Top Student Paper

Pro-ana, a Culture Remediated in Cyberspace[i]

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This paper is an attempt to understand the shifting relationship between humans and cyberspace, and how the inherent qualities of digital environments impact predisposed behaviors. It specifically investigates the dual nature (opaque and deep) of the Internet and how it manifests in tandem with certain human behaviors.

> *If we are to free ourselves from the dead weight that has once again been made out of femaleness, it is not ballots or lobbyists or placards that women will need first, it is a new way of seeing.*
> (Wolf, 2002, p. 206)

AN eating disorder exposed in cyberspace is a tale of two cultures. One culture embodies a beauty myth, a fatal obsession with food and psychological distress (Wolf, 2002, pp. 9–19); the other encompasses a boundless digital space, an electronic frontier that lures with its promise of a new world, abundant freedom, and transcendence of a limited physical space. Both cultural worlds have embedded in them the power of seduction. A woman suffering from an eating disorder is taken by the deluge of commercial images equating self-worth with flawless skin, a size 5, and radiant hair; she is taken again when her obsession with attaining this image turns into an eternal cycle of starvation, bingeing, purging, and shame. A myth of beauty overwhelms her; she becomes addicted to repairing her physical inadequacies. Another addiction, all too similar to this kind, is at work in the absorbing electronic spaces of the Internet. Cyberspace is an infamous lure, attracting people for hours, even days at a time, inducing addictions and creating, as it were, cyberholics (Barnes, 2001, pp. 188–200). As a "cool"[1] medium, cyberspace demands involvement, participation, and immersion. Much like the ubiquitous beauty myth, digital environments have the driving power to envelop, engross, and instill certain behavior patterns. The cultures tell similar stories of seduction.

It is when these two cultures converge that a new tale begins. The convergence of a community of eating disorders and electronic cyber places has brought forth a new world; it is called pro-ana (short for pro-anorexic) or pro-mia (short for pro-bulimic),[2] depending on the Web site. Members of this culture meet in digital places to encourage and support one another, not in the healing and abatement of anorexia and bulimia, but rather in retaining practices of starvation, self-deprivation, self-deprecation and, in some cases, self-mutilation. "Pro-ana sites are emphatically not for those who are in recovery, regard themselves as victims, or even regard

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[1] "Cool" refers to media that are low definition. McLuhan (1964/1994) offers a lucid depiction of a cool medium in his description of speech, which he said is "a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to filled in by the listener" (p. 23). In the same way, cyberspace is a cool medium that requires users to participate and to fill in the gaps. It is this participatory trait of cyberspace that is relevant to this paper and its discussion of pro-ana culture.

[2] Pro-ana and pro-mia will be interchangeably used throughout to refer to an online community that regards eating disorders as an alternative way of life, rather than an illness.

themselves as ill. They are targeted at those who '*believe that the Ana way is the only way to live*' . . ." (SIRC; emphasis in original). The names of the Web sites, discussion rooms, topic titles, and subheads reveal pro-ana's cultural thrust. The names of these Web sites include Ana By Choice, 2 b thin, Starving for Perfection, Anorexic Addict, and Anorexic Nation. These are just a few of at least 400 pro-ana sites and chat rooms that currently exist on the Web (Harrison, 2001). On the Ana By Choice (n.d.) Web site , discussion groups are separated according to disorders: "ANA" (anorexic), "MIA" (bulimic), "COE" (compulsive overeating), "The Cutting Room (to harm or not to harm)," "Depression," and "Fasting." The names of discussion threads within these groups further detail the character of pro-mia. "Messy purgers?," "gag length," "Messy, Nasty 'puter," "Last Cuts," and "When your best friend finds your razor," are titles of discussion threads that capture the multi-faceted, psychologically entrenched nature of pro-mia culture. Here, bingeing, purging, and self-harm are discussed casually as practices as routine as brushing one's teeth. Pro-ana is the gathering center of bulimics and anorexics who engage in an online show-and-tell, displaying their goal weight and the scars they have carved on their bodies. At the same time, it is the meeting place of two seductive cultures: The cool, digital medium meets the invasive powers of anorexia and bulimia. Pro-ana is the retribalization of humans through eating disorders exposed online.

Pro-ana culture has made headlines in the mass media. *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *The Seattle Times*, *USA Today*, and the *New York Post* have published stories about pro-ana culture. Many of them depict a narrative in which women with eating disorders employ Internet technology to congregate and embrace bulimia and anorexia as an alternative lifestyle. In these feature pieces, people, mostly women, have constructed their own culture. None of the articles portrays the ways in which these technologies have simultaneously made these women; many of these mainstream stories have not investigated the ways in which the inherent character of wireless, digital technology has abetted, or at least contributed to Pro-ana. The relationship between Internet technology and eating disorders, like most Web relationships, is multifarious, blurry, and undetermined. Pro-mia is inextricably linked to cyberspace. Pro-mia would not exist, at least to the extent that it does today, without the wireless, boundless, and asynchronous world the Internet provides. Yet one could hardly say that the Internet evokes eating disorders in women. The relationship between pro-ana and Internet technology is far from clear-cut; it can most aptly be described as an ecology of interconnected parts. In the investigation that follows, central characteristics of Pro-mia and cyberspace have been singled out to provide a general motif of the emergence of Pro-mia culture. Pro-ana as a virtual community and a support group, cyberspace as a global village and a "cool" medium, the remediation of the beauty myth, and the refashioning of eating disorders are themes that grapple with the relationship between pro-ana and cyberspace. The way these themes coalesce suggests that Internet technologies are astute abettors in pro-mia culture. Moreover, they suggest that the new world of the electronic frontier is complicit in the provocation of certain pre-existing behaviors.

Normalizing Shame: Pro-ana as a Support Group and Virtual Community

THE Ana Creed, the Ana Prayer, and the Thin Commandments are pseudo-religious guides for the pro-ana culture. The first tenet of the Thin Commandments declares, "If you are not thin, you are not attractive." The Ana Creed is a series of dark mantras that evoke shame and guilt. One of the mantras says, "I believe that I am the most vile, worthless and useless person ever to have existed on the planet, and that I am totally unworthy of anyone's time

and attention," while the beginning of the Ana Prayer says, "Strict is my diet. I must not want. It maketh me to lie down at night hungry." They appear on several pro-ana Web sites as strict rules. They serve as not only rallying cries, but also fixtures around which a virtual community has formed and underpinnings from which members draw their advice to one another.

Howard Rheingold, a pioneer of media scholarship, called virtual communities "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships" (quoted in Dean, 2000, p. 5). In her essay about community on the Web, Jodi Dean (2000) extrapolated thematic trends in this definition, sharpening the character of a virtual community as an emergent group drawn together through feeling, affect, and emotion. These themes resonate in the chat rooms and discussion lists of pro-ana culture.

As an emergent, unique property of the Web, pro-ana unites under specific lifestyle choices. "Community on the Web does not refer to physical communities that use computers to facilitate interaction" (Dean, 2000, p. 5). Rather, a virtual community coalesces in cyberspace. The difference lies in the divergent roles of the Web: In the former instance, the Web is simply an accouterment that would further communication in a group that already exists. In the latter situation, the Web is a forerunner of communication that would initiate and build cyberspace relationships and a community.

Pro-ana is an international phenomenon that could not emerge with the intensity and reach that it has in the last decade without the virtual, limitless, and accessible environment of Cyberspace. Ana By Choice is a club with thousands of members from countries that span the globe. They meet on a regular basis, transcending time and space. Members log on to Ana By Choice from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, Costa Rica, Spain, New Zealand, and Israel, transcending time zones, national boundaries, and the binding, synchronous elements of visual space (seeing and hearing). Time-bound visual space is replaced with asynchronous computer-mediated communication. Members essentially emerge from the transcendent paths paved by the wireless world of the Internet. Pro-ana is an emergent community, flourishing with the chaotic, untamable contours of cyberspace.

A second crucial fixture of a virtual community is the infusion of "feeling, emotion, and affect" (Dean, 2000, p. 5). "Those in a virtual community understand their interactions as those of a community and hence feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to something beyond themselves" (pp. 5–6). To follow this principle, those who visit Kazaa to download music files are not a virtual community. They are not members of a group sharing thoughts, insights, and emotions; their interchange consists mainly of swapping music files.

On any given topic, whether it is depression, bingeing, or suicide, the members of Ana By Choice disclose more than just their personal tastes and preferences. They comfort one another after a guilt-ridden binge and empathize with one another after a particularly sloppy purge. They offer one another tips on how to be thin; they encourage one another to fast; they disclose, with pride, the number and kinds of scars they have self-inflicted. This is a community that shares more than a similar interest in a particular Web site; it is a community composed of members who share a devotion to a way of life well depicted in the Ana Prayer, the Ana Creed, and the Thin Commandments.

Pro-ana is a culture that thrives on the virtual properties of cyberspace. Ana By Choice, an international satellite of pro-ana, is a virtual congregation. Just as a congregation without a church would leave members isolated in their faith and practice, pro-ana practitioners would execute their faith of eating disorders in disparate solitude without a cyberspace discussion group.

Pro-ana needs a meeting place. Moreover, since anorexia and bulimia are largely considered psychological ailments, pro-ana is a social taboo that can really flourish only outside the public eye. Thus, it needs a discreet meeting place. Cyberspace provides the perfect medium. As a gathering spot for pro-ana communities, cyberspace is, in a sense, a church for the fulfillment of the pseudo-religious pro-ana credo. Similar to a confession booth, the Internet more specifically is a space wherein people disclose feelings of guilt and shame. Just as confession is a normal routine in the Catholic faith, so, too, are the online confessions of overeating and purging in pro-ana culture. Much like the behaviors that would evoke a confession in the church are considered part and parcel of being a fallible human being, so, too, are the pro-ana behaviors that result in online confessions considered normal.

The confessions and subsequent passages offering comfort and reassurance constitute an online support group. The same elements of a support group that help Vietnam veterans deal with past trauma, or that become a therapeutic tool for those with gender identity disorders, assist anorexics and bulimics to carry on with their eating disorders and deal with challenges by and conflicts with friends and family members. In a message titled "Seriously Need advice," one woman requests the expertise of her fellow pro-ana community members:

Posted: 14 December 2002 at 9:15 a.m. by Sc@ry J@ne

"Guys I really need your input here. My family and friends are basically threatening to find a way to hospitalize me and I seriously don't think I'm a low enough weight for that with my distended stomach! Can you guys give me some advice on what I could 'eat' to appear under control but not gain weight? I don't believe in 'safe' foods, but is there anything I could eat in small portions that wouldn't make me gain over time if I were exercising/"

This woman is 25. She is 5'3" and weighs 79 lbs.[3]

One response told this woman to "Eat seriously Big Salads."

Posted: 14 December 2002 at 9:32 a.m.

If you fill a Huge Bowl with lettuce, chop a tomato and a bit of cucumber and onion, carrots and celery, you will look like you are eating a ridiculously large portion without actually consuming more than 80 calories. You can be seen to be eating an awful lot when in actuality; the calories are very, very low. I get away with this all the time.

Another post offered a suggestion to eat bananas or watered-down oatmeal, which are "easy to digest." None of the response posts questioned Sc@ry J@ne's desire to subvert her family's wishes or requested that she consider her family's concern. All of them were posts of support. Many posts are similar to the one above. Pro-ana women who perceive eating disorders as a marginalized, socially accepted way of life seek assurance from other members by posting. In one post, a young woman asks the community to help her resist pumpkin pie during Thanksgiv-

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[3] Each post in a discussion group has listed a member's screen name. Most members' signatures include their current weight and height, their lowest weight, their highest weight, and their goal weight.

ing. Several responses encouraged her to resist her hunger urge and, in order to alleviate her yearning, chew it up and then spit it out.

Behavior that is considered unhealthy and abnormal is normalized in the pro-mia environment. People with gender identity disorders alienated from the rest of the world find solace in discussion groups where members share similar challenges, including estrangement from families (Barnes, 2001, pp. 185–186). In much the same way, pro-ana women find comfort from the online world when dealing with their eating disorders. In online pro-ana what may otherwise be considered unorthodox becomes part and parcel of a way of life. Conventions are reinvented; this is seen in a discussion thread, started by Sarabear, the forum moderator, titled "What are you b/p'ing up?" where members recount what they have purged for the day.

Posted 30 November 2002 at 11:58 a.m. by Sarabear.

"for me tonite … I'm eating a can of Pringles cheezums, half a large pizza and tons of vanilla coke.

This post received six pages of response posts, all of which listed in detail the food that was eaten and subsequently purged. The posts reflect the erratic nature of bulimia. While some women undertake massive overeating and subsequent purging periods, other women purge whatever small amount they have taken in that day:

Posted: 01 December 2002 at 2:13 a.m. by kortney

"alright. I finished the pie, am eating more peanut m&ms and placed an order to dominoes for 3 orders of chicken kickers with blue cheese dressing, an order of cinnastix and a 2 liter diet coke—for a whopping grand total of over $24!!!!! Arrrggghhh. Oh well. Now I will prolly go ahead a place another order somewhere else, so that I'll get here by the time I finish my dominoes stuff … god help me …oh … and finished 2 more cans of diet cherry coke."

Posted: 01 December 2002 at 4:26 a.m. by Sundance

I have been eating as little as possible so right now I'm about to purge some applesauce!!!!

The self-disclosing character of computer-mediated communication allows women to share information with one another that could not be disclosed in the offline real world. Behaviors considered by the real world as symptoms of a psychological illness are regarded as lifestyle choices by most pro-ana participants. "The elimination of immediate face-to-face reactions enables individuals to discuss personal problems in a less emotional context" (Barnes, 2001, p. 181). So an emotional confession to a therapist (or a priest) becomes a matter-of-fact conversation in a pro-ana discussion group. As a support group and a virtual community, pro-ana has formed an international, close-knit pseudo-religious group. The inherent qualities of online communication have paved the path to self-disclosure and the normalization of marginalized, socially unaccepted behaviors. Anorexics and bulimics have employed computer technology to construct pro-ana culture.

But how has this technology, in return, galvanized and created certain behavior patterns? The conflation of eating disorders and computer technology has given way to pro-ana. What impact does the computer technology have on a pre-existing culture of eating disorder? Pro-ana, as it has been reported by the popular press and as it exists today, is co-dependent on the "cool" technological wares of the computer. Its existence is grounded in its role as a virtual community and an online support group. Computer technology has turned an isolated, scattered community of anorexic and bulimic women into a global village. The expansive electronic world mediated by computers has inherent structural attributes complicit and couched within pro-ana online culture.

Retribalizing in Pro-ana: The Conflation of Computer-Mediated Worlds and Eating Disorders

"THE important thing is to realize that electronic information systems are live environments in the full organic sense. They alter feelings and sensibilities, especially where we are not attended to" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968, p. 36).

There is something profoundly magnetic and admittedly unnerving when viewing pro-ana culture through a McLuhan lens. If every human artifact is an extension of the human body, and if the electronic world is an extension of the human central nervous system, then the Internet has not only connected human information communications systems, but it has essentially electronically bound together the physical and psychological extensions of every Internet user, creating the global village. The danger of this interconnectivity, as it pertains to pro-ana, is its devastating effects on a culture of women already suffering from eating disorders. Much as the fashion plates, daguerreotypes, tintypes, and rotogravures of the Industrial Revolution created the mass dissemination of the beauty myth (Wolf, 2002, p. 15), the decentralizing powers of the Internet hold comparable staying power in projecting an ideal beauty type. Says McLuhan: "through this extension of our nervous system, we become members of a global village that we replace individual identity with role playing and that our forms of perception and our own sense of our bodies are altered (McLuhan, 1968, p. 14). In the digital global village, a beauty type is instantaneously reproduced to millions of international users, far outpacing the reach and prowess of the mechanical processes introduced in the Industrial Revolution.

Pro-ana is a global village with residents of anorexic and bulimic women. The replacement of individuality with role-playing, in this observation of the global village, would translate into the replacement of an individual woman for her role as an anorexic or a bulimic. Thus, pro-ana may, in a sense, be described as its own global village populated by a homogenous group of women with eating disorders. Chances for "a new way to see" for which Wolf (2002, p. 19) calls in the new edition of *The Beauty Myth*, may be slim amid the homogeneity of the pro-ana global village.

It is not necessarily the interconnectedness of the physical computer that perches pro-ana culture on a precarious pedestal; it is the electronic, communal character, manifest as an extension of the human central nervous system, which may prevent pro-ana communities from a new way of seeing. For, once personal identity is stripped and role-playing takes over, the global village becomes more of an electronic mass than a wireless mind with the capacity for discernment. In this way, the general digital culture of cyberspace, as a global village, embodies an intrinsic capacity for a sweeping seduction, with millions of users (or role-players) interconnected.

Another seductive attribute of electronic technology is its "cool" character. The deep spaces of the computer (the chat room, the interactive MUD, etc.) require users to get more involved; these cyber places call on people "to participate," "to fill in the gaps," (Levinson, 1999, pp. 9, 12) and to help deliver their own messages. Just as television calls upon an audience to get more involved, the computer solicits from people a high level of attention. Unlike TV, however, the computer is interactive (Levinson, 1999, pp. 107–109), doubly reinforcing the computer as a seductive medium. One could say, in a sense, that a computer seduces a user and brings her into its shadowy, undefined depths without her cognizance or permission. Unlike the big motion picture or the radio, which is high intensity, and evokes passivity rather than interactivity, the electronic forums of the computer are highly participatory.

If "hot and cool" analysis has any bearing on the manner in which humans interact with technology, then the computer as a "cool" medium should be taken seriously upon investigating the influence of pro-ana online culture. The enveloping penchant of computer-mediated communication matched with the persuasive leanings of a wireless, digital global village make Internet technologies powerful media of seduction. Thus, in a way, there are two main collaborators vying for the attention and commitment of the pro-ana community: cyberspace and the beauty myth. Both hold women with their seductive prowess, evoking specific human responses. Whereas the depth found in virtual communities lures people in and calls upon them to participate, the beauty myth encourages an obsession with food and a dislike for one's own body (Wolf, 2002, p. 25).

The Refashioning of Eating Disorders and the Remediation of the Beauty Myth

P RO-ANA and pro-mia are emergent, virtual communities of people, mostly women, who suffer from anorexia and bulimia; they come to life in chat rooms, message boards, and the guest books of personal pro-ana Web sites. People who dub themselves pro-ana and pro-mia support one another not in the recovery and abatement of their eating disorders but rather in retaining their self-depriving, self-deprecating and, many times, self-mutilating behaviors.

Inherent in these communities are embedded strains of remediation. First, there is the remediation of the body as a compelling impetus behind the creation of the pro-ana virtual culture. A second form of remediation figuring prominently is the changing shape and meaning of eating disorders from harmful, psychological ailments into accepted, sometimes liberating, ways of life. A third, perhaps most culturally resonant, tide of remediation couched within the culture of pro-ana is the renegotiation of the male gaze. Women have recapitulated the cultural norm of beauty into something all their own, albeit far from being more dignified and more realistic.

Eating disorders derive from a dissatisfactory self-image of the body, rooted in the paradoxical fallacy Naomi Wolf (2002) has termed the "Beauty Myth," which renders women inadequate by imposing a stringent notion of beauty and then fueling the need to meet it. A similar distaste for one's own body has propelled women into the operating room to undergo expensive cosmetic surgery. Eating disorders and cosmetic surgery alike remediate the female body. In cosmetic surgery, the body is remediated by a plastic surgeon who is apt to conceive a new shape for a woman based on an ideal of beauty grounded in the male gaze. Surgical procedures that would lift, tuck, and suck refashion the body, then literally mold a woman into the "cultural ideal of 'natural beauty'" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 238).

In much the same way, anorexics starve themselves and bulimics purge all their meals to attain the same cultural ideal. In many of these cases, women add to their malnourished diets a

rigorous workout schedule that would burn away the remaining substance of the body. While cosmetic surgery reconstructs the body to fit a cultural standard, starvation and other eating disorders refashion women's bodies to attain the fashion-model size. The difference between these kinds of remediation lies in the fact that the former is a form of hypermediacy, while the latter is a type of transparent immediacy.

"Cosmetic surgeons appeal to transparent immediacy" (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 238); that is, the process of cosmetic surgery appeals to the absence of a mediating mechanism. Yet the remediation of cosmetic surgery relies heavily on the sketches, video, and computer graphics that prepare the surgeon for operation. Thus, the operation becomes a hypermediated procedure that emphasizes the forms and functions of mediation.

Transparent immediacy characterizes the remediation abetted by an eating disorder. For a person suffering from anorexia or bulimia continually starves or purges a meal to get the desired effect. There is no intermediary in an eating disorder, save time, which is transparent and, in some cases, is immediate. While both eating disorders and cosmetic surgery would remediate the structure and visual function of the body, they would do it differently. Pro-ana is like the plastic surgeon, but without the need for instruments for the process of mediation.

The second instance of remediation infixed in pro-ana culture gets at the very backbone of its existence. Pro-ana is the remediation of anorexia. Pro-ana, an online, virtual community, is the newly refashioned version of off-line, real eating disorder support groups. Since every form of media—the printed word, the radio, the television, etc.—has its own characteristics, which are each remediated by older forms of media, each one has its own influence on culture, which is another medium (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 65). Thus, the anorexic community that pre-existed the clandestine world of the Internet was far different from the online, internationally organized pro-ana community of today. The online pro-ana reformed the isolation of the real-world pro-ana community. Isolated, an anorexic individual would succumb to the pressure and feelings of alienation from friends and family members who told her she was sick, needed help, and should go into recovery. With the global village of the Internet, which wirelessly connects millions of people, this same woman could now find a community that would embrace her beliefs. What was once considered a psychological ailment had become an alternative, sometimes liberating, way of life. The digital remediation of pro-ana, which refashioned the value judgment of eating disorder culture, urged the proliferation of the pro-ana culture.

Yet a third tide of remediation entrenched in pro-ana is the recapitulation of the beauty standard. Pictures of waif-thin models adorn the Web pages of many pro-ana sites. They serve as "triggers," which will keep women focused on staying thin or, in many cases, emaciated. The beauty standard has been remediated by a community obsession not with beauty, but with food. The Beauty Myth described by Wolf is the manufactured product of million-dollar cosmetic, diet, and cosmetic surgery industries that garner profits from the insecurities of women. The traditional beauty standard is pushed by the corporate male gaze and is thus formed, mediated, and remediated according to it. In pro-ana sites, the primary, immediate concern is not beauty, but the consumption of food. Thus, the pro-ana notions of beauty are created and perpetuated by this obsession. The preoccupation with food has remediated the cultural obsession of beauty; the traditional notion of beauty is remediated by the pro-ana community, who have succumbed to it and formulated their own images of beauty, which have sprung from obsessions with food.

On the back cover of the paperback edition (and the front dust cover flap of the hardbound edition) of *Remediation* (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) lies an illuminating definition in understanding pro-ana: ". . . [V]isual media achieve their cultural significance precisely by paying

homage to, rivaling, and refashioning such earlier media as perspective painting, photography, film, and television." Pro-ana has used the opaque (triggers, as mentioned above), yet deep niches (chat rooms) of cyberspace to pay homage to anorexic and bulimic behaviors and to rival the conventions that would put an end to them. This includes everything from the rivalry of concerned parents and friends who would seek treatment to the rivalry of the one-way, information-based medium of the television. Lastly, pro-ana refashions the idea of anorexia and bulimia and their subsequent practices of starvation, bingeing, and purging from psychological ailments into an alternative, cherished lifestyle.

The topics of the above investigation—pro-ana as a virtual community and a support group, cyberspace as a global village and a "cool" medium, and the remediation of eating disorders and the Beauty Myth on the Web—grapple with the emergence of pro-ana. It has explored the ways in which the Web, as online support group, has helped normalize anorexic and bulimic behavior; how the inherent character of electronic culture vies for and attains the attention of users and could collaborate with similar engrossing character traits of eating disorders; and finally how pro-ana has remediated the perception of eating disorders and refashioned its own Beauty Myth. Cyberspace is an integral player in the thriving world of pro-ana culture. This has put Web aggregators on edge. Yahoo has taken down many pro-ana Web sites in response to criticism (SIRC). An online petition has circulated among the pro-ana community seeking the right of freedom of expression and to maintain Web pages that consider eating disorders a way of life. Says the petition:

> If we have an illness, depending upon one's view, then why are we not allowed to discuss it until we are prepared to recover? In the words of Makayla's Healing Place, offer us a hand, but please, don't shove it down our throats. We believe that we live a lifestyle, and not that we are succumbed to illness. (Broken Angel, 2002)

The petition was sent to Yahoo, geocities, MSN, and Lycos. Pro-ana sites bring to the table more fodder for the discussion of censorship on the Internet. Should sites that potentially harm other people be allowed on the Internet? And, if so, what sort of protocols should be set for further censorship? The Social Issues Research Centre posits the problem well:

> Knowledge of their existence entails a dilemma—is it ethically acceptable to allow sites which encourage unrealistic aspiration towards self-destructive goals to continue to function? We may as well censor the pages of major fashion glossies, with their features on "How star x slimmed to x stone one month after birth of their first child." (SIRC)

Censorship of pro-ana has already caused many Web sites promoting anorexic and bulimic behaviors to change the title and content into more diet-oriented information (SIRC).

Talk of censorship of pro-ana brings in another dimension of the relationship between the Internet and eating disorders. While both embody seducing agents, which one is responsible for pro-ana? Is the solution to ban potentially harmful information and viewpoints, or is it to undertake a project that would dismantle the culture from the inside—beginning with the deconstruction of the Beauty Myth for a new way of seeing?

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[i] What follows is not intended to be an ethnography of the pro-ana and pro-mia culture. As it delves into the cultural context of pro-ana, the paper is replete with many ethnographic qualities, but it falls short of giving a complete picture of the culture, which is deeply rooted in a culture of eating disorders, which, in turn, is anchored in a history of advertising and the industrial objectification of women (Wolf, 2002, pp. 9–19). The examination that follows is not an intended value judgment on pro-ana culture. Nor is it an analysis that probes at cases and circumstances of eating disorders to get at their causes.

The excerpts of dialogue from posts and chat rooms in this paper are accessible by anyone with Internet access. In fact, at the bottom of each dialogue sits an icon for a printer-friendly version. This implies that list administrator is aware of and may even encourage public, outside observation and participation. While some pro-ana chat rooms require a password and a profile, Ana By Choice requires neither of these. A lurker is a guest who is not required to disclose any personal information and is given the option of entering almost any topic room with the opportunity to print everything out when finished. All the dialogue in the paper is taken from Ana By Choice.