

The ethereal bodies of pro-Ana blogs: emotional communities and spaces of sociability on the web

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Abstract *The study presented in this paper aimed at understanding how anorexic young women use virtual environments as spaces of sociability in order to construct a narrative about anorexia, anchor their experiences through emotional mutuality and validate discourses. To do so, an analysis of the content found in the commenting and posting sections of pro-anorexia blogs was carried out. Three thematic categories were identified: body, personal identity and sociability on the web. It was observed that blogs are virtual spaces of sociability and construction of identity groups. The representations and the experiences lived by the corporal materiality feed cyberspace and are the starting point for understanding a phenomenon particular to the contemporaneity, that is the virtual exchanges. In blogs, one can find body narratives that seek to give coherence to an individual and to his or her existence as well as narratives that aim at anchoring and legitimizing personal experiences and validating pro-anorexia attitudes. Social ties are strengthened within the group, which becomes an emotional community. The meanings of the spreading discourses allow us to infer that in these groups, the materiality of anorexic bodies emancipates itself from the social stigmas of a disease.*

Key words *Anorexia nervosa, Adolescent, Internet*

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Introduction

Eating disorders involve a set of complex physical, emotional and social factors and conditions in which the subject's relationship with the food and the body is disturbed. In cases of anorexia nervosa, eating behavior is severely altered to the point of deleterious effects on the individual's health. Disorders in the perception of body image are manifested and consequently a pathological control of weight is triggered¹.

Anorexia nervosa is characterized by large intentional weight loss caused by restrictive diets and strict patterns in order to get excessively thin^{2,3}. The change in eating habits usually starts with increasing fasting, that later evolves to a strict control of food and nutrient intake.

The routine dietary control through restrictive diets, the thin ideal and the body instrumentalization are present in the social context of eating disorders in the contemporary western societies. Personal factors and negative eating experiences are relevant factors in the etiology and development of disorders⁴⁻⁸. Young women are the main protagonists of these stories⁹. From the Sociology point of view, it is possible to think of anorexia not only as a specific disease, but as a result "of complex processes of identity in contemporaneity. In this perspective, bodily regimes open up to continuous reflective attention" in order to cultivate a project of self¹⁰. Anorexia, as a subjective disease, raises questions about the subjectivity regimes involved in the process of singular constitution of a self-identity, of a narrative about being a woman. Giddens¹⁰ sheds light on anorexia and the reflexivity of the body considering that women experience "the opening of late modernity in a more complete and, at the same time, in a more contradictory way" when abandoning certain identities more forcefully. For Giddens¹⁰, it would be a kind of "accident of necessity – and responsibility" of the individual, which, not by chance, mainly affects women – in their youth – in the moments of constitution of their identity in the social world.

Hence, this article will address the set of situations that characterize anorexia, but not from the nosological categories of biomedicine. The thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that comprise an anorexic experience will be revisited as subjectivities that are potentially affected by the social bonds and the dynamics of the reality in which they are constituted. Therefore, by adopting a sociological perspective and assuming the body as a physical modality of relationship with the

world¹¹, this study intends to understand bodily practices and behavioral repertoires of anorexic women as products of the regimes of psychic economies particular to the contemporary society. Thus, instead of a qualitative research whose data are gathered from face-to-face interviews, the data collected for this study were produced in the new languages of modernity: the virtual environments¹².

Eating disorders and digital life

New forms of communication have emerged in contemporary society, which increasingly incorporates technologies and social networks in the daily lives of young people and adolescents¹³. Cyberspace is a powerful channel of a language whose syntax and semantics the new generations, especially digital natives, master perfectly. The consequences on subjectivities and the social implications of these new machine-mediated relationship configurations still need to be better clarified and scaled.

On the world wide web, *web bloggers* or blogs are virtual diaries in which content is updated chronologically. The publications contain personal content and images in which the author writes about his or her daily life and thoughts, spontaneously and without commitment¹⁴.

In these spaces, members meet, relate, exchange experiences and share worldviews. Bonds can be established and networks of identification are formed through the comment section, which allows for different levels of interactivity chosen by the members. Although the environment is virtual, it is a real social field. It is a societal space that has become a powerful instrument that permeates exchanges and confluence of subjectivities¹².

In pro-anorexia or pro-Ana blogs, the goal of losing weight is reaffirmed and valued with the feeling of belonging to a group¹⁵. In these virtual environments plastic and aesthetic bodies are intentionally exposed, as well as styles and ways of living that act as a communication channel. However, these virtual communities, characterized as an emotional phenomenon, have relevant clinical consequences since they function as anti-treatment and anti-recovery devices.

This paper presents a study that sought to understand how young women use virtual environments as spaces of sociability in order to construct a narrative about anorexia, anchor their experiences through emotional mutuality and validate anorexic discourses.

Notes on the method

This is a study in the field of sociology of health. Four pro-anorexia blogs were selected for the empirical research, meeting the following criteria: Brazilian blogs, updated and containing monthly posts in the last 12 months; blogs that had images related to anorexic bodies; the author of the blog self-identified as anorexic. The analyzed corpus comprised the content found in the *posts* and *comments* categories. All blogs selected were maintained by young women and the interactions analyzed in the comment section were also among women.

Data systematization and analysis were based on the content analysis method proposed by Laurence Bardin¹⁶, which defines it as a set of techniques for evaluating communication, with the aim of grasping meanings that underlie textual messages. By using Bardin's thematic analysis, the corpus went through codification, classification, inference and interpretation.

Results

Three thematic categories were identified. The first was entitled "Body", which was discussed from three subcategories: "Perceptions and Sensations", "Body Rebellion in the Anorexic Experience" and "Body Liturgies". The second category found was "Personal Identity", discussed from the sub-theme "Ideas About Yourself and Manipulation of External Impressions". And the last thematic category defined as "Sociability on the Web" was elaborated through the sub-themes "Sentimental Reinforcement and Valorization of Anorexic Practices" and "Mutual Support".

Body

Perceptions and sensations

The perspective that matters in these analyses about body perceptions concerns the narratives on behavioral repertoires that gain legitimacy in blogs for their power to aggregate opinions and feelings. In this sense, the research focused on the content which visitors identified themselves with.

A central aspect of these blogs is the fact that the spreading discourses are targeted to a specific social group. Those who access these spaces share worldviews that circulate there. The participants in these forums post content that reinforces notions of internal group cohesion and that attribute positive value to anorexic practices¹⁷.

The perceived sensitive matter – body – does not only involve the image reflected on the mirror¹⁸. There is a dissatisfaction towards the body^{19,20} that sociologically reveals a discomfort expressed through corporeality. Although the body is the *locus* that root us in the world, the individual who is anorexic struggles to detach from it, to lose weight and disappear. There is a clear disruption of the self with the world, symbolized by a body that wants to be thinner and thinner²¹. The following excerpts portray aspects of one's own perception of the body:

Life goes well. Love life too. Only my mind is not good! I no longer see what I should be like. The scale shows me numbers that my mind disagrees with. It's no use measuring me anymore, the tape measure displays what the mirror distorts.

Continuous and progressive weight loss is not seen as a disease symptom:

Similarly, I feel disgusted by what I see in my body: pounds of fat hiding my real me. Pounds of fat crushing my bones. Pounds of fat drowning my will to live. However, my weight becomes increasingly contradictory to what my eyes can see. The conquest to reach 42kg, again, brought no satisfaction. It only gave me more open eyes, more attentive to the imperfections of my body. It evoked the sense of urgency in me and the fear that every calorie will become another pound within myself.

The weight that is initially idealized is no longer an important mark when it is reached and new goals are set. Body experience for someone with anorexia involves feelings of a constant struggle with oneself. Satisfaction is always on the horizon. A physical tiredness due to malnutrition evolves to mental and emotional tiredness as well.

The bodily rebellion of anorexia

The body, as a means of contact of the individual with the world, reflects the social fabric in which he or she is entangled^{21,11}. The corporealities exposed on blogs communicate the personal and social dramas that affect the individual²³. They are bodies that speak of the tensions to which they are tied:

I have a sudden desire to be like this, and at the same time I don't want anyone to worry about me. Do you know what it feels like to have the desire to be super thin but you don't want to be so, as not to worry anyone, even if it makes you unhappy?

There are contradictions between the self-perceived image and the contents of the representations that resonate from the looks external to the group²³. Visible extreme thinness is not understood as a disease by the anorexic individu-

al¹⁷. The image of the starved body, noted by the people around, collides with the self-representation, which is refractory to the eyes of the others. The tensions experienced daily are the ones that echo in the opinions shared on blogs:

I know my face has thinned, but nothing else. It's so strange that you see yourself in a way and everyone else sees you differently.

Body liturgies

As a form of punishment or for both physical and emotional pain relief, purgative methods and self-mutilation are commonly used:

I am keeping my NF (No Food) and I saw 48.4 kg on the scale. I don't regret that or the recent red scratches on my wrist, I definitely don't regret it!

After 36 hours of happiness and lightness, again the exaggeration, followed by despair and frustration. I miss the cuts: pain soothes the soul. But I resist and the blades remain stored.

These are behaviors that sustain the social identity of the anorexic woman and are perceived by her as enabling a certain purity²⁴. Restrictive behavior seems to provide an experience of negative affection⁵, that is, the symptom (not eating) has an effect on emotion regulation²⁵:

The bliss aroused by the lack of food is the roller coaster of my amusement park.

Door locked, shower running, loud music and blood under my fingers: feeling of accomplishment. I am clean of my mistakes, my failures. I'm clean - for now.

The lightness felt is the conquest for overcoming the pain of hunger, which is prolonged as long as possible. When hunger wins, the over-eating requires purging, which is signified by the anorexic woman as a way to cleanse the body. Self-mutilation is conceived in the imaginary of the person with the disease as a punishment that will make him or her continue to foster anorexic body practices. It also harbors feelings of relief and compensation²⁶.

When relating food to feelings, the persistence of hunger and resistance to eating are highlighted:

I'm hungry and my empty stomach asks for anything to fill it, even though I know the insistence is pointless, since Ana reminds me of all my effort thrown away.

The toxicity of the smell of my favorite foods has a hallucinogenic effect on me. I feel the fat on my fingers, my lips, my stomach. I feel disgusted to wish for anything that feeds me.

At the same time that there is desire, there is repulsion for everything that is supposed to fat-

ten. The possibility of pleasure in eating is not allowed, and often the experience of eating is accompanied by feelings of guilt. There is an idealization and appreciation for resistance to food and the thought of being thin is tied to the need for struggle, sacrifice, self-control and discipline.

Identity

Ideas about yourself and manipulation of external impressions

In certain discourses that denote a negative perception of oneself, showing personal and moral depreciation, anorexic practices represent a horizon for overcoming that condition²³.

Anorexic women regard 'Ana' as a kind of entity with which they maintain a contradictory bond of love and hate²⁴. They feel trapped by 'Ana' and dependent on the requirements that they are far from fulfilling:

I don't want to be free (from depressing and anorexic thoughts) to become a prisoner of a reality that is not mine.

Deep down you know: nothing will ever be enough, it's all an excuse to hide your true self.

Your fear of reaching your goals is as great as your fear that nothing will change. You know: you will suffer!

As soon as the weight reduces, the forces will go away. It will be hard to get out of bed. You're afraid of losing the one who says that love you, you're afraid of losing what's left of your health, but most of all, you're afraid of finding yourself. You are afraid of - finally - being good enough. And die for it.

I had cutting relapses, threw my blades out yesterday and opened my Ana box. The tables, the calculator, the tape measure, the bracelet, the photos... Everything told me to come back. I cried. The truth is, she and all this are inside me.

The testimonials shared on the web resemble other narratives produced in face-to-face interactions by Giordani²¹. In the daily networks in which their personal lives are inscribed, there are continuous efforts to control the impressions of others²⁷. The discourse enunciated, both here on the web and in that direct interaction with the researcher, shows common features of a carefully crafted performance for social coexistence:

Yesterday when I was in class, my cuts decided to open. My friend only saw one (thank you wristband) and asked what it was. I said I had accidentally cut myself in the kitchen. I always carry Band-Aids in my bag because my shoe sometimes hurts me. I grabbed about three and went to the bathroom to fix the situation. No big deal.

Restrictive behavior and purgative and/or compensatory practices are triggered in order to control emotions²⁵. Focusing on body, weight and food is a way to avoid difficult feelings²⁸:

I'm done and exhausted. Very exhausted. Every bit of me is tired. I'm weak on the outside, but on the inside my determination is strong, stronger than ever. I need my bones. I need my determined and strong self-fighting for its world of perfection. I have to go back to around 40 kg or I'll never be satisfied. I'm hungry. Hungry to be thin. I'm exploding, but this time I will explode in several butterflies.

The metaphor of the butterfly in reference to lightness and metamorphosis represents idealized perfection. The control over hunger represents a deeply desired stability. Hiding the cuts, inducing vomiting or other forms of purgation updates the tension between the unbridled desire to lose weight^{18,22} and the external judgments about a condition that is socially pathologized and perceived as irrational²³.

Sociability on the web

Sentimental reinforcement and appreciation of anorexic practices

In the virtual environment, relationships between individuals who share an imaginary in which anorexic practices are resignified are created^{15,17}. Comments from the visiting public speak of the mutual feelings and sharing of representations. The blog is recognized as a safe space that welcomes the suffering inherent in the condition. Anti-recovery messages are reported, while ascetic and purgative practices are valued. Praise serves as an incentive to continue on the journey of excessive weight loss:

I imagine you're thin, like you weigh less than I do and you are thinner than I am. But there's no point in anyone saying so, because if we don't feel good, it's never gonna be enough. I wish you a lot of strength in your diet. And I hope this wave of sadness passes. Try to focus on other things to distract yourself. Kisses. Hold on!!

Girl, you don't even have to lose weight anymore, but I know what it's like... We always find weight to lose. Stay strong, I envy your willpower. Kisses!

In the comments, the authors are named "thinspiration", a *thin inspiration*. Greater symbolic capital and prestige for those who have greater self-control over their eating behaviour are observed.

Anorexia is experienced as a lifestyle that involves a body posture (haughty, clean and thin)

as well as an irreducible conduct towards food. On the blog, visitors support the adopted lifestyle. Anorexic practices are positively reinforced, weight loss strategies are widespread, and lessons are shared about ways to hide eating restriction and fasting, as well as ways to manipulate family and friends' perceptions of thinness (e.g., clothing and ways of dressing). In these spaces, users cultivate thoughts, value anorexic behaviors and exchange experiences in order to reinforce a sense of intragroup belonging¹⁷.

Social isolation and a sense of maladjustment in former social and family circles are feelings and events accommodated through insertion and self-identification among participants in these forums. There is a consensus that the blog is an environment of people who recognize themselves in a specific way of life that follows strict rules. Digital technology is a new tool through which these subjects develop other forms of socialization. Their desires are acknowledged and they bond over their shared ideas, although their nature, consistency and extent are not well determined.

The term "strength" is often used to reaffirm a positive value for weight loss and to motivate the blogger to increase weight loss. There is recognition of health problems - considered imponderable and irrelevant -, but obstinacy overcomes possible damage and loss.

Spaces of mutual support

The comments present, besides the positive opinion, the attention focused on each other's lives. It is often observed that it is advisable to proceed with bodily liturgies for the definition of particular ways of being and of existing in the world, a *hexis*, an acquired disposition:

Gorgeous, you need to work on that self-esteem. Feel victorious over the NF, it's not just anyone who can do it, you bear things to get what you want. That's characteristic of people with willpower. That's potential. And you are already turning this potential into action, towards the thinness you desire.

Little girl. You are amazing and really help me in many moments. All I want for you is that you feel good without this masochistic behavior, but I understand and I won't turn my back on you for acting like this. It hurts me that you're sad like this and that there's so little I can do to make you feel better. But you know I'm with you, and you can wake me up in the middle of the night and talk about anything you want and I'll do my best to help you.

Blogs assume characteristics of virtual diaries, but with a hyperinteractivity due to the powerful dynamics of communicational exchanges. Therefore, those who read become part of the life of those who write. In the case of anorexic bloggers, the blog becomes the space for them to talk freely about their perception of the body without receiving criticism. The relationship between participants in these spaces is cooperative and strengthens ties; it provides support for the group as well¹⁷. They find a space for identification and cooperation with people who experience similar existential dilemmas²⁹.

Discussion

Ethereal bodies

Images of absolute thinness are shared on these blogs that become communities; its members share aspirations, opinions and suffering. The representations and experiences carried out by the bodily materiality feed the *cyberspace* and are the starting point for understanding a phenomenon particular to contemporaneity, which are virtual exchanges. On cyberspace, there are images and representations of the body, which continues to function as a semantic vector “through which the evidence of the relationship with the world is built”¹¹. Reading anorexia as a social event makes it possible to think of the body as a provider of evidence of the social and cultural logics that feed the regimes of the psychical economies of individuals.

Distortion of body image is one of the criteria for the diagnosis of Anorexia Nervosa. This is the most important aspect of the disorder, as the improvement of symptoms can be transient if there is no corrective change in body image³⁰. But would the body be just the repository of mental illness? Or a possession, an attribute, an alter ego in the words of Breton¹¹?

On the blogs, there are body narratives that seek to give coherence to the individual and their existence. As seamstresses cutting and sewing their own bodies, “It is about forming a self-controlling, self-monitoring, self-governing subject. [...] The expert self has in the body and in the act of practicing the basic source of its identity”³¹.

Existence is bodily, and by appropriating the substance of their life, the individual translates to others¹¹. In the body experience of the anorexic condition, metaphorically the body communicates disruptions with the world¹⁸. The body that

is both the foundation and the condition for participating in the social world seeks to disappear³².

The attitude of remaining oblivious to outside looks is reinvigorated through the constitution of a collective body in the virtual community. Social ties are strengthened within the group that becomes an emotional community³³. They question and refute the perception of the outside world about anorexic corporalities, comparing it to what they see of themselves.

Regulation, moderation and rationalization of the experience with food are what organize the daily life of the anorexic individual. Eating is the form of restraint and the leakage of the desire for food, (a sensitive feature of the physical mode of connection with the world) it is read as an excess. The grammar of this desire organizes a body pedagogy that involves using purgative and compensatory methods as a form of punishment.

The disturbed relationship with food evokes guilt in consumption and relief from fasting²⁵. There is a transfer of emotional demands and requests from the world that do not trigger in these individuals adequate responses from their inner structure^{6,7,34,35}.

Fullness manifests itself in the containment of food, in the limit of hunger, and in the dominated physical need. Ecstasy lies in the attainment of extreme thinness even though the desire fulfilled in slimming is bound to rapture when it is accomplished and keeps continually demanding new goals in the scale; in the realization of an almost ethereal body, devoid of carnality.

Emotional communities

Body repertoires on the web speak of collectivized subjectivities. Blogs are environments for sharing emotion, spaces for the collective construction of the group with which they identify themselves. In *cyberspace*, the materiality of anorexic bodies emancipates from social stigma of disease and raises other levels of meaning through the “embodiment of identities”^{33,35}.

In these virtual spaces of sociability, collective identities are constructed³³. Through the interaction created by the sharing of pro-anorexia content, thoughts and behaviors between bloggers and visitors, and in the exchange of experiences and opinions, bonds and relationships that positively reinforce intragroup identity are established.

The fragments of the posts demonstrate the movements of manipulation of both the identity and the representation of the self in order to

sustain social relations³⁶. The intention to share in the network their anxieties, weaknesses and efforts to maintain a “façade”³⁶ that refers to the maintenance of ordinary relationships and their relationship with particular worlds in which they play specific roles is noticeable in the content posted.

In the perception of Maffesoli³⁷, tribes that share the same interests are created through these communities and groups. For the author, these tribes would be a new type of social organization of postmodernity and their emergence reflects the exhaustion of individualism itself.

Blogs suggest bonding around interests, as well as belonging and acceptance. They are privileged spaces for the constitution of groups or, in the words of Maffesoli³⁷, affective tribes. Opinions, feelings, disagreements and imbalances are presented, read and accepted. On such blogs, they find support by legitimizing anorexia as a way of being in the world and repositioning themselves in social life.

These media are used by young anorexics as a mechanism to express their emotional needs and as a tool in the construction of spaces of sociability in which there is positive identification with anorexia. They are a channel for the free manifestation of feelings and emotions related to body and food, uncensored within a reality in which they are not perceived and stigmatized as sick¹⁴. As already adequately identified by Ramos et al.³⁸, the virtual environment as a social space of communication, which by anonymity ensures “protection, recognition and reciprocity”, reinforces ties supported by a narrative that paints anorexia as a “lifestyle”. The authors³⁸ encourage us to think about how these virtual communities make modern identity processes feasible, and we add that they provide the experience of anorexia deliberately shared as a psychic problem of modernity.

Conclusion

The anorexic experience has dimensions that go beyond the explanatory possibilities of biomedicine. The thoughts, feelings and behaviors that understand the anorexic experience need to be problematized from other interpretative possibilities. The symptoms are also a product of social life and need to be unveiled as such: subjectivities potentially affected by the social bonds and dynamics of the cultural reality in which they are constituted.

Cyberspace is activated as a social support tool and should be the subject of behavioral and sociological studies. Pro-Ana blogs bring together emotional communities that sustain and reproduce an anorexic *ethos* that re-signifies pathologized bodies and behaviors represented as irrational in the sphere of everyday life. Narratives about anorexia that anchor and legitimize personal experiences are built.

The connection through the virtual environment generates horizontal communication networks in which new contexts and processes of interaction particular to contemporary life emerge. Although an important aspect for the analysis of the phenomenon lies in the technological interference in discourse, it is possible to extrapolate the possibilities of cyberspace as a channel for *continuous online* flows and mediations of *offline* experience. The plunge into digital life does not seem to be simply a detachment or denial from the world of life, but appears as another, a new universe. In it, new subjectivities are possible, new embodiments emerge in their own identities validated by these sociability networks.

Collaborations

RCF Giordani worked in the theoretical and methodological design, analysis and interpretation of data, writing and final review of the version presented. FS Silva participated in the original idea, data collection and analysis, and writing of the article.

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