(Un)doing Deviance: Social Categorization in User Reactions to Proanorexia Videos on

YouTube

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Abstract

Proanorexia ("promoting anorexia") is an online-based phenomenon that is popular among young women. It is publicly seen as a deviant activity that is attached with the stigma of eating disorders. This chapter explores how the proana identity is categorized in comments on proanorexia videos on YouTube. Using the search word "pro-ana," twenty-five popular YouTube user channels were selected. The comments (n = 2122) of these channels' videos were analyzed using membership categorization analysis. Proanas are categorized as a deviant out-group because of activities such as spreading harmful ideals, and for attributes such as grotesque appearance. Commenters position themselves in relation to proanorexia with various self-categories, which is used as a rhetorical device to justify one's stance. While proanas defend their in-group identity and distinguish themselves from hateful outsiders, extreme categorizations reinforce deviant attributes and stigma towards those identifying as proanas and may strengthen the attractiveness of the risky in-group.

Keywords: eating disorders, anorexia, social identity, social media, membership categorization analysis

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Introduction

Proanorexia (i.e., *proana*) is an Internet-based phenomenon that typically glamorizes the anorexic body and promotes eating-disordered behavior. Generally, it challenges the medical view of anorexia as a disorder (Conrad & Rondini, 2010) and promotes an "anti-recovery" stance on anorexia (Fox et al., 2005). Proanorexia content includes inspirational videos and images (i.e., "thinspiration") that aim to motivate weight loss (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Norris et al., 2006). Exposure to proanorexia content is associated with increased eating pathology and negative body image (Rodgers et al., 2016). The majority of people using proanorexia websites are young women (Csipke & Horne, 2007), who are also in the high-risk group for anorexia (Fairburn & Harrison, 2003). The mortality rate in anorexia is one of the highest among psychiatric disorders (Smink et al., 2012), which makes promoting anorexia a dangerous activity. Because of its extreme ideals and risky health behavior, proanorexia is publicly considered to be a deviant and dangerous phenomenon, and, as such, it provokes strong criticism among outsiders (Giles, 2006; Knapton, 2013; Marcus, 2016).

This chapter focuses on public reactions to proanorexia videos on the popular video sharing site, YouTube. We will also provide new perspective on YouTube commenting that is popular among young people. While there is a growing body of research on proanorexia, studies on YouTube remain scarce. A study by Syed-Abdul et al. (2013) found that there are thousands of videos promoting anorexia on YouTube, and that they are also more popular compared to informative anorexia videos. As the users on YouTube mainly communicate by commenting on videos, the sense of community is looser as any registered user can leave comments on public videos (Oksanen et al., 2015). Due to controversial and counter-normative nature of proanorexia, and due to YouTube's high popularity and easy

accessibility, YouTube is a fruitful context to study public reactions and criticism concerning proanorexia phenomenon. Drawing from the literature on stigma, deviance, and social categorization, we examine what kinds of resources are used to (de)construct proanorexia as a deviant phenomenon in user comments for the most popular proanorexia videos.

Stigma and the Deviance of Proanorexia

As with other psychological disorders, negative attitudes and stigma towards individuals with eating disorders are common (Easter, 2012; Mond et al., 2006; Rich, 2006). In a stigma theory proposed by Erving Goffman (1963), a perceived negative attribute serves to distinguish a person from others as "less human." Individuals with anorexia are often perceived as seeking attention (Mond et al., 2006; Rich, 2006) and responsible for their illness (Stewart et al., 2006), while an anorexic body is perceived as unhealthy and grotesque (Marcus, 2016). In proanorexia phenomenon, an anorexic ideal is celebrated, which further provokes negative attitudes and hostility in outsiders (Giles, 2006; Knapton, 2013; Marcus, 2016).

Communities based on risky health behavior are often considered deviant, as they are seen to deviate from the cultural norms (Adler & Adler, 2008). According to Howard Becker (1963), social groups construct deviance by reference to a set of rules, which then enables them to label or categorize other people; "The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label" (p. 9). Scott and Lyman (1970), in turn, defined a deviant as an individual whose actions are perceived as a possible threat to the common good and who is held responsible for deviant action. Thus, we are interested in what kinds of social and cultural resources are used in online interaction to construct, maintain, and resist the stigma and deviance of the proanorexia phenomenon and proana identity.

Proanorexia and the Internet: The Social Identity Approach

Various studies show that those identifying as proanas are motivated to search for online support because they do not receive understanding and non-judgmental support for disordered eating habits offline (Casilli et al., 2012; Rich, 2006; Tong et al., 2014; Yeshua-Katz and Martins, 2013). Proanorexia is widely spread to different kinds of social media platforms, such as Tumblr (Park et al., 2017), Instagram (Marcus, 2016), Flickr (Yom-Tov, Fernandez-Luque, Weber, & Crain 2012), blogs (Tong et al. 2014), YouTube (Syed-Abdul et al., 2013), and discussion forums (Giles, 2006). Platforms have their unique characteristics that differ, for example, in terms of the sense of community and support they offer for users (e.g. Brotsky & Giles, 2007), which influence social identity practices and group behavior.

Social identity refers to identification within certain social groups, in which social categorization serves as a resource. In social identity theory (SIT), social categorization refers to the need to achieve or maintain positive social identity by evaluating one's in-group as positively differentiated from relevant out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner & Reynolds 2010). For example, in proanorexia communities, those identifying as the in-group of proanas wish to maintain their authenticity and distinguish from outsiders, such as "wannabes", "fakers" and "haters", that are seen to threaten their positive in-group identity (Giles, 2006). According to the minimal group paradigm, favoring one's own in-group over a perceived out-group is activated, even in the most minimal group conditions (Tajfel et al., 1971), which may be especially relevant in a visually anonymous online context.

In a social identity approach, the starting point for social identity formation is self-categorization. Self-categorization theory emphasises how individuals within a particular context cognitively define themselves in terms of social category memberships rather than a unique personal identity (Turner, 1985; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994). This shift from personal identity to collective group identity is called depersonalization (Turner et al.,

1987). In the proanorexia phenomenon, self-categorizations vary in terms of embodied and

metaphorical descriptions (Bates, 2015), and anorexia itself is categorized, for example, as a

disorder or a lifestyle (Brotsky and Giles, 2007; Csipke and Horne, 2007; Giles, 2006) or

even a skill or religion (Knapton, 2013). These differing self-categorizations provoke debates

in terms of the "authentic" identity of proana (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Giles, 2006).

Proanorexia sites also contain subgroups advocating healthy eating habits and ways of

recuperating from anorexia (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Conrad & Rondini, 2010; Yom-Tov et

al., 2012). These kinds of recovery-oriented communities represent an opposite approach to

proanorexia, and these two camps mostly coexist separately without high levels of inter-

group interaction (Oksanen et al., 2015; Yom-Tov et al., 2012).

Although social categorization and depersonaliszation are fundamental parts of group

processes and structuring the social world (Billig, 2002; Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel, 1981), group

comparison and negative out-group categorization may sometimes culminate in extreme hate

towards and even dehumanization of the perceived out-group (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014;

Tajfel, 1978). Dehumanization occurs when the "humanness" of others is dismissed or

denied, which thereby constitutes others as animal-like or mechanical objects (Haslam,

2006). Dehumanization varies from subtle and relatively mild to more blatant and severe

forms, in which absolute judgments about a particular target are made and its humanity is

outright denied (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). However, as Billig (2002) noted, even though

dehumanization illustrates an extreme form of depersonalization, SIT fails to elaborate on the

continuum between depersonalization and dehumanization or between "ordinary" and

"abnormal" forms of social categorization (p. 181).

Some characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC) make group

processes even more salient in online interaction than in face-to-face interaction. According

to the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE), the visual anonymity aspect

present in social media interaction reduces the amount of personal information available to

other users and thus enhances contextually relevant social identities, which may lead to

categorization of other people based on their group memberships rather than on their personal

attributes (Lea et al., 2001; Postmes et al., 2001; Reicher et al., 1995; Spears et al., 2002).

This enhanced depersonalization may further activate stereotypes and hostility towards a

perceived out-group (Billig, 2002). Anonymity may also lead to stronger group polarization

(Sia et al., 2002). On YouTube, interaction is based on relatively high anonymity which may

be useful for people wishing to spread hateful messages (Oksanen et al., 2014). YouTube is

based on pseudonymity-based interaction where usernames and profiles are visible, but visual

anonymity of online interaction is still present. While interaction is not fully anonymous,

hostile and offensive speech (i.e., "flaming") is very common on YouTube (Moor et al.,

2010). This makes it interesting to examine intergroup categorizations concerning

proanorexia phenomenon from a social psychological perspective.

Overview of the study

In this chapter, we combine theoretical frameworks of social identity and discursive

identity practices to study proanorexia discussions on YouTube. We use the social identity

approach as a starting point to understand in-group and out-group differentiation as a need to

maintain positive identity and self-enhancement within those identifying as proanas and

outsiders. However, as we are analyzing naturally occurring online data, we do not have

access to commenters' cognitive states. Instead, we conceive social categories and deviance

as constructions that are produced in discursive action (Billig, 2002; Goode, 2015; Lamerichs

& Te Molder, 2003; Potter & Reicher 1987). We approach intergroup behavior as a social

construction process in which the social context influences one's perception of the self and

others as representatives of certain social categories, distinguishing "us" from "them" (Turner

et al., 1994). It is important to gain knowledge on online behavior around proanorexia that is

mainly an Internet-based phenomenon and attracts particularly young women. This kind of knowledge may help to understand how online group distinctions and social categorizations on popular social media platforms may affect the attractivity of risky in-groups among young people.

Our research questions are:

1) How are proanas categorized as a deviant out-group?

2) How do proanas defend their in-group from outsiders' criticism?

Data and Methods

Data Collection

Our data consist of user comments on proanorexia-related videos on YouTube's most popular proanorexia channels. During October 15 - 29, 2014, 25 of the most popular proanorexia user channels on YouTube were selected using the search word "pro-ana." The popularity of the channels was based on the video views and channel subscriptions. All the chosen channels included videos that promoted anorexia and had been commented on during the previous 24 months. The selected 25 YouTube channels included a total of 214 videos. User comments on those videos were then gathered systematically with a web crawler using the YouTube Data Application Programming Interface (YouTube, 2016). Two independent coders checked all the videos available on these channels and excluded the videos that did not concern proanorexia. The interrater agreement was 94.76% (Cohen's κ = .88). The final data consisted of 2,122 comments on 133 proanorexia-related videos containing only comments to videos that the coders had mutually marked as relating to proanorexia.

All of the channel proprietors were identified as having a positive stance on anorexia. Twenty-four of the 25 channel proprietors were identified as women, and only one channel did not reveal any gender identity. Videos included thinspiration videos of extremely thin women and users' own video blogs in which they talked about their dieting progress, shared

extreme weight-loss tips, and presented their bodies to the camera. As we focus on public reactions to proanorexia more generally, we have not distinguished between comments on different genres such as thinspiration videos or video blogs in our analysis.

We have carefully considered ethical guidelines of the Internet research (see Markhan & Buchanan, 2012) before conducting this research. All the videos and comments were publicly accessible on YouTube. We do not see that our research would inflict any harm to the proana individuals or commenters. Also, we have focused on public reactions in general, not on the particular individuals. To respect privacy matters, we do not identify video proprietors or commenters, and all user names have been excluded from the data. The comment extracts are identified only by reference to their data file numbers (presented in square brackets). All the extracts are identical to the data, including spelling and grammar errors. Extracts that are parts of longer comments are signalled with ellipses.

Membership Categorization Analysis

To examine intergroup behavior and categorization, we analyzed the comment data with tools of membership categorization analysis (MCA). MCA, which was originally developed by Harvey Sacks, draws from the ethnomethodological tradition in order to examine interactional and textual practices (Stokoe, 2012). MCA is a method to examine categories and descriptions (that also serve as identities) that refer to a certain person or group (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007; Silverman, 1993). In MCA, categorization is seen as an interactional activity in which the focus is the category (or identity) that is invoked in a particular occasion and the kinds of implications these category selections have (Jayyusi 1991). An individual can be categorized, for example, by gender, age, occupation, or appearance, and all these categories are loaded with different kinds of category-bound activities and attributes that we expect to be fulfilled in different situations (Stokoe, 2012). Categories that are closely related to each other, such as "baby," "mother," and "father", are

organised into category collections, in this case "family" (Schegloff, 2007).

Categories and their collections include shared cultural common-sense knowledge that enables people to orient themselves in relation to those categories and their attributes in a relatively similar manner; that is, to "know" what category members are like, what kinds of attributes they have, and how they are related to each other (Sacks, 1992; Shegloff, 2007). This knowledge contains category-bound attributes and activities that serve as a resource to identify the existence of a particular category, even when that category is not explicitly mentioned (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). From the description "The X cried. The Y picked it up," we are likely to recognize "X" as the baby and "Y" as the baby's mother (or parent), although these identities are not explicitly mentioned (Silverman, 1993). This is possible because, in our cultural knowledge, crying is a category-bound activity of the baby and the attribute of the mother is to take care of the baby. Although interpretations of categories are not always correct, this example reveals the cultural power of category knowledge in making sense of the world.

Categorizations are not just neutral descriptions; instead, there is always a moral dimension in categorizing people, both self and others, with different labels (Jayyusi, 1984, 1991). In terms of self-categorization, categories and their perceived attributes can be used as entitlements for various kinds of acts and to undermine others (Potter, 1996). Categorization also serves as a political and rhetorical strategy to justify one's stance (Goodman & Speer, 2007). Moreover, failing to fulfil expectations of a certain category is often perceived as morally punishable (Jayyusi, 1991). Accounts are needed, especially in situations where a person is perceived as behaving in a way that deviates from normative, that is, culturally acknowledged moral behavior.

In earlier studies concerning risky health behavior, MCA has been successfully applied to studying interaction and social categorization in online settings (Giles, 2006;

Smithson et al., 2011; Stommel & Koole, 2010). Although MCA is often used as a co-method with Sack's tradition of conversation analysis (CA; e.g. Goodman & Speer, 2007; Stommel & Koole, 2010), the analytical focus in MCA is not as strictly based on sequential matters, and it is thus possible to apply to more diverse textual and interactional settings (see Giles, 2006; Stokoe, 2012).

As the focus of our analysis is on social categorization between groups, the results do not represent all comments from our data. For example, the comments that did not concern proanorexia directly (e.g., "I love this song!") were excluded from the analysis. Instead, in order to examine intergroup categorization between "proanas" and "outsiders," we focussed on the comments with a reference to one's membership category (i.e., self-category) in relation to proanorexia (i.e., those who glamorize anorexia, "proanas," and those who do not glamorize anorexia, "outsiders") and a stance on proanorexia. While self-categories were not always explicitly mentioned, they could be identified with category-bound attributes (see Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). For example, if a commenter strongly criticized the anorexic body and message of the video, we took it as an "outsider," whereas, if a commenter described the anorexic body as beautiful and worth achieving, we took it as "proana." With MCA, we examine what kinds of attributes are given to proanas and what kinds of category distinctions are made in order to dismiss them and perceive them to be deviant as well as how those identifying as proanas defend their in-group identity from this criticism.

Results

Doing Deviance: Dismissing the Proana Identity

In the first section of analysis, we examine how those identifying as outsiders distinguish themselves from proanas. We focus on what kinds of attributes are given to proanas and how categorizations of self and others work as entitlements to undermine proanas as a perceived out-group.

Distinguishing "Anorexic" From "Proana"

A large portion of the critical comments in our data are from those who claim to have experience with eating disorders. Thus, they act as entitled authorities to describe why promoting anorexia is wrong. The dual distinction between conflicting categories of "proana" and those who express suffering from eating disorders is illustrated in the following extract where the commenter explicitly wishes to distinguish oneself from the former category:

. . . But I'M NOT PRO ANA! I've just had (and still now) problem with anorexia and bulimia. [78]

Distinguishing oneself from the negatively perceived category "proana" serves as normalizing the category membership of having "problem with anorexia and bulimia." The following extracts also show how the self-category (individual with eating disorder) is used as a justification for categorizing proanas as a deviant out-group that differs from "us," or people suffering from eating disorders. Commenters distinguish themselves from the negative attributes of proanas, such as "encouraging people to kill themselves":

these things are sick. i suffer ana, but i would NEVER make one of these videos. you are encouraging people to kill theirselves. [1164]

i cant believe this i almost died having a eating disorder and this is put up F#@$! This. [249]

However, the analysis of the data also shows that proanas can be categorized without such a strict group distinction. Even though the following extracts also categorize proanorexia as problematic and dangerous, it is made with the mention of two sides of eating disorders, and there is an implicit option of moving between these two groups (compare Stommel & Koole, 2010). Proanas are seen more as moving towards a wrong direction, and self-categories such as "recoverer" are used as a rhetorical device to justify one's stance:

this is dangerous, what you're doing here. It's not a game. As a recoverer, take

it from me. I've seen both sides. [63]

> I am very curious and not trying to be rude but why are you posting "pro
>
> ana/mia" videos? In doing this you are actively helping others get sicker. It is helping
>
> others hurt themselves. I personally don't think that is okay to do. I am just wondering
>
> why you take part in it. I have an eating disorder myself and just don't seem to
>
> understand this side of things. [1790]

> You are sick and you need help! i know this from personal experience. this
>
> disease WILL KILL YOU! don't think it won't, don't think you are in control. i
>
> know it sucks but you will end up killing yourself. [638]

As anorexia is categorized as a "disease" and something that "can kill," proanas are

categorized as "sick" and in need of help. The following extracts show that even without an

explicit self-category, anorexia is categorized as belonging to a category collection of deadly

disorders, which makes proanas' category-bound activity of promoting it questionable:

> pro ana? Are you stupid . . . Thats not a diet, thats a disorder. [225]

> you sick fucks are adoring a serious medical condition??? . . . to praise ones
>
> own sickness and weakness is terribly sad . . . [944]

> why would you be "pro ana" . . . you want to be for something that kills
>
> people?? That's like saying . . . can i be "pro aids??" weird. [1076]

In sum, anorexia is categorized as an unwanted disorder that has negative and dangerous

implications for health. Proanas become categorized as a problematic group that has false

thoughts about anorexia, and they are seen to threaten the culturally shared knowledge that

disorders are something negative that individuals suffer from. Those self-categorizing as

former anorexics use their experience to entitle their criticism as a warning as they claim to

understand the reality of anorexia better nowadays, whereas those without an explicit self-

category construct anorexia as belonging to a category collection of disorders as factual

knowledge.

Proanas as Failed Women

As proanorexia is a predominantly female phenomenon, the category "woman" and its normative attributes, especially beauty, are essential in debates on proanorexia. Although proanorexic individuals admire extremely skinny bodies, outsiders tend to see them as unattractive and unhealthy (see also Marcus, 2016). In some criticizing comments from outsiders, commenters identify themselves as men. Because categories "woman" and "man" are mutually related, the self-category "man" is used as a rhetorical device to justify what is expected from the category "woman." An anorexic woman is constructed as undesirable because extreme thinness challenges the ideal female body in the eyes of men and is seen as a deviant attribute of womanhood:

> anorexia looks DISGUSTING! it is in no way attractive (coming from a guy, and every guy I've asked agrees with me) . . . [591]

> . . . in my opinion along with other men who will agree with me that anorexia is just wrong women who smell like vomit is wrong, women with hair loss is wrong, women with no teeth is wrong . . . [269]

Even without an explicit self-category, anorexic attributes are defined in relation to the categories "girl" and "woman" and to their normative attributes, such as naturality and healthiness. These can be interpreted to come from those who position themselves into the self-category "real women" or at least "we who know what is needed to be a real woman." Categories such as "kid" and "freak" are juxtaposed with proanas, constructing proanas as deviating from what is expected as being an adequate woman:

> ew that's not hot, thats ugly!! You need to put on weight, you look like a little kid. [216]

ew, nasty unhealthy anorexic freaks. girls thats not the type of body any one

should want. [5]

Even though proanas are criticised for their extreme thinness, the following extracts reveal

that thinness is also recognized as a normative attribute of beauty. However, there are two

contrasting categories that are both based on an attribute of thinness: proanas with grotesque

and skeletal appearance, and thin people who are normal, healthy, and attractive. This

distinction constructs proanas as a deviant out-group:

Im all for being toned and thin. But i do NOT believe in doing it with anorexia

or bulimia . . . [441]

yes its nice to be thin but damn you people just cross the line for real . . .

[2001]

ehh sorry. i like thinspo and it inspires me but i dont want to be thin enough to

look like a skeleton. just to look hot. [1978]

In sum, proanas become categorized as failed women, as they are perceived as not fulfilling

the adequate attributes of womanhood. While criticism is aimed at proanas as individuals, the

cultural ideal of a thin body is celebrated and proanas are seen as crossing the line between

acceptable and unacceptable thinness. Thus, anorexic thinness is seen as challenging the

pressure to conform to Western beauty standards, which constructs proanas as a deviant out-

group of women with questionable beauty ideals.

Proanas as Guilty Malefactors

As proanorexia is advocated in YouTube via videos, the video uploaders become

constructed as guilty and even inhuman malefactors who spread harmful material to others. In

the following comments, self-categorizations are not explicitly mentioned but can be

interpreted as a wider self-category of "moral online users" who criticize spreading harmful

content online:

Making these videos is a CRIME against humanity. It should be a punishable offense with PRISON time. They encourage vulnerable young girls to commit slow suicide... it ruins lives and hurts many people . . . [1986]

. . . you know as well as anyone, that someone who promotes this evil shit is just as guilty as any criminal who kills someone with their own hands! Supporting and promoting a wicked problem like EDs is pure rotten behavior and should be punished! [1021]

People that post this kind of stuff are as bad as murderers. You should be thrown into jail and starved. [1084]

Proanas are categorized as belonging to the same category collection of guilty and dangerous people such as "criminals" and "murderers" who deserve punishment for their deviant and antisocial actions. They are seen to share dangerous influences, especially towards young girls, who are constructed as victims. Categorizing eating disorders as a "wicked problem" and promoting them as a "crime" construct the category of proanas as a deviant out-group.

At its most extreme, group comparison culminates in dehumanizing comments, which dismiss and deny the human value of proanas. Although self-category is not explicitly mentioned, the extracts illustrate an extreme group distinction to "us" as human and moral individuals and "them" as a deviant out-group:

. . . you are a horrible person for condoning anorexia and deserve to be stoned to death and then chucked into a volcano . . . [1893]

HOW DARE YOU PUBLISH THIS ! the net hates you I hope you die from your obsession. Cause truning normal KIDS into pro ana kids it diservs painful death. [1015]

Pro anorexics who try to influence others to join in their delusional ideal of beauty are faggots. If you've got this problem, by all means talk about it to people but

if you try to get them to do the same like this video is encouraging, then you deserve

to die . . . [2024]

The activity of spreading proanorexia material is seen as a threat against the common good that justifies dehumanization. Proanas become categorized as a fundamentally distinct out-group with unhuman attributes such as "horrible" and "evil." In extract 2024, however, the commenter makes a distinction between two out-groups of proanas: those who only have the "problem" and those who encourage others. The commenter suggests that the normative activity of proanas (or individuals with anorexia) is to seek help for their "problem," while counter-normative and deviant activity is to encourage others. These differing categorizations suggest that two groups of proanas should also be treated differently, as only those who spread their ideals to others are seen as a problematic out-group that deserve punishment.

In addition to spreading dangerous material to other people, deviant thoughts are construed as differing from what is seen as culturally acceptable human activity, which serves as distinguishing proanas from other people and justifying dehumanization:

I feel sorry for you and your small brain. Don't ever have kids, they will

probably end up like a low life peice of shit like you . . . [2011]

when some girls and even some guys are dumb enough to think that the better

way to lose body fat (and they are never satisfied with the result) is to just stop eating,

or fake a eat to then vomit it, than it's better that this loosers die feeling a lot of pain

and very slowy. [1460]

In sum, proanas become categorized as guilty malefactors who are harmful to others and responsible for their actions, which underlines their perceived deviance (see Scott & Lyman 1970). The antisocial action of spreading proanorexic material is constructed as worthy punishment, and proanas become categorized as a fundamentally distinct out-group that differs from the whole human race. Wishing extreme punishment and even death for

perceived out-group members can be considered a blatant and absolute form of dehumanization, in which the out-group is seen as lacking humanity outright (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), even going so far as to see death as a justified punishment for perceived deviant behavior and thoughts.

Undoing Deviance: Defending the Proana Identity

In the second section of the analysis, we examine how those identifying as "proana" defend and normalize their identity category from outsiders' criticism. We are interested in what kinds of accounts they offer for their perceived deviant actions and how they wish to maintain positive social identity with group differentiation.

Accounts for Deviant Behavior and Identity

Because of the public stigma of eating disorders, those identifying as proanas have an accountability to justify their behavior that is often perceived as deviant by outsiders. This includes defending the proana identity and its attributes such as extreme thinness. The following extracts reveal what kinds of positive attributes are attached to proana identity:

> Because, Its Not A Disorder. Its Perfection . . . [1006]

> . . . I started as a way of control, of making my body mine after someone tried to take it from me. I wanted to be pure, clean, empty, delicate, floating. Complete control of what went into my body. The way for me to monitor how in control I was was to weigh myself . . . So I want to be thin, because thin is control, delicacy, beauty and perfection. [2059]

> being too skinny is closer to what nature intended us to be. nature never intended us to be fat and eat refined carbs and sit all day on the computer. so yay to thin! [1641]

Proanorexia is defined with attributes such as "perfection," "willpower," "beauty," and "control," which is also a rhetorical device to distinguish proanorexia from the negative

category collection of disorders. In extract 1641, thinness is also categorized as something natural, healthy, and worth achieving compared to its counterpart, fatness. These categorizations serve as normalizing deviance and challenging the public negativity of proanorexia and proana identity.

In some comments from those self-categorizing as proana, it is considered a deviant but also misunderstood identity. The following extract reveals how deviance is resisted by categorizing an eating disorder as an active agent that possesses its victim, which serves as a rhetorical device and an account for proana identity:

> what people don't realize is that eds take control of you. Don't get me wrong; i am 100% pro ana and think bones are beautiful but i know that that is a distorted truth and ''m pretty sure that what i see in the mirror isn't the truth but i keep losing weight :'(it's a sick vicious cycle that we have no control over. it does take over your life. It's something that i want to get away from so badly but it's already embedded into me that i can't find beauty in anything that isn't bone. [1472]

The commenter explicitly uses the self-category "proana" but also recognizes the perceived deviant and distorted attributes that are often culturally category-bound to eating-disordered individuals. People with eating disorders are implicitly categorized as victims, whereas an eating disorder is an active agent and a guilty malefactor. Thus, "proana" is defined as an identity-based category in which category-bound attributes include both valuing extreme thinness and being a victim of a disorder. This kind of victim speech also challenges the generally used definition of proanorexia as a lifestyle choice.

Distinguishing "Us" From "Outsiders"

In order to maintain a positive social identity when their in-group identity is threatened by outsiders, those identifying as proanas defend their in-group with strict group distinction. In the following extract, "thin people" are contrasted with "fat people,"

constructing the former category as superior compared to the latter that is perceived as

harmful and blameworthy:

> Blame every thing and everyone but yourselves? Fat people are the cause.
>
> Little girls look at these hulking beef bags and they get traumatized by what they see.
>
> . . .   Thin women really are far superior to fatties. This anti ANA stuff needs to
>
> stop. 200 people die from it each year compared to 400,000 who die from obesity. Fat
>
> people suck! [2056]

Group distinction is also explicit in the following extracts, where the out-group of hateful

outsiders, "haters," is categorized as a deviant and antisocial group that differs from "us":

> . . . if you guys who areextremely opposed to what we do, why are you
>
> watching videos like this? . . . if you dont like what you see, stop watching. [1307]
>
> if your not pro ana. then stop watching this and LEAVING RETARTED
>
> COMMENTS. becuase you guys ovbiously dont understand . . . [1785]
>
> why are you haters watching this if you dont support/like it . . . leave us alone!
>
> [1049]

Those self-categorizing as proana defend their identity by differentiating their in-group

positively from the perceived out-group. The out-group of "haters" is constructed as ignorant

and hostile people whose actions are questionable. Perceived hostility from outsiders may

even strengthen the group boundaries and desire to attach to one's own in-group, as in extract

1049, where the commenter asks "haters" to leave "us" alone.

Discussion

This chapter examined social categorization and group distinction in the comments on

proanorexia videos on YouTube. The commenters positioned themselves in various

categories in relation to proanorexia and proanas, such as (recovering) anorexics, healthy

people, "real" women, men, or moral online users in general. These self-categorizations can

be approached as flexible definitions of the individual and a rhetorical device that reflect a

particular context (Turner et al., 1994). Proanas were depicted as false anorexics, failed

women, criminals, and even inhuman agents who advocate harm and victimize other users. In

order to defend their identity from outsiders' criticism, those identifying as proanas gave

accounts of their perceived deviant actions by normalizing their behavior and attaching

positive attributes to their in-group in relation to perceived out-groups, such as "fat people"

and "haters" (compare Giles, 2006; Marcus, 2016). Dealing with haters was executed with

strict group distinction, such as categorizing them as a hostile and antisocial out-group. These

discursive actions and group comparisons can be interpreted as attempts to maintain positive

social identity and to boost self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Hostility in our data illustrates the normative nature of offensive communication on

the Internet and especially YouTube (Moor et al., 2010), as anonymity is connected to

stronger group polarization (Sia et al., 2002) and, according to SIDE, identifying more

strongly to contextually relevant social identities (Postmes et al., 2001; Reicher et al., 1995;

Spears et al., 2002). This, in turn, tends to intensify reactions to other groups (Billig, 2002).

This may be particularly true in the case of reactions to counter-normative online groups such

as proanas, especially in the context of YouTube, where interaction is based on a relatively

high anonymity (see Oksanen et al., 2014). Hostile categorization of proanas on public social

media platforms, like YouTube, construct and normalize deviant attributes towards eating

disorder-affected individuals, and strict group distinctions may further unite the harm-

advocating proanorexia communities (see also Knapton, 2013).

Our results also demonstrated supportive understanding and warnings from those self-

categorizing themselves as having experience with eating disorders. The beneficial role of

peer support in terms of a shared recovery-oriented social identity is acknowledged in a study

concerning eating disorder support groups online (McNamara & Parsons, 2016), but,

according to our results, YouTube is not necessarily a fruitful platform for forming a shared

identity. Thus, it is important to understand the group dynamics in a particular social media

platform, as using online communities and sites related to eating disorders can reinforce but

also undermine the effects of clinical interventions (see also Yom-Tov et al., 2012). As young

people are active online users and prefer Internet as a help source for various health-related

problems (Ali et al., 2015), it is crucial to gain understanding of ways to utilize recovery-

oriented online support and interventions.

From the theoretical and methodological points of view, our analysis revealed that

intergroup behavior in the context of YouTube contains rich identity work. Analyzing CMC

on social media platforms benefits from combining theoretical approaches of intergroup

behavior with discursive tools on identity practices. Social media platforms like YouTube

form a special kind of interactional context, which challenges the original theories of

intergroup behavior (Moor et al., 2010). As such, in the context of social media, intergroup

behavior must be approached from a wider perspective than theories were originally

developed to achieve. The SIDE model drawing from the tradition of SIT is one example of

trying to examine the role of anonymity in group processes in CMC (Lea et al., 2001; Reicher

et al., 1995; Spears et al., 2002), but both SIT and SIDE would benefit from applying a more

discursive approach to identity practices, especially in the context of social media (see also

Lamerichs & Te Molder, 2003).

Future studies should aim to scrutinize the different levels of anonymity and its

influence on intergroup communication on various social media platforms (see also Keipi,

2017). In addition, the concept of dehumanisation must be elaborated upon and extended on

public social media platforms. This kind of approach would be vital in examining what Billig

(2002) noted as lacking in SIT: elaborating the continuum between "ordinary" and

"abnormal" forms of social categorization in terms of dehumanisation towards the out-group

(p. 181). In the context of the Internet, anonymity, pseudonymity and hostility constitute an even greater challenge to this elaboration, as degrading and threatening out-group categorization has become quite an "ordinary" form of communication on different social media platforms (Foxman and Wolf, 2013).

As we examined categorizations only in textual practices in naturally occurring online data, we cannot test the full social identity process. However, the social identity approach as a starting point formulated a fruitful ground for examining social identities in discursive action online (see also Lamerichs and Te Molder, 2003). Our analysis was also only focussed on video comments on YouTube, and the results are not representative of all proanorexia discussions online. However, we feel that this chapter has shed light on public reactions to the proanorexia phenomenon and has contributed to CMC studies in terms of intergroup behavior and group dynamics on social media, particularly on YouTube.

The category "proana" is constructed on YouTube as a negative identity with deviant attributes such as grotesque appearance, harmful activity, and delusional thoughts. People seeking and promoting ways to achieve an anorexic state are perceived as a deviant group who are distinguished from the category of individuals suffering from an eating disorder. Therefore, the proana identity is not only carrying the stigma of anorexia and eating disorders in general but also, and maybe even more importantly, the deviance of *promoting* a stigmatised illness (see also Easter, 2012). Whereas those identifying as proanas wish to defend their identity from outsiders' criticism, public hostility can be seen as constructing and maintaining deviance towards the phenomenon and the individuals advocating it, which may serve as strengthening the group boundaries and uniting the in-group of proanas. These findings give an important insight to health professionals working with young people with eating disorders.

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