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Thinspiration: new media's influence on girls with eating disorders

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**THINSPIRATION:
NEW MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON GIRLS WITH EATING DISORDERS**

by
Victoria Lynn Stonebridge

A Thesis

Submitted to the
Department of Public Relations
College of Communication
In partial fulfillment of the requirement
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Abstract

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THINSPIRATION: NEW MEDIA'S INFLUENCE ON GIRLS WITH EATING DISORDERS

2010/2011

Suzanne FitzGerald, Ph.D.

Master of Arts in Public Relations

The use of thinspiration and social networking by girls with eating disorders on social media websites and through user-generated content aids the disease in general. The purpose of this research exploration is to find out how influential these specific forms of new media are on girls with eating disorders. A content analysis will serve as the primary quantitative measure for this study. A survey, via SurveyMonkey.com, will be used to find what kind of impact new media has on girls with eating disorders. The researcher will also conduct a personal interview with an expert in the field of psychology and eating disorders. Thinspiration and eating disorder communities on social media websites are a harmful thing to girls. Although they may not encourage the development of eating disorders, they certainly aid the disorders in general. They provide unhealthy support, tips and motivation to girls to continue with their disordered eating behaviors. The research shows that these girls feel worse about themselves when they view thinspiration. This type of material makes them want to harm their bodies even more than they already are in hopes of becoming thinner and thinner. By linking together with other girls in the communities, these girls receive an unhealthy type of support. They help each other to fall deeper into their disorders.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In the age of new media, information, or misinformation, is right at a person's fingertips. This information can be put out on the Internet by anyone, whether a company, organization or person that just wants to spread the word about something. Because this form of communication is often uncontrollable, it can spread as quickly and wildly as a virus. The result of this can lead to positive effects or very negative ones.

User-generated content, specifically social media, has become a very popular form of communication on the Internet. Websites like YouTube and LiveJournal allow people to express themselves freely, without direct face-to-face contact. They allow users to share information, stories and personal experiences, often accompanied by pictures, illustrations and videos. This can allow people to make connections with one another, even though they may be miles away, through the use of a computer. Websites like LiveJournal even have groups where a person can find others who have the same interests. This is a type of virtual community, "similar to general Internet-based information systems that have a significant impact on individual decision-making behaviors and Internet marketing strategies," (Lin, p. 541).

These types of websites have become widely used by girls who have eating disorders. These girls often blog or vlog about their own personal experiences; and they give support and advice to other girls in the same situations through pro-ana and pro-mia outlets. By joining groups specifically created for girls with eating disorders, they have easy access to a whole community of "friends." In many cases, the girls share

"thinspiration," or "thinspo" with one another to "inspire to be thin."

Thinspo consists mainly of pictures or videos of other girls who are extremely thin, and often boney. The overall purpose is to give the girls a push to look like the girls in the pictures. There are often accompanying phrases, such as the popular "Starving for Perfection," or advice on how to achieve these results. The advice may go as far as encouraging the girls not to eat a single thing and to look at the thinspo pictures for motivation. The girls often interact with one another, giving each other support along their journeys to "perfection."

These virtual communities for girls with eating disorders often become an important part of the girls' lives. Many of the girls often feel closer to the other girls on these websites than with people in their own lives, such as parents or friends. These websites allow girls to easily and openly express their innermost feelings, without the fear of rejection. It is comforting to them to know that there are other girls who feel the same way as they do. They can share stories and advice with one another and give each other a "shoulder to cry on" when they feel they cannot turn to anyone in their real lives.

Eating disorders are severely damaging mental illnesses. "Medical complications include hair loss, growth retardation, osteoporosis, loss of tooth enamel, gastrointestinal bleeding, bowel paralysis, dehydration, electrolyte abnormalities, hypokalemia, hyponatremia, and cardiac arrest," (Klump, p. 100). Ultimately, these conditions harm not only the person with the disorder, but also loved ones around them and the community in general. That effect causes this to become a public relations situation. Eating disorders that can have such a severe effect on people cause a serious health care concern.

A leading cause in the onset of an eating disorder is poor body image. The

American culture values a more slender body type, which in recent years has become thinner and thinner. Girls often feel pressured to live up to these standards and turn to eating disorders as a solution. A study by Jansen, et. al. found that "the dissatisfaction with one's body might be mistakenly transferred to body weight," and "body weight might have become the focus of change because of its apparent controllability. It seems, after all, easier to do something about body weight than overly narrow shoulders, short legs, or being broad-hipped," (Jansen, p. 133-134).

Statement of Problem

Eating disorders are unarguably a serious mental illness. The disease has severe emotional and physical repercussions. The use of thinspiration and social networking by girls with eating disorders on social media websites and through user-generated content aids the disease in general. It provides support to girls and gives them advice and motivation to nurture the illness.

Pro-eating disorder websites are becoming a public health issue. They affect not only the girls involved, but also their family, friends, caregivers, doctors, schoolmates, co-workers, etc. In order to help the girls recover from the disease, their loved ones, and society in general, needs to be aware of the issue so that they can help them. A public relations practitioner can successfully spread the message of pro-eating disorder websites and help raise concern in society. This issue can be tamed before it becomes a major health crisis.

This study is significant to public relations practitioners using social media to caution what effects it has on certain audiences and to help develop educational

techniques to help this particular audience. Health care public relations is a huge niche of the public relations discipline. Pro-eating disorder websites are certainly a crisis for this sector of public relations professionals.

This researcher plans to explore the effects of the negative influences that new media has on girls with eating disorders.

Purpose

This researcher intends to find out how influential these specific forms of new media are on girls with eating disorders. These outlets have become widely used forms of communication and support for this group of girls.

Researcher Mark L. Norris found that most pro-eating disorder websites contained a vast amount of medical misinformation. Although warnings were posted and terms of use stated that items like thinspiration or tips would not be allowed, the rules were usually not followed. This shows that the websites are not carefully monitored by the host sites. Norris feels that family, friends and clinicians need to be aware of these sites so that they can counteract the misinformation and provide help and support to the girls.

A study performed by Kelli Corrigan, published in 2010, found that eating disorders have become a way for girls to cope with emotions and gain a sense of control over their own lives. A content analysis of pro-eating disorder websites revealed recurrent themes, including: "1. Social support and connection; 2. Sanctuary or refuge; 3. Ana as lifestyle vs. disorder; 4. Readiness for recovery," (Corrigan, p. 52)."

Based on these findings, this researcher developed two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1:

It is expected that new media negatively influence girls with eating disorders.

A study performed by Dina L. G. Borzekowski, et. al., in 2010 found that pro-eating disorder websites lead to higher body dissatisfaction, decreased quality of life, and a longer struggle with the diseases. Users of these websites eventually found disordered eating to be the "norm" because everyone else in these communities is the same way; it can even be viewed as a sign of success within the communities. "Social cognitive theory would warn that the high prevalence of interaction opportunities in the pro-eating disorder community has the potential to be extremely harmful if viewers are learning dangerous behaviors from one another," (Borzekowski, et. al., p. 1532).

Hypothesis 2:

It is expected that some new media outlets may become sensitive to the plight of girls with eating disorders and use educational techniques to assist them.

As found by Mark L. Norris, et. al., these websites often violate the host servers' terms of use. If these host sites more closely monitored these websites, they will be filtered or deleted. This can eventually lead to an elimination of the trend and a decrease in the number of cases of eating disorders. Treatment for the diseases should be promoted rather than positive support and influence for the disorders to flourish.

Delimitations

This study will not include males with eating disorders.

This study will not include reverse thinspiration.

This study will not include girls who have not used social media.

Procedures

This researcher will conduct content analyses on the direct sources, i.e. YouTube, LiveJournal. The content will be examined as well as how the girls responded to it. This researcher will also use an Internet-based survey using SurveyMonkey.com. It will ask the girls how thinspo makes them feel and what kind of emotions they get from viewing it. A link to the survey will be placed directly on an eating disorder online community. There will also be an interview with an expert in the field of psychology and eating disorders to find out a professional opinion on how thinspo can mentally affect these girls.

Summary

Because social media is currently so widely used, it can very quickly spread a message. For girls with eating disorders, this message is to be thin, often at all costs. Society pressures girls to be thin and petite; these girls often feel the need to comply. Severe stress and poor self-esteem and body image can cause the onset of an eating disorder.

Social media aids the girls and their illnesses by providing support and advice to one another. The sharing of thinspiration on pro-ana and pro-mia outlets provides motivation to these girls to become as thin as they possibly can. The girls are supporting structures to one another and often give each other someone to run to when they cannot go to someone in their real lives.

Virtual communities and other social media can become an addiction to people. Because of this, a girl with an eating disorder can become addicted to the pro-eating

disorder virtual communities. This can pull the girl further and further into the eating disorder, often pulling them away from friends and family. These websites can make an existing problem an even bigger problem.

Pro-eating disorder websites are a serious concern for public relations professionals. They affect the health of so many girls and are a severe health issue for the community at large. Social media has become a huge part of the public relations profession, and a health epidemic that results from social media is of concern to public relations professionals.

Thinspiration has a severe effect on girls with eating disorders. Body image plays an important role in this, as does lack of proper health care communication. Girls are drawn to the attractiveness of having a community of other girls who understand and sympathize with them and their addictions. Pro-eating disorder sites provide girls with the support they feel they need; however, there are public relations techniques that can be applied and certain things that host websites can do to assist these girls with the healthy support that they need. The research in Chapter 2 will backup these claims.

Glossary

blog - a "web log," or online journal

eating disorders - mental illnesses that cause a person to obsess over food and react in unhealthy habits (i.e. anorexia, bulimia, eating disorders not otherwise specified)

LiveJournal - a website where users can blog and join groups consisting of other users with similar interests

pro-ana - pro-anorexic

pro-mia - pro-bulimic

reverse thinspiration - thinspiration that shows images of overweight individuals with the purpose of inspiring people not to look that way

social media - websites that allow users to socially interact with one another (i.e. Facebook)

thinspiration - material that inspires a person to be thin, such as videos or images of thin people, or tips and advice on how to be thin

thinspo - slang term for thinspiration

user-generated content (UGC) - content that can be put out on specific websites on the Internet directly by the users of the websites

virtual community - an online interactive group of people who typically share similar interests

vlog - a "video log," or video journal

YouTube - a website where users can post and respond to videos

Chapter 2

Introduction

The Internet is teeming with information about eating disorders; and new media is no exception. Websites like YouTube and LiveJournal contain pro-eating disorder content that provide support and a sense of community for those suffering from the illnesses. These websites can affect not only those who have the disorder, but also their families, loved ones, healthcare professionals, and the community at large. It can become a public relations concern for any young female, anybody with a young daughter, anybody with a young female friend, anybody with a young female relative, or anybody that has concern for young females in general. These websites can be largely influential and, therefore, need to be considered in-depth.

Health Communication

People are often at least mildly aware of issues that affect their own personal health, but often lack the amount of information necessary to hold control over their own health. This holds especially true from adolescence through young adulthood. It also may be difficult to entirely understand health issues that affect others, for example one's own child.

Some people may have a desire to gain more information about health but are unsure or unaware of where to obtain this information. People may even be scared to seek out certain information. This is where health communication plays a part. "Effective health care and health promotion are guided by relevant health information.

Communication is clearly the primary process used in health care to disseminate and gather relevant health information," (Kreps, p. 4). However, it often remains in question how to effectively communicate this specific type of information.

In today's society, new media plays a major role in health communication, especially for the younger generations. People are in-tune with the Internet and its capabilities; and they often seek and trust certain outlets. Although, this should not be the sole means of communication. Consequently, "there are no golden rules for effective health communication in every situation. Health communicators must adapt to the specific individuals and situations encountered in health care/promotion," (Kreps, p. 15).

According to the uses and gratifications (UG) theory, people "are active users of various communication channels and, as such, consciously choose the channels that are likely to satisfy their perceived needs and desires. These needs and desires are affected by social and psychological characteristics and are then manifested in motivations," (Baxter, p. 428). Different channels and outlets have different effects on people. Some may be more widely used for certain topics and for certain audiences.

In the case of the younger generations, the Internet is a widely used, if not the most widely used, source of health information. College students, for example, utilize the Internet for data and advice on health issues that pertain to them. This specific group of people face certain health risks. "The overall goal of the National Health Education Standards for youth is to increase their health literacy--their ability to find, understand, and use information and services to enhance health," (Baxter, p. 427). Health communication is important in giving college students the information they need.

A study done by Baxter, Egbert and Ho researched health communication in

college students. A main method in their study was the use of diaries by the subjects. The first question regarded the topics or themes discussed in these diary entries. They found the main health concerns of this sample to be: "nutrition and diet (23.0%); minor acute or chronic health concerns, such as colds, flue and allergies (22.9%); risky health practices, including alcohol use, drug use, tobacco use, and unsafe sexual activity (17.7%); and body fitness, including exercise, rest, and body weight (17.6%)," (Baxter, p. 429). They found that college students, in general, face several health risks in which they lack adequate data. The "sample of college students differentially chose communication channels depending on the health topic being discussed and whether the students were motivated by a search for information or advice," (Baxter, p. 431).

RJ Cline "has argued that people live in social worlds in which objective, factual information weighs less heavily than do social knowledge and motivations," (Baxter, p. 432). This finding indicates that people, including younger generations, are inclined to seek information in a more social manner, rather than merely academically. A person may be more apt to take medical advice from a relative or friend than from a textbook.

It is important to note when discussing health communication that there are so many outlets of communication. Each outlet must be considered, along with the topic of discussion and the intended audience, when disseminating information.

Eating Disorders and Body Image

Eating disorders are one of the most common mental illnesses in the young female population. These diseases affect millions of girls worldwide. The consequences range from emotional to physical damage and, in some cases, even death. Eating disorders also

affect the family, friends, coworkers, healthcare providers, and other loved ones of the person with the disease. Science has affirmed "with a reasonable degree of medical and scientific certainty that eating disorders are significantly heritable; influenced by alterations of brain function; significantly impair cognitive function, judgment, and emotional stability; and restrict the life activities" of the people with the disorders, (Klump, p. 97). They can often be a consequence of severe stress in young females.

There has, however, been conflict among the government, insurance companies, and healthcare providers about how eating disorders should be treated. Many insurances and states do not regard eating disorders as serious mental illnesses, along the lines of depression or bipolar disorders, and, therefore, do not cover eating disorders under health care plans. This can consequently cause those who have the diseases to go untreated simply because they cannot afford to treat their issues.

There are many different types of eating disorders; however, the two most common are Anorexia Nervosa (AN) and Bulimia Nervosa (BN). Anorexia is typically characterized by purposeful starvation by the person with the disease. "The salient feature of AN is the refusal to maintain a minimally normal body weight," (Klein, p. 205). Bulimia is typically when a person binges and then uses some form of purging to compensate. Purging may include self-induced vomiting, use of laxatives, over-exercise, etc. People may often cross-over between the two disorders.

Anorexia is defined as having features "of severe weight loss, amenorrhea, psychological disturbances, and increased physical activity" according to the fourth edition of the American Diagnostic and Statistic Manual and the 10th revision of the International Classification of Diseases, (Klein, p. 205). It is a very difficult illness to

overcome, with less than half making a full recovery and a third relapsing at some point. "Anorexia nervosa is a chronic illness in some 20% of those who develop it; another five to ten percent ultimately die of complications from AN, including suicide," (Klein, p. 210).

Bulimia nervosa involves consuming extremely large amounts of food, often associated with a lack of self-control. Purging ensues after a binge in order to avoid unwanted weight gain. "Feelings of low mood, rejection, anxiety and frustration often precede binges, which appear to become learned responses to adverse emotional states," (Klein, p. 211).

Although, as stated previously, many government agencies and insurance companies disregard eating disorders as being serious mental illnesses requiring intensive health care treatment, scientific data has shown otherwise. Anorexia, Bulimia, and Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified (EDNOS), "are heritable conditions in which the contribution of genetic factors is similar to that observed for other disorders considered to be biologically based (e.d., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, OCD, recurrent major depression)," (Klump, p. 99). Eating disorders also hold a higher rate of medical complications than many other mental illnesses. "Medical complications include hair loss, growth retardation, osteoporosis, loss of tooth enamel, gastrointestinal bleeding, bowel paralysis, dehydration, electrolyte abnormalities, hypokalemia, hyponatremia, and cardiac arrest," (Klump, p. 100). These complications ultimately "carry significant costs to the individual, their family members, and to society at large," (Klump, p. 100).

A study presented in 2009 by Costarelli, Demerzi and Stamou found there were several significant variables that relate to eating disorders, including "obsessive thinking

about food and dieting, body image dissatisfaction, overweight preoccupation and fear of fatness," (Costarelli, p. 240). Body image dissatisfaction is perhaps the most significant of these variables. Their study also revealed that, "In western countries, DE [Disordered Eating] is reported to affect 9-22% of adolescent girls and young females," (Costarelli, p. 243). The survey they used in their research showed "that almost one in four young women (23%) presented DE attitudes symptomatology, which is a high prevalence given the fact that the majority of the subject in the DE attitudes group (76.2%) were of normal weight," (Costarelli, p. 243).

Body image plays an enormous role in the lives of females with eating disorders. The American media and society in general favor a more slender body type. Over the years, this image of the ideal body type has become more and more extreme towards the skinnier spectrum. This, consequently, causes some girls to take extreme actions to live up to the stereotypical skinny female model or celebrity, which often leads to eating disorders.

A study by Jansen, et. al. found that "the dissatisfaction with one's body might be mistakenly transferred to body weight," and "body weight might have become the focus of change because of its apparent controllability. It seems, after all, easier to do something about body weight than overly narrow shoulders, short legs, or being broad-hipped," (Jansen, p. 133-134). People with eating disorders often have the idea that weight is more easily controlled than anything else in life, therefore making that their focus of change.

Scientific data and numerous research studies support the claim that eating disorders are severe mental illnesses. They greatly affect the well-being of the person

with the disorder, as well as the people around them. Diagnoses of eating disorders have risen greatly over the years to the point of a major health issue in America, as well as other parts of the world.

Social Media and its Impact

In recent years, social media has become a normal part of life. Websites like Facebook allow people to easily stay in touch and communicate with one another. These types of websites can allow people not only to talk with or message others, but also share photos, videos, stories, links, etc. There are several different types of social media websites that all accommodate different types of sharing capabilities. These websites range from simple social interaction, to blogging, to video exposure and sharing, and everything in between.

One social media website that has made its impact on today's society is YouTube, and the like. This is a type of "web-based video sharing [program], which can accommodate everyone from bored children and eager parents to emerging and established artists of many genres and disciplines," (Salvato, p. 72). This type of website serves many purposes and can be helpful to artists, students, teachers, corporations, small businesses, and the list goes on and on. YouTube has given rise to many new stars and has strengthened the reputations of others. "The new fora for public performance, typified by YouTube, have indeed brought the amateur and the professional together, but not with the outcome...of 'strengthening the position of both,'" (Salvato, p. 78). YouTube, and other sites like it, are still in their early stages of development. However, they have thus far proven to be useful in some way, if even for entertainment, to all who encounter them.

Virtual communities on the Internet exist on many different websites and allow people to form a type of "community" bond with other people with the same interests. An example of a virtual community may be a fantasy football league or a group of mothers with small children sharing experiences and advice. "Virtual communities are similar to general Internet-based information systems that have a significant impact on individual decision-making behaviors and Internet marketing strategies," (Lin, p. 540-541). The types of activities in these communities "range from chatting, making friends, exchanging ideas, and sharing knowledge on particular subjects," (Lin, p. 540). Connections with these online worlds can be strong, and can become a daily occurrence or even an addiction. Members of the virtual communities may end up feeling more connected with the other members than with people in their real lives, such as family members or significant others. A study done by Hsiu-Fen Lin found that "43% of respondents spent over 5 h[ours] using the virtual community every week, and may have exhibited Internet symptoms, such as heavy preoccupation with the Internet, excessive time spent online, compulsive behavior, and time-management problems," (Lin, 545). Increased activity in the virtual community also caused the participants to spend less time with family and friends, often becoming lonely and/or depressed.

Another type of popular social interaction on the Internet, and a subset to many virtual communities is blogging. Blogging allows a person to freely express themselves through words, pictures, or a combination, without the fear of direct face-to-face social contact or rejection. People can make their blogs as private or as public as they choose. They can even link to others who have similar blogs or blogs of interest. Some interesting facts were recently discovered regarding blogging:

Bloggers are educated and affluent; Bloggers skew toward males, singles, and self-employed; Most bloggers write about multiple topics, with personal and professional issues being equally popular; The top reason for blogging is "speaking my mind on areas of interest"; Most bloggers don't hide their identity; Among professional and corporate bloggers, the most frequently cited benefit is becoming better known in their industry; The majority of bloggers don't make more from their blogs, (Goldsborough, p. 16).

One flaw of blogging, though, is that it can very rarely be deemed reliable. Blogs are more often a source of communication and outlet of emotions or ideas rather than a trustworthy flow of information and data.

With all of the social websites currently in existence, it can be difficult to monitor them for content, use or misuse. With the exception of child endangerment, it is often difficult to say what is acceptable and what is not acceptable for an online community. The lines can often be blurred here. The Communications Decency Act (CDA) was created to more clearly define and protect certain rights regarding Internet communication. "The CDA was intended to balance promoting free speech while encouraging Internet service providers to restrict content in an effort to protect minors," (Christ, p. 13). While its originating goal was to protect children, it has also reached many other areas of protection, including for example the infringement of intellectual property. The CDA, however, protects Internet services from having to monitor the user-generated content of their websites. "Recent decisions continue to immunize Internet intermediaries from liability for content supplied by others and refuse to impose an affirmative obligation to monitor and screen Web sites for objectionable content, including even child pornography," (Christ, p. 14).

Pro-Eating Disorder Websites

With the rising popularity of new media, pro-eating disorder websites have also given rise. These websites are communities that consist of girls with eating disorders who support each other in their struggles with the disorders. The type of support can range from a simple "good job," to pictures of thin girls for inspiration, to tips and tricks on how to unhealthily achieve weight loss.

Researcher Mark L. Norris found these types of websites to contain a large amount of medical misinformation. He discovered stories and poetry the girls shared, as well as suggestions and tips. He found that 58% of the sites posted warnings before entering and had specific rules for usage, which often included not posting tips. However, two-thirds of these sites still contained this type of information. They promoted use of laxatives, fasting, and other unhealthy habits for weight loss. Norris felt that parents, clinicians and caregivers should be aware of the type of content on these websites so that they can counteract the misinformation. Because the majority of the website users violated the terms of use of the websites, it shows that these websites are not monitored properly. Better watch over these sites can help filter out the negative ones and foster the more positive ones.

A study done by Kelli Corrigan in 2010 found that "disordered eating is a complex expression of underlying difficulties, problems and pain with the individual attempting to gain a sense of mastery in a life that may feel out of control," (Corrigan, p. 49). Eating disorders become a form of coping with emotions for many girls. Pro-eating disorder websites are an extension of this coping mechanism. They are a place where the girls can vent to one another and gain support for their disorders, without feeling rejected or

ashamed. They feel safer on these websites and less pressured by society. Corrigan found through her research that many of the critics of pro-eating disorder websites feel the sites will cause an increase in the occurrences of the disease. The researcher conducted content analyses of the websites in order to view them from the standpoint of a user. She found some recurrent themes, including: "1. Social support and connection; 2. Sanctuary or refuge; 3. Ana as lifestyle vs. disorder; 4. Readiness for recovery," (Corrigan, p. 52). The feelings of rejection and isolation that these girls often receive in their real lives are often alleviated through the sense of belonging and connection they get on these websites. Participation in pro-eating disorder websites is often due to the negative stigmas and control placed on the girls by society in general. The girls feel the need to search elsewhere for the support and connections they require.

A large portion of pro-eating disorder websites contain thinspiration. Thinspiration consists mainly of photographs of very thin girls, often boney and even sickly looking. This can include celebrities, athletes, or "real girls." These pictures are posted in order to inspire other girls to be thin like the girls in the pictures. The pictures often focus on the pronounced bones of the hips, ribs, spines, collarbones, etc. "Like other kinds of photography involving young women, thinspiration is regarded by some as a moral outrage, even a public-health threat," (Heffernan, p. 16). Thinspiration can keep the girls from recovering from the disorders. Rather than getting help to get better, thinspiration encourages them to remain sick and unhealthy.

A study performed by Dina L. G. Borzekowski, et. al., in 2010 found that pro-eating disorder websites lead to higher body dissatisfaction, decreased quality of life, and a longer struggle with the diseases. Users of these websites eventually found disordered

eating to be the "norm" because everyone else in these communities is the same way; it can even be viewed as a sign of success within the communities. "Social cognitive theory would warn that the high prevalence of interaction opportunities in the pro-eating disorder community has the potential to be extremely harmful if viewers are learning dangerous behaviors from one another," (Borzekowski, et. al., p. 1532). The sites can also influence those who do not yet have eating disorders to develop the diseases. The researchers in this study found recent reports from media that stated many of these websites now include video and social networking; this trend is expected to rise in the near future.

Pro-eating disorder websites are on the rise, and may be a public health crisis in the near future if not immediately addressed. As found by Mark L. Norris, et. al., these websites often violate the host servers' terms of use. If these host sites more closely monitored these websites, they will be filtered or deleted. This can eventually lead to an elimination of the trend and a decrease in the number of cases of eating disorders. Treatment for the diseases should be promoted rather than positive support and influence for the disorders to flourish.

Public Relations Educational Techniques

The term "public relations" refers to "activities and policies used to create public interest in a person, idea, product, institution, or business establishment," (Public relations, p. 1). It can influence awareness in a community as a whole by helping to gain an understanding through promotion of a certain topic or idea. Public relations goals need to be realistic, achievable, and meaningful.

In relation to eating disorders and the new trend of pro-eating disorder websites and thinspiration, public relations can help people to gain awareness of the issue. Thousands of girls in the United States are affected by these pro-eating disorder websites. Parents, guardians, clinicians, friends, family, caregivers, etc. need to know about the existence and content of these sites in order to understand how to help the girls affected by them. The first step is community awareness, which can be achieved through public relations efforts.

Social media has become a large part of the public relations profession. It is the way most people in the world today communicate with one another. News is spread and information can reach one person to a million people via social media channels. It is important for a public relations practitioner to know how to control messages in order to get out the correct information to the correct people. In terms of pro-eating disorder social media sites, a public relations professional must see that the messages being spread are harmful and a public health crises. It would be their job to control the content and spread of the messages being sent via these social media sites.

There are many public relations tactics that can help bring awareness to the issue of pro-eating disorder websites, for example: news releases, fact sheets, news conferences, special events, newsletters, brochures, media kits, video news releases, advocacy ads, walkathons, seminars and public service announcements.

When sending out a message to people, it is always important to recognize what your message is, who the audience is, and what channel would be most suitable. For example, girls with eating disorders (the audience) may be responsive to current, relatable health care education regarding eating disorders (the message) on certain social media

websites like Facebook (the channel).

One public relations issue that is raised, however, is the use of censorship. By monitoring pro-eating disorder websites and filtering out content that seems to promote eating disorders, the host sites are presumed to be censors. This can be subjective to the reader, and users may feel their free right to speech is being violated. Both censors and users feel they are in the right, which causes an obvious public relations issue. However, if the terms of use are clearly violated, the host site is within rights to censor the material in question. This may be the only way to eliminate pro-eating disorder websites, which gives greater reason to promote censorship. It is better to stop these websites at their onset before they get out of control.

Communication is essentially the key to conveying a specific message to a specific group of people. A public relations professional has the tools necessary to successfully convey a message, such as educational information to girls with eating disorders.

Summary

The emergence and rise in pro-eating disorder websites is becoming a public health issue. Thousands of girls in the United States alone take part in these websites and are severely affected by them in very negative ways. The sites foster and influence eating disorders by giving the girls support and making them feel that disordered eating is a normal way of living.

In order to stop the trend of these websites, public relations tactics need to be executed. Community awareness on this issue needs to be raised; people need to know about the existence of these websites in order to know how to help the girls affected by

them.

This researcher will study the effects of pro-eating disorder websites by conducting content analyses on the direct sources, including how the girls respond to items such as thinspiration. Internet-based surveys will be conducted, as well as personal interviews regarding the issue at hand.

This researcher will conduct personal research to take an in-depth look at the effects of pro-eating disorder websites. Chapter 3 will go into detail about this research.

Chapter 3

For this study, this researcher will examine how new media negatively influences girls with eating disorders. Research methods will include a content analysis, survey and personal interview.

Research Method

A content analysis will serve as the primary quantitative measure for this study. This researcher will examine the direct sources, such as YouTube and LiveJournal, for disordered eating communities and content. Two LiveJournal websites, three YouTube videos, and one pro-eating disorder website will be chosen. They will be randomly selected, but they must be active and updated within at least a month of the time of research. The researcher will conduct an initial review of ten sites to determine categories for the analysis. The most active sites will be selected from this initial review for further study. This research will occur in January-February 2011. These sites will be analyzed for the types of content and categories of content (i.e. thinspiration, tips, advice, encouragement) throughout the entire sites. The researcher will also look for any terms of service, whether or not these were violated, and whether anything was done if they were violated. Advertisements on the hosts sites will also be looked at to see if they are content specific (for example, advertisements for eating disorder treatment centers). This researcher will use a coder to ensure intercoder reliability. The coder will be instructed to look for specific keywords that may denote a pro-ana or pro-mia site, for example, thinspo.

A survey, via SurveyMonkey.com, will be used to find what kind of impact new media has on girls with eating disorders. A link to the survey will be posted in April of 2011 on eating disorder communities on LiveJournal. The survey will ask the girls their feelings towards the use of new media to positively promote eating disorders. It will ask how they utilize new media for these purposes in their personal lives. It will also ask how these types of images or phrases make them feel or possibly if they inspire them to have disordered eating habits. Sample questions include: What do you get from looking at thinspo?; How do you usually feel before you look at thinspo?; How do you usually feel after you look at thinspo?

The researcher will also conduct a personal interview with an expert in the field of psychology and eating disorders. It will take place in May, 2011 at Rowan University. The interview will examine how this particular type of content can affect a girl with an eating disorder and what could be done about it. Sample questions include: How do you, as a professional, think these types of websites can affect a girl with an eating disorder?; What do you think host sites could do to help resolve this issue?; Do you think this online problem merits involvement or intervention by either the FCC or Surgeon General?

Sample Selection and Size

For the content analysis, a random sample of six sites will be selected. This includes two LiveJournal sites, three YouTube videos, and one pro-eating disorder website. Specific keywords will be selected beforehand (i.e. thinspo, fail, purge), and profiles and groups will be randomly selected based on results found on the host sites. Several more widely utilized blogs, videos, etc. will ultimately be selected from both

YouTube and LiveJournal.

The survey will be hosted by SurveyMonkey.com. The link to the survey will be posted to eating disorder communities on LiveJournal. They will be neutral communities, not ones that are pro-eating disorder and not ones that are against pro-eating disorder sites; they will be general groups that focus on eating disorders in general and discussions surrounding them. The sample size will be between 15-20 participants.

The interviewee will be selected based on credentials and experience with girls with eating disorders. The expert will have a vast knowledge of the mental and physical consequences of eating disorders as well as the cognitive qualities of girls with eating disorders.

Data Collection Method

The content analysis will be performed on random sites found on the host sites YouTube and LiveJournal. Several sites or videos will be chosen from each website for study. Specific terminology and keywords will be chosen beforehand, and coders will be instructed to look for those terms. This research will take place in January-February of 2011.

The quantitative survey will be conducted via SurveyMonkey.com. A link to the survey will be placed on a general eating disorder community site on LiveJournal. Charts and graphs will be formulated based on results of the survey. It will be posted in April of 2011.

The researcher will personally conduct the expert interview at Rowan University in May of 2011. The interviewee's answers will be recorded by the interviewer.

Data Analysis Method

Data will be analyzed in-depth for type of content and the frequency and percentages of this content. A coder will be used for intercoder reliability. Graphs and charts will be created through Microsoft Office (i.e. Word and Excel).

Chapter 4 will report on the findings of the research. It will be displayed through charts and graphs and discussed in depth.

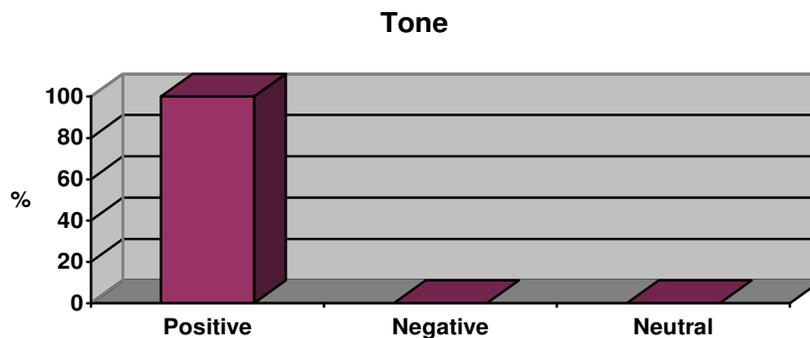
Chapter 4

General Findings

Content Analysis

The content analysis gave an in-depth look directly at the social media sources. Two LiveJournal blogs were studied, as well as three YouTube videos and one website devoted entirely to thinspiration. The different social media outlets all link together at some point. Often, girls on the blogs post links to YouTube videos or other websites.

Figure 1:



The girls on the blogs often spoke similarly to one another. They showed hopes of losing weight and felt failure when they didn't. As shown in Figure 1, 100% of the girls spoke about their eating disorder as if it was a positive thing. There were advertisements on the bottom of the pages placed by the host site, LiveJournal. The advertisements are different every time the page is accessed, but they were almost always advertising for eating disorder treatment centers. The blogs were a type of personal journal or diary for the girls to talk about their days, let out all of their emotions, and connect with other girls.

Sample quotes from "Demon-Skinny's" LiveJournal are:

- "I'm taking my life back."

- "I am a fat pig that deserves to die."

- "Purged it all!!! and for some reason i felt great after tht, it made me feel strong...
for some reason"

- "I deserve to die. no.. i dont deserve to die, thats not painful enough. i need to go
through torture or something.."

Sample quotes from "Kinda-Rose's" LiveJournal and YouTube vlog are:

- "I realize that I need some support beyond LiveJournal and whatnot because it's
easier for me to express what I feel and what I've done lately or whatever, or what
I've eaten, through video."

- "If you put a bag of potato chips in front of me, it's like putting crack in front of a
crack addict."

- "I just really want it this time, and I think the YouTube thing is helping."

- "I'm bummed out that I haven't lost any weight."

Figure 2:

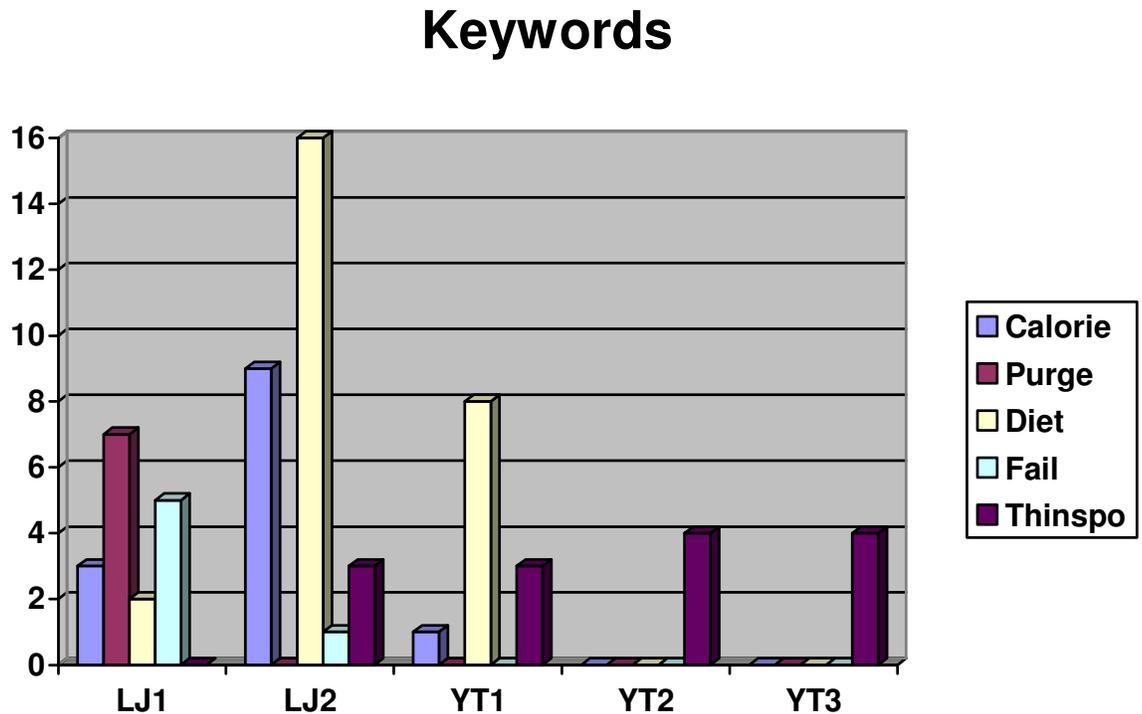
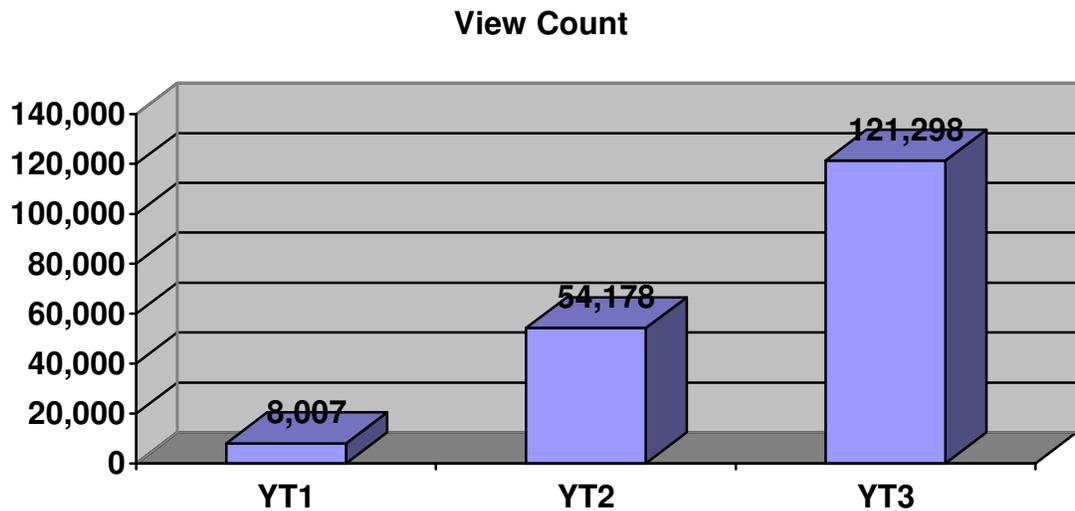


Figure 2 shows the usage of certain keywords. The words calorie, purge, diet, fail and thinspo were used often in the blogs, and occasionally in the YouTube videos as well. For instance, "Kinda-Rose" used the word "diet" 16 times in her blog and vlog. In the figures, LJ1 represents "Demon-Skinny's" LiveJournal; LJ2 represents "Kinda-Rose's" LiveJournal; YT1 represents the YouTube video titled "motivational thinspo, the daily life for ana's everywhere (pro ana/mia)" at URL http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ua_Kq7veHms; YT2 represents the YouTube video titled "Thinspiration – Lucy in the gym" at URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g9AaMD6ries>; YT3 represents the YouTube video titled "A thinspiration video – Ana's Song" at URL <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftm2LYSdj74>.

Figure 3:



The YouTube videos contained a large number of photographs of extremely thin, young, Caucasian girls. They contained tags of words, such as thinspo, pro-ana and pro-mia, so that users could find those videos more easily. There were not any advertisements placed by the host site, YouTube. There were only links to other similar videos. The videos also had disclaimers cautioning that users needed to be over 18 to view the video. Figure 3 shows the view count for the videos studied. The users who posted the videos showed eating disorders as being positive. However, the comments posted by other users were mixed with positive and negative comments.

Sample comments from YouTube video #1:

- "you dont want to b friends with ana and mia it will destroy your life! you will feel pain when you stop eating...but you cant stop obsessing youl be checking your weight 20 times a day and starving yourself even though you never ment it to go that far...im am currently sufferung from ana..please dont do this to your

self."

"Gross I mean seeing the ribs?!? Ewwwwwwwwwwww don't aim for this ladies it's nasty"

"What a wonderful video it was done so nicely and it really helps a perfect song as well! THANKS!!!! :)"

"hi im looking for some pro ana buddies message me or add me thanks"

Sample comments from YouTube video #2:

"if it kills us at least we die skinny. stay strong everyone! :]"

"But no one said anything about being bulimic... I said if you don't eat. Bulimics are just lazy because they eat but they don't work out so they puke everything up, it's not even losing weight it's just gorss. If you don't eat then work out you lose double the wight you would normally. Just a simple fact tis all."

"Bro eat a sandwhich, creepy chicks"

"I need a 'starving friend.' With that I meen somebody who I can support and who can support me in our starving, so we dont give in and don't give up :) It would be so great, I think it all would be much easier then :)"

Sample quotes from YouTube video #3:

"I just wanna be skinny so bad"

"It's like all these girls are wanting to ruin their bodies through appearance, have organ failure and kill themselves. Seems like a dream come true? :/ A lot of girls are naturally thin, genetically. They eat normally. Embrace who YOU are, not

what they are."

"for me, this is thee MOST triggering thinspo, probably the song and pictures mixed."

"Understand, People like us do this because people like you wont accept us. We don't care if its unhealthy. All we want is to be thin, beautiful, and accepted. Thats it. You try being made fun of everyday because of weight. Its not easy to deal with. This is the only way to get accepted. And to love who we are. PRO ANA FOR LIFE <3"

The website, www.pro-thinspo.com, was linked to on several LiveJournal blogs. It is a random sample of many other websites in existence. The page had a view count of 1,023,002, 288 at the time the researcher viewed it. There were many sections on the page including pictures, tips, links to other sites, etc. There was a small disclaimer on the bottom of the page stating that it was for entertainment purposes.

Sample quotes from the website:

"First on this page is the 100 calorie diet and then scroll down on this page and there are new photos of Diane Kruger these photos are so pretty and her body is amazing, you can really see her rib bones."

"check out this page I put together on how to curb your hunger pains with using pressure points on your body."

"Call it whatever you want pro-ana, calorie restriction, bulimia, vanity, anorexia it is the desire for perfection. Thinspiration is not a negative part of today society. It can be a positive tool in reaching our goals. A muse of sort to keep you focused

on your goals."

-Wear a rubber band around your wrist and snap it when you want to eat."

- "Munch on ice cubes to get rid of the cravings of chewing."

- "Arrange your house so you won't eat... Put things away in high places you can't reach. If you have to get a chair to reach you might think twice."

The website was very active; it appeared to be widely utilized by many people. There was a vast amount of information spread throughout the web page and included many user-submitted material. There were no advertisements found on this website.

Survey

The survey was created on SurveyMonkey.com and posted on a couple of randomly selected eating disorder communities on LiveJournal. The survey found that 95% of participants are female, 65% are over the age of 20, 70% live in the United States, and 85% are Caucasian. The majority of participants look to thinspiration as a form of motivation to be skinny. The majority feels sad and depressed before looking at thinspo and less confident but inspired after looking at thinspo.

Figure 4:

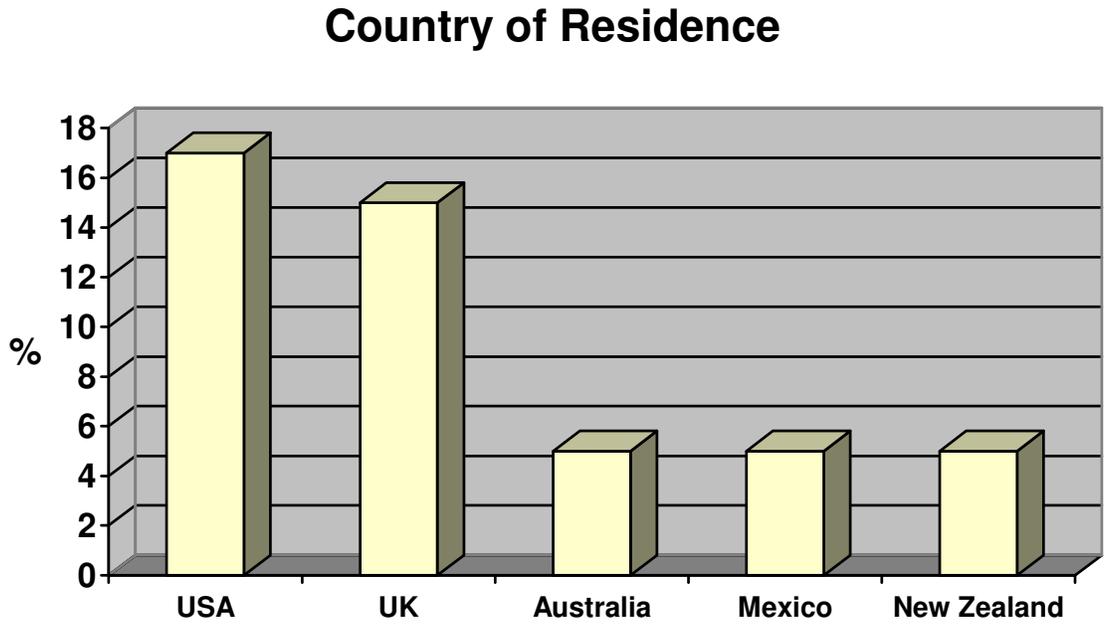


Figure 5:

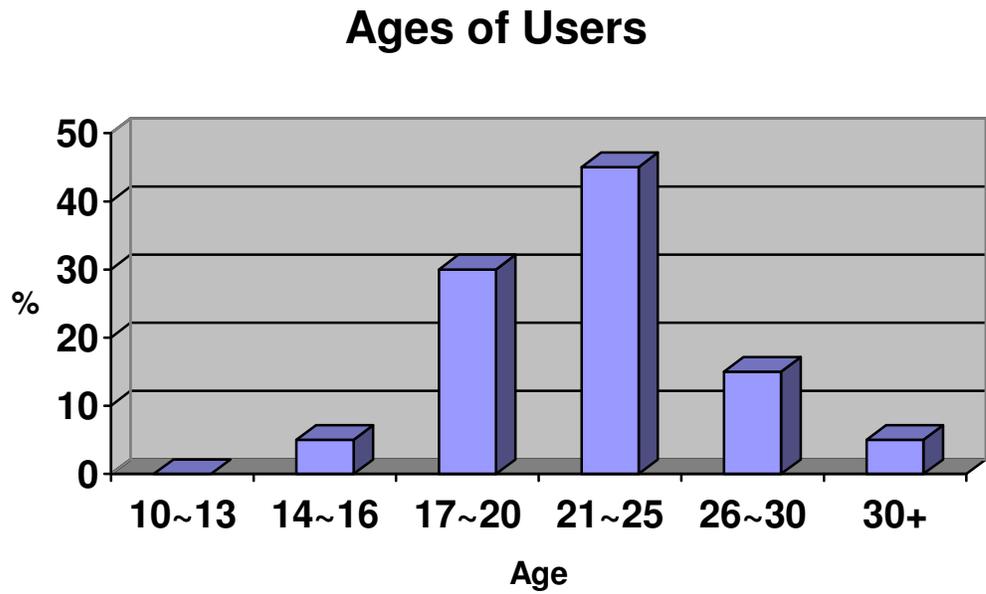


Figure 6:

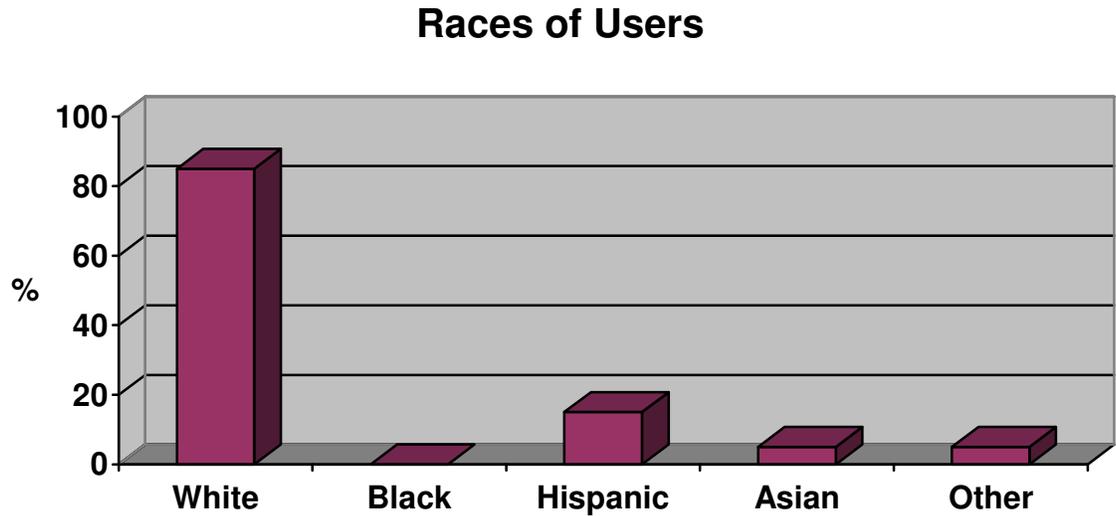


Figure 4 shows the country of residence of the participants in the survey. Figure 5 shows the age of participants. Figure 6 shows the participants' race.

Sample responses when participants were asked, "What do you get from looking at thinspo?":

- Motivation, to have a goal in mind.
- Jealousy, motivation, guilt...shame.
- Motivation. Proof that it is possible.
- inspiration, a goal to reach, something to beat
- A high
- motivation, encouragement, focus, determination. it fulfills my voyeuristic desires. i especially like photos of people that i know in real life.
- Motivation to keep working toward becoming thin like them; reminder of how

far I am from being thin; hope that I can look like that
-confirmation that i am a monster.

Sample responses when participants were asked, "How do you usually feel before you look at thinspo?":

- "Sad, disappointed in myself, or even pumped for changing my body."
- "Depressed, weak, looking for something to keep me feeling powerful"
- "anxious, depressed, fat"
- "Bad about my self"
- "Fat"
- "like crap... pretty depressed"
- "hungry. i almost always use it to distract me from eating/binging in the moment."
- "fat, hungry"
- "unsure as to why i'm about to torture myself by looking at it."

Sample responses when participants were asked, "How do you usually feel after you look at thinspo?":

- "Excited, depressed about not being thin enough"
- "Depressed, ashamed, more empowered to take control of my food addiction. Motivated to continue."
- "Less self confident, but ultimately more motivated."
- "inspired with a drive to lose weight"

- "I feel motivated to do something about the way my body looks."

- "motivated to do better"

- "Hopeful, motivated; mix of discouraged and motivated"

- "fat and disgusting."

In-depth Interview

The researcher conducted an interview with Julie Mallory-Church, Assistant Director of Rowan University's Counseling & Psychological Center. The interview was done at Rowan University in the interviewee's office on May 3, 2011.

Mallory-Church stated that it is often difficult to know for sure whether a female patient has an eating disorder or not because she does not often identify herself as having one. She has not heard a patient refer to thinspiration in those terms, but she is aware of the concept. It is most common, in her experience, for girls to utilize thinspiration and new media outlets for disordered eating purposes as a patient in an in-patient program. It becomes a secret way for these girls to continue disordered eating behaviors while they are being so strictly monitored in other aspects.

Eating disorders are a type of obsession. Girls become obsessed with their bodies and with being thin. "A lot of girls are looking for another tool to fuel their obsession," and these websites become one more tool, stated Mallory-Church. Girls with eating disorders tend to have very competitive personalities, according to Mallory-Church, and social media websites for eating disordered purposes give them a place to compete with one another, in an unhealthy manner. This is a very similar dynamic to group sessions.

Thinspiration and new media sites centered around eating disorders are not a

place where eating disorders develop. Mallory-Church stated:

girls may develop an eating disorder in a gym class, comparing with friends how much they weigh. It doesn't have as much to do with technology as with peer pressure and family systems, but it will feed into it. I would say, though, that the culture itself is as much a culprit. If you were to tackle the issue, you need to look more broadly, for example, advertisements with beautiful, thin, sexual women. It's a cult of thinness that is pervasive across society. I think that's where thinspiration is able to thrive, in a culture like ours. I think thinspo gets its marching order from society, (Church).

The researcher's survey showed that 85% of girls on these types of websites are Caucasian. However, Mallory-Church finds that girls of all ethnicities have issues with their bodies; although, the girls may obsess over different body parts. All ethnicities and cultures promote different ideals as being beautiful. While one may emphasize that a small waist is beautiful, another may favor more curves. In some cultures, blonde hair and blue eyes are the ideal; but in other societies, darker hair and darker skin are considered to be more beautiful. Because different cultures have different ideas on beauty, the girls of those cultures will point their obsession towards those ideals. Consequently, there may be social media outlets geared towards those specific beauty desires. For instance, girls who wish to be thinner may join eating disordered social media sites, while girls who want smaller facial features may join plastic surgery centered social media sites.

Websites like YouTube thrive on money made off of advertisements. The more views a certain video has, the more a company will want to advertise on that video. Mallory-Church feels that YouTube would most likely not want to censor or limit this

because they are in the business of making money, not protecting the health of others. Some type of outside agency, such as the Surgeon General, would need to control this. However, as with cigarettes and alcohol, it may take thousands of deaths before anything is done about the problem. Eating disorders are, in essence, another type of addiction and should be treated as such.

Some websites, such as LiveJournal, contain advertisements that promote eating disorder treatment. Mallory-Church stated that these types of advertisements may or may not work. Many times, girls with eating disorders "are at a fork. Part of them thinks what they are doing is crazy, but part of them wants to be better at it. If you put that ad out there, and they're at that fork, it's sending the other message." If you happen to catch a girl at the right point in her disorder, her attention can be grabbed and she may find the courage to seek help at that very moment.

H1: It is expected that new media negatively influence girls with eating disorders.

All three research methods support this hypothesis. The content analysis shows that the girls view their disorder in a positive light. They connect with other girls and support one another in their diseases. They give each other encouragement and tips on how to be "better" at having a disorder.

The survey shows that the girls feel negatively about themselves when they view thinspiration. They often feel overweight and depressed, but motivated and inspired to continue with their eating disorder in hopes of losing weight.

The interview uncovered that although eating disorder communities on social media websites are not a place where eating disorders develop, they are a factor in

furthering the obsessions involved with eating disorders. They become a secretive way for girls to carry out disordered eating behaviors.

H2: It is expected that some new media outlets may become sensitive to the plight of girls with eating disorders and use educational techniques to assist them.

This hypothesis is supported by the research. The content analysis revealed that some websites, including LiveJournal, attempt to address the issue. This host site placed advertisements providing support and help to girls with eating disorders. However, other websites, such as YouTube, do not provide any type of support system.

The interview supported the idea that links for treatment on the host sites may be of help to some girls. If the girls are caught at the right moment, they may feel urged to click on the links and seek treatment. This, however, is not a solution entirely to the problem. An outside agency, such as the FCC, may need to monitor and control these types of sites.

Both hypotheses set forth by the researcher were supported by the research. It was affirmed that new media does negatively influence girls with eating disorders. It was also discovered that some new media outlets are indeed sensitive to the plight of girls with eating disorders. The research will be evaluated and interpreted in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5

Evaluation

H1: It is expected that new media negatively influence girls with eating disorders.

This hypothesis was supported. The researcher expected these results because eating disorders are an addiction. Girls with eating disorders become obsessed about their bodies and ways to become skinny. Thinspiration and new media are a tool for these girls to continue and further their eating disorders.

It is obvious that the girls feel more negatively about themselves when they are viewing thinspiration, and it makes them want to do more to become skinny, in an unhealthy manner.

H2: It is expected that some new media outlets may become sensitive to the plight of girls with eating disorders and use educational techniques to assist them.

This hypothesis was supported. It was discovered that some new media sites do indeed attempt to provide some sort of assistance to girls with eating disorders. While it is a minimal amount of help, it may be just the support that a girl is looking for at a specific point in time.

Interpretation

Thinspiration and eating disorder communities on social media websites are a harmful thing to girls. Although they may not encourage the development of eating disorders, they certainly aid the disorders in general. They provide unhealthy support, tips

and motivation to girls to continue with their disordered eating behaviors.

Control and support by the host sites can help the girls who are participating in these online communities. If the girls are caught at a point where they feel they might have help, they may just click on a link for eating disorder treatment. In any case, it does not hurt to place those advertisements there.

Conclusions

The researcher feels that something needs to be done to address the issue of thinspiration and the use of new media for eating disordered purposes. These sites have an extremely damaging effect on girls, and the problem can only get worse without some form of control.

The research shows that these girls feel worse about themselves when they view thinspiration. This type of material makes them want to harm their bodies even more than they already are in hopes of becoming thinner and thinner. By linking together with other girls in the communities, these girls receive an unhealthy type of support. They help each other to fall deeper into their disorders.

Some type of outside agency needs to regulate these websites. They should be controlled and, ultimately, eliminated. There are already thousands of girls obsessing over these websites and making themselves sicker in the process. Many girls die from eating disorders every year; and thinspiration undoubtedly plays a role. Such a serious international health epidemic needs immediate attention. These girls need help and support; and it is time that they receive some.

Contribution to the Field

The use of new media for eating disordered purposes is an international health crisis. Girls all over the world are taking part in this epidemic and furthering themselves into disease. It is almost impossible for a person to fully recover from an eating disorder without any help or support.

Public relations professionals are experts at handling crises. They can keep a situation under control before it gets any worse and create a plan to lessen the effects of the crisis. One of the greatest techniques of a public relations professional is to spread the word about something. Thinspiration is something that needs to come more into the public eye. Most people are not aware that it exists; and even more people do not know just how damaging the effects of it are on these girls.

Thinspiration and the use of new media for eating disordered purposes is an extremely damaging thing to girls. The family, friends and loved ones of a girl suffering from this need to know what is going on so that they can get her the help she needs and support her with her disorder. Without the knowledge that this epidemic even exists, the girls will be able to continue on in private obsession.

Public relations professionals will be able to spread the word about thinspiration. They can create a plan on how to tackle this issue. These girls need help; and a PR practitioner can spread that message to the masses.

Further Research

The researcher recommends that further research be completed regarding this topic. Males are highly absent from eating disorder communities on social media

websites. Only 5% of participants from the researcher's survey identified themselves as being male. It would be significant to research why the males are almost entirely absent from these websites. There are males with eating disorders, but they are not present on these sites. It is possible that it is a fear factor of being discovered or that they just do not feel comfortable or welcomed on these websites. It would however, be significant to uncover the reason behind this finding.

According to Julie Mallory-Church, Assistant Director of Rowan University's Counseling & Psychological Center, girls of other ethnicities and cultures often obsess over different body parts. Some girls may focus all of their attention on facial features or hair color. It would be significant to research if there are communities, similar to online eating disorder communities, where girls can obsess over different body parts. For example, there may be communities devoted to plastic surgery, where the girls may encourage each other to have more and more surgery.

The use of new media for unhealthy habits is certainly a trend that is going to rise. As social media becomes more and more popular, so will these types of communities. This issue needs to be addressed before it becomes even more of a problem.

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