

THESIS

EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE:  
MISS PERFECTION, A MISPERCEPTION

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### EXAMINING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON BODY IMAGE: MISS PERFECTION, A MISPERCEPTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the potential influence of social media sites such as pro anorexia and pro bulimia blog sites, in the support or encouragement of eating disorders, body dysmorphic disorders, eating behaviors, and body dissatisfaction in females.

Research shows that some women are easily influenced and pressured by social media and many other social influences to achieve the perfect body. Many pro anorexia and pro bulimia blogs contain information on disordered eating and behaviors, offer tips, and connect individuals to others who are struggling or engaging in disordered eating behaviors.

This thesis provides insights into the possible reasons many females are engaging in these conversations and using these pro anorexia and pro bulimic blogs. Using the Uses and Gratifications theory to guide the research questions, I examined the ways in which females are engaging in these pro anorexia/pro bulimia blogs by analyzing comments posted on three blogs. It would seem obvious that pro anorexic and pro bulimic blogs would be harmful and influential to young females; however, the results did not support this assumption. Many of the users on these blogs would use these sites for several needs including: emotional and social needs, and to become informed. However, one key need that is often overlooked is the need for support. Many of the users seemed to seek out, contribute and use these sites for emotional and social support.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“I don’t care if it hurts*

*I want to have control*

*I want a perfect body*

*I want a perfect soul”*

—Creep, Radiohead

*“The emotional, sexual and psychological stereotyping of females begins when the doctor says,  
it’s a girl”*

—Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, (thinkexist.com)

Many men and women are at war with their bodies. Thin is in and fat is out. Not only is thin in, but the appearance of an almost emaciated thin body for women and a considerably large muscular body for men is considered the norm. A large population of men and women are feeling the pressures to look a certain way and to achieve the perfect body (Cash & Smolak, 2012, p. 208). People trying to meet these ideals of the perfect body may do so by any means necessary, even if that means starving their bodies, or bingeing and purging and following strict nutrition regimens (Cash & Smolak, 2012, p. 291).

From an early age, we are taught that we should take care of our bodies and eat a healthy, balanced diet. As we hit puberty, we realize that our bodies are meant for more than just getting us around. We begin to learn that in order to capture the attention of a desirable partner we feel the need to be attractive (Cash & Smolak, 2012, p. 20). Women learn that worth, success, and

likeability is judged and determined by physical appearance (Bordo, 1993). Women start wearing makeup, shaving their legs, buying clothing and accessories to attract a partner. “Women learn that their bodies are an article of trade and that if they can look good this will influence their life experiences” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 177). As women grow into adults, they realize their body becomes an object. They are judged daily on their appearance, learning quickly that thinness is something to be valued and appreciated; women come to learn that their bodies equate to societal meanings such as, lazy, inadequate, out of control etc. (Bordo, 1993).

### **Online Presence**

The media, including social media and blogs may be a catalyst for triggering body image issues such as Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) and eating disorders (Phillips, 2005, p. 178). Body Dysmorphic Disorder, BDD will be explained later. According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, even the smallest amount of exposure to these sites could be harmful and risky (2013).

If the pressures to achieve the perfect body are getting worse, is the use of the Internet communications, specifically social media sites, contributing to the burden? What is the impact of websites that promote a mindset that appears to normalize or naturalize anorexia and bulimia, referred to as “pro-anorexia” and “pro-bulimia” blogs? Pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia websites, which are commonly known as, “pro-ana,” “pro-mia,” or “pro-ed” refer to the eating disorders, anorexia nervosa, (pro-ana, or ana), bulimia nervosa, (pro-mia, or mia) or pro eating disorder, (pro-ed). Pro ana/mia websites, blogs, videos and photos are popping up all over the Internet. The pro-ana and mia websites are also known as “e-ana,” “e-mia” or “ana/mia” when referring to the cyberworld of eating disorder websites. At first glance, some people may think these sites

are for people trying to recover from an eating disorder. In fact, a pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia website is typically a blog hosted and found on the Internet that promotes, supports, and provides information about eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia (Peebles, Wilson, Hardy, Lock, Mann, Borzekowski, 2012). The blogs may include photos, videos, crash diets, diet tips, anorexia and bulimia tips, how to induce vomiting, how to hide eating disorders, comment boards or boxes, competitions, support, personal stories, size, weights and goal weights from the users, and external links to other pro anorexia and bulimia blogs or websites (see Figures 1, 2 and 3).



Figure 1: Example of pro-ana website, Ana Boot Camp, Techniques page.

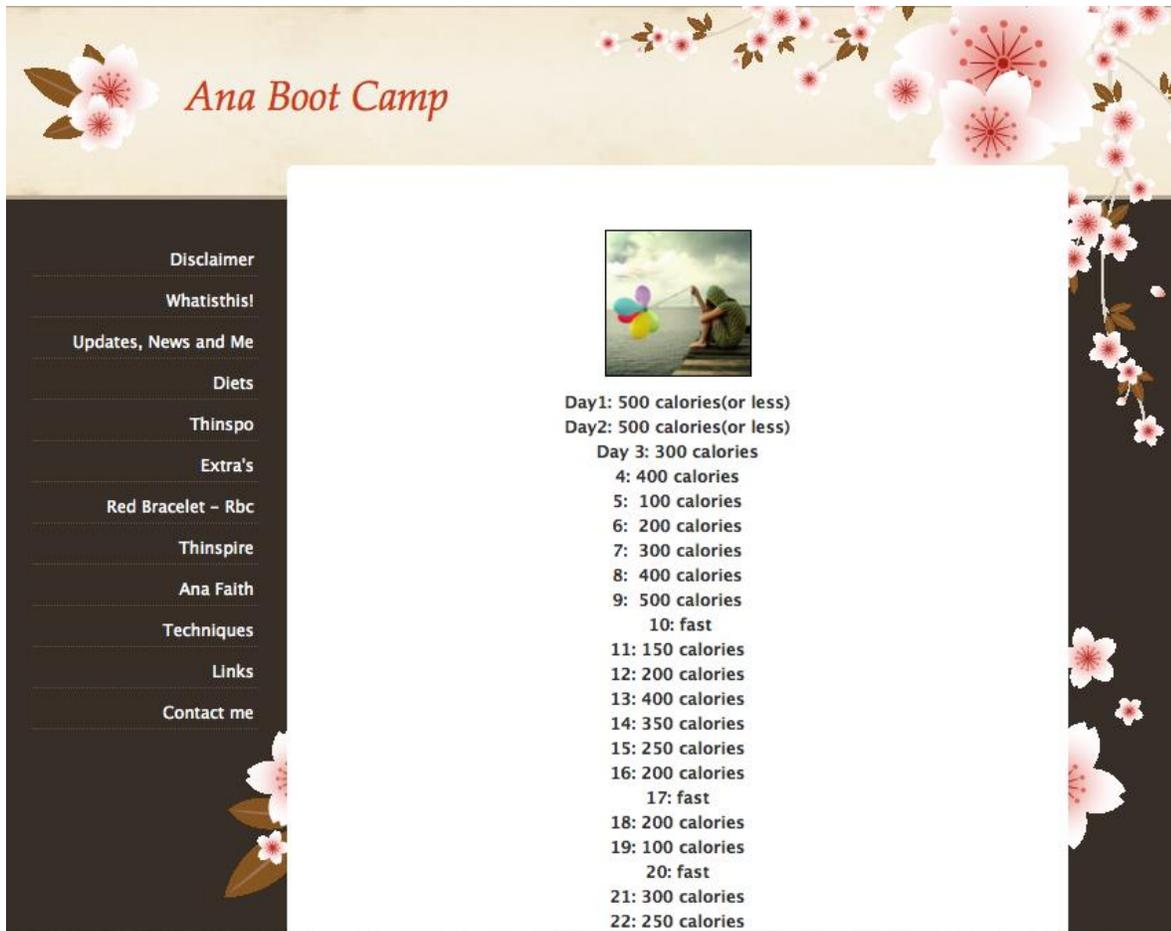


Figure 2: Example of pro-ana website, Ana Boot Camp, Diet Page.

Borzekowski (2010) describes these blogs and websites as a way to inform, encourage and motivate participation in disordered eating habits and routines to achieve “successfully” low body weight, and typically contain information on how men and women can starve their bodies and how to binge and purge. These websites facilitate these disorders by validating unhealthy behavior. Not only can the users find information on the support and maintenance of an eating disorder, but also, these websites offer a cyber-community where young women and men can connect with others from all over the world who suffer from an eating disorder.



Figure 3: Example of pro-anorexia blog, The Pro-Ana Lifestyle Forever.

Pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia blogs are widely accessible and easy to locate and are growing at an alarming rate. In 2015, a Google search for “pro ana blog” revealed 10,300,000 results. A Google search for the term “pro mia blog” revealed 8,990,000 results. It should be noted that not all these results were pro ana/mia blogs and support sites; in some cases, these results included pro ana/mia recovery sites, recovery or treatment centers, and information on eating disorders or cited pro/ana mia blogs and eating disorders.

“A distinction must be made,” writes Peebles—

...“unlike websites that encourage healthy weights, moderate exercise, and recognized nutrition and diets, many pro-eating disorder sites recommend that their users try intense practices, such as vomiting and fasting, with an emphasis on achieving extremely thin or skeletal appearances. Adolescents exposed to pro-eating disorder websites have been shown to have higher levels of body dissatisfaction than adolescents not exposed to these sites, as well as decreased quality of life and longer durations of eating disorders. In addition, increased use of pro-eating disorder sites have been positively correlated with disordered eating behaviors and negatively correlated with disease-specific quality of life among adults” (Peebles, 2010, p. 1526).

A study by the European Eating Disorders Review (2010) showed college females with no prior history of eating disorders decreased their caloric intake the following week after being

exposed to 1.5 hours of pro-ed sites. Some participants claimed to use some of the diet tips and techniques shown on the websites.

### **Research Problem**

The compulsion to be thin and perfect is all too relatable. Many women struggle with this dissatisfaction on a daily basis. People are feeling ashamed, guilty, and discouraged about their bodies (Cash & Smolak, 2012, p.102). Are the media, both traditional and new, further driving the pressures to have the perfect body? Are new media misrepresenting and creating a false idea of what it means to be perfect? This qualitative study attempts to gather information in order to understand what people are feeling when it comes to media depictions of body image, why so many women feel pressured to be “perfect,” and what their idea of perfection is.

The purpose of this constant comparison study was to look for indications that move us toward a deeper understanding of why women use these pro ana/mia blog sites. What do they gain? The study will examine detailed use of these blog sites. This study needed to be conducted because little research exists that provides information on how women use pro ana/mia sites to support their eating disorder(s). Past research has shown when women visit these sites they are exposed to the graphic material presented, but research has yet to fully explain how or why women use these sites. Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson and Peebles (2010) conducted a content analysis on e-ana and e-mia pro-eating disorder websites and found these sites contained material to support, encourage and motivate users in their anorexic and bulimic behavior. The researchers noted that only through continued monitoring would we learn the effects of these sites on the users. Hundreds of thousands of pro ana/mia blogs exist that promote eating disorders. The information posted on these blogs is readily available, easy to access and rarely require a membership or acceptance into the blog. Virtually anyone can visit

these sites and interact with the followers on these sites. Most blogs offer information and inspiration to anyone who is seeking to be skinny. The participants are the followers, users, and bloggers who use these blog sites.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Body Image and Eating Disorders

There are a few different types of eating disorders. Eating Disorders are defined as a “persistent disturbance of eating or eating related behavior that results in the altered consumption or absorption of food that impairs physical health or psychological functioning” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.329). Eating disorders include avoiding food, restricting food intake, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge-eating disorder (p. 329).

Body image has been described as the psychology of one’s body, something Cash (1990) characterized as an “inside perception” (p.53). Body image refers to the feelings, perceptions, emotions, and beliefs about our bodies, the way we see and feel about our body (Cash, 1990).

Past research indicates those suffering from an eating disorder may have difficulty relating with peers and as a result hide their disorders and behaviors out of shame (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson & Peebles, 2010). Some women suffering from eating disorders may feel alone and withdraw from family members, friends and peers.

Up until now, many researchers have made the case that women may not be the only ones suffering from poor body image; in some cases men suffer from a poor body image. However, suffering from poor body image is more common in women. Morgan (1993) states, “Women’s bodies are represented more frequently in the media than the male body,” (p. 71). Research has shown “in general, idealized body images have a more pronounced impact on women than on men in terms of body image and body satisfaction” (Aruguete, Debord, Yates, & Edman, 2005, p. 329; see also, Penkal & Kurdek, 2007, p. 2270). In the past researchers, have mainly focused on studying women, “partly because the research has indicated that women report higher levels

of body dissatisfaction than men and place a greater value on losing weight. This is thought to contribute to their increased risk of developing an eating disorder” (Grover, Keel, & Mitchell, 2003, p. 65; see also, Garner, Garfinkel, Schwartz, & Thompson, 1980).

To date there has been little research on men who suffer from poor body image and eating disorders. There are several reasons for this. Men are less likely to recognize they have a problem or an unhealthy body image (Pope, Phillips & Olivardia, 2002, p. 227). If men do realize they have an unhealthy sense of their body, or engage in an eating disorder, they are less likely to seek help for their disorder (Grogan, 2017). Therefore, it is often difficult to conduct research in this area in men. For the purpose of this study, men were excluded as well as the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) population. LGBT individuals may suffer from poor body image, BDD and/or possess an eating disorder; however, the pressures and mind-set may be different than that of heterosexual females. Further research should be conducted in these populations (however, this study focuses solely on young, apparently heterosexual, women engaging in eating disorder websites).

### **Causational Factor**

Eating disorders are a serious problem that affect millions and can have devastating long-term effects. Some people may not survive. The South Carolina Department of Mental Health, 2016, estimates that eight million Americans (seven million women and one million men) have an eating disorder. The crude mortality rate for anorexia nervosa is approximately 5 percent per decade. However, some individuals may die as a result from medical complications because of the disorder or from suicide, 12 per 100,000 per year (American Psychiatric Association, 2013 p. 342-344). The consequences of an eating disorder can have devastating long-term health effects due to malnutrition and strain on the heart. According to the American Psychiatric Association,

eating disorder behaviors can result in “significant and potentially life-threatening medical conditions” (2013, p. 341). Eating disorders can cause physiological disturbances and affect major organ systems. Some individuals may experience depression, insomnia, irritability, dry skin, thin hair, bruises, tooth decay, weak heart, osteoporosis, dry lips, and more (American Psychiatric Association, 2013 p. 341).

Some eating disorders can be a result of poor body image. People who have poor body image may be dissatisfied with their body and want to change it, however they do not want to undergo extensive cosmetic surgery and may choose to control their body image through extreme diet and exercise. As Davis (1999, p. 37) points out “Negative body image and eating disorders usually go hand in hand.”

Some eating disorders are a result of a much more serious cause such as body dysmorphic disorder (BDD). According to the American Psychiatric Association, body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), may occur when individuals feel humiliated or embarrassed by their body and are afraid to be seen in public, they also can feel “preoccupied with an imagined defect in their bodily appearance” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 344). There is a distinct difference between people with poor body image and people with BDD. People with BDD absolutely see a different image in the mirror and in their mind than everyone else. People with BDD think there is something so wrong with their body that they will do anything to change it no matter how extreme or unnecessary it may be. Sometimes, this often includes cosmetic surgeries, and even then, the person may still think there is something wrong with their body or body part (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). It is quite possible that many people suffering from an eating disorder also suffer from BDD. The result of BDD may lead to an eating disorder, and severe unhappiness. “An unhealthy body image may also increase the risk

of eating disorders” (Shisslak, Cargo, & Estes, 1995, p. 213). People who experience constant body dissatisfaction and view their bodies as larger, smaller or more misshaped than it actually is may attempt to fix the perceived problem by means of eating disorders, drugs, such as steroids and diet pills, or several cosmetic surgeries.

There are a many factors that contribute to a negative body image including social contexts such as home or school, or media such as television and magazines (Levine & Harrison, 2009 p. 492).

### **The Role of Mass Media in Negative Image**

Women often compare their bodies and associate their self-worth with the people shown on television, magazines and the Internet. It is common in the western culture to portray women in the media significantly thinner than women in real life (Fouts & Burggraf, 2000). Women who feel they do not compare to the skinny or perfect actors on television will often associate that comparison with a low sense of self-worth. One researcher in the field of media and body image, Harrison (2003), studied the relationship between media and female body image. Her research found that, bodies featured on TV had smaller waists, hips, and a medium bust than woman not featured on TV. Because of this, both men and women that she studied were more likely to condone surgical body procedures such as breast enhancements or liposuction (Harrison 2003).

According to researchers Levine and Harrison (2003) the reason the media are at fault for producing body dissatisfaction and disordered eating include the oversaturation of messages from the media about physical appearance and happiness.

According to Potter (2012), the media can influence and shape the way people think about themselves. One of the ways media are altering people’s beliefs involves their sense of

body size. “Most people depicted in magazines, films and television shows are physically fit and model a thin body ideal. Overtime, audiences come to think of most people as being thin” (Potter, 2012, p. 156). Overtime people, mostly women, begin to think they are overweight. Potter claims that, “over the past three decades, fashion models, Miss America contestants, and Playboy centerfolds have grown steadily thinner, while the average woman’s weight has risen” (Potter, 2012, p. 156).

George Gerbner (2002), who conceptualized what became known as “cultivation theory,” argued that the effect of media might evolve over a great deal of time with a potentially substantial impact. Gerbner believes when a message is repeated persistently, people who see the message repeatedly are more likely to believe the message and believe it accurately reflects reality. Cultivation theorists began by examining the effects of television violence. Research on Cultivation theory has since expanded, now encompassing a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to, sex, sexual behavior, crime, gender roles, money and body image and eating disorders. Yamamiya, Cash, Melnyk, Prosavac, & Prosavac, (2005) believe women who use the media as a basis for comparison are more at risk of being influenced by the media images. In other words, when women see the images on television and use those images as a baseline for what their bodies must look like, they become more depressed, upset and negative about their bodies and images. The more these women view these images and the repetitiveness of the images it begins to convince the women that is their reality. Those that visit pro-ed websites may believe extreme dieting measures and eating disorder behaviors are normal, and in no way dangerous or a disease (Borzekowski, 2010). The online users frequenting these websites may not see themselves at being at risk or having a problem. Most are in denial of

having a problem, therefore further isolating oneself out of fear, rejection, judgment, shame, sadness, and/or guilt (Borzekowski, 2010).

Many women work at developing a socially perfect body based on beauty, grace, and femininity (Cronan & Scott, 2006). Crafting a perfect body takes work—a lot of work. It is a constant challenge. The images displayed in the media on a daily basis of perfect body types lead people to believe they need to capture all of the elements mentioned. Body image can be defined as the image of one's "body, hair, face, shape, weight, degree of visible fat and muscle, posture, etc." (Levine & Harrison, 2009 p. 491). Body image can also represent the emotions, memories and sense of comfort or awkwardness one feels about their body (Levine & Harrison, 2009 p. 491). Researchers found that when it comes to the female body depicted in the media and internet, it can be summarized in two phrases, "thin is normative and attractive" and "fat is aberrant and repulsive" (Levine & Harrison, 2009 p. 494). "Unhappiness with our body image has become almost the new normal." Wolf (2002) concurs with this idea stating that body image, and feeling dissatisfied with your body, is so common, it is now "considered by some researchers to be a normative discontent" (p. 19). Feeling dissatisfied and unhappy with your body can actually start to feel normal for many people and may even seem abnormal not to feel some degree of dissatisfaction with your body.

### **The Role of the Internet in Body Image**

Contemporary researchers wonder how much Internet use is leading to overweight children and obesity among adults. The Internet is very accessible for people living in the North America and other countries. The Internet is a host to thousands of websites, blogs, videos, chats, photos, and information on how to take dieting and exercising to the extreme. For those suffering from BDD or an eating disorder, the Internet serves as a valuable tool. People with

disorders may seek out information on the Internet about their disease either on how to maintain their disorder, communicate and connect with others, find motivation, or possibly to seek out tips and tricks. The opportunity to connect with like-minded women suffering from the same disease can be a great comfort for women with eating disorders. The pro-ana/mia blogs may offer a safe haven for women to share, talk, open up and feel accepted (Borzekowski, 2010). Interacting online with strangers may give a sense of security and safe haven to share deep personal information while remaining anonymous (Borzekowski, 2010). The blogs also offer advice and tips on how to hide and engage in eating disorder behaviors.

The Internet provides information and tools on eating disorders but it may also be the cause of the disorders. Most people use the Internet daily for a variety of activities including email, researching, networking, watching videos, accessing news sites, and catching up on celebrity gossip or pop culture. The Internet may be having the same effects on people that television, film and advertising do, in that it may be misrepresenting ideal body types. Many websites feature advertisements, celebrity gossip, pop culture news, photos and videos of celebrities, models, and perfect looking people. These images could be sending the wrong messages to online users and viewers; in order to be perfect you must look like them. Haferkamp and Kramer (2011) found that “people who look at attractive users on [social media] have less positive emotions afterwards and are also more dissatisfied with their own body image than people who look at unattractive users” (p. 313). Many young women and men struggle to achieve the goal of looking like the perfect celebrities and models featured through the Internet channels. Women may feel pressured to look as skinny as famous models and actresses by any means necessary and men may feel pressured to look as muscular and strong as the actors and male models by any means necessary. The means at which people attempt to achieve these ideal bodies could be

through restricted diets, cosmetic surgeries, fad diets, excessive exercising, starvation, self-induced vomiting or bulimia, steroid use, or other drugs.

Pro-eating disorder websites are full of information on how to become anorexic or bulimic. Content includes text, photos, and ‘thinspirational videos’ which show extremely thin people and models. These websites “encourage knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors to achieve terribly low body weights. Pro-eating disorder websites and communities have emerged wherein users can find material to support the progression and maintenance of eating disorders” (Borzekowski, 2010, p.1534).

Not only can the users find information on the support and maintenance of an eating disorder, but these websites also offer a cyber-community where young women and men can connect with others who suffer from an eating disorder. Young women and men are often ashamed of their disorders causing them to hide their behaviors and emotions from friends and family who might not otherwise understand or approve (Borzekowski, 2010). Often these websites allow all users to post comments, communicate, and join groups and conversations, discussing their struggles, achievements and feelings regarding their eating disorder. Online eating disorder websites offer a venue for women to share their shame without judgment or repercussion (Borzekowski, 2010).

### **Thinspiration or Thinspo**

Thinspo, short for Thinspiration are a collection(s) of photos and/or videos of extremely thin and/or emaciated women (see Figures 4 and 5). According to Virginia Heffernan (2008), thinspiration videos feature, “photomontages of skeletal women, including some celebrities and models, play all over the Internet, uploaded from the United States, Germany, Holland and elsewhere. These videos are designed to ‘inspire’ viewers-to fortify their ambitions” (p. 1). In a

2010 content analysis, 84 percent of pro-ana sites feature thinspo images or videos (Borzekowski, 2010, p.1534). Generally, thinspiration videos are found on YouTube or Vimeo and are often posted to several of the pro-ana/mia blogs. As of March 10, 2015, a Google search for “thinspiration videos” resulted in 545,000 available videos on the Internet. Thinspiration videos are highly popular, easily accessible, easy to create and motivational for those suffering from an eating disorder (O’Brien, 2013). Many of the videos resemble a dark ominous theme where in addition to showing several images of thin women, they also display quotes and words, to guilt and shame the viewer into restricting, dieting, and losing weight (see Figure 6).



Figure 4: Screen shot of image from Thinspirational video from Vimeo, titled, *My body is a Cage*.

The newest onset of thinspo videos are “thigh gap” videos. These videos specifically encourage viewers to create a one-to-two inch space or “gap” between their thighs. Just as many women obsess and desire to show protruding collarbones, the newest aspiration is to show space between your thighs. Women often express their disgust when their thighs touch or rub together. The thigh gap fixation could be contributed to many fashion magazines and fashion models sporting thin thighs that do not rub together.



Figure 5: Example of Thinspo images, from Thinspiration Pictures.

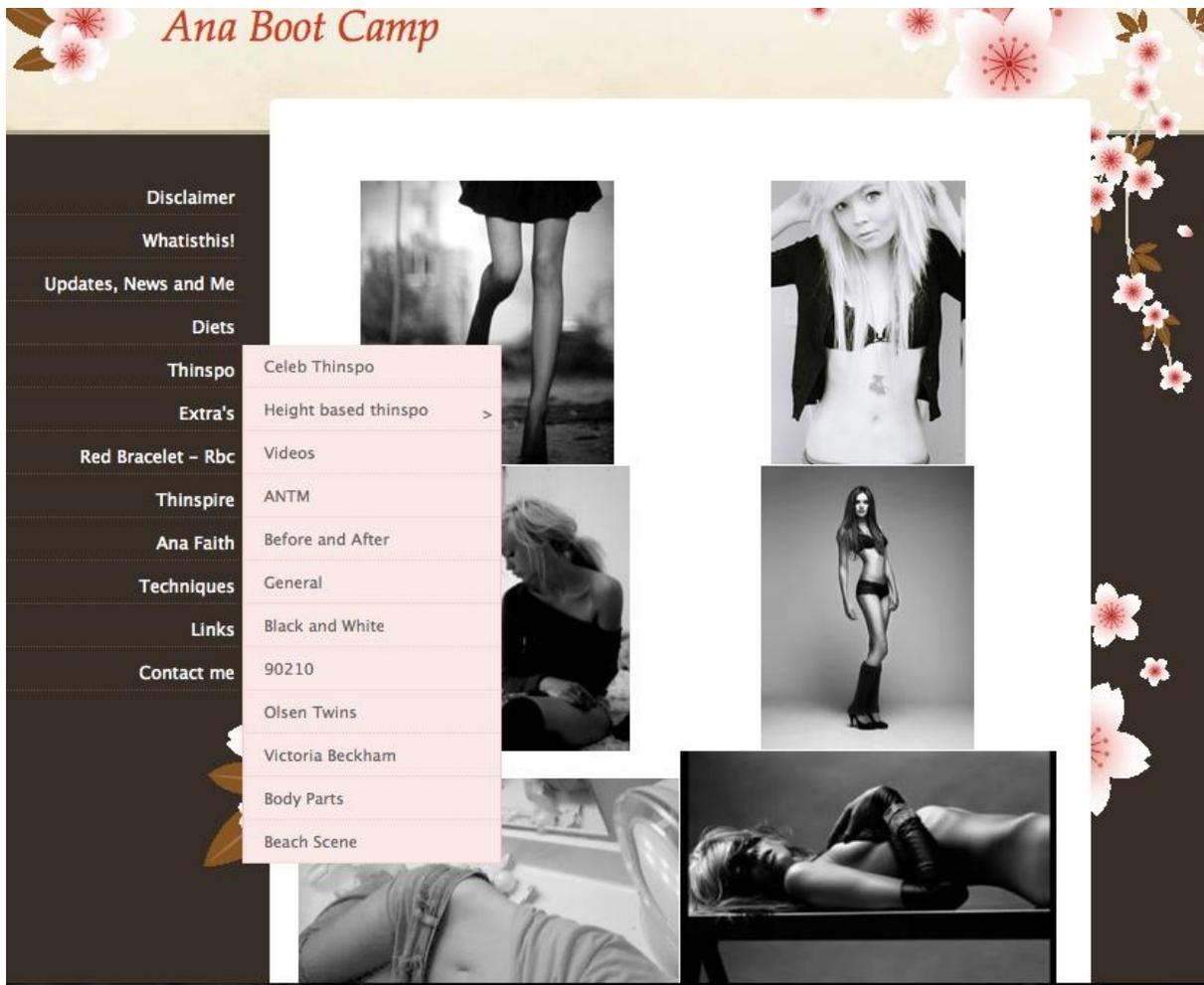


Figure 6: Example of “Black and White” Thinspire images, from Ana Boot Camp.

## Media Theories

There have been quite a few studies conducted on the influence of media on body image and from research come several theories on body image and media's role in influencing the negative body image that so many people face.

### Uses and Gratifications Theory

One particular media theory may help us understand the potential influence of media on body image and body image disorders. The Uses and Gratifications theory, developed by Harold Laswell, explains how people use media (Potter, 2012, p. 75). According to Rubin (2002) and Potter (2012), viewers are active communicators and not passive recipients of messages. The Uses and Gratifications theory claims people have two main motives for seeking out media messages; information and entertainment (Potter, 2012).

According to the Uses and Gratifications Theory, people use the media to fulfill different needs. Researchers have conceptualized five different categories:

(Communication Theory, 2010)

- **Cognitive needs:** people may use media to gain knowledge, become informed.
- **Affective needs:** includes all emotions. People use the media for emotional needs, crying, pleasure, etc.
- **Personal Integrative needs:** people use media to satisfy their wants and needs by improving their personal status. For example, someone may watch ads for cars, or expensive products. Through this media, they have a basis for where they are in society.
- **Social Integrative needs:** people use the media to interact and socialize with others. For example, people may use Facebook or other social media outlets to connect and interact

with others. In addition, people may watch a specific program so later they can discuss it in a social setting.

- **Tension free needs:** people use media to escape, relax, enjoy, withdraw, and unwind.

How one person fits into these categories is dependent upon the individual. Not every person will fall into every category. People may watch the same television program but for different needs. For example some people may watch a reality show because it is entertaining, controversial, relatable, and/or realistic (Communication Theory, 2010).

It is possible people use traditional media and new media, such as the Internet, for different reasons. In the case of young women with eating disorders, they could potentially be using these pro-ed websites for cognitive reasons—to learn how to become better at their eating disorder, learn new diet techniques, or how to hide their disordered behavior. Perhaps other users of these pro-ed sites are fulfilling their affective needs by gaining support from other online users, and by reaching out to those who share in their disease. These women could be using these sites to escape, which falls into tension free needs; they could also be watching these sites to fulfill their personal and social integrative needs. The blog sites feature several young, skinny women who are presented as having a body to envy. In the minds of these women suffering from eating disorders, the bodies shown on these sites might seem socially acceptable, and to an extreme extent—much like having an expensive car, watch, house, etc. Users could be viewing these sites as a means to understand what is socially acceptable and as a basis for their own appearance.

Not all researchers believe Uses and Gratifications offer an effective model for understanding the human relationship to mass communication. Some researchers argue that the Uses and Gratifications Theory suggests the idea of an active audience in which people seek out

their media, versus a passive recipient of messages (Rubin, 2002). However, the Uses and Gratifications model can offer a framework in which the researcher can begin to code and categorize data based on the motivational categories mentioned by the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Rubin argues, “People are relatively active participants who choose media content” (Rubin, 2002, p. 167). With the rise in progressive communication technology, people have even more control over what media they seek out and through which communication vehicle they seek such media. This study is exploratory and using the Uses and Gratifications, theory has been effective in this study and the other studies recently cited. The results presented will encourage further research in the area of eating disorder blog communities.

## METHODOLOGY

*“Whoever controls the media controls the mind.”*

–Jim Morrison

*“Ana Faith 10 Commandments*

- 1. If you aren't thin, you aren't attractive.*
- 2. Being thin is more important than being healthy.*
- 3. You must buy clothes, style your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself, do anything to make yourself look thinner.*
- 4. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.*
- 5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.*
- 6. Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.*
- 7. What the scale says is the most important thing.*
- 8. Losing weight is good/gaining weight is bad.*
- 9. You can never be too thin.*
- 10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true willpower and success.”*

-Ana Boot Camp, pro-ana website, ana faith

By collecting and analyzing comments posted on these blog sites, we may learn more about how social media influences women when it comes to their body image. We may also gain insights into the ways women may be using social media to further drive their disorders. Are there eating and behavior patterns and/or similarities and differences of the users of these sites? What are some of the characteristics of the users of these sites? e.g., what are some of the common terms used? What are some of the feelings, behaviors and attitudes noted? Do comments on these blog sites largely indicate support for the images of bodies promoted in these online venues, or not? Specifically, what does all the above say about body image, body shape, anorexia, and bulimia? To what extent, if any, do the comments reveal feelings of shame, guilt, and discouragement about body image? Conversely, how do they feel empowered? According to the blog comments or posts, what do the users gain from using these sites? According to the blog

comments or posts, what frustrates/challenges the users of these sites/blogs? Do comments reveal any discussion of new media contributing to pressures to have the perfect body?

The researcher conducted a qualitative analysis and used an interpretation method to determine a set of research questions guided by Uses and Gratifications theory noted earlier. By using qualitative research to analyze these websites, the researcher can develop in-depth data and insight to the users' minds, bodies, and feelings. "Qualitative data can yield not only deeper understanding but also political actions, the depths of participants' feelings are revealed" (Patton, 1995, p. 17). Qualitative research asks the question, why? While other research approaches often, leave unanswered questions and less in-depth understanding as to why. "Qualitative studies focus on the social practices and meanings of people in a specific historical or cultural context" (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). A qualitative approach allows themes and patterns to naturally emerge from the research. Where quantitative research provides numerical data, qualitative addresses the questions that cannot be added, multiplied, or summed up. Many new phenomena have been identified thanks to qualitative studies. In the case of pro-eating disorder websites, qualitative research can provide insight into if, and/or why the women using these blog sites may feel bad and ashamed about their bodies, and why they feel the motivation to visit and use pro-eating disorder websites.

## **Research Questions**

Little research has provided information on how women use pro ana/mia sites to support their eating disorder(s). Most research has shown that generally, women as opposed to men use these sites but the research reports do not fully explain how women become informed and knowledgeable in their eating disorder behaviors. Based on the theories and literature review, the following research questions were established:

**RQ1: How do women use these pro-ed sites to become informed and gain knowledge?**

**(Cognitive needs)**

**RQ2: How do women use these pro-ed sites to fulfill their emotional needs? (Affective needs)**

**RQ3: How do women use pro-ed sites to improve their personal status? (Personal Integrative needs)**

**RQ4: How do women use pro-ed sites to satisfy their wants and needs? (Personal Integrative needs)**

**RQ5: How do women use pro-ed sites to interact and socialize with others? (Social Integrative needs)**

**RQ6: How do women use pro-ed sites to escape?**

**RQ7: How do women use pro-ed sites to relax?**

**RQ8: How do women use pro-ed sites to enjoy?**

**RQ9: How do women use pro-ed sites to withdraw? (Tension free needs) (Communication theory, uses, 2010).**

## Sampling

For this study, three pro-eating disorder websites were selected and analyzed for user comments posted on these blogs. The blogs used for this study were selected through a Google.com search based on the following criteria:

- Top sites returned in a Google.com search
- Current Information, blog posts, or comments posted on the blog. If a blog has posts older than the year 2012 at the front of the page, they were not considered for the study.
- Pro-ana websites based on Google search terms such as, “best pro-ana websites.”
- Followers- followers are people who follow a page or a website and may visit daily or several times a day. Followers include as few as 100 and more than 500, which include a sample of people from a variety of locations around the world. (The number one pro ana website returned in a Google search, returned a blog titled “The pro ana Lifestyle” this website was not selected for analysis because the last post was on March 25, 2008. Ana Boot Camp was used as a source in writing this; however, it was not used for the study because it excludes an area for member’s discussions and/or forums).

\*Video comments and posts were excluded from the data collection and analysis process to keep the user and user’s information confidential.

Website #1 Pro-Ana Nation  
<http://pro-ana-nation.livejournal.com/>

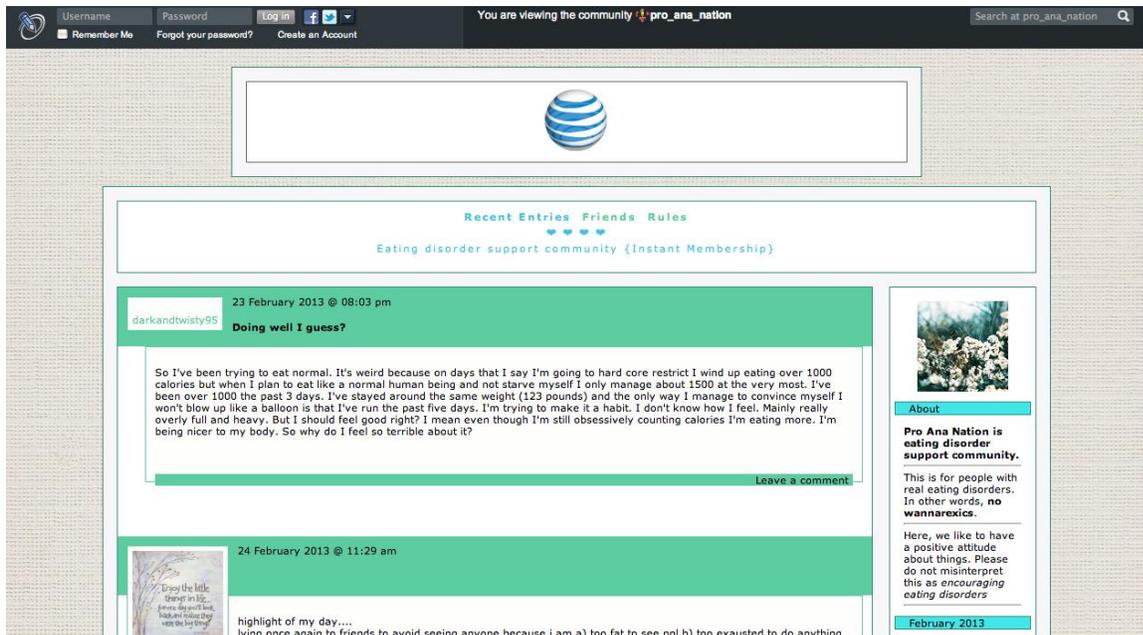


Figure 7: Home page of Pro-Ana Nation

Pro-Ana Nation was the first website to appear in a Google search for “pro-ana websites, 2013.” In February 23, 2013, Pro-Ana Nation had 2,934 members and is being watched by 2,413 people. This blog was selected for analysis in 2013.

The home page of Pro-Ana Nation states:

“Pro Ana Nation is eating disorder support community. This is for people with real eating disorders. In other words, no wannarexics. Here, we like to have a positive attitude about things. Please do not misinterpret this as “*encouraging eating disorders.*”

Pro-Ana Nation contains the following tabs:

- Recent Entries- where members can post and share journal entries, comments, questions, etc.
- Friends- Another area where members can share photos, discussions, journal entries, etc., with other members.
- Rules- The rules are stated as:

*{You must have an eating disorder to join this community.  
This isn't a quick fix to weight loss. You need to have a genuine eating disorder to post here.}*

*{Also, please set your entries to "Members", so only other members can see your entry.  
But this is NOT mandatory.}*

*{You can post tips & tricks,  
however do not distribute dangerous advice to others that could harm them}*

*{We do not encourage "group fasts" here  
Do not ask for people to join you in harming yourself.}*

*{Do NOT post your exact location when/if filling in "Current Location". This is for your  
safety.}*

*{When you join, posting an introductory post is always welcomed.}*

*{Comment and support as many entries as you can.}*

*Just a quick warning, although this community is pretty much "free speech",  
if you break any of the rules or upset any members you WILL be warned, and possibly  
banned depending on the severity of your offense.*

Website #2 PrettyThin

<http://www.prettythin.com/>

\*Pretty Thin blog has since been removed or changed, the original, [www.prettythin.com](http://www.prettythin.com) URL no longer exists.

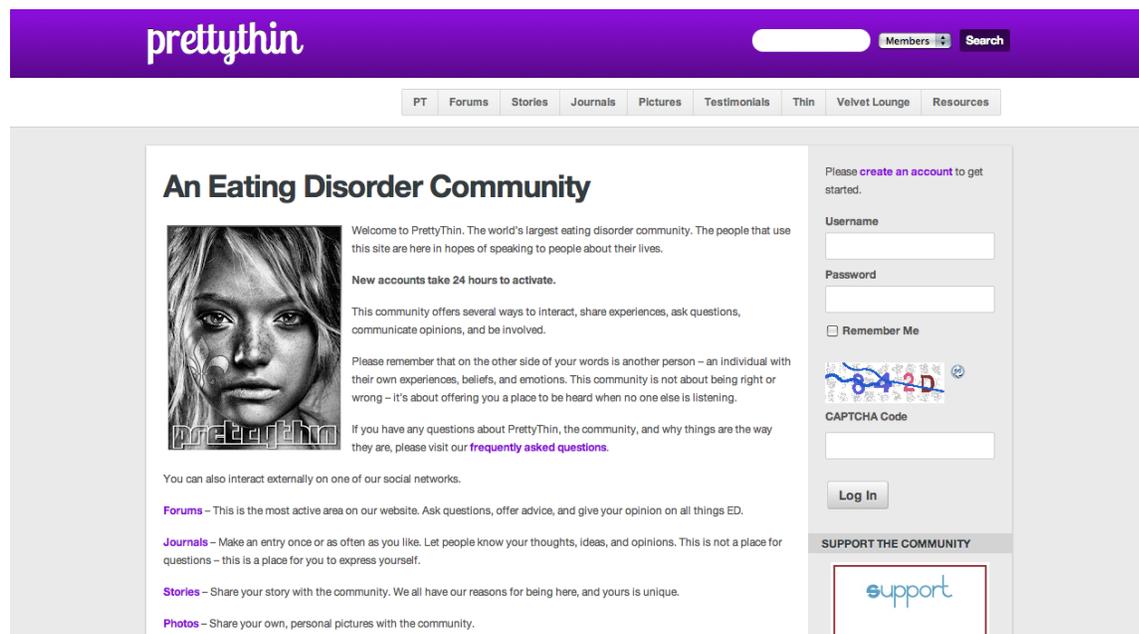


Figure 8: Home page of Pretty Thin

At the time of the initial data collection, this website was the next most popular pro ana website based on a Google search. PrettyThin had 10,675 members as of February 23, 2013. In August 17, 2012, PrettyThin had only 2,146 members; this website increased its membership by 8,529 in a six-month time. The home page of PrettyThin states,

PrettyThin is the World's Largest Eating Disorder Community and Forum, established in 2006, and continually changing for the needs of the community. It is a Pro-Anorectic community, meaning it is in support of individuals with anorexia, and more generally, eating disorders (PrettyThin, 2012).

PrettyThin contains the following discussion forums:

- Private

- General
- Rebuild
- Anxiety and Stress\*
- Private: Journals
- Recovery\*
- Men
- EDNOS
- PTSD/ED\*
- Diet and Nutrition
- 30 and 40-something
- Bulimia\*
- Anti-Boredom Forum
- Exercise
- Mental Health\*
- General Health

Pretty Thin has three sections where users can post comments. These sections include forum, stories, and journals. The researcher took screen shots from the section titled 'journals'. This section was the only section that did not require a member sign in and consistently had a journal entry for each day.

## Website #3: Not Another Teen Diet Blog

<http://notanotherteendiet.blogspot.com/?zx=2dea216953fcb706>



Figure 9: Home page of Not Another Teen Diet Blog

As of February 23, 2013, Not Another Teen Diet Blog had 285 members and a total of 86,701 page views. This blog has a section titled, “labels” which contain topics on:

- Anxiety
- Body fat
- Books
- Candice Swanepoel (Fashion Model)
- Clothes
- Comments
- Cooking
- Death
- Download festival
- Exercise

- Family
- Fast
- Fitness Friday
- Food diary
- Goal weight
- Goals
- Harcombe diet
- Hip impingement
- Illness
- Measurements
- Music
- Natural
- Panic
- Phase one
- Phase two
- Plateau
- Propoints
- Quotes
- Skinny Sunday
- Student
- Taylor Momsen
- The fast diet
- Therapy

- Thinspiration
- Weight
- Weight gain
- Weight loss
- Weird
- Wishes

The host of Not Another Teen Diet Blog is from the UK and often posts topics about her weight, where the members may comment. She also posts information about herself, “Introduction, 21. Student. Rock chick whose life revolves sadly around the numbers on the scale and the inches on her thighs. Cat lover. Engaged to the most perfect guy. Twitter: @LittleMissThin.” The blogs contain forums or sections where users can post and comment.

The researcher collected a series of posts and their respective comments from a six-week period. This period was selected because at the time of the study these were the newest posts and comments added to these three blogs. The researcher captured screen shots of the posts and comments to analyze later. Upon collecting all the data from the blogs, the researcher then used the constant comparison method to analyze the data guided by the Uses and Gratifications Theory.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher collected screen shots from the three-blog sites during the time of, August 1 – September 12, 2013. The blog posts selected for this study were the most recent posts made on the blog sites at the time of the sample collection. Originally, the researcher intended to select a sample size of a two-week period; however, one blog, Pretty Thin, had very limited detail during that two-week period so the sample size was expanded to six weeks of blog posts. In total 784

blog, posts were analyzed multiple times and categorized based on the research questions, 108 posts for Not Another Teen Diet Blog, 306 post for Pretty Thin and 370 for Pro Ana Nation.

Since the initial data collection, some of the blogs analyzed have changed or evolved into slightly different blogs. Specifically, some of the names have changed or the formats and layouts have also changed. The users set up a screen name and add a photo to their profile while using this site. Based on the profiles and screen names the posts used for this study were assumed female, although it is not certain this was always the case. Some users could be males but used a photo of a female as their profile photo. The researcher did not change screen names to protect the user's identities because the screen names did not specifically identify any specific individual and because the comments and screen names are already public. Most, if not all the screen names were assumed pseudo screen names.

Because these pro-ed blog sites are open to the public and the researcher was not contacting any of the users or commenting on any of the user sites, it was not required to obtain approval from the Internal Review Board. However, the researcher is certified through the Internal Review Board.

### **Analysis and Interpretation**

Upon completing data gathering, the researcher conducted a full analysis of the data. Analysis included organizing all the gathered data into the appropriate categories driven by the research questions. Categories included: become informed and gain knowledge, fulfill emotional needs, improve personal status, satisfy wants and needs, interact and socialize with others, escape, relax, enjoy, and withdraw. The researcher placed each comment into the category related to the comment. At times, one comment related to more than one category, so it was placed in all the categories that related. Comments were analyzed multiple times. The data were

then refined, thinned, and placed into themes, concepts and patterns. Labels stemmed from the reoccurrence of particular words used by the users on the blogs, e.g., “guilt” and “shame” were part of the dialogue by the users. After this process was completed, the information was interpreted and patterns and themes were inferred from the data (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2002). Although a large amount of data were gathered, not all the data were used, only data that were critical and advanced the research were kept in the results section, however all the data gathered was used in the discussion section, thus data reduction took place, and the information was prioritized according to emerging schemes of interpretation. The grounded theory approach involving constant comparison was used to code and analyze the data through three stages. The first stage consists of open coding, which involves examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing the data into as many categories as possible. Some categories took on their own concepts. The second stage is axial coding, which involves grouping the data based on patterns within the categories; selective coding which involves identifying and describing the main phenomenon or the overall theme from the data. Constant Comparison was used to make meaning of the data and develop conclusions (Starks & Trinidad, 2007 p. 1376, see also Dey, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). By using the constant comparison approach, the researcher was able to develop and generate new theories. Constant Comparison processes from the grounded theory approach was created by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967) and is “one of the most influential models for coding qualitative data” (p.218).

The researcher began a deductive process of reducing the data into categories according to the initial research questions. The deductive analysis approach gave the researcher a model to follow in the data analysis, which was based on the Uses and Gratifications theory (Wimmer & Dominick, 2012). The Uses and Gratifications Theory provided the researcher the categories to

place the data into. The themes, concepts and theories were used to conclude the research and are discussed later. (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2002). The data was not discarded; another category formed after the data was analyzed and placed into categories. This additional category included an inductive process, where the researcher examined the data and found several words, phrases and sentences that related to each other and formed themes that did not fall into the Uses and Gratifications categories (Lindlof, & Taylor, 2002). These themes and concepts were collected and discussed as emergent indications. The researcher used both deductive and inductive analysis to make meaning of the data. It is important in a qualitative study to include both the inductive and deductive analysis because the inductive development of themes allow the researcher to develop important theories that emerged after interpreting the data.

## RESULTS

Through the deductive analysis process, several themes emerged when the blogs were compared that fell into the categories based on the Uses and Gratifications theory.

### **RQ1: How do women use these pro-ed sites to become informed and gain knowledge?**

#### **(Cognitive needs)**

##### **Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

It seems the followers on this blog use this site to gain knowledge and become informed by asking other users for information on recipes, diets, and low-carb diets. For example, on Aug. 5, 2013, *o\_b\_l\_i\_v\_i\_o\_n*, posted asking if anyone had tried the low-carb diet and if anyone had any tips with achieving ketosis. According to *WebMD* (2016), Ketosis is a normal metabolic process, something your body does to keep working. Some people may restrict carbohydrates or eliminate them, forcing their body to use stored fat to burn for energy, which makes ketones. Ketones are formed when carbohydrates are deficient in the body (Collins Dictionary of Medicine, 2005). When the body is in a state of ketosis, the body will rely on fat instead of glucose from carbohydrates for energy. Ketosis is one way to burn fat through diet.

*o\_b\_l\_i\_v\_i\_o\_n* was interested in knowing how to achieve ketosis and asked for tips on achieving ketosis. She also included her plan of how she was going to go about obtaining ketosis. Users responded with recommendations advising against using the low-carb diet since it is hard to live on a low-carb diet and it is difficult to achieve a state of ketosis. Other users mentioned that many people gain weight when they go off this diet and recommend against it.

Other users asked about healthy organic and clean eating recipes, to which some users discussed vegan forums, salad recipes, and referenced some Facebook pages. It seems some

users may gain new or additional in depth-information from visiting some of these three blogs. For example, many may not understand this concept of ketosis and what it means to force the body into that physical state.

### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

Users on this blog used this forum to ask questions similar to the Pro Anna Nation blog. The users had questions about weight loss, supplements, diets, etc. Much like the questions posted on the first website, users asked questions about diet pills and supplements. On August 7, 2013, imTHERExx, posted a comment, “Any other good supplements ideal for weight loss and a healthy body? I’ve done some research but I’d rather hear it coming from someone who has actually used them.” Tiffany, responded with, “try liftoff by herbalife!! gives you TONS of energy and is pretty yummy.” Dani Kursnova, responded, “green tea pills and sleep is my best advice.”

One user posed a question about eating disorder recovery. On August 26, 2013, Jay, posted, “is there anyone that’s recovering or trying to recover?” one user, AndThen, responded to his question by saying,

“I think most people get to the point where they want to recover, all the self-hate, the constant obsessions, the inner voices, the amount of perfectly good space inside a person’s brain that’s taken up with thoughts of weight and food that could just as well be used for thinking about so many other things.

It’s like a person’s brain just gets wired in the ED mode, so there’s a lot of mental stuff to fight against when it comes to trying.” She suggested checking out the other pretty thin forums. It was rare to see posts by users asking for information regarding recovery centers. There could be a couple of reasons for this. Either users were not looking for that information, or they already knew where to find that information. After all, a majority of these blogs claim to be pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia based blogs. One explanation for the lack of comments about recovery

could be due to the data collected for this study. Out of all the data collected in this sample, there were very few that contained comments or posts about recovery and recovery centers. Other data samples could contain more comments and posts about recovery and recovery centers. It should be noted that some of these users confess the pain and agony in dealing with ED, as indicated in the comment by, AndThen. She claims there is so much mental capacity that is taken by all the self-hate and constant obsessions over food and body weight.

It is a little unclear why the users would choose these sites to gain knowledge and become informed about diets, recipes and healthy or clean eating information, when there are several other websites and blogs on the Internet that are more specific to clean eating, vegan lifestyle, diets, and healthy living. Other websites on these topics contain more information and are more specific. It could be that some of these women using these blogs come to these blogs out of habit and security so they post to a community they feel comfortable with. In other words, they would not necessarily seek out new blogs if they habitually visit the same blog routinely. Some of these women may be asking for diet tips and information out of desperation. They may not know where else to look or which sites are credible, trustworthy sources. It may seem obvious to some that women who suffer with eating disorders would know all the best diet tips, recipes, and sources for losing weight, therefore, some of these users may use these blogs for this type of information. Just as, I'mTHERExx, indicated on Pretty Thin, "...I've done some research but I'd rather hear it coming from someone who has actually used them." There is a certain level of trust pre-established with the users on these blog sites. The users may already believe that the other users know more about diets and supplements than other credible sources.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

It seemed the users on Not Another Teen Blog were not interested in using this site for information, rather the majority of the users would merely respond to posts by the blog host. The format of this blog is different from other blogs because the host guides it and users are not free to post to the blog but can respond to comments. The blog host seemed to use her blog as a sounding board to relate to the users. For instance on August 15, 2013, the blog host posed the question, “Ever had a day when you think you have a very limited diet?” to which some users responded. Users were limited to responding to what the blog host wanted to discuss. This makes understanding the reason for using this blog to gain knowledge or become informed a little unclear.

It was noted that on several occasions many of the girls throughout the blogs mention a book called, *Wasted*. *Wasted*, written by Marya Horbacher, is a memoir where Marya details her experience and struggles with anorexia and bulimia. Marya became bulimic in fourth grade and anorexic at age 15. She was in and out of hospitals and even an institution. *Wasted* is popular among those who struggle with anorexia and bulimia. The book also gained notoriety, becoming a *New York Times* best seller. This relates to research question one, which explains how women use these sites to become informed and gain knowledge, fulfilling their cognitive needs. The book *Wasted* may help many women learn about one woman’s struggles with eating disorders and how she eventually overcame them. It is likely that many women read this book to relate to someone who went through what they are currently experiencing.

By visiting the pages on these three blogs, users may gain new insight on extreme weight loss approaches such as ketosis. In addition, users have the advantage of learning through others

who have tried different weight loss methods, thus gaining knowledge on which ones work and which ones do not.

**RQ2: How do women use these pro-ed sites to fulfill their emotional needs? (Affective needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

Users of this blog seemed to use this site to vent or discuss their emotions, which could be a form of coping. Many of the users would post about their bad days, struggles, comments made by their parents, or they would post songs and poems.

One user, atsukof, mentioned in her post that she was feeling anxious and scared of gaining weight from “eating what is perceived as too much” (she ate an English muffin, 295 calories, and is now feeling anxious). The other users responded to her post saying that 295 calories is nothing and to not worry. Another user, edsurreal, mentioned the feeling of being in a desperate state of mind when you “just have to purge.” Her baby’s dad was in the shower and she decided to purge in front of him instead of trying to hide it and purge in a cup or bowl. Interestingly, another user responded by saying when she was camping in Canada she puked in bags. Her uncle was worried about the bags of puke because of bears. She said she did not sleep for a week and ends her post, “I swear to god, bulimia takes you to previously undiscovered depths. BEARS.” It seems these users were posting out of despair and upset.

User, danimalstitcher, posted on August 5 that her mom told her she looked fatter, which she understands her mom meant she looked better, healthier. The users responded to this post trying to make sense of what her mom really meant. One user said, “You are extremely the opposite of fat. You are emaciated!” It would seem in the pro ana/mia world, and in this case being called emaciated, is a compliment. Emaciation is often the achievable goal. Another user

commented, “fat shouldn’t be used anywhere near someone with an eating disorder.” Another user said he feels her pain; he went on to say that, “those sorts of comments can be triggering and can send you spiraling of extreme restricting.” Comments such as these where one person is called fatter or healthier could be construed as a major insult and indeed send someone with an eating disorder or body dimorphic disorder spiraling downward and often feeling out of control, which could begin the vicious cycle over again of restricting or bingeing and purging.

User, psychotic\_memor, posted a comment on August 5, 2013 about her loneliness and bad day; she discusses her purging and her struggles with her mom. She mentions, “I am so alone and I don’t want ‘in’ on life anymore; the joke has gotten old, I am tired of it now, can it all please end? It is so damn terrible that I can’t do it to myself.” Then she ends her post with saying,

“So sorry for the insane psycho-babble, but here is the only place I feel will lift me somewhat...I hope all of your days have been treating you great and that you are on top of the world because all of you beautiful souls deserve it. Xoxo.”

This user directly indicated that she uses this blog because it is a place where she feels comfortable enough to vent and open up about her struggles and emotions. Clearly, these women and men feel that these blogs are a safe place for them to open up and share their deepest thoughts and feelings, often sharing some deep secrets.

On August 5, 2013, maya6120, posted the recollection that, when she was nine or 10-years-old she would have diet books sprawled across the floor and she would make meal plans and diets adding up to 2,000 calories because that is what the books “told her to do.” She mentions she cried every day because the diets and meal plans were not working. Now as an adult, she still reads the books but now they are websites. She still cries every day when she does not reach her goals. This user specifically recalls at an early age of feeling the pressure to

count calories and make meal plans and to diet. Young girls are not immune to these pressures, which often begin very young around the puberty age.

User, Annabel\_lee91, posted a comment on August 5, 2013 that she binged on Chinese takeout and now she hates herself. She took laxatives but wants to avoid a family party. She said,

I know it's insane. I can't see my family. I can't go back until I have something to show them. Until I can prove that I am capable of doing...something...I know they love me...they didn't banish me, but I feel like I can't go home until I am worthy again. Anyone else feel like that?

To which many of the users respond they have felt that way. One common finding throughout all the blogs and comments is that the majority of the users and followers on the blog sites could relate to many of the comments by other users. It was noted on several occasions that one user would post a comment about their guilt or shame over eating or gaining weight, to which several users would respond with similar feelings and shared experiences.

Maya6120, said after one of her posts on the blog, "just my creative outlet" (after another user asked her if her post was real or fiction). It seemed several users would share their poetry, song lyrics, and journal entries with others on the blogs. Several of the users felt comfortable to share deep, personal thoughts and talents with total strangers. It may seem a little strange to post intimate thoughts on a public website where anyone can read the material; however, it is possible that for many people the websites make them feel comfortable and they will not be judged. One explanation for this could be the fact that the users do not see the other users on the blogs reading the comments and posts. If the blog users posting the content were faced with the other users reading the posts, they may not feel as comfortable to express such intimate details with each other. Another possible explanation for this could be that the users may feel the blogs serve as a place where they will not be judged and can open up and express any thought or feeling and no

one will criticize them for that. Some users may feel if they share those same thoughts and feelings with family members or friends, they could be faced with strong judgment, harsh criticism, or they may feel outcast and not accepted. As Borzekowski found, those suffering from an eating disorder may have difficulty relating with peers and as a result hide their disorders and behaviors out of shame (2010).

### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

On September 12, 2013, user, Julie Xiong, posted a comment about hating everything and everyone, she feels she is going insane and wishes she could run away. She does not explain why she is having these emotions, yet she seems to be venting. This type of comment was also very common throughout the blogs. Several users seemed to vent feelings of frustration, guilt, or feelings of being out of control.

On September 11, 2013, user Constantbattle, posted an entry about going out to eat with her friends. She was scared to order, was worried about receiving suspicious looks from friends. She orders an entrée with more than 1,000 calories of “pure filth” and ate everything. She proclaims that today was the day she was going to clean up her act. Now she proclaims she is going to start tomorrow, she will eat only whole foods for the remainder of the week. A similar comment by samanthakeefe, posts that she had a bad binge, consuming ice cream and cereal, then purging it all. She fears she did not get it all out. Now she is panicked she is going to gain weight. She ends her comment by saying she is going back to school the next day so that should help her to not eat. These types of comments were also very common throughout the blogs. Many women would post comments describing their disgust at the food they ate during the day or at one sitting. Often the comments would be followed by a proclamation to start over, to start eating better, and to never repeat the same act again. The women would express severe disgust

and vent as if they were sharing their sins with a religious leader. They punished themselves with words and commented as though they were non-deserving of any food; they also expressed severe concern and panic about the food and the potential weight gain.

On August 2, 2013, user, Julie Xlong, posts a comment about her family. She feels her family barely knows her. She thinks they do not know she is falling apart. She mentions crying every night after she purges and how much she hates herself. One user, Alicia Baker responds to, Julie Xiong, that she knows how she feels and that she lost so much weight and her family did not notice. She felt broken and hurt as if she “was just a dead person walking around.” The two girls mention to each other they are available for each other if one of them needs to talk. It is not uncommon for people struggling with an eating disorder or body image issues to keep it a secret and not confide in anyone, including those closest to them, such as friends or family members. What is interesting is that total strangers can open up and feel safe enough to share something so secretive, such as an eating disorder. It is likely these two users have never met each other and the chance of them every meeting is very unlikely, yet they will most likely continue to communicate and confide in each other about their struggles and their shame.

August 20, 2013, user, ChibiKirin, posts, “It’s no longer a want, but a need!” She cannot seem to lose a pound and she thinks she has gained weight.

This is no longer a wanting to lose the weight. No. It has turned into a NEED!!! I can’t stand myself!! When I look into the mirror, I disgust myself!! My gag reflex kicks in and I almost purge just by looking at myself!!! I can’t be intimate with my fiancé, because if I just so happen to walk past a mirror, I turn myself off and want to hurry and put my clothes back on!

She continues by saying she wants to change so she does not look like this on her wedding day. She does not want to see “a fat disgusting pig in my beautiful white wedding gown!!” Many women and men post comments about their disgust in their appearance. They

often speak very strongly about themselves. Perhaps posting a comment such as this to one of these blogs is a way for these users to vent and open up about their shameful feelings.

On September 2, 2013, user, Julie Xlong, posted a comment about going out with her boyfriend and that if she could take a knife and literally cut off her fat legs, chin, arms, thighs and stomach, she would. She second-guesses her boyfriend for being with her. Some users respond to her post, one in particular, ChibiKirin, posted this response, “I know EXACTLY how you feel. I so really do. I thought I was the only one who thought about cutting the fat off my legs, stomach and chin.” She continues and said her boyfriend said some really “mean and fucked up things” to her that she cannot let go now. Several girls post responses to this saying they feel the same way, and all of them can relate to her and her boyfriend.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

The blog host uses this blog to complain about her weight. On August 1, 2013, the blog host, Little Miss Thin, said, “The contents [of the blog] are currently just me whining and complaining and getting fat.” One blog follower, Fat Piggy, responds with,

“Even though you may just whine about being fat (like we all seem to do)—this is still your truth and you shouldn’t try to hide it, delete it or deny it. We are here for you and at least it is one place where your truth is welcome.”

Another follower, Sam Lupin, responded with, “I love reading people’s blogs. It makes me sad when you deleted your stuff last time because I hadn’t had a proper chance to read through!”

Little Miss Thin, also states how she uses social media to fulfill emotional needs, on August 2, 2013 she posted, “If you read my Twitter, I was rather panicked—that thing is a lifeline when I have a food panic!” Later she posted, “Even on break I want to blog, to scatter my thoughts about...,” her followers responded saying they are so happy when she posts. Based on

her comments it sounds, as though, Little Miss Thin, is addicted to using social media as a way to connect to others and express herself. Her comment about Twitter being a lifeline sounds as though she uses Twitter whenever she needs to write about her food issues. It is possible that when she uses Twitter while she is having a “food panic” and that she will receive several encouraging or supportive comments and Tweets back. She mentions blogging to scatter her thoughts about; perhaps this is her way of journaling or connecting with others who may offer her some feedback. Little Miss Thin has made blogging and tweeting a habit and a part of her routine when it comes to food.

Many of the girls on these blogs speak as if they are in disbelief that they have a boyfriend or that someone actually likes them. They post comments as if they are undeserving of being with someone because of their body. It is possible that these users reach out to others on these sites for reassurance or fulfill some emotional needs. Maybe they are hoping someone will reassure them that they are feeling insecure and modest. On the other hand, perhaps they reach out to other users on the blogs because they do not love themselves and cannot believe someone could like them or love them back.

If the followers on these blogs were using these blogs as a means to express their feelings, vent or for therapeutic reasons, it would explain why some users would post poems, song lyrics, and art on the blogs. Perhaps the users would post their poems, songs, and art as a way to express their feelings, loneliness, struggles, and frustration. The blogs also seemed to serve as a place where women could show their artistic and lonely side, which also fulfill their emotional and affective needs. It seems the majority of the users of these blog sites use these sites as a diary or to journal, often posting comments about their struggles, bad days, relationship issues, family problems or just to vent. Many of the users posted about the shame they feel toward their

body, the frustrations they experience in not losing more weight, and the envy they feel when they walk through the halls in high school and see girls who are skinnier than they are. Many women mention the frustration and shame they feel about their bodies, perhaps these blogs offer a place for them to express their feelings, fulfilling their emotional and affective needs as related to research question two. The users of the blog, Pretty Thin, seem to use the blog to vent, connect with others, and journal their emotions, frustrations, disappointments, etc. It was noted that the users on the Pro Ana Nation blog were more expressive than any of the other blogs. Users on the Pro Ana Nation blog posted journal entries, song lyrics, and poems. One possible explanation for this could be the format of this blog. Unlike Not Another Teen Diet Blog, the host of the Pro Ana blog was not the main author, and allowed all users to post and comment as often as desired.

**RQ3: How do women use pro-ed sites to improve their personal status? (Personal Integrative needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

On August 9, 2013 user, Laughoutloud27, posts a comment that she is going to Hollywood to see a concert. She had a goal to lose weight in time for the concert but she did not meet her goal weight and now she feels she failed and does not deserve to have fun. Users may not directly indicate that they want to improve their personal status through improving their body, but in some ways, they could be placing a high importance on how they look and therefore feel a different status. The goal of losing weight prior to a vacation is not uncommon for most people and it was a common theme throughout the research data. Another common theme found throughout the research is the guilt they would feel, or the need to deprive themselves of fun because they failed to meet their goal weight. Laughoutloud27 has made up her mind in advance

of her vacation that she does not deserve to enjoy her vacation or have fun because she did not meet her goal weight. The irony is most people go on vacation to have fun and to take a break; this user is going on vacation and is punishing herself because she failed to meet her weight loss goal. Some people may feel a little discouraged or let down by the fact that they did not meet their goal weight for a vacation, but most people usually still find a way to enjoy the vacation and have fun. Declaring to yourself that you do not deserve to have fun because you failed to meet your goal weight is extreme thinking.

Two users mentioned shopping in the little girls section for clothes because it is cheaper and they can fit into the clothes. The users almost brag in a sense about being able to fit into children's clothes. One user said, "Being able to buy kids clothes is a perk." The irony about this statement is that most of these users want thin, almost prepubescent bodies that resemble children. Being able to fit into smaller clothing does not necessarily mean these users are trying to improve their personal status, nor does that mean they are using this site to improve their personal status. Rather, they may discuss the fact that they can fit into children's clothes because in a sense it makes them feel better. Perhaps in some way these users think that if they can fit into kids' clothes then they have reached their goal and accomplished their body size. These users may feel a sense of accomplishment since children's clothes are much smaller sizes than adult size clothes.

### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

It does not appear that the users on this site use this blog to improve their personal status. The only indication or mention of improving a personal status is this comment made by imTHERExx, on August 7, 2013; she posted a comment about her best friend getting pregnant at age 21 and getting married to a man after only knowing him less than a year. She writes,

Her and I also have something we do. Never say it directly to each other's faces, but it's like a secret competition to who can be better in shape and thinner and whatnot. The fact that after she has the baby and her body is going to be huge. For some SICK reason it makes me a little happy knowing I'll be the thinner one by a long shot. I do not know why. But it does. I'm a horrible person I guess.

It seems, imTHERExx, both disapproves of her best friend getting married and pregnant at such a young age but also gets some gratification out of the fact that she will be thinner while her friend is gaining weight during her pregnancy. She is secretly competitive with her friend. She may be feeling she is "better" or "skinnier" than her friend is.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

There was no indication of the followers or host using the blog to improve personal status. Little Miss Thin, posted on August 2, 2013 that she is struggling for money and that her mother had to purchase food for her for the next two weeks, she says, "Oh, for a rich family." Then later she posted, "I've made a decision not to be fat any more. I want to be able to pass myself off as a chic and professional if the situation requires it, I think." This comment is not uncommon; many young women think they need to be thin to be professional or chic. She goes on to talk about her identity, stating she does not know who she is anymore. One of her followers, The Dancer, responds to her post about her identity, saying she understands how she feels and says,

"Do what you want and what you're comfortable in and fuck the haters? Confidence makes you look older. :P you CAN do this. You absolutely can. You have the willpower. And the strength. And the determination. It'll happen."

It is possible these users learned over time that in order to feel or come across as professional or chic is to be thin. This comment resembles what Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) said about women feeling and believing that in order to influence their life experiences they must look good, as such; they view their bodies as articles of trade.

It seemed the users on these sites experience very low self-esteem, based on many of the self-defeating comments. They judge their value, self-worth, and success by the appearance of their body. Any slip up, whether it is minor or major; they beat and berate themselves to others over social media.

A common theme throughout the blogs were the images of thin women used as the profile photos. Based on the screen shots taken from the blogs, the profile photos of the majority of the users are of models, celebrities, dinner plate and fork, Victoria secret models, or extremely thin women. Most likely, these images were expressions of items they struggle with or people they idealize or aspire to look like. Many of the women posted photos of the thin models and celebrities on the blogs almost as if the image or person is a standard to live by, which could be a way to improve their personal status.

It was noted that, several times throughout the comments on the blogs, users post comments or mention the pressures of being thin at school and how school helps to distract them. For instance, one user, Anna, posted on September 1, 2013,

“School has motivated me beyond belief. The anxiety I feel when around anyone on campus is unbearable. Do they see the fat, beneath my bra under my arms? Can they tell I’m sucking in? Are my jeans too tight?”

This comment could help us answer how women are using these sites to improve their personal status. This particular user mentions that school motivates her to improve herself. It seems she is very concerned about what others around her are thinking about her and how they may perceive her. Other pressures noted included upcoming weddings. Several users mentioned their looming wedding date and the pressure they felt to fit into their dress and look great on their wedding day, as related to question three, improving personal status-personal integrative needs.

**RQ4: How do women use pro-ed sites to satisfy their wants and needs? (Personal Integrative needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

It seems users of this site satisfy their wants and needs by using this blog as a way to vent their feelings. Often the users will write a long paragraph about their day or their current feelings, then end the paragraph apologizing for writing, and then express their gratitude for the site. The users often indicate the blog is the only place they feel they can vent, or, as one user stated, “My creative outlet.” One user posts, “Needing support has nothing to do with not being strong enough. Admitting that you need help takes a huge amount of strength. I think you should win. Not your ED – YOU.” Some of the users mention the “need” to seek help from a professional, but very few actually blog or comment about the help they have sought.

One user posted about turning down some food that was offered to her by her husband. She said she turned it down because she felt fat and needs to lose some weight. Interestingly, this user uses the word “needs” and not “wants.” She needs to lose weight, not that she would like to lose weight or she wants to lose weight. Expressing a need to lose weight sounds serious, and perhaps to some degree, life threatening. There is a lack of desire rather a strong sense of desperation when users say they need to lose weight.

One user asked if she should tell a boy she started dating about her anorexia. The other users gave her their opinion and she responded with, “thanks, that’s what I needed.” Another reason these users may use these sites is for advice. Some of the users ask questions and seek advice on many topics ranging from relationships, money, family, and eating disorders.

Another user mentions she is going into treatment and is excited and nervous, to which others responded with words of encouragement and support. One specific user wished her luck

and said if she needs anything than she can reach out to her since she has been through treatment before. On August 12, 2013, one user posted about rejoining the ED community and forum—she was feeling alone and wanted to talk to others who have gone through ED as well. This was a common theme throughout the data. Many women indicated needs and wants, ranging from wanting to be thinner to needing to lose weight, wanting someone to talk to, or needing someone who could understand.

On August 12, 2013 user, jessa\_babe, posted about getting engaged and purging for the first time in months. She mentions that she does not want “out” of her disorder because she does not want to be a fat bride. Another user responded that she felt the same way and wants to be healthy going into her marriage. Interestingly, some users mention purging and healthy in the same comment, as though they believe if they purge and lose weight it means they are healthy. Jessa\_babe does not want to get better or to “get out” of her disorder for fear of suddenly becoming fat. Clearly, these users feel the pressure of their weddings to not look fat and that is driving their disorders, but many of the users believe disorders are the only way to look skinny or healthy.

In some sense, it seems that users used this blog to satisfy some level of wants and needs. They expressed their wants, needs, and desires, but they did not directly state that the blog was satisfying their wants and needs. In general, the users of this site would use this site to express their needs and wants from others, or in other means but did not specifically indicate that the blog was helping them to satisfy their wants and needs.

### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

Many of the users express their desperate need to lose weight, rather than a casual wish or a desire to lose weight. For example, on August 20, 2013, ChibiKirin, posted a comment, that

she no longer wants to lose the weight, but it has now turned into a need. She mentions she cannot stand looking in the mirror and it disgusts her to do so. She also mentions that something needs to change and she had better not look like this on her wedding day. In response to her post, apw51, said, “Breathe, you’ll get there. Start slowly. Remember you have done this before. Do not give up. Keep envisioning your wedding day.” Several of the other users on this blog mention to others that they are there for them if they ever need someone to listen to them.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

Little Miss Thin, posted on August 7, 2013, “All my dreams recently keep swinging back to changes within myself. Negativity needing to change and such. I’m thinking it’s very much linked with my fat ass. More on that in the future.” She continues posting,

I’ve also been dreaming of being ultra-thin. Like 98, lbs. thin. The thought is so inviting. The more I think about it, the fatter my goal weight seems. I just want thin. Thin, thin, thin. I’m also tempted by the sick idea that if I get too thin my periods will stop without needing to go back to the injection. They’ve been coming back since I had an implant – every three months for three weeks.

Little Miss Thin, expresses a great desire to lose weight and become very thin. She mentions she needs to change but does not elaborate exactly what she needs to change. Many of the users write about their deep wants and needs.

It seems women may use these sites to vent about their lack of personal status. One shocking comment posted on the Pro Ana Blog, “I’ve started smoking as after 11 years of b/ping (binging and purging) up to 42 times a day...” –glam-gem. The user did not expand on this comment. It is possible this woman uses smoking as an alternative to binging and purging, substituting one unhealthy behavior for another, which would fulfill her personal integrative needs of needing to satisfy, wants and needs as related in research question four.

**RQ5: How do women use pro-ed sites to interact and socialize with others? (Social Integrative needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

The users on this blog seem to use this site to interact with others, ask for advice, vent, seek out support, ask questions, relate to each other, etc. For example: On August 7, 2013 user, abcisme, posted that her husband and all her friends are tired of hearing her talk about food and weight all the time so that is why she comes here. [The pro ana nation blog]. This quite possibly could be another explanation for how and why these followers use these blogs and sites to discuss their eating behaviors, weight, and food. Some users may feel isolated or unwelcome to share their thoughts with others so they use these sites to do so.

Users ask the other users on this site myriad questions about; diets, about ketosis, about low-carb diets, comments made by parents, friends or loved ones, about triggers, career changes, eating disorders, pregnancy, depression, recipes, being vegan, in-patient treatment, bulimia, eating habits, anorexia, eating and meal portions, loneliness, suicide, struggles at home, stress, bingeing, work, pressures, share poetry or stories, and struggles with eating, relationships, and school.

**Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

In general, it seems all these users on this site use this blog to vent, express their frustrations, talk about success or failures, share information, or to journal. One girl talks about her frustrations with her family and how they do not notice her. One user responded that she knows how she feels, she mentioned at the end of her comment that if she ever needed someone to talk to, she would be there. The girl responded, “same here, if you ever need anyone to listen to she would be there.”

One user, My jacket, posted a comment on August 9, 2013 about restricting her calories between 360 and 450. In her post she said, “I don’t know if anyone really cares to hear about all this but since I can’t tell anyone else about my progress...lol.” A couple users did respond to Myjacket’s post about how to contain the urge to eat cupcakes and what to eat instead. Some users may visit the sites to connect with others who will offer them support or steer them in a different direction, whereas their friends and family may not. My jacket, mentions she cannot tell anyone else about her progress, which could indicate lack of support from close friends, and family, which would explain why she would choose to visit this site to tell strangers about her progress. With these sites, the other users seem to accept, embrace, and encourage others, especially when it comes to progress.

Another user, Samanthakeefe, posted that she had a bad binge eating ice cream and cereal, and then ended up purging it all. She ends her post by saying she will be going back to school and that should help her to not eat. Several users responded to this post by saying they too use school as a means to help control their food intake. Most of them state school helped to keep their mind off food because it kept them busy. One user, Anna, responded, saying that school motivated her beyond belief because the anxiety she feels when she is around anyone on campus is unbearable. She wonders if others see the fat under her arms and if they can tell she is sucking in, or if her jeans are too tight. It seems that Samanthakeefe struggles with controlling her weight, and struggles when she is at school. She mentions the anxiety she feels when she is on campus and all the negative thoughts she believes people are thinking of her. It is possible ‘Samanthakeefe’ uses this site to connect with others and seek out those who also suffer from similar anxiety at school and feeling out of control.

One comment made on August 26, 2013 by, Jay, states, “is there anyone that’s recovering or trying to recover?” This comment may have been meant to connect with someone who is recovering, or it could be a question of whether anyone on this site is using it for recovery, or if they are using it to assist their eating disorder. Rarely did someone mention recovery, and if they did, it usually was a short comment thread where users either mentioned they were about to go into recovery, or they already went into recovery.

One user on September 2, 2013 mentions how she wants to take a knife and literally cut off her fat legs, chin, arms and stomach. Many users responded to this comment that they know how she feels. One user said she thought she was the only one that thought about cutting the fat off her. Another user said she is glad they can relate to one another. Another user said she has the exact same problem and that the user explained her thoughts so clearly. It seems these users are relieved and happy to relate to others that are struggling with the same thoughts and issues. Many of them express the surprise and shock that they are not alone in their thinking. These users could visit the sites to find others that think the same way and engage in some of the same behaviors.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

The blog host poses questions on her blog to her blog followers, mostly asking questions about social media, what sites are good to use, if she should keep her blog, and the blog followers respond to her questions about social media. She also interacts with the blog followers about her diet. She posts her diet plans, and her desire to lose weight. On August 7, 2013, she posts her goals to lose 15 pounds, run 15 minutes straight and fit into clothes. On August 2, 2013, the blog host thanks all her followers for being there. Blog followers comment to her posts with cooking tips and respond to her comments about losing weight and watching diet

documentaries. Most of the followers respond with words of support, and some respond with sympathy over her financial problems. The host of this blog interacts with her followers quite a bit. She often poses questions and responds to comments on her blog. It seems almost as though the blog host sees her followers as fans--keeping them apprised of things going on in her life, her current weight loss and weight goals. She is developing more of a one-way relationship; her followers learn more about her than she learns about her followers. This blog is set up in such a way that she is in control of the content, and the audience base is only allowed to react. On some level, this blog host must receive some sort of social fulfillment by being the navigator and controlling the content, blog, and responses. There was little interaction from the followers with one another; the followers mostly interacted with the blog host solely.

Overall, it seems the users of these blogs are unkind to themselves, but are very kind to others. They will write about how much they hate their body or life but when it comes to responding to another user, they will comment about how beautiful that person is and how they have a reason to live. Many of the users on the blogs would engage in "Fat Talk" which is a form of negative, destructive talk about one's body (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994). It seems women may use these sites to vent about their bodies, and to interact and socialize with others. A common theme or comment that was mentioned throughout the blogs is how these women can drive people around them "crazy" with all the fat loss talk. User, Kaffy123, on the Pro Ana Nation blog said,

"My husband offered me some food today, I turned it down...he got all pissy and told me not to talk to him about food anymore because he's sick and tired of hearing me go on about my weight...I didn't realize I was driving everyone crazy with it."

This idea that friends and family are tired of hearing about weight loss could be another reason that women feel compelled to use these blogs. In using these blogs, comments such as

these and vents about food, weight loss, and lack thereof, are welcomed and women are never shamed for talking about fat or food. One user, Jaemil, wrote the reason she used the Pro Ana Nation blog is to “spew venom and not be judged.” She mentions she does not want to feel as though she has to “be politically correct” and that is why she blogs on Pro Ana Nation. According to one user, she uses the blog to feel free to express herself and not worry about judgment or anyone getting upset.

Yet another apparent discovery was one blog follower mentions this notion of what she calls “normal people.” To her, normal people indulge [in eating] on vacations, celebrations, etc., then return to their normal diets and normal weights. The user does not go into much detail, nor does she define this concept of normal people. It is possible this user will feel much like an outsider, possibly viewing the world and others as if they are all normal and she is not.

#### **RQ6: How do women use pro-ed sites to escape? (Tension Free needs)**

##### **Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

One user on this blog posted on August 13, 2013 by keepasecret, a poem titled, “Relationship with Ana”, which talks about a tall, thin girl named Ana. The poem is a deep, dark narrative of a girl, Ana, who entices other girls to restrict and starve until they reach their graves. Another user on this blog does not directly indicate that she uses this blog to escape, however she mentions in a long post, that she took XTC, or the drug ecstasy, again. She mentions she takes it when she feels depressed. She said it makes her feel happy and complete again.

##### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

The only indication that blog users use this blog to escape is indicated in a post on September 8, 2013 by Vanessa who posts that she complains to her boyfriend about her weight and her body dissatisfaction and that he does not like to hear her put herself down. She then

mentions she joined this blog site so she can share her complaints with someone. After Vanessa's post, Julie Xiong, responds, saying she needed a place to tell her story or write her thoughts. Perhaps some users visit these sites as a way to escape from their pressures, including journaling. It is possible these users comment on these sites as a mean to alleviate all their feelings and emotions. These sites could offer a reprieve for some users, whether they realize it or not.

### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

There were very few indications that the blog user and blog followers use this blog to escape. One comment the blog user made on August 2, 2013 was that even when she takes a break from blogging, she still wants to blog and "scatter her thoughts around."

### **RQ7: How do women use pro-ed sites to relax? (Tension Free needs)**

#### **Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

Users may not necessarily use this blog to relax. Rather, they may use this blog to receive some reassurance, or users may encourage others to not worry about things. For example, one user was worried about eating an English muffin at 295 calories. One user responded that 295 calories is nothing, and she should not worry too much because she will not gain weight.

#### **Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

There was no indication that the users of this site use this blog to relax or for relaxation. They mention drinking tea and dating, but no mention of relaxing.

#### **Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

From the data collected and analyzed, it did not appear that neither the blog host nor the blog followers used this blog as a means to relax, although they talk about relaxing. Miss Thin

posted on August 2, 2013, “I’m feeling really in the zone right now. I pray this good feeling lasts because, without wanting to be egotistical, I deserve it.” She goes one to say she feels calm about having her mom pay for her groceries and prescription.

**RQ8: How do women use pro-ed sites to enjoy? (Tension Free needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

There was no direct indication that the users of this blog use the blog as a means of enjoyment, however many of the users would communicate back and forth on commonalities and similar interests. Often the users would relate on a similar topic and mention that comments would make them chuckle or laugh, which could be assumed they are enjoying the current conversation taking place. Some users mention concerts they are going to attend and vacations they have planned, which are means of enjoyment.

**Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

There was no real indication that users of this blog use the blog for enjoyment.

**Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

From the data collected and analyzed, it did not appear that either the blog host or the blog followers necessarily used this blog for enjoyment. This excerpt, noted earlier, also applies here. Little Miss Thin, posted on August 2, 2013, “I’m feeling really in the zone right now. I pray this good feeling lasts because, without wanting to be egotistical, I deserve it.” She goes on to say she feels calm about having her mom pay for her groceries and prescription. Little Miss Thin, expresses some feelings of relief but she does not directly indicate that she uses this blog for enjoyment. It can be assumed that she enjoys this blog since she is the creator of it and continues to post to it, but her blog reads more as a journal versus a place where she finds enjoyment.

Overall, there was little indication from the three blogs that the users follow these blogs for a means of enjoyment specifically. It seems some of the users related to each other on the blogs but none of the users discussed the blogs adding to their personal enjoyment.

**RQ9: How do women use pro-ed sites to withdraw? (Tension free needs)**

**Blog #1 Pro Ana Nation:**

The only indications that followers use this blog to withdraw are posts by some users that include poems, song lyrics, or comments indicating that this site is their “creative outlet.” However, there was little indication that followers use this blog to withdraw.

**Blog #2 Pretty Thin:**

There was no real indication that users of this blog use the blog to withdraw.

**Blog #3 Not Another Teen Diet Blog:**

Little Miss Thin, and blog follower, Fat Piggy, discusses between blog posts the idea of Little Miss Thin dropping her blog or taking a leave of absence. There is no other indication of the blog host or followers using the blog as a means to withdraw. The blog followers talk about withdrawing from the blog and deleting the contents, but not necessarily using the blog to withdraw.

Overall, there was little indication from the three blogs that the users follow these blogs to withdraw. It seems these users follow the blogs for many other reasons but not to withdraw.

## EMERGENT INDICATIONS

Through the deductive and inductive data analysis process, several concepts and themes emerged when the blogs were compared that did not seem to fit the Uses and Gratifications assumptions. This section is the result of the inductive analysis and the themes that emerged from the data.

One particularly important emergent theme that did not fall under a Uses and Gratifications category was a concept that came to be labeled “support.” Although these sites are pro-eating disorder, the users are generally supportive of others about losing weight the healthy way and not by starving or purging. For example, often users would post a self-defeating comment or a comment about a struggle currently going on in their life, about their eating disorder, relationships, money or family; other users would respond with a supportive comments and offer to listen to the other person more if they needed. Specifically, the users on the Pro Ana blog seem to have an incredible sense of compassion, sympathy and support for each other. Several of their comments include the words: sorry, hugs, and if you need to talk, I’m here. There was rarely ever any judgment, opinions, or criticism of the users on this site. On August 12, 2013, Tia Renee posts on the Pretty Thin blog a response to a user who is venting about cupcakes. The user commented that she hates cupcakes and always will. She did not give into eating the red velvet cupcakes. Tia Renee writes, “Don’t be a fatass and cave into cupcakes. They’re not worth the weight. Just, when you get tempted, look at your thighs, then put down the food.” This type of comment could be considered a motivational, supportive, or uplifting comment to this user. Much like the thinspirational videos that feature emaciated models and phrases, this type of comment is very similar to the comments posted in the thinspirational videos. In the

same comment, another user posted a comment, “There are so much more less fatty food you can eat instead of junk food like cupcakes, they may taste good at the time but afterwards it’ll make you feel sick for giving in. Eating fruit or yogurt or drinking water would be so much better for you. Say no to the junk food, good for you, keep it up.” This type of comment would seem to be a supportive form of encouragement to not give into temptation; however, comments similar to the fatass comment are very common and used often to inspire others. It seems users would post comments similar to this on these blogs to reach out to others for support. They encourage each other to stay strong; they remind each other of how beautiful they are. In general, the users are sympathetic and empathetic with each other.

Many users on the Pro Ana blog mentioned their deep obsessive thoughts about their bodies, weight, and eating. “It’s an obsession the thoughts can’t help but spill out sometimes.” –affy123, “I have no idea why I talk about it so much, I guess because it’s always on my mind it just slips out.” –gi\_interrupted, “for me it’s the routine of the ED that I crave, the idea that something is going to stay the same and be okay.” –xprettylostx, “This stuff almost fills up my mind. It rules my thoughts, my dreams and plans.” –rainbowgirl5964; “I am at war with my mind and my body and I don’t know who to let win.” –amarillobarbie. The users on these sites reinforce the societal pressures to be thin but often struggle daily to obtain their personal level of thinness. Many women made similar comments about the obsessive thoughts. Perhaps posting comments such as these on blogs could be therapeutic or offer an outlet to express their often-obsessive thoughts.

Another theme that inductively emerged from the data is the observation that some of the young women on these sites would verbally abuse and diminish friends and other girls at school who were skinnier or who had recently lost weight. However, when one user would complain about slipping up or being fat, the same users would show support and offer words of

encouragement. It seems when it comes to body image and achieving the perfect body, it can be contradictory. One user on the pro ana nation blog, neverlookback15' posted a comment that she feels weight is more than a number, to her it is proof whether she is weak, attractive, or in her words, "weight is everything. I rely on it to define every single thing about who I am." Similar to what Bordo (1993) mentions about women feeling that they are judged on their appearance and their body equates to value, lazy, inadequate, or out of control.

Finally, one other concept emerged which seemed to fall outside of the research questions, is this thought that many of the women on these blogs believe they are "bad" at having an eating disorder. Meaning they believe they are not successful at being anorexic or bulimic. Many women in this community feel such failure at losing weight and starvation and purging. There is an idea that women think they cannot get anorexia and bulimia right. Laughouloud27, said, "I have this ED and so does everyone else on this community who weigh less than I do. My mind thinks, "This person has the same disorder that I have yet I am still much bigger. I am a failure at even being sick." There is also a certain level of envy among the ED community. Many women envy and admire other women who have "successfully" become extremely anorexic or bulimic. Often these women compare themselves to the women who are obviously anorexic and bulimic. There is a sense of not being as good as they are at this disease.

## CONCLUSION

Contrary to what may seem as though an obvious justification as to why these women are using these blogs—what really seemed to be the overall reason women use these sites—was for support. Most women were seeking support in every aspect of their life ranging from; support in their eating disorder, their dysfunctional home, in losing weight, recovery from an eating disorder, pregnancy, self-mutilation, quitting smoking, career changes or career decisions, relationships with men, parents, and/or friends, loneliness, money problems, working out, school pressures or stress, family issues, bad days, food struggles, diet plateaus, depression, or suicide. Support comes in many forms, and as we see from this study, support comes in many forums.

Researchers Albrecht & Adelman claim social support can “promote self-acceptance, self-esteem and satisfies needs for affection, intimacy and communication with others (1987 p. 177; see also Ogle, Park, Damhorst & Bradley, 2015). Many of the users on the blogs posted comments about not feeling accepted by family, friends, and peers. It is possible the blogs offer a forum for these users to find the acceptance and social support they need. Researchers believe social support may help individuals gain control over their situations specifically in relation to health conditions (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987, p. 177; Thoits, 1983; see also Ogle et al. 2015). This would help explain why so many women turn to the eating disorder blogs for answers and for support.

According to Bambina, there are four forms of social support; emotional/affective, informational, instrumental and companionship (2007, p. 177; see also Ogle et al, 2015.) Emotional/affective support includes love, encouragement, empathy, sympathy and concern (Ogle et al. 2015). Informational support includes offering guidance, facts or solutions to

problems (Bambina, 2007; Thoits, 2011; see also Ogle et al. 2015). Instrumental support involves offering assistance with tasks, problems or responsibilities (Bambina, 2007; Thoits, 2011; see also Ogle et al. 2015). Companionship involves convincing others that they are important and a part of something bigger (Bambina, 2007; Wellman & Wortley, 1990; see also Ogle et al. 2015). Out of all the forms of support, the two that seem to resonate with the research in this study are emotional/affective support and informational support. These two forms of support offer some explanations for the motivation in using these sites. We can also understand more about the women who use these sites and the struggles they experience. As stated earlier, it is clear that many women use these sites for information, facts and/or solutions. Whether they are looking for solutions with their eating disorder or information and solutions for other areas in their life, these blogs offer a community full of information on a myriad of topics. The women using these sites also seem to offer encouragement, love, sympathy to others posting on the sites who seem to be struggling or sad. One of the appealing characteristics of these sites for many is the opportunity to connect with “like others.” Researcher Thoits categorized the different groups of supporters, health professionals, like others and close others (Thoits, 2011; see also Ogle et al. 2015). It is unlikely that these women are seeking support or help from health professionals, however some could be. It is more likely that women would connect with others like them because it is easier to connect with someone who understands what you are experiencing.

Perhaps some of the women using these sites managed the stress stemming from their eating disorders and life stresses through different coping methods. As seen with patients who had recently undergone bariatric surgery, many of them managed their stress from the surgery by using different coping methods (Ogle & Park, 2016). Coping is conceptualized as the cognitive and behavioral methods that people may use to manage stress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980;

Lazarus & Folkman 1988). One of the ways in which people use coping strategies is through seeking and providing social support. In some sense, these online blogs could be viewed as support groups, where individuals can go and either find the support they are looking for or to offer support to someone who maybe experiencing a hardship. In other cases, it seemed that some users would use another coping method, voluntary nondisclosure, which involves not sharing their eating disorder to family and friends. One reason people may choose not to disclose their eating disorder or eating disorder behavior to their close ones could come from a place of not upsetting or worrying their loved ones (Ogle & Park, 2016 p. 38). Some users could also use voluntary nondisclosure for fear that others may try to intervene or prevent them from engaging in their eating disordered behaviors. However, what we tend to see on the eating disorder blogs is a community of disclosure. Many of the users share their experiences, fears and challenges of their eating disorder, body image disorders with the online community they are engaging with. Here it seems the users feel safe to disclose such feelings. Others may be selective with who they share information about their eating disorder, out of fear of being judged or shamed. As Borzekowski et al., indicated, those suffering from an eating disorder may hide their eating disorders if they feel their peers will not be able to relate (2010). Another coping method some of the women may use is screening. Screening involves avoiding stressful situations and conversations with those that may not understand or threaten their well-being (Aspinwall, 2011; Ogle & Park, 2016). Users screen whom they encounter or limit their encounters with certain individuals if they feel they their interactions with these individuals will be negative or posse the potential to sabotage their eating disorder efforts.

As a contemporary woman and the researcher, what I experienced while conducting this research resonated with me. I have faced the same challenges as many of these women have

when it comes to body image, societal pressures, feeling alone and eating disorders. What I found when I started this thesis, is when I would tell people about the topic, many people thought these blogs encouraged the recovery of an eating disorder, which seemed positive. However, when I explained that the blogs encourage anorexia and bulimia eating disordered behavior, they would look shocked and quickly mention that they believe these blogs would be negative. Then they would usually want to know more about the blogs and were generally intrigued and appalled that such sites existed. I initially set out believing that in many ways these blogs would be harmful and negative. I was surprised at my findings; these blogs are actually positive in many ways and offer a community full of support and a place where women can relate. On a personal note, I related too many of the comments made on these sites. I view these blogs differently now after conducting this research. I now understand more of why women use these sites and I do not feel alone in my challenges with my own body.

### **Limitations**

Since this is a qualitative study and the researcher did not interact with the users directly, the researcher can only provide indications, for future research. There is some risk that the users studied on these blogs could be lying or not completely honest in their comments, or they could hold back information or feelings. Since the researcher did not directly interact or contact the participants, the conclusions and concepts are the interpretations of the researcher.

There is a certain level of risk researchers' face when conducting studies on blogs or websites. Blogs and websites often change or are removed or taken down. It is not uncommon for website domains to expire, go dormant, change, or sometimes be removed by the domain host for the content posted. When pro-ana/mia blogs first started appearing, they were often quickly shut down by the blog domains because of the content. Another possible factor could be the blog

hosts may decide to remove or suspend their blog or website for a period of time, or indefinitely for privacy concerns, secrecy, or the lack of motivation to continue updating and posting to the blogs.

The material gathered for this study took place in 2012 at the beginning of the initial study. Since then, two of the blogs used in this study changed. Website #2, Pretty Thin website link, is no longer active. The link to prettythin.com will take users to a static hosting page. However, a Google search for the blog, Pretty Thin, will result in similar blogs such as, Pretty Thin Again, Pretty Thin 2 be, and one blog, prettythin.webs.com. Pretty Thin.webs.com claims to be the original Pretty Thin website. The blog host posted on the home page of this site that the original thin domain expired. The blog host is contemplating changing the Pretty Thin blog site. Some of the additions the blog host would like to incorporate include new user profiles, responses to the new content, and a section for user's stories. The blog host indicated the option to allow other users to contribute content to the blog. Similar to the blog, Pretty Thin, the blog host of Not Another Teen Diet has recently changed the name of the blog to, "Running on Caffeine." The blog host posted a message to the followers on the blog that she updated the look of the blog because she feels she has "outgrown" the tastes of the blog, now in its fourth year. She mentions the fact that she started Not Another Teen Diet blog when she was 19. She is now 24. The blog host also mentions she decided to change the name because she lives for coffee, and running is her preferred form of cardio. She thinks the new name reflects who she is now more than the old name did. In addition to the new look and name change, the blog hosts said, as an added feature, she would begin to respond to comments posted on her blog.

In using Uses and Gratifications theory to help understand and explain this study, this theory proved to help understand and explain the usage of these blog sites. However, I would

recommend that future Uses and Gratifications researchers utilize an additional category of that of “support.” As discussed, my research indicates that some people may seek and provide support in their use of these social media sites. This would include either support in their eating disorder, their dysfunctional home, in losing weight, recovery from an eating disorder, pregnancy, self-mutilation, quitting smoking, career changes or decisions, relationships, loneliness, plateaus, depression, or suicide. Support is possibly overlooked but just as important. People may use social media, television, and the web to seek out entertainment or information, but also quite possibly for support. Another category to consider including in Uses of Gratifications based research would be the concept of “relation.” Many of these users seem to follow and use these blogs to relate. The users would use the blogs to relate to each other, relate their situations, relate their struggles, and relate their daily lives. They all want to feel included and not alone. These blogs not only offer a safe haven to do so, but they allow the user to connect and relate to strangers struggling with similar situations, thoughts, and body image issues.

Although Uses and Gratification theory helps explain how these women fulfilled their cognitive, affective, personal integrative, and social integrative needs, this theory applied very little, if at all, when it came to tension-free needs. There was very little indication throughout the blogs that these women use these sites to escape, relax, enjoy, or to withdraw. Perhaps one explanation for this is the fact that these women are struggling with a serious matter, body image and eating disorders, even in the most minimal sense, are still serious, dark, secretive, and often sad. It did not seem to the researcher that these women would seek out these blogs to escape their eating disorder. In fact, quite the contrary, they seemed to be seeking out these blogs to gain more knowledge, to understand, to find advice or support from others. It also does not

appear that these women could really feel relaxed or withdraw when they were on these sites.

These sites almost made them compound their situations and struggles, since the main topic was usually always centered about weight, shame, feeling inadequate and eating, not eating, and disordered eating behaviors.

### **Future Research**

Possible future research observations and interviews of people, who use these sites, interact on these sites, and who create or host these sites. Other possible future research could involve interviewing the hosts, or creators, of these sites; in doing so, we may find that the media influences are more subtle than many might assume.

Researchers Grover, Keel, Mitchell, & Garner, (2006) claim,

“historically, body dissatisfaction among females has attracted more research interest than that among males, partly because the research indicated that women report higher levels of body dissatisfaction than men and place a greater value on losing weight” (p. 65).

Research could be done including men who post on pro-ed sites. Men could be interviewed or studied to understand how men view their bodies, and how they may use social media blogs as a mean to achieve a perfect body. Studies could include men who struggle with anorexia and another on men who struggle with Adonis complex. Adonis Complex is a term that is often used to describe body image issues by men (Pope, et. al, 2002, p. 97). Adonis is a God according to Greek mythology and is considered to possess the perfect masculine body (Pope, et. al, 2002, p. 253). Although, it is said that men have a harder time admitting or acknowledging they have an issue, or struggle with their body. Some men may feel it is part of their nature to strive for the perfect body. Some men also may see it as a sign of weakness or a character flaw if they admit their body image issues (Pope, et. al, 2002, p. 5).

Additional research could be conducted to include the LGBT demographic. Of course, an independent study could be conducted on gay men, lesbian women, bisexual men and women, and/or transgendered men and women. Each demographic could possibly have different ideas and pressures to achieve a perfect body. For example, a transgendered man may have several pressures to achieve a perfect body of a woman, which may involve a lack of societal support, struggles against the male DNA, etc.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

**AN-** Anorexia Nervosa

**ANAD-** National Association of Anorexia and Associated Disorders

**Anna-** Abbreviation for Anorexia or Anorexic

**BDD-** Body Dysmorphic Disorder, a type of chronic mental illness in which a person cannot stop thinking about a flaw with their appearance - a flaw that is either minor or imagined.

**B/P-** bingeing and purging

**BN-**Bulimia Nervosa

**ED-**Eating Disorder

**GW-** goal weight

**IP-** in-patient (eating disorder treatment centers)

**LW-** Lowest weight

**Mia-** abbreviation for bulimic

**Pro-** In support of

**Thinspiration-** A combination of two words, inspiration and thin, thinspiration.

**UGW-** Ultimate Goal Weight

**Wannarexia-** Someone who desires pretends or wants to be anorexia, may show inconsistent anorexia behavior