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Eating Disorders on the Web: Risks and Resources

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Abstract. Our work is aimed at exploring the recent literature data on web sites, forums, and blogs, which promote eating disorders as normal life styles and their implication in the changes of the psychopathology of such disorders. We also want to understand whether new technologies have an impact in the course of the disorders or, on the other hand, whether they can also represent an instrument for searching help or information about them. The search strategy included a search of PsycINFO, Medline, and Ovid databases to identify research reports about pro-ana sites and their implication on the course of anorexia using the following key words: pro-ana, thinspiration, anorexia-web, online help eating disorders, anorexia nation.

Keywords. Eating disorders, Internet, pro-ana web sites.

Introduction

Among the risk factors for eating disorders the role of cultural influences coming from mass media has been widely described [1,4]. The links between eating disorders and new technologies show the cultural influences and the changes of the psychopathology of these disorders, which are accompanied by changes of individual and collective perception about the inner representation of food, body image, and individual wishes.

Western society is characterized by the cultural pressure towards the values of performing and being efficacious. Body image and the current ideal of pursued thinness as a value has progressively become an important mediator of one’s own identity and is often promoted by media. The perception and the acceptance of the ideal female body type have changed throughout history [2]; twenty-five years ago the average fashion model was 8% thinner than the average woman. Today that number has risen to 23% [3]. In western countries’ television, advertisements and the Internet describe models as being thin and “perfect,” which are difficult to reach [4]. In a study carried out by Becker and colleagues, it has been shown that there was an increase in the incidence of eating disorders after the introduction of the television into the Fijians population [5].

Today it seems important to evaluate the role played in eating disorders by the Internet, starting from the observation of the diffusion of “pro-ana” web sites. Recently, blogs promoting anorexic and bulimic behaviors as a healthy and a sharable lifestyle have been spreading. Moreover, there are many web sites and forums in existence that promote the awareness and support a call for help [6]. The pro-anorexia movement promotes anorexic behaviors as normal and an acceptable ideology of life [7,8]. The
Internet could perhaps represent the most powerful media or influence, due to its peculiar ability to virtually connect people to each other by means of chat, blogs, and social network; these create virtual spaces to share culture, interests, and emotions. In some circumstances the Internet can, on the other hand, ease the risk to create closed and selfish communities in which deviant behaviors can be promoted and incentivized. It has been showed that the Internet can influence and promote dysfunctional behaviors such as drug seeking, smoking, self-injury, and suicide—especially among adolescents [15]. Some authors have argued that pro-ana web sites can have an impact on the incidence and on the course of eating disorders [1, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 15, 16, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25].

1. Method

The purpose of this review is to evaluate recent literature data concerning the studies, which explore the impact of the web sites promoting eating disorder-related behaviors. It also reviews the impact of the websites, which offer information and help about eating disorders in order to evaluate the link between new technologies and eating disorders psychopathology. We conducted an electronic research using the most popular search sites such as PsycINFO, Medline, and Ovid databases, using the following key words: pro-ana, thinspiration, anorexia-web, online help eating disorders, anorexic nation.

2. Results

According to Abbate Daga and colleagues (2006), there are at least 300,000 websites promoting anorexic behaviors (257,000 “pro-anorexia”, 18,600 “pro-ana”, 14,200 “thinspiration”, 577 “anorexic-nation”) [6]. Almost all the webmasters are female; often adolescents and someone who has reported a previous history of depression or self-harm attempts [9]. Websites promoting recovery from eating disorders are less numerous [10]. The latter usually includes posts about personal experiences, links to professional sites, forums, and pages concerning eating disorders, but often the quality of information is less than excellent. As well as pro-ana users, pro-recovery visitors are characterized by a similar need of sharing and understanding; they often feel the virtual forum is more supportive than traditional therapy. The value of professional help in recovery is conditioned by the sufferer of an eating disorder’s own willingness to change [11]. While pro-recovery sites support the initial phases of recovery, they may impede the process at later stages [12].

The philosophy of pro-ana websites does not use the medical model of anorexia as a pathological condition or within the claim of an anorexic identity, which expresses values of power, success, and beauty. Despite the fact that the pro-ana philosophy is based on the refusal of the conceptualization of anorexia as a mental disease, several sites present themselves as supporting means for individuals affected by eating disorders, while only few of them clearly state that anorexia is a sharable lifestyle choice [9]. Ana represents the personification of the ideal of beauty and control, users refer to Ana calling it “she” and almost all sites are full of “letters from Ana.” Pro-ana members are invited to establish a blood pact “with her”. In comparison with pro-recovery sites, pro-anorexic ones are characterized by a rationalization of the
pathological eating behaviors and by an idealized perception of thinness and of the practices to lose weight. From a linguistic perspective, pro-ana sites display more positive emotions, lower anxiety, and lower worries concerning school and the severe consequences of fasting such as death; the use of verbal tense, shows that they are more focused on the present than on the past or the future, more worried about weight gain and, obviously, less aware of the disorder, as evidenced by a limited use of cognitive mechanism words, specifically insight words [13]. Focusing on the body, on the food, and on extreme physical exercise prevents subjects affected by eating disorders from facing the deep, depressive experiences, which are not easily managed and controlled.

The chance to share internal experiences and behaviors makes the community a special place where the individual is sure to be understood and comforted. All this, once again, determines a strong underestimation of the true risks of the anorexic behaviors, which are, on the contrary, normalized and justified [14].

Pro-ana sites share some features in common [9, 14]. The section called thinspirations usually shows motivational quotes and the images of thin and emaciated women, especially celebrities (often modified by graphic editing programs) in order to support the adherence to pro-ana ideal and to motivate further weight loss [15, 16]. A thematic analysis of pro-ana (n=12) websites identified several prevalent themes including control, strength, and perfection. Weight loss is conceived as the only way to achieve success and control, while thinness represents the ideal of perfection. Religious metaphors are also very common, as it is described by the Ana Psalm entitled Commandments and Creed, as well as the use of words such as “sacrifice,” “transformation,” and “ideal” [9]. The ideal of thinspiration can become a compensatory function towards an inner experience of inadequacy in order to face the several requests of the post-modern society. Thinspiration expresses ideals of self-sufficiency omnipotent control of hunger. The exercise of controlling the body with eating and the interpersonal relationships, allow the subject to experience oneself as being autonomous, skilled, and worthy so they can compensate their internal experiences of inadequacy and of low self-esteem [8].

Newsletters, posts, and chats are the ways in which pro-ana groups provide social support to their members; they can keep constantly in touch with each other, the users describe themselves as isolated and stigmatised by others, and websites allow them to be supported and appreciated in their pathological behaviors. As Giles underlines, frequent attacks on websites in the media and by occasional hostile site visitors, often force the community into a defensive attitude which strengthens its sense of identity [17]. An analysis of the content of pro-ana posts, in fact, indicate that pro-anorexic identities are normalized and strengthened by the normalization of participants’ pro-ana thoughts and behaviors as well as by the group bonds created through the sharing of a secret identity [18,19].

“Tips and tricks” are maybe the most dangerous features of these sites because they promote fasting and the use of laxatives, complimentary, and alternative medicines [9, 20]. As observed by a systematic review of this section, the most frequent tips concern “dieting and calories restriction”, use of “distraction” to reduce the eating impulse, and tricks for “deceiving” family members and clinicians about anorexic behaviors. Fasting, purging, and vomiting advice is also displayed. “Tips and tricks” induce distorted practices of weight loss, encourage dangerous behaviors for health, and can decrease the effectiveness of diagnosis and treatment of anorexia nervosa [20]. Finally, several sites sell Ana accessories such as the “ana bracelet,” which is a symbol to remind the practice of anorexic behaviors and allows the wearer
the ability to identify and recognize other people who adhere to the philosophy; this obviously reinforces the sense of community.

The impact of pro-ana sites on the onset and to the course of eating disorders is still controversial [21]. Some studies analyzed the relationship between users of such sites and several measures of positive and negative affects, body images, self-esteem, and self-efficacy in the healthy population. While some have identified an increase of negative affects and a decrease of self-esteem and self-efficacy as potential risk factors for eating disorders in pro-ana users [21,23], others suggested that only a good self-efficacy could support the viewers in maintaining their strict eating practice [14]. As reported by two researchers comparing large samples of healthy women viewers with non-viewers of pro-ana sites (n=235, n=1575), the use of pro-ana sites is associated with a higher body dissatisfaction and worry of weight gain [23,24]. In the first study, even a single view of those sites has been linked with the expectation of dieting and exercise in the near future [23]. In the second study, visiting pro-ana sites predicted higher levels of eating disorders as well as restrictive and bulimic symptoms [24]. Interestingly, in this research, conducted among undergraduate students, the authors did not find significant differences in terms of abnormal eating behaviors between people who visited pro-ana sites and those who visited professional eating disorders sites [24]. Further research should better examine this issue, perhaps using larger samples. A study on the impact of pro-ana sites of 13-17 year-old students (n=711), reports that people who visited pro-ana sites more frequently have a more positive attitude towards pro-ana philosophy and have higher scores on several predicting factors of eating disorder such as the drive for thinness and perfectionism. This last association remains, even if the data is controlled for BMI and attitudes toward pro-ana philosophy [25]. Only a few studies investigate the relationship between anorexic behavior and pro-ana sites in young people suffering from an eating disorder. Wilson and colleagues have carried out a study on a sample of adolescents affected by eating disorders. 40.8% of the patients reported visiting pro-recovery sites and the 35.5% stated that they visited pro-eating disorders sites. Pro-eating disorders site use was correlated with longer disease duration and with less time spent on school-related activities. There was a higher level of hospitalization in adolescents using both pro-ana and pro-recovery sites. Most pro-ana users reported to have acknowledged new purging techniques and methods to lose weight [15].

3. Conclusion

The diffusion of blogs, web sites, and forums dedicated to anorexic practices can play a role in the course of eating disorders that promote abnormal attitudes towards dieting and restriction techniques while strengthening the identification with movements, which promote anorexia as an acceptable way of life. Clinicians in this field should consider the possible influences of new technologies on the prognosis and on the course of these disorders [15].

References


