

Pro-anorexia Cultural Identity: The characteristics of a lifestyle in a virtual community

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ABSTRACT

Anorexia nervosa is a disease listed in the International Classification of Diseases. However, young pro-anorexics believe they are adopting a “lifestyle”. The aim of this paper is analyze the “cultural identity” of these youth, investigating a Brazilian Virtual Community. Virtual Ethnography was used methodologically in three “units of meaning” found in this community: the tension between anorexia as a disease versus anorexia as a lifestyle, the ideal of perfection and the meaning of belonging to the group. The results suggest that pro-anorexia identity differs from the biomedical model. She admits that the thin body serves as reference for social recognition and economic success. In this sense, the online *forums* allow construction of identity based on anonymity. We conclude that studies of anorexic practices in Virtual communities should be encouraged because they contribute to understanding the universe of the adolescents and collaborate to promote policies and actions for their health.

Key-words: Anorexia; Adolescent Behavior; Webcasts as Topic and Internet.

INTRODUCTION

Anorexia Nervosa is a disease described in the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-10) as a “food disorder, characterized by intentional weight loss, induced and maintained by the patient” (WHO, 2008). This food disorder has practically doubled in the last 20 years, affecting mainly female teenagers and young women, between 10 to 19 years old (Dunker and Philippi, 2003). This scenery shows the importance of the topic in public health, and to develop actions related to teenagers’ health (Brasil, 2005).

According to Lira (2006), the increase in anorexic practice among female youngsters is part of a global movement facilitated, especially in the 90's, by the use of the Internet. For Brotsky e Giles (2007), until then anorexics would rarely discuss their food disorders outside psychiatric or psychoanalytic clinics. Nowadays, there are thousands of Virtual communities in which people with repulsive reaction to food, who are interested in reducing or losing appetite, talk publically about the topic. These communities are visited by teenagers and young women who see anorexia as a life style* and do not share the idea that it is a food disorder or a disease. Among their practices are long term fasting, auto-induced vomits and the use of medicine to lose weight. Anorexic girls find in these virtual environments a new space to safely interact and share experiences, since their identities are not revealed (Gavin, Rodham & Poyer, 2008; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Pereira, 2007 e Fox *et al*,2005).

What makes a person anorexic? How is his/her identity characterized? Dubar (1997) defines identity as a dynamic and processual social construction which is related to a person's history of life and refers to feelings of recognition, belonging and identification of an individual based on common features. This definition is useful to analyze social interactions mediated by the Internet where we can find Virtual communities, with public access, aimed at people who fear gaining weight excessively. In that case, the social construction of identity is developed through negotiations, which are permeated by feelings and expectations. The body's cultural meaning and its social image have an important role in the construction of the identity of anorexic people. The view presented in this article admits that the body should not be considered only in biological terms. It is perceived as a cultural construction that can be interpreted and signified by different societies in different historical contexts, as analyzed by Mauss (2003).

Mauss (2003) offers an interesting reflection on this issue when the author analyzes the meaning given by a person to his/her body by means of negotiations with the social order, existing models and the use he/she makes of it. As far as pro-anas are concerned, the tension is between considering anorexia a disease or a life style. In that case, we can notice representations of what is revered or desired and what must be avoided or eliminated because it is considered to be harmful to health.

The objective of this study is to observe relations, processes and phenomena expressed in the speech of young women who participate in a virtual community aiming at identifying the universe of meanings, reasons, beliefs and attitudes that make them believe they have a different life style but are not sick.

METHOD

* This study uses the concept of 'life style' as defined by Possas (1989). According to this author, 'life style' is translated as a specific social and cultural way of living, which is expressed in actions and behaviors such as practicing (or not practicing) sports, going on a diet, habits of consuming (or not consuming) tobacco or alcohol, among others.

There are several qualitative methods that may help to understand and gather relevant information in virtual communities. Among them, the emergence of a research method in cyberspace denominated online ethnography, virtual ethnography or *netnography* sticks out. This method was conceived to analyze communities that have established the relationship in electronic communities mediated by computers in the cyberspace as a routine. The virtual ethnography keeps some characteristics which are similar to the conventional (face-to-face) ethnography. First of all, it is important to emphasize that both of them study social groups trying to identify their nature and singularity. Participant observation and discourse analysis are some of the procedures adopted by both. In both cases, emphasis is on the point of view of the investigated community. The objective of virtual ethnography is to understand the meaning of behaviors and values put into practice virtually by a specific community. Thus, virtual ethnography makes use and assumes as its own some concepts that had been created to study cultures in a real or concrete territory. However, the concepts of conventional ethnography cannot be absorbed in an automatic way. Adaptations and analysis of possibilities as well as the limits of those adaptations to web designed research are needed. Virtual ethnography aims at decoding the human experience present in virtual communities in order to know the meanings and logic underlying the behaviors and values exposed. Two authors seem to emerge in this field: Christine Hine (2005) and Robert Kozinets (2004). He points out in his analysis that *netnography*:

[...] has been used in marketing and research on customer's profile – an applied interdisciplinary field that is open because of the development and adoption of new techniques (Kozinets, 2010: 2).

Its emphasis is on the analysis of customers' behaviors and desires in relation to products and brands in a technology mediated environment.

Hine (2004), on the other hand, states that:

[...] In its basic form ethnography consists of a researcher spending a determined period of time immersed in a field setting he is studying, taking account of the relationships, activities and understandings that are built by those in the setting and participate in social processes of this world. [...] The ethnographer is in an intermediary world, being, at the same time, a foreigner and a native. He must know the culture he studies to understand how it works and keep the necessary distance in order to cope with it. (Hine, 2004: 13).

The work of the virtual ethnographer is to observe, describe and participate in the environment that is being researched (Braga, 2006). This observation can be hidden.

This participation in the group (even if invisible) will make it possible to understand aspects of that culture, allowing the elaboration of a rich description later, which demands detailed understanding of meanings shared by its members and of the significance in focus (Braga, 2006: 5).

The virtual ethnographic procedure used in this study was the “passive observation”. This article follows the ethnographic model adopted by Gavin, Rodham e Poyer (2008), which allows the researcher to observe the virtual community without identifying himself or interacting with its members; therefore, an observation called *lurking*[†] - this is a special kind of participation in which observation is the source of analysis of behavior and values (Braga, 2006). Using this model of observation, the ethnographer does not interfere in the process and preserves the exchange of messages among the members of virtual communities.

To carry out the research that resulted in this article, a pro-anorexia virtual community on the Orkut social network in Brazil was selected. This community was chosen, among others, because it was the one with most members when this observation took place (1,616 participants).

Observations were carried out from January to March, 2009. It was not necessary to get this virtual community’s users’ formal permission, since the community is of public domain and participants will remain anonymous.

The virtual community studied is called “Perfection is a 24- hour effort”. It was accessed using the key words “perfection/effort” and “anorexic”. These are some signals that suggest that its users search for practices to reduce or lose appetite. When this community was observed, it was subdivided into three segments: *forums* – in which the participants debate issues related to body, diets and food practices; *polls* – where any participant can ask a question about any subject, which is answered by the participants and presented statistically; and *profiles* – through which participants introduce themselves and where they place their photos.

When the observation was carried out, this community had 34 *forums* in total. For the present study, only six *forums* were chosen, totalizing 76 participants; 99% of them were female. The criterion used to select those *forums* was the same used by Gavin, Rodham & Poyer (2008): the most number of accesses in the period the research took place. The titles of the selected *forums* include issues related to the topic of this article, such as: “How can I reduce my thigh?”; “What does ‘to be perfect’ mean to you?”; “I don’t know how to answer anymore”; “Girls, how tall, fat, old are you?”; “Do vinegar and lemon help to lose weight or is it a myth?”. Although the participants do not call themselves anorexic, the titles of the *forums* suggest they are obsessed by losing weight and getting a perfect body – characteristics considered to belong to anorexic people. In fact, it is not a virtual community of young people who search for thinness. As it will be

[†] This expression means “to lie in wait” in Portuguese.

analyzed later, they help one another and develop a number of behaviors aiming at getting the ideal body.

Forums where dialogs between the members of this virtual environment took place are the unit of analysis presented in this article. In order to use these *forums* as unit of analysis, they were read and excerpts that better represented the view of the participants relating anorexic practices to a life style rather than to a harmful practice to health were selected.

One of the great current intellectual challenges is associated with the discussion of cultural identity in times of globalization. In this sense, the work of Hall (1999) has become reference. The question seems to be the difficulty of thinking of the construction of cultural identity in relation to the production of otherness in a globalized world. Abandoning the essentialist conception of identity, Hall (1999) admits that the subject in post modernity (re)produces, represents and (re)signifies his cultural identity. Agier (2001) complements this view stating that the post modern ethnographer faces “cultural identities” as they are created; and does not find totally ready cultural identities, which he would only have to describe and catalog. In his understanding: the emergence of “cultural identities” in a context of globalization is accelerated by local situations (Agier, 2001: 7). These seem to be some useful macro concepts for the development of this study.

The excerpts selected in the following analysis show the existing tension between anorexia as a disease and anorexia as a life style. This article shows the pro-ana “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) as something which is built in this dual structure. Based on this opposition, a set of expectations and procedures to have the perfect body as well as the feeling of belonging to the group are elaborated.

The selected excerpts were submitted to a thematic analysis in search of the principal “units of meaning” (Minayo, 2008). They join some central ideas of the social actors and reveal key moments of their existence. Thus, it constitutes a qualitative method. This investigation did not deal with quantitative variables. It did not worry about measuring the frequency of certain words or expressions. Its attention was not drawn to the identification of the presence or absence of a specific characteristic or message. It tried to go beyond pure description of quantitative techniques in order to get deeper interpretations based on inference.

Identification and analysis of “units of meaning” were useful for this study as they have contributed to understand what underlies the explicit contents, making it possible for us to go beyond what is explicit. The steps of this research were the following: identification of central ideas (“units of meaning”) of the users’ interventions; analysis of those ideas based on bibliographical production on the theme and determination of thematic areas; and discussion of the categories found.

RESULTS

Three “units of meaning” (Minayo, 2008) were identified. One refers to the existing tension between understanding anorexia as a disease in opposition to the idea of anorexia as a life style which implies dedication and sacrifice.

The other is related to the objectives expected to be reached with this life style: happiness and professional satisfaction. The third unit refers to feelings of belonging to this pro-ana virtual group, and is related to the security and freedom offered by anonymity. Together, these three “units of meaning” take part of the process of construction of pro-ana “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) in this virtual community.

LIFE STYLE

The first “unit of meaning” (Minayo, 2008), reflection on life style, seems to have a central place. In this view, the idea of associating the fact of losing weight with a disease seems to be condemned while the view of losing weight as an aesthetic need seems to be a healthful and desired practice. A patient states that:

“I am against losing weight until your face and body look sick, but I’m in favor of losing “just the right weight”. (K).”

“Just the right weight”? What does this patient mean by this expression?

In order to better analyze the profile of the members of these virtual communities, a diagnosis of height and weight was carried out in order to get the body mass index (BMI) and the classification of the nutritional status of the participants. By calculating the BMI, we found out that about 60% of them had normal weight, 20% were overweight and 20% were underweight. According to the BMI, K, the participant mentioned above, had normal weight.

Following the same line, Perreira (2007) also calculated the BMI of the participants of 20 Brazilian blogs and found out that the BMI of 60% of them was normal and only 15% were under their weight while 20% were overweight.

“Just the right weight” means, then, to reach the weight below the one considered normal by the BMI.

For the participants, reaching this goal is not enough. They still need to have a “perfect body”. And what does it mean? Two testimonials may serve as examples:

“To be perfect means to have thin hips, thighs and arms, a flat belly and to show your hip bones (Ju *no name*.)”

“To be perfect means to pinch your skin with a pair of tweezers not with a pair of pliers to try to find some fat (Luana blogs).”

This study showed that many participants reported that “to be perfect” means to have a thin body, with thin legs, waist and arms. For them, “loosing just the right weight” is not enough. It is also necessary that some parts of the body are thin.

The opposite situation is considered repulsive. The following statement was posted in one of the *forums*:

Ridiculous... being fat is ridiculous!!!! Wearing blue jeans and having fat hanging out of your clothes ... this is ridiculous! (K).

Lira (2006) reached similar conclusions by studying the virtual journals of pro-anorexics. The author noted that the bones in the body of an anorexic symbolize that part of the body which is not subject to stereotypes of beauty or ugliness. For Lira (2006), “pro-anas” reach the ideal of perfection when they are able to lose weight to show their bones.

Damico (2004) analyzed the discourse of school girls about strategies used nowadays to take care of the body. The author found that their ideal body image is similar to the one of the users of the virtual community analyzed in this study. Both worry more about the “softest and most prominent parts of the body”, especially about the excess of fat in their bellies, buttocks and hips (Damico, 2004:74). They wish to have a thin, fat free body. They want to show their bones and have them seen in some parts of their bodies. The author also noticed that these young girls “are brought up to show their bodies according to what is ‘in’; wearing mini blouses, low waist pants and mini skirts, dental floss bikinis and strap blouses” (Damico, 2004:12). According to this author, wearing these clothes may be uncomfortable when the body is not appropriately prepared to be shown. This may happen when the person has a prominent belly or if the legs are not well defined, or, as stated by the participant mentioned above, when “one has fat hanging out of her clothes”.

Results found by the above-mentioned authors coincide with the testimonials observed in this study. For this reason, it is believed that these participants have been adopting what can be called anorexic practices, although they do not consider themselves anorexics.

By analyzing the explanations about the body, it was noticed that the participants wish to have a thin, fat free body, mainly, in the parts considered to have more volume such as hips, thighs, arms and belly. They wish to show their bones and feel frustrated when their bodies don’t match the idealized patterns. Participants of these *forums* live in constant search for thinness and reject any signal of fat in their bodies.

The practice of losing weight and reaching “the right weight” and the “perfect body” imposes sacrifices. *Fanna Voltando*’s testimonial seems to exemplify this distinctive feature of the anorexic “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001).

[...] from time to time, there are always those moments we get determined to reach our goals, we think: no, now I’ll do it, I’ll lose weight, that’s ok, we buy laxatives, see millions of pictures of thinspos, and insist on vomiting, but, then, we get weak and start eating all over again, or, worse, even more [...] if you want to lose weight, close your mouth and concentrate, you can do it, it’s a daily effort which is worth it at the end, you can only win, whatever it is, self steam, with your friends and much more, with the boys, if you stop and think of the rewards, you will see that the

sacrifice is worth it! and nobody becomes an ana from one day to another or overnight, this takes long and long months, or even, why not?, years of life. (Fanna Voltando).

Typically anorexic practices as buying laxatives, insisting on vomiting are proposed in this speech. The pain resultant from physical effort has a special connotation in this context. Torri *et al* (2007) carried out a study with the objective of investigating “body modeling practices – understood as technological interventions on the body, policies of consumption and youth” (Torri *et al*, 2007: 261). In that study, the authors also noticed that individuals who go to gym centers “naturalize” the pain and body suffering. To these people, the pain also has a “legitimizing character”, i.e., the individual must pay the price to get a perfect body, no matter whether he is in pain (Torri *et al*, 2007: 266 e 227). The authors also demonstrated that the teachers used strategies to help their pupils to put up with the pain such as sentences like “Come on, you can do it!”, and even threatens such as “the one who doesn’t finish it will get a lot of cellulites” (Torri *et al*, 2007: 268). In the virtual community investigated, the strategies to tolerate the pain come from the participants themselves.

“Eat very little! Really little, but keep fighting because you can do it!!! OK? Kisses! (Karol).”

This excerpt demonstrates that in order to be part of this “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001), a lot of effort and sacrifice are necessary, since this is the only way the goals can be reached. The participant declared that everyone who wishes to have a thin body needs to make an effort, sacrifice, have self control and discipline. Thus, the life style of an anorexic follows the current beauty model and is subject to hard sacrifice. This first “unit of meaning” participates in the construction of the “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) that turns a sick practice into something healthful, in spite of the sacrifices required.

THIN, RICH AND HAPPY

The second “unit of meaning” (Minayo, 2008) gathers the expressions and excerpts selected from the *forums* that are related to the participants’ expectations to reach a thin body. In this case, sacrifice is not merely seen as a way to follow an aesthetical pattern. The ideal of physical perfection in this “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) is also associated with a happy and financially prosperous future:

Perfection, to me, is to be extremely thin, wear the clothes I want and be flirted with the boys... be envied by the girls, and be as beautiful as the models!” (C.).

“To be extremely thin and able to wear what I want... or not wear anything haha to make people

envy and admire me, have a great job, and be successful, have great education: university, post graduation etc and have a gorgeous guy that loves me (P).”

Explanations on being perfect also start to be related to the expectation of being desired and admired. Besides that, participants of these *forums* relate the thin pattern of beauty to a social and economically successful citizen.

These excerpts also reveal that the search for a thin body is strongly influenced by what is in the media. Models become the parameter of what one wishes to be and have in terms of thin body and process of social recognition and integration.

Brandini (2007) demonstrated that the current culture of the body is retro fed by the fashion world which promotes practices, attitudes, techniques, technologies and markets that may be seen as the ideal ones. In order to do so, they present models consensually accepted that are supposed to be followed. In the 50/60's, for example, Marilyn Monroe was considered the sexiest woman in the world. She wore size 42 (8 - U.S.A.; 10 - U.K.), she had a 72/74 cm waist and a 98 cm hip. Nowadays, in the XXI century, the kind of ideal female body is size 36 (2 - U.S.A.; 4 - U.K.), waist - 50/60 cm, and hips, 80 cm. To Alvarenga (2004), the current concept of female beauty is not the same of the one in the 50's. In her understanding, valorization of the thin body outshined the model of a body full of curves. To Goldenberg (2005), worship of the thin body has become a real obsession in Brazil, mainly by the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. In her view, nowadays there is a generation that has grown up trying to imitate the bodies of famous models and singers like Kate Moss and Beyoncé. To Reis & Silveira Júnior (2008), inspiration by celebrities is a strong feature in pro-anorexia virtual *forums*. According to these authors, participants of these *forums* are influenced by famous actresses and models who expose their bodies, considered perfect by the occidental society, in the media. Besides that, they work as a stimulus for the “pro-anas” because they have well defined and thin bodies and are financially and socially successful. They work as *thinspiration*. A participant declared: “To be perfect means to have Kate Moss' body”. (Satella.)

Niemeyer & Kruse (2008) studied the influence of the media in the construction of a thin body when they analyzed the discourse of a teen magazine called “Revista Capricho”. They found out that this magazine conveys contradictory messages because it condemns anorexia by considering it a disease and, at the same time, it stimulates teenagers to have anorexic practices. Besides that the magazine valorizes the thin body as the perfect body and prescribes measures to correct the imperfect ones. Medina (2007), in her study about pro-ana blogs, also found that the participants of these virtual spaces do not display their pictures on their home pages because they demonstrate a “fascination for the other's image” (Medina, 2007: 48). Consequently, they deny their own image, considering it imperfect and out of the pattern of thin beauty.

To Goldenberg (2005), the obsessive worship of the body in contemporaneous society arrests women, making them live in search of the pattern of thin beauty. The author demonstrated that women in the 80's promoted a liberation of their bodies in relation to sexuality and clothes they should wear. Nowadays, the opposite is happening. The author notices that there has been a patterning of bodies and a process in which women are worried about remaining young and thin is also taking place. In order to reach this goal, they make use of several resources such as diets, gymnastics and plastic surgeries.

This study agrees with the above-mentioned authors and admits that the ideal of perfection to these participants in the *forums* analyzed here goes far beyond having a thin body. They also wish, even subjectively, to have status in society, since, to these participants, having a thin body means to be successful, desired, envied, have money, fame, a good job, and to be loved. Thus, all that effort and sacrifice would be rewarded in some way.

Damico & Meyer (2005) understand that fat and flaccid bodies are evaluated by individuals who worship the body as signals of "indiscipline and slouch" (Damico & Meyer, 2005:9). To Sabilia (2004), individuals who are overweight and obese are considered by the present society as bad managers of their own bodies. For this reason, they are considered individuals without self control and morally weak. Following the same line, Santos (2008) demonstrated that the image of a thin body is related to successful individuals who are able to have a better control of their food behavior. The fat person, on the other hand, is seen as a looser, lazy and slouch person because he/she demonstrates to be unable to control himself/herself. Miskolci (2006) agrees with this point of view. To this author, not only a fat body does characterize an "ugly or unshaped" body but it also generates an "auto-destructive" thought that, many times, searches to adequate, at any cost, to the thin pattern (Miskolci, 2006:685).

The second "unit of meaning" is part of the construction process of "cultural identity" (Agier, 2001) because it associates this practice to personal and professional success, excluding fat people, who would be, for their own conditions, fated to failure.

BEING IN COMMUNITY

The third "unit of meaning" (Minayo, 2008) emphasizes the importance of virtual communities. There, the identity condemned by Medicine and society remains immune and the participants are able to support one another. For this reason, all the participants are honest about their food behavior. This honesty, however, cannot be spread to the real world, due to possible retaliations they would suffer from their families and friends. In the virtual world, they try to find the best way to react to the real world when asked.

This was the case of a participant who told her boyfriend she wanted to undergo a lipoaspiration surgery to take out "the disgusting fat in her body". She was not supported. When she told her boyfriend's reaction to the other participants of the virtual community, they told her she should not have

talked to her boyfriend about lipoaspiration. They even made suggestions on how to hide her identity from her boyfriend. Brida said: “At least in front of him, show that you are eating... for example, wait to eat with him; don’t eat when you are alone... take care (Brida).”

Kally used the same arguments:

“Avoid talking about food plans, lipo, near him. He will be mad! You can do it, darling (Kally).”

These two statements reveal the difficulties found by the participants of this virtual community to hide from their family and close friends their considered to be sick behaviors by society and Medicine. As *life style* goes beyond the virtual world, the attitudes and behaviors in the real world make people who are closer to these participants become suspicious of their weight losing. A daughter’s pro-anorexic behaviors and weight loss can be noticed by her parents at home, in everyday life. Then, even not knowing their children’s virtual identity, parents, as well as friends and relatives, may become suspicious and even discover the pro-anorexic life style of their children as they find laxatives in their drawers, vestiges of vomits in the bathroom or even perceive a sudden loss of weight.

Participants also support one another and publish successful anorexic practices. They may also have questions which, many times, are answered by another participant. We can show an example of this: “Do vinegar and lemon make you lose weight or is it a myth? My grandmother told me that when she was young she used to eat a lemon a day and started to lose weight; can that be true? (V.).”

[...]in fact, it is true, but only as far as lemon is concerned. It works as a purifying agent in the body and breaks cells of fat; there is even a diet based on lemon, you can search for it. haha, even Beyoncé has been on a diet with a lot of lemon, the name of this diet is master cleanse.(B.).

In fact, a lot of young women who search to be thin look like the ones that get together in this community. The difference is that the young girls who participate in the community analyzed in this study expose themselves, share doubts and participate in the process of the anorexic “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001). Thus, it is not a community which is limited to worship present patterns of beauty. In the dialogs they have in the virtual community investigated here, expressions that also denote practices of the same kind, such as *miar* (to vomit, in Portuguese), *Ana* (anorexia), *LF* (light food) e *NF* (no food), are used.

Therefore, virtual communities acquire a unique meaning. Participants hide in these environments because outside them their ideas and practices are criticized and even condemned. In this case, virtual communities represent a shelter. To Damico e Meyer (2005), they are an environment to share practices and feelings in search for a thin body. Fox *et al* (2008) show that the pro-anorexia sites have the objective of administrating pro-anorexic practices and, because of that, they provide participants with a “free of

judgment space". There, these individuals can feel safe, get support and share experiences.

Recuero's (2005) point of view is similar to Fox *et al's* (2008). He showed that interaction between the participants of these communities is "mutual and cooperative" and aims at strengthening relations of solidarity and offering support to the group. To this author, social relations may be either "strong or weak". *Strong* social relations are the ones that are characterized by intimacy, proximity and intention of creating and maintaining a connection between two people. *Weak* social relations, on the other hand, are characterized by sparse relationships that do not represent proximity and intimacy.

Forums online are, then, spaces of sociability used to keep the secret and also to support and understand one another, preserving the "cultural identity" (Agier, 2001) built by the interaction of their parts. Users accept one another's anorexic thoughts and behavior, which allows all of them to be honest about their practices, values and behaviors. In virtual *forums*, they may share experiences. This exchange straightens the feeling of belonging to the group and integrates their "cultural identity" (Agier, 2001). However, honesty may not be shared with or revealed to the real world because of the possible consequences. Honesty among the integrants of the virtual community and security in the preservation of this practice are present in the shared meanings of the material analyzed in this study. This issue is closely associated to the debate on the construction of the anorexic "cultural identity" (Agier, 2001). In this process of construction, it is essential that there is identification among the peers, through signals of distinction and similarity that will delimit the identity features of specific groups in relation to others. Participants of these *forums* build a cultural identity that valorizes the thin body, without any trace of fat; restrictive dieting and *thinspirations*. Dias (2003) pointed out that a lot of pro-anorexics, in opposite to the biomedical model, consider anorexia a life style. In this sense, virtual communities are environments where they can find a shelter. Besides that, these young women search for a creative way to share their thoughts, practices and behaviors and run away from the judgment of the real world. The possibility of remaining anonymous provided by the Internet also contributes to the construction of a pro-ana "cultural identity".

To Baldanza(2006), anonymity introduces some positive aspects in the process of interaction and sociability on the Internet. For example, it makes virtual communication easier because it does not impose "social blockages or prejudice" very often inherent to real identity (Baldanza, 2006: 6). The possibility of creating virtual identities allows the relationship to be "uncensored, commitment free and territorial mobility is not needed" (Baldanza, 2006: 6). It is also noticed that the participants of these *forums* may freely interact and relate to one another, regardless of social/economic position, color or the neighborhood where they live in.

Following the same line, Tierney(2006) showed in her study that the pro-anorexia sites generate a safe and trustful environment where individuals

that share the same beliefs can interact freely and are not isolated inside their homes anymore.

Gavin, Rodham e Poyer (2008) reinforce the above-mentioned authors as they have noticed that with the development of online discussion *forums*, anorexics suffer less from isolation and loneliness, once they can share their feelings with other individuals who have the same life style. The authors even found that:

a lot of users still feel unable to share their pro-ana identity with those they care most. This indicates that they are fully aware of the controversy surrounding their choice of behaviors and that they believe they will not be accepted by their loved ones in the real world (Gavin, Rodham e Poyer, 2008: 330).

Recuero (2005) analyzed the construction of identities in pro-anorexia virtual communities. The author found out that individuals in these communities aim, above all, to identify themselves as members of the pro-anorexia group. This happens because when they are recognized as individuals who belong to the same social group, they have access to all the content available in the community with which they identify themselves and are identified. According to this author, anorexics search for identity construction in virtual communities in order to be socially accepted. This author has also noticed that these individuals establish strong virtual friendship relations. Although these people have never met face-to-face, the virtual friends share the same problem and anguishes.

Following the same line, Medina (2007) studied blogs of pro-ana and pro-mia communities who defend the practice of anorexia and bulimia as life styles. To this author, these blogs and communities are spaces in which the individuals confess their secrets and expose their pro-ana identities. Besides that, these blogs and communities allow them to feel that they belong to a social group because in these environments there is no judgment and prejudice against anorexic practices and behaviors.

CONCLUSION

Studying the “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) of the young participants of the pro-anorexia public *forums*, it was possible to find a tension of meanings and senses. They attempt to justify the pro-anorexia life style by trying to show its healthy, not sick, side. Pro-anorexics try to take care of their own bodies aiming to reach the ideal pattern of thinness pre-established by themselves or imposed by society. These goals have the objective of showing their bones, without any trace of fat.

Another issue that was noticed was that the pattern of thin beauty remounts to a successful person. Participants idealize and search for the thin body, which is associated to projections of a successful life in the future. However, we cannot forget that these adolescents are facing a phase in which they are building their own identity and public existence, i.e., they

have not become adults yet. Therefore, there is a need of further studies in this field, since the health of these adolescents and young women is a matter of public health.

The last point noticed in this article was that the fact of belonging to the pro-anorexia group allows the construction of a “cultural identity” (Agier, 2001) which is built within the anonymity provided by the Internet. Participants of these *forums* identify themselves with the group; consequently, they reveal and live their pro-ana identity more freely and completely, practicing and sharing all the values and beliefs of a pro-anorexic. However, it was possible to find that the pro-anorexic behaviors and attitudes could be perceived by individuals who live together with the integrants of these *forums*. They cannot hide their attitudes and behaviors totally; they can be noticed by their constant refusal to eat, excessive practice of physical exercises, provoked vomits and use of medicine to lose weight.

Virtual *forums* are environments where participants can expose the pro-anorexic life style without judgment and prejudice. Besides that, they can share experiences and make their friendship stronger because in this virtual space, they are protected, recognized, and have reciprocity. Thus, Internet has become an important channel for those who experience pro-anorexia in their lives to express themselves. It has made possible for people who wouldn't meet in the real world to meet online. This study allowed us to analyze the anorexic practices outside medical parameters.

This research made use of the “passive observation” methodological procedure developed by Gavin, Rodham e Poyer (2008). Then, it is inserted in the discussion about this theme that takes place in international literature, and contributes to it by inserting the perspective of a Brazilian case. National research on this theme is still really incipient. For an idea of the current research production, we can mention that, among the 56 titles on anorexia found at *Scielo* (Scientific Electronic Library Online), none analyzes the role of *virtual communities*. Similarly, out of the 190 titles found on the *Internet* research database, none addresses the Anorexic Virtual Communities. Thus, this article represents a contribution on this theme to international and national literature.

This article intends to encourage other researchers to develop studies on anorexic practices in virtual communities. These studies contribute to better understand the universe of young adults and may help the promotion of policies and actions related to teenagers' and young adults' health.

CONTRIBUTORS

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