to be interpreted as independent from one another and lack interconnectedness. On the contrary, that would imply a degree of discursive compartmentalisation that is very rarely characteristic of naturally occurring communication. An example of thematic interconnectedness in this corpus of data is that some of the users' fantasies that fall under *Imagining the perfect ED life* include concepts that are thematically similar to those of *Metaphors of sickness*. On the other hand, the narratives around symptoms that are employed in *Metaphors of sickness* occasionally border on coming across as acts of fantasising. It is, in fact, accepted that the categories that arise from every discursive analysis will always be arbitrary to a certain extent (Johnstone & Andrus, 2024). Naturally, this is also true for my analysis – another researcher using the same corpus of data could produce substantially different results, since their focus, as well as the biases that characterise every individual's interpretative work, would also differ. From a qualitative perspective, this is not seen as a weakness, given that the analyst does not present their work as something different than what it is: an individual's theory-informed yet inevitably subjective interpretation of how the discourse that is available to them answers the question they initially asked.

Self-categorisation, social support and censorship

The task of interpreting my data from the perspective of self-categorisation led my attention to another matter that has for a long time been a part of the conversation around ED online spaces – that of censorship. The existence of these spaces has always been controversial,

and, ever since internet providers and the general public became aware of them, there have been persistent attempts to shut them down (Cobb, 2020). Those in support of heavy moderation or overall banning of ED websites bring attention to the potential harm they can cause to eating disordered people, as well as non-disordered visitors who find them accidentally or due to curiosity (Rodgers et al., 2016). Some highlight the abundance of unhealthy tips they host (Bert et al., 2016), while others express concern about them possibly making users reluctant to recover, due to their validation of the eating disordered identity (Haas et al., 2011; Arseniev-Koehler et al., 2016).

The data gathered for the purpose of this paper, when interpreted through the lens of self-categorisation, contributes to the dialogue around moderation by offering insight into how those who take on the ED identity respond to attempts at censoring their content. As this analysis demonstrated, users of ED websites often exhibit a need to compete among themselves for the right to the ED identity. What has not yet been mentioned is that this study's data set included multiple posts that describe the online ED community as a source of support and defend their community's right to exist. Users express frustration over those who "demonise" them, while also at times admitting that these online spaces are their only outlet, in contrast to a disinterested or judgmental real-life environment:

Excerpt 30:

non disordered ppl demonize edtwit sm like the ppl on here r the nicest ppl ive ever met in my life

Excerpt 31:

Hi I'm so sick and tired of tumblr mudering 4n4 accs some of us need this. This is the only place I can talk ab my disorder without people ignoring me. Im neglected in my home life, and am not in a situation where I can help myself. My ED physically disables me but I can come on here and talk to people who care and understand me / If other mental disorders get to have a safe space on here why the fuck can't we?

According to the self-categorisation theoretical framework, identification with a group and its normative traits is frequently motivated by the need to establish a positive self-image.

This motive, in combination with cognitive biases, such as the urge to achieve positive distinctiveness (Trepte & Loy, 2017), can lead to members of the group overestimating the differences between those who belong in the group and those who do not. In this case, the users' perception of their community as a source of understanding and social support, when combined with outside "attacks" in the form of censorship, can further such biases, resulting in them categorising outsiders as a force they should either hide from or defend their identity against (Lukač, 2011). Since their identity is constructed and performed within these online spaces, and given that this identity is salient to their self-definition because of the support and validation associated with it (Maloney, 2013), it is not unlikely that attempts at censorship will be perceived as threats. It is crucial to mention here that the ED community often describes experiences of isolation as a result of the stigma surrounding their disorders (Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2013; Puhl, 2015). There is thus a significant possibility that they might try to evade that threat by retreating further into the fringes of social media and barricading their community even further. This is exemplified in my study's data, namely in the creative hashtag variations that users have come up with, in order to prevent the termination of their accounts. Such isolation, as Chancellor et al. (2016) also warns, can make it more unlikely that they come across alternative narratives, leading to anti-recovery echo-chambers.

This analysis, as an example of qualitative research on the matter of eating disorders, can aid clinical practice by contributing to this dialogue. Namely, it would be beneficial if mental health professionals became familiar with common discursive themes and narratives that people with eating disorders often employ within their own spaces, since they provide unique insight into how they conceptualise themselves and their struggles, as well as what kind of support and resources they lack and would benefit from. As Alderton (2022) asserted, such familiarisation can be of help when it comes to bridging the communication gap between ED populations and clinicians, promoting a deeper understanding. She proposes that the focus should be shifted from censorship towards attempts at implementing safer peer support networks that will welcome the expression of negative emotions, without entering the anti-recovery territory. In accordance to the data, which demonstrate the users' need for unstigmatised self-expression, this study can attest to the opinion that online policies should be focused on intra-community harm reduction instead of the overall banning of certain spaces.

Methodological limitations

Perhaps the most important reason behind choosing the method of discourse analysis is

that it captures personal perspectives that cannot be reflected in standardised scales, whose main aim is to assess symptoms based on a diagnostic manual. Despite this paper being in line with the general aims of qualitative research, my chosen method is not without its drawbacks. Firstly, there is the limitation that comes with the fact that the analysis was performed by one person. Since this was known from the beginning, my corpus of data had to be relatively small compared to other discursive studies, which at times incorporate even thousands of units of analysis. This naturally constricts the scope of this study, which is limited to showcasing only the most popular posts under each hashtag. While there is merit to recognising which narratives are popular among website users, there is no guarantee that these posts accurately represent the experience of the average user.

Another possible limitation of my study lies with the exclusion of posts that relied on images from the analysis. Some posts that included images in a way that was clearly supplementary and/or aimed at drawing attention were included in the corpus, but those whose meaning was found in the images themselves, such as visual “thinspiration”, often alongside text that was supplementary to the images, were excluded. Albeit necessary in accordance to my chosen methodology, this means that the depiction of the online communities in question, as it arises from the results of this study, might not be representative of their content in its entirety, since some of their features are not analysed. It is worth noting that, even though this issue applies more to X, with Tumblr users preferring to express themselves through text rather than pictures, this difference did not seem to be reflected in the discursive themes, which were observed to comparable degrees in both websites. However, it remains likely that a comprehensive qualitative depiction of these spaces would require additional studies that focus on their visual features.

A broader issue that has sparked debate among researchers regarding discourse analysis is the degree of generalisability that its results offer. Some, like Taylor (2001), believe that generalisation would only be possible if the corpus of data were to be unrealistically lengthy and perhaps aided by quantitative methods. Others, including Goodman, whose recommended steps this analysis followed, attain that rhetorical devices observed in a body of text can be generalised to another, given that the functions they perform are equivalent. An example of this is what he called the “Us and Them” distinction, a device used to construct a sub-group or “incoming” group as meaningfully different than the larger or “native” group that it wishes to consider itself a part of. Goodman commented on this device in reference to asylum seekers,

yet the “Us and Them” narrative is also evident in the discourse of those users who attempt to draw a line between the true bearers of the ED identity and the “fakers” or “wannarexics”, thus highlighting the generalisability of this device across two substantially different contexts. It is worth noting that generalisability per se is not an explicit goal of most discursive analyses, which more often focus on capturing the nuances of their specific context. Therefore, I believe that, when it comes to the desire for more general conclusions than what a singular analysis can offer, those interested would benefit from a larger body of qualitative research on the matter of eating disorders.

Future directions

Online discourse around eating disorders does not exist in a vacuum, but rather, within a cultural matrix in which intra-community narratives have broader sociopolitical implications. For example, narratives pertaining to the quest for love manifesting as a quest for thinness, while affected by individual psychopathology, are facilitated and often even sourced by societal attitudes regarding women’s bodies, which, in turn, have their roots in prejudice, including but not limited to fatphobia and sexism. There is a particular facet of discourse within ED spaces that I believe is quite suitable to be analysed from a feminist perspective – that of taking control of one’s body. A few researchers, such as Schott & Langan (2015), have asserted that the ability to control or at least contribute to the dialogue around one’s body and/or one’s illness constitutes a form of resistance that ED individuals, who are predominantly women, can pose against norms that attempt to define “acceptable” versus “unacceptable” embodied experiences. However, with a few exceptions, such studies seem to be theoretical in nature. Since narratives surrounding control and autonomy appear frequently in disordered individuals’ discourse, including in my own corpus of data, I believe there is ground for future studies that analyse online content from such viewpoints.

On a comparable note, the body of literature analysing online ED content would benefit for more research that takes into account gender identity. Even though it has been established that ED are much more prevalent in women than men, the studies on the matter very rarely account for transgender and non-binary individuals and their unique experiences with eating disorders, leading to their perspectives being severely understudied. This literature gap is rendered even more serious by the fact that transgender people are much more likely to experience disordered eating (Rasmussen et al., 2023). This tendency was observed in the

online communities that were relevant to this study as well, even through my chosen procedure prevented information regarding gender identity from being reported. Furthermore, especially when it comes to the framework of self-categorisation and identity construction, it is only natural that transgender individuals, whose journeys towards self-definition often differ substantially from those of their cisgender peers, would also exhibit different processes of identity construction and performance.

Closing remarks

I am of the opinion that, with respect to both ED and other mental illnesses, unmediated glimpses into the communication patterns of those suffering from a disorder can uncover aspects of their experience that would take a lot longer to come to the surface, were they to be assessed in either a clinical or experimental setting. Moreover, if professionals came to understand the distinct thematology, metaphors and narratives that characterise eating disordered individuals' discourse, they would be better equipped when it comes to helping them develop and internalise alternative narratives of themselves. As a result, they would be able to implement practices that would help them strengthen other social identities of theirs, promoting self-categorisations that depend less on their disordered identity. It is my sincere hope that this study manages to contribute to this discussion in a way that promotes much needed understanding in place of sanctioned condemnation.

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