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**“Good Things Happen When I’m
Starving”: A Corpus-Based
Critical Discourse Analysis of
the Tumblr Pro-Anorexia
Community**

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INTRODUCTION

Anorexia nervosa (AN) is increasingly acknowledged as a serious and widespread health concern and, although it is not possible to provide the exact figure of anorexic individuals worldwide, it is estimated that “at any given point in time between 0.3-0.4% of young women and 0.1% of young men will suffer from anorexia nervosa” (National Eating Disorders Website, 2022). Anorexic individuals experience a series of conditions as a consequence of the eating disorder, both physical and psychological, ranging from mild to life-threatening. Furthermore, anorexia nervosa has been found to have a mortality rate of “around 10%” (*ibid.*), with 12 cases per 100,000 per year (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 343), making it the psychiatric disorder with the highest mortality rate (Beat Eating Disorders Website, 2022).

Although the seriousness of AN has been documented and attested throughout the past decades, there is still very little understanding of a relatively new phenomenon associated with this eating disorder, i.e., the rise of pro-anorexia communities. Indeed, since the dawn of social media in the early 2000s, numerous digital communities have formed where members engage in pro-anorexia discourse, sharing their daily struggles with the disease and supporting each other in their pursuit of extreme thinness. Numerous concerns have been raised by medical professionals and policy makers about the proliferation of these communities on popular social media platforms, resulting in generally ineffective attempts at censoring pro-anorexia content.

One of the most interesting aspects of the proliferation of pro-anorexia communities starting from the early 2000s has been the possibility to gain access to the narratives and sense-making strategies of anorexic individuals produced in non-medical spaces where no outsiders are present. Indeed, in the past decades, anorexia nervosa has been consistently characterised as a purely individual psychopathology, solely made accessible to outsiders through medical accounts of patients undergoing treatment. Furthermore, the systematic stigmatisation of the eating disorder has contributed to the exacerbation of an already-existing culture of silence surrounding

sufferers of anorexia, resulting in the tendency frequently displayed by these individuals to isolate themselves in order to avoid threats of stigmatisation.

However, the pro-anorexia phenomenon appears to have challenged this *status quo*, enabling anorexic individuals to interact with each other outside medical environments, in spaces where they perceive themselves to be safe enough to be uncharacteristically forthcoming about their struggles with the eating disorder. The spread of these communities has thus opened up the unprecedented opportunity to observe and analyse the discursive practices and the personal narratives of anorexic individuals in their most unadulterated state, thereby providing a better understanding of an otherwise complex and still relatively impenetrable condition.

Since the emergence of the earliest pro-anorexia communities, a growing body of literature pertaining to different research fields has investigated the nature of these online spaces. Several studies have examined this phenomenon from a psychological perspective: a notable example is Giles's (2006) foundational work on some of the earliest pro-ana communities, wherein the author pointed out that these new and peculiar Internet niches functioned as sorts of sanctuaries "for people with interests that are unacceptable to the general public" (475). Lai et al. (2021) conducted an assessment of pro-ana bloggers' inability to provide a realistic representation of their condition. Furthermore, other works have emphasised the negative psychological effects which sustained viewership of pro-ana blogs can especially have on more impressionable demographics in their developmental years, such as teenagers and young adults (Custers & Van Den Bluck, 2009, and Tiggemann & Slater, 2013).

From a sociological standpoint, Haas et al. (2011) and Boero and Pascoe (2012) examined the relational dynamics which are formed within some of these communities, highlighting the existence of complex practices which this "new type of social support group" (Haas et al., 2011: 40) revolves around. Yeshua-Katz (2015) provided an interesting analysis of the pro-anorexia phenomenon as a response to the stigma associated with the eating disorder and faced by anorexic individuals in their daily lives. In doing so, the author also proposed a reimagining of Goffman's (1963) spearheading work on stigma and its consequences on individuals and their social behaviours. Casilli et al. (2013), on the other hand, emphasised the high levels of community resilience displayed by pro-ana bloggers, presenting evidence that mere

attempts at censoring these individuals and their communities have generally resulted in an involuntarily counterproductive strengthening of the pro-anorexia phenomenon itself.

Although researchers in the fields of psychology and sociology have shown an increased interest in the study of pro-ana communities, there has been little discussion surrounding this topic from a linguistic standpoint. Day and Keys's (2008) research provided several insights into a series of pro-ana communities and their discursive strategies by relying on "a poststructuralist style of discourse analysis informed by a feminist perspective" (1). Stapleton et al. (2019) also conducted a discourse analysis of several pro-anorexia communities, exclusively focusing on the presence of religious metaphors within the bloggers' discursive constructions about the eating disorder. Chinello et al. (2020) provided a semantic account of discourse surrounding food on Italian pro-anorexia websites. Finally, Elrod and Dykeman (2019) investigated Spanish pro-anorexia activity on Tumblr using a Corpus Linguistics methodology.

However, apart from the aforementioned studies, there appears to be a general lack of linguistic research surrounding the pro-anorexia trend, despite the evident need for a better understanding of what kind of discourse constructions and sense-making strategies are at the root of this peculiar phenomenon. Indeed, seeing as it has generally proved difficult even for medical professionals to gain insights into the rationale and the motives of anorexic individuals, primarily on account of their tendency to isolate and retreat into themselves in fear of facing social stigma, it would appear worthwhile to capitalise on the unprecedented accessibility into their livelihoods which is afforded by pro-ana spaces. Consequently, in light of the fact that these spaces are characterised by continuous identity- and community-building efforts by the bloggers which are mediated through the use of recurring discourse constructions and language patterning, the necessity for further linguistic studies on the topic at hand appears to be a natural progression of the current state of the art.

Therefore, the main objective of the present study is to provide a detailed analysis of the uses which pro-ana bloggers make of language in order to convey their experiences with the eating disorder. Indeed, this work seeks to determine the peculiarities of one specific community, i.e., the Tumblr pro-anorexia community,

through the analysis of the language produced by the individuals digitally inhabiting it. In order to do so, the present study systematically parses out the instances of discourse being enacted in this digital space, so as to assess the extent to which the preoccupations and struggles of anorexic individuals are reflected in the narratives they share with fellow bloggers.

This study provides an opportunity to gain insights into the linguistic and discursive nature of the Tumblr pro-anorexia community. Aside from the previously mentioned contribution by Elrod and Dykeman (2019), wherein the authors relied on corpus methodology to analyse Tumblr pro-ana activity in Spanish, no other studies appear to have previously investigated the pro-anorexia phenomenon on this social network through the use of corpus methodologies in conjunction with Critical Discourse Analysis tools. The present work should therefore represent a welcome contribution to the advancement of the currently limited understanding of the pro-anorexia phenomenon, insofar as it seeks to apply an original research method to a generally obscure field of study.

The data for this dissertation, consisting of a total of 1,228 textposts, were collected from the Tumblr platform throughout the month of September 2021. The data were then cleaned and compiled into a corpus. Quantitative and qualitative methods alike were used for this research in the form of Corpus Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis tools. Corpus methods were especially adopted to provide a solid quantitative and frequentist foundation for the subsequent Discourse Analysis, which in turn expounded on the corpus findings from a more qualitative perspective. The reason for the choice of this mixed methodology primarily lies in the need to reduce researcher bias and maximise objectivity as much as possible, which is all the more pressing in light of the sensitive subject matter at hand.

It should be pointed out that, due to practical limitations, the scope of the present work is limited to the analysis of a single pro-anorexia community, i.e., the one hosted on the Tumblr platform. However, it has been observed that pro-anorexia communities thrive in a vast array of different digital spaces, and it is thus conceivable to assume that different host platforms may influence the characteristics of each pro-ana community in equally different ways. Nonetheless, despite a number of platform-specific peculiarities, it is possible to hypothesise that the main

characteristics of pro-anorexia discourse generally remain consistent across a spectrum of communities, primarily on account of the shared experiences which the majority of anorexic individuals go through as a result of their condition.

Furthermore, as stated in previous paragraphs, the present study aims to expound the main discursive strategies adopted by pro-anorexia bloggers on Tumblr, and for this reason it exclusively focuses on posts containing textual data. However, although it is beyond the scope of this research, it should be noted that pro-anorexia activity on this website is not solely textual in nature, as it has been observed to consistently rely on a wide range of multimodal content, including images, videos, and audios. Indeed, given the great focus which anorexic individuals place upon their appearances, it is rather unsurprising that visual imagery should play an especially important role in most pro-anorexia communities.

Finally, the present study only examines text posts published in the English language. While the majority of pro-anorexia content on the Tumblr platform is authored in this language, the reader should bear in mind that this phenomenon is not limited to Anglo-American societies. Indeed, as was previously mentioned, a number of authors (e.g., Dykeman & Elrod (2019) and Chinello et al. (2020)) have conducted analyses of pro-anorexia activity in languages other than English, such as Spanish and Italian. Regrettably, no research has been found that examined possible non-Western extensions of this phenomenon, although it is conceivable to assume that such communities may exist in non-Western cultures as well. Indeed, seeing as anorexia nervosa has been observed to be on the increase across all cultures and countries, and that the rise of pro-anorexia communities appears to be a natural progression of the spread of the eating disorder in the age of the Internet, it would be interesting to explore the extent, if any, of this phenomenon outside the Western world.

This study takes the form of three Chapters, along with the present Introduction and the final Conclusions. Chapter One strives to lay out a theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis by relying on the relevant literature, providing a wealth of background information on the topic of anorexia nervosa and, consequently, on the pro-anorexia phenomenon and its roots. The first Chapter also presents the digital context in which this research was conducted, i.e., the Tumblr platform. Chapter Two

begins by situating this study in the field of Corpus Linguistics, outlining the main characteristics of this research approach. Chapter Two then provides a quantitative analysis of the corpus at hand by means of Corpus Linguistics tools. Chapter Three relies on Critical Discourse Analysis to examine a sample from the corpus consisting of 34 textposts, thus offering a more qualitative and in-depth insight into the community's distinctive discursive constructions. Finally, the Conclusions provide a summary and a discussion of the findings and their significance, while highlighting the limitations of the present work and identifying possible areas for future research.

Throughout this study, the keywords pro-anorexia and pro-ana will be used interchangeably to refer to the phenomenon which is being investigated. It does not appear necessary to provide a further definition of these two terms, seeing as they are quite unequivocal and self-explanatory in nature. However, it should be pointed out that two other words, i.e., thinspiration and thinspo, have also been used in the relevant literature to refer to pro-anorexia/pro-ana content. These two portmanteau terms, resulting from the combination of the words thin and inspiration (or, inspo for short), appear to be, at least superficially, absolute synonyms of the aforementioned pro-anorexia/pro-ana pair. However, despite the superficial similarity between these two pairs of terms, no research has been found which investigated possible differences in the patterns of usage of these keywords. The present work will therefore primarily rely on the pro-anorexia/pro-ana pair.

A final introductory remark should be offered as far as the use of pronouns in this dissertation is concerned. Indeed, throughout this study the pronoun they will be used not only as a plural pronoun, but also as a gender-neutral third-person singular pronoun. Although the singular use of the pronoun they has recently been the subject of considerable debate, it should be noted that “this use [...] has existed for centuries, and is perfectly correct” (Swan, 2017: 521). Furthermore, although it is more common in an informal style, numerous examples of this use are found in formal written English, among which on British passport application forms (*ibid.*).

The rationale for this decision lies in the practical impossibility of establishing the gender of the bloggers who author the textposts on the Tumblr platform. In fact, as will be pointed out in upcoming Chapters, Tumblr pro-anorexia bloggers generally conceal their real identities behind pseudonyms and extravagant, frequently

anorexia-related, usernames. Although a number of bloggers do in fact provide personal information such as their age or gender in their profile description, due to the large number of bloggers whose content has been taken into consideration for the present study, it appears impractical to peruse each user's profile in order to determine their gender.

Furthermore, although anorexia nervosa has been statistically observed to occur more frequently amongst females, the assumption that most, if not all, pro-anorexia bloggers are indeed girls/women will not be made in the present work. This decision has been made on account of the fact that, although male sufferers of anorexia nervosa are severely underrepresented in the medical literature, it is not unlikely that a number of male bloggers also partake in pro-anorexia discourse on Tumblr. As a matter of fact, the lack of understanding generally faced by male sufferers of anorexia (Strother et al., 2012), it may be possible to hypothesise that these individuals are all the more driven to seek

Additionally, it should be noted that, as will be discussed in forthcoming Chapters, the corpus at hand contains textposts wherein users mention their struggles with gender identity and gender dysphoria. Therefore, it appears all the more necessary to refer to singular bloggers whose gender identity is not clearly specified with the neutral pronoun they.

CHAPTER ONE

Anorexia in the Time of the Internet

1. Anorexia Nervosa

Anorexia nervosa, also known simply as anorexia, is an avoidant food intake disorder whereby an individual consistently and severely limits their caloric intake, which inevitably leads to weight loss (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 339). The first criterion for a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa is indeed a weight “that is less than minimally normal” (*ibid.*): the assessment of this criterion is based on an individual’s BMI (body mass index) percentile, which in the case of anorexic subjects ranges from mild (BMI > 17kg/m²) to extreme (BMI < 15 kg/m²) thinness.

The second diagnostic criterion for anorexia is an intense fear of weight gain, contributing to behaviours which encourage weight loss. Furthermore, an anorexic’s fear of “becoming fat” does not seem to alleviate with increasing weight loss: “in fact, concern about weight gain may increase even as weight falls” (340). The third and final criterion for a diagnosis of this eating disorder is a display of “disturbances in self-perceived weight or shape” (339): the majority of anorexic individuals either feel generally overweight or are particularly concerned with the appearance of certain body parts, such as their abdomen or thighs. On account of their obsessive preoccupation with weight, these individuals “may employ a variety of techniques to evaluate their body size or weight, including frequent weighing, obsessive measuring of body parts, and persistent use of a mirror [...]” (340).

Subtypes of anorexia nervosa can be characterized by purging behaviours such as “self-induced vomiting, misuse of laxatives, diuretics and enema” (339). Furthermore, as per its clinical definition, an individual suffering from anorexia is rarely aware of the seriousness of their condition and will therefore “lack insight into or deny the problem” (340), which is why anorexics rarely seek treatment on their own, unless family members urge them to upon noticing marked weight loss or abnormal eating behaviours.

Individuals suffering from anorexia nervosa experience a series of conditions as a consequence of the eating disorder, ranging from mild to life-threatening. Among them, from a physiological point of view, anorexics often display

amenorrhea (which is exclusive to females), loss of bone density, electrolyte disturbances, anaemia, lanugo, hypothermia and bradycardia (343). Psychological disturbances include “social withdrawal, irritability, insomnia, and diminished interest in sex” (341). Depressive states and obsessive-compulsive behaviours surrounding food and eating are common as well, and both are believed to be a result of being undernourished, seeing as they are also observed in individuals who experience malnourishment without anorexia nervosa. Suicide rates are reported to be higher than average among individuals with anorexia, with 12 cases per 100,000 per year (343): indeed, Pompili et al. (2004) refuted the common misconception that starvation is the primary cause of death among individuals with anorexia, suggesting that suicide is much deadlier instead. Nevertheless, factoring in both deaths by suicide and those caused by medical complications, the crude mortality rate (CMR) of anorexia nervosa is estimated to be “approximately 5% per decade” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 342).

Given the occurrence of anorexia across diverse cultures and societies, an attempt at providing a detailed overview of the “average” individual affected by this eating disorder would result in a reductive and simplistic account. However, it may be observed that, as far as the population of the United States is concerned, the median age of onset of anorexia is estimated to be 18 years old (National Institute of Mental Health, 2021). It should be mentioned that here the United States are considered as representative of the majority of Western and Western-oriented countries, given that Muller and Pumariega (2001: 99) pointed out that the rates of anorexia in these countries are comparable with those of the United States of America. Indeed, anorexia “rarely begins before puberty or after the age of 40” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 342), and its onset is often linked to “a stressful life event, such as leaving home for college” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the disease has been found to disproportionately affect the female population in what is believed to be a 10:1 female-to-male ratio (341). Although, as noted by Strother et al. (2012), estimates about the prevalence of anorexia nervosa in the male population are to be considered as skewed, due to the fact that men suffering from anorexia are consistently “underdiagnosed, undertreated, and misunderstood” (347) by clinicians. As for the ethnic background of those affected by the disease, Miller and Pumariega

(2001) found that, statistically, anorexia nervosa tends to be much more prevalent among individuals from Western and Western-oriented cultures (e.g., Japan). Moreover, they pointed out that significant differences in the pervasiveness of anorexia have been reported even as far as the various demographics of the United States are concerned, with ethnic minority groups being affected by this and other eating disorders less frequently than Caucasian Americans. Furthermore, an interesting finding was that acculturation of individuals from ethnic minorities in Western societies generally leads to higher rates of anorexia nervosa (98).

An issue which has been investigated by numerous researchers is whether anorexia is, at its core, an exclusively modern phenomenon. Overall, considering the array of historical analyses of the eating disorder proposed by a number of authors, this certainly appears to be the case. Indeed, Bemporad (1996) pointed out that self-starvation behaviours have been observed throughout recorded history with varied frequencies and forms, from hunger strikes to religious fasts and similar kinds of ascetic practices. However, willful self-starvation for reasons other than the aforementioned ones seems to have been quite unusual all throughout history, at least until the 19th century. As highlighted by Miller and Pumariega (2001: 95), voluntary abstinence from food was predictably rare in historical periods when hunger and scarcity were already widespread. Indeed, it appears that only in relatively recent times has self-starvation been overwhelmingly driven by a “desire for thinness [...] and a psychological connection between a slender body and success, sophistication, and self-control” (Bemporad, 1996: 231).

The 19th century is generally held to be a turning point in the history of anorexia: in 1859 Louis-Victor Marce, a French physician, was the first clinician to provide a modern account of anorexia nervosa in a paper where he focused on the case study of a group of women who refused to eat, and who reportedly displayed a peculiar “oppositionalism as well as an obsession with food” (Bemporad, 1996: 228). Later, the 20th century brought about a deepening in the understanding of the disease and its psychogenic origins: in 1973, psychiatrist Hilde Bruch stressed “the anorexic’s sense of helplessness and ineffectiveness and her disturbance of body image and perception” (230). Finally, the disease was first included in the *Diagnostic*

and *Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) in 1980, which paved the way for the establishment of its current diagnostic criteria.

Despite anorexia nervosa being a relatively recent phenomenon, several studies have highlighted that the disease has been consistently on the rise for the past two decades (Galmiche et al., 2019: 1408). Numerous researchers have set out to determine the underlying reason for the recent increase in the incidence of anorexia nervosa, and the consensus seems to be that culture plays a central role in this upward trend. The “increasing gap between the weights of women in the general population versus the weights of women who serve as role models for attractiveness” (Miller & Pumariega, 2001: 94) is posited to be one of the driving factors behind the rise of anorexia. The promotion of the “thin ideal”, particularly in Western societies, is indeed suggested to be the leading cause of body dissatisfaction, especially in the female population. The growing number of diet articles and the spread of dieting behaviours (*ibid.*) are symptomatic of a larger phenomenon which is also responsible for the spread of anorexia. This account also provides an explanation for the relatively low prevalence of anorexia among men: because of the “lower level of social emphasis on male body weight and shape” (*ibid.*), men are less exposed to the factors which so often engender body dissatisfaction in women. Such an interpretation was also proposed by the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 342): “historical and cross-cultural variability in the prevalence of anorexia nervosa supports its association with cultures and settings in which thinness is valued. Occupations and avocations that encourage thinness, such as modeling and elite athletics, are also associated with increased risk”.

Although the traditional sociocultural explanation presented thus far represents a comprehensive account for the rise of anorexia which is still relevant to this day, recent studies (i.e., Tiggemann & Slater, 2013) have also expanded on this narrative by considering the impact of Internet exposure on the continued rise of this eating disorder, finding that “time spent on social networking sites [...] was correlated with higher levels of internalization of the thin ideal, body surveillance and drive for thinness” (8). Moreover, Tiggemann and Miller (2010: 86) argued that the Internet, on account of its interactive nature, is even more dangerous than television and magazines as far as the promotion of harmful body standards is concerned:

Unlike television and magazines, which are more unidirectional and passive, the Internet allows greater participation by the user, allowing girls to control, find and share information they are interested in [...]. Users are able to access (privately and whenever they wish) appearance-related websites—some celebrating and encouraging eating disorders, others including a wealth of information related to methods for losing weight—that might directly promote drive for thinness.

Indeed, the vastity of the Internet and the unregulated pervasiveness of content centred around the thin ideal, especially on social media platforms which are popular amongst teenagers, are factors which seem to currently exacerbate the already widespread public health concern posed by anorexia. Interestingly, such an account about the relationship between social media and the onset of anorexia nervosa is also frequently validated by anorexic patients themselves, as they reflect upon what they believe are the causes behind their illness. An insightful example is offered by this patient narrative in the *British Medical Journal* (2017):

I wasn't overweight, but I was obsessed with magazines and social media, where I first saw pictures of very slim women who did not look anything like me. They had no curves, no thighs, no fat, yet they were considered very beautiful. I was determined to change my shape to look like them. I thought that was a healthy thing to do.

For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that recent studies have investigated a possible genetic component which is purported to increase the likelihood that an individual may develop anorexia nervosa in their lifetime. As stated by Pinheiro et al. (2009: 159), there is evidence that “eating disorders run in families, largely due to the effect of genes, and that some areas of the genome may be considerably more likely to harbour risk genes”. Furthermore, Klump et al. (2001) conducted a study on hundreds of anorexic twins, the results of which suggested “significant genetic and non-shared environmental influence on anorexic pathology” (739). Research on the potentially hereditary nature of anorexia nervosa is still ongoing, with possible future developments as medical knowledge about this eating disorder increases. Keeping in mind the existence of a genetic explanation as to why some individuals are more

likely to suffer from anorexia nervosa than others, it is undeniable that the sociocultural context in which they live, along with societal pressure and the impact of Internet exposure contribute to the exacerbation of any predisposition to the development of this eating disorder.

1.1. Pro-Ana Communities: A Brief History

Thanks to the wonders of the Internet, anorexics and would-be anorexics around the globe can access more than 400 web sites designed solely for them. Need to know how to disguise your weight loss so concerned (read: jealous) friends will stop hounding you to eat? Looking for a few words of support as you launch into your latest deprivation diet? Or perhaps you'd like to know the tricks for satisfying that pesky weekly weigh-in at the doctor's office? It's all right here.

The above excerpt (Reaves, 2001) was taken from a *Time* article with a rather intriguing title: *Anorexia Goes High-Tech*. The article, which dates back to July 2001, is one of the first by a major publication to offer an insight into a newly developing and peculiar phenomenon: the digital pro-ana trend (Boero & Pascoe, 2012: 27).

According to Boero and Pascoe (29), the pro-ana blogosphere represents a digital meeting place for anorexics “that is non-recovery oriented, offers weight-loss tips, generates support, and provides non-judgmental community that does not take a negative attitude toward eating disorders”. While such a definition is generally accepted within the academic community and certainly constitutes a solid foundation for further investigation into this phenomenon, it should be pointed out that, as remarked by Giles (2006: 464), “it is an over-simplification to regard the pro-ana community as reflecting a universally coherent standpoint”, in the sense that the above features mentioned by Boero and Pascoe should not be considered as unshakable tenets of this community at large. Indeed, as it will be discussed in the next Chapters, the attitudes of those who partake in pro-ana discourse within the community are varied and complex: “even users themselves are unsure as to whether they are ‘celebrating’ their EDs, whether anorexia is a life-style choice, a medical condition, an illness, or a positive or a negative experience” (*ibid.*).

The online pro-ana paradigm and its development appear to have run parallel to the evolution of the Internet itself. The first pro-ana websites started emerging on the Internet in the early 1990s (Ging & Garvey, 2018: 1181). By the early 2000s, the World Wide Web hosted “over 400 ‘pro-ana’ sites” (Giles, 2006: 464). These early pro-ana communities were quite “nomadic” in nature (*ibid.*), seeing as they often faced shutdowns by server providers, and therefore had to frequently reorganize and reopen at new web locations. The rise of social media had a great impact on the nature and internal organization of the pro-ana community, which, as highlighted by Ging and Garvey (2018: 1182), in recent years “has migrated from websites, which tended to be static, heavily moderated, password-protected and exclusively focused on anorexia, to social media platforms [...]”. A more detailed overview of the types of pro-ana communities currently existing on the Internet will be presented in upcoming Sections.

1.2. Pro-Ana as a “Circle of Lament”: a Sociological Perspective

One issue that needs to be asked before delving deeper into the inner workings of pro-ana communities is why these peculiar digital spaces even exist in the first place. In order to provide a satisfactory answer to this query, the present research will rely on the conceptual framework offered by social psychologist Ervin Goffman. According to Goffman (1963: 5), society categorizes individuals based on the attributes they are expected to have in order to be considered as “normal”. Stigma arises whenever someone displays an attribute that is “deeply discrediting” (3), insofar as it strays from societal expectations. The consequence of possessing a stigmatizing attribute is that the individual “is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (*ibid.*). The author furthermore provided a taxonomy of possible kinds of stigma: abominations of the body, blemishes of individual characters (among which mental disorders, addictions and suicidal attempts), and stigma owing to race, nation and religion. Moreover, Goffman asserted that, as a consequence of being isolated and discriminated by an unaccepting society, the stigmatized individual will seek others like them, “a circle of lament to which [they] can withdraw for moral support and for the comfort of feeling at home, at ease, accepted as a person who really is like any other normal person” (20).

Although it was published in the early 1960s, Goffman's seminal work is still considered to be "remarkably useful to understanding the motivations of stigmatized individuals" (Yeshua-Katz, 2015: 1347). One such group of stigmatized individuals is that of people suffering from anorexia nervosa. Stewart et al. (2006: 323) found that "normal people", in Goffman's words, tend to express "blame-based stigma towards AN [anorexia nervosa]", meaning that they seem to place the blame for the illness directly on the ill. The results of the study conducted by Stewart et al. highlighted that "individuals with AN elicited more negative characterizations than those elicited for healthy individuals, individuals with asthma, and even individuals with schizophrenia". Furthermore, Brelet et al. (2021: 9) conducted a survey wherein people with anorexia were consistently described by the general public "as dangerous, incompetent, able to pull themselves together if they chose to, hard to talk to, and considerably attention-seeking". A series of factors may be responsible for the high degree of stigmatization which individuals with anorexia are subjected to, among them that, as previously mentioned, adolescent females are the main demographic affected by this disease, which is believed to "diminish the extent to which [anorexia nervosa] is viewed as a serious mental disorder on par with conditions like schizophrenia and bipolar affective disorder" (Stewart et al., 2006: 324). Furthermore, anorexia nervosa does not have a proper pharmacotherapy and is therefore characterized by a lack of pharmaceutical advertising, which in other cases "has been shown to effectively reduce stigma and increase awareness of illnesses" (*ibid.*).

Stigmatization of people suffering from anorexia nervosa is believed to lead to "depressive and self-esteem symptoms, social alienation and social withdrawal, poor physical health, and greater ED symptoms" (Brelet et al., 2021: 3). Furthermore, Becker et al. (2004: 160) found that one of the reasons why individuals with disordered eating attitudes did not seek treatment was out of fear of others knowing about their eating disorder. One more consequence of the stigma surrounding anorexia, and the one which is most relevant to the present research, is that, in line with Goffman's thesis, individuals suffering from this eating disorder tend to seek out their own and join communities of sympathetic others which can offer refuge from stigma. In the case of anorexia, these communities have been found to be

exclusively digital, since real-life social relationships “do not always provide the needed support” (Yeshua-Katz, 2015: 1348).

In a modern adaptation of Goffman’s analysis, the Internet is thus revealed to offer a virtual haven, a digital “circle of lament” (Goffman, 1963: 20) to this group of stigmatized individuals, who would otherwise struggle to find others like them on account of the secrecy and isolation which surround the struggles of individuals with anorexia nervosa in real-life. Indeed, as observed by Yeshua-Katz (1350), members of pro-ana communities “reported being motivated to blog because, through it, they found social support, a way to cope with a stigmatized illness, and a means of self-expression in the online realm”.

Furthermore, it has been posited that the prevalence of online communities of anorexic individuals over real-life ones is owing to four main factors: anonymity, interaction management, immediate access, and weak-tie support preference. Anonymity precludes the embarrassment these individuals “might experience if offline acquaintances were to know of their concerns” (1348). Interaction management, which is typical of online spaces, allows them to “exert greater choice and control over interactions than is possible in face-to-face” (*ibid.*). This implies that individuals suffering from anorexia can tailor the interactions they expose themselves to, blocking out pro-recovery messages and rather immersing themselves in discourse which does not frame their eating disorder as inherently negative. Immediate access has to do with the perks of being able to continuously receive some form of support from other individuals in these online spaces: as opposed to offline support groups, online communities are constantly accessible, with no time constraints, and they are not subjected to any other kinds of barriers or limitations, aside from the attempts by server providers at shutting down pro-ana content. However, as will be expounded in following Sections, said attempts are often unsuccessful, and they have been shown to strengthen these communities rather than eradicate them. The fourth and final factor is preference for weak-tie support, which implies that people suffering from anorexia nervosa would rather communicate with individuals they are not interpersonally close with, as opposed to their family, friends or acquaintances in real life, because “they perceive the advice from weak-tie network members to be more objective and less emotional” (1348-1349).

1.3. Violence, Affection, and Rituality: Relevant Features of Pro-Ana Communities

As was pointed out above, reducing pro-ana communities to a monolith displaying a universally coherent approach to anorexia would be an oversimplification of this complex and unique phenomenon. However, it is quite useful to explore some of the main characteristics which seem to consistently underlie most of these online spaces. Boero and Pascoe's (2012) research conducted on 14 pro-ana groups offers valuable insight into the main patterns of the pro-ana blogosphere. It should be noted that Boero and Pascoe's study was conducted on MySpace, which was the largest social media platform in the United States at the time of the research, but that, as of today, attracts fewer users than it did a decade ago. However, the 2012 study is still one of the most in-depth textual analyses available about the pro-ana phenomenon, and it proves to be particularly useful as a basis for understanding the core aspects of pro-ana communities, keeping in mind that any differences of current pro-ana spaces from the characteristics proposed by Boero and Pascoe will be expounded in forthcoming Sections of this dissertation. Moreover, the following overview of the proposed characteristics of pro-ana communities relies on the work by Haas et al. (2011), who presented an account of the phenomenon which is somewhat contrasting with Boero and Pascoe's. Finally, a brief reference will be made to Stapleton et al.'s 2019 study on the prevalence of the religious metaphor in pro-ana discourse.

According to Haas et al. (2011), the primary overarching theme of pro-ana communities is the "construction of an ana personal identity" (47), which mainly relies on two specific communication strategies: "staying true to ana" and "creating an audience for ana". In order to stay true to the eating disorder, community members post food and exercise logs, minutely detailing how many calories they have eaten and how many they have burned. In this sense, these digital spaces "function as a sort of 'online confessional', a virtual place where members can go to free themselves from the guilt of not 'staying true to ana' when they have eaten too much or engaged in too little physical activity" (*ibid.*). But these individuals' confessions are not released into a vacuum: indeed, by implementing their communication strategy of "creating an audience for ana", members of the

community seemingly craft a mental image of the audience they disclose personal information to. As a result, pro-ana bloggers post content that is addressed to a very specific group of people, i.e., other members of the community, with whom they establish a sort of parasocial connection. By means of this double pattern of establishing a mental model as to who their viewers/readers are and then sharing with them some of their most intimate and painful experiences, “pro-ana bloggers engage in co-constructing personal identities that are consistent with group ana membership expectations of a perceived audience” (48).

The second underlying theme proposed by Haas et al. is self-loathing: in fact, members of pro-ana communities seem to be consistently engaged in self-deprecation, which is quite consistent with the fact that “negative self-belief is a common characteristic of those with anorexia” (*ibid.*). Interestingly enough, this practice of ritual self-hatred is not only centred around their bodies and physical appearances, as would be expected, but also around their inner beings: one recurring example is the harsh self-criticism directed by the bloggers towards their own perceived weakness when they fail at upholding their anorexic tenets. Indeed, “participants frequently write about feelings of inner worthlessness and weakness” (*ibid.*), but what is most surprising about this pattern is that “unlike other social support situations where these feelings would likely be discredited (e.g., ‘you aren’t fat’ or ‘you are beautiful the way you are’), these negative rants are embraced by others in the movement and help confirm group membership” (49). This peculiar approach to self-disparagement thus appears to be exclusive to this online community, as it also constitutes an important cohesive and identity-building factor.

Advice-seeking and advice-giving has been found to be another major theme within the pro-ana blogosphere. Most advice which is requested or imparted pertains to two different categories: “dieting advice and impression management advice for dealing with ‘non-anas’ in social situations” (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, most dieting advice revolves around tips and tricks on how to achieve fast and extreme weight loss: participants share their first-hand experiences to aid others in their quest to attain an ever-lower weight. These suggestions usually pertain to the topics of food and calorie tracking, as exemplified by the following contribution from one of the websites sampled by Haas et al.: “everyone should eat celery girls. It burns more

calories to chew and digest than it does to eat it. How awesome is that?” (*ibid.*). Impression management advice is often sought out by individuals who ask for other members’ assistance in dealing with real life situations such as family gatherings where they are required to eat. Practical suggestions are exchanged as to how to arrange food on a plate to feign eating, or how to “chew your food and spit it into napkins when no one is looking at you” (50), and so on. In this sense, the weak-tie support provided by the community is useful to deal with the pressures and anxiety resulting from relationships with close-tie individuals, such as friends and family, who are perceived as distant outsiders who fail to understand the anorexics’ eating behaviours, while “the virtual community is perceived as salient, understanding and full of helpful personal supporters” (*ibid.*).

Group encouragement is posited to be the third overarching theme within online pro-ana discourse. Displays of affection and support towards one another seem to be frequent among members of pro-ana communities: according to Haas et al. (51), numerous posts contain messages of encouragement to be strong and persevere in the pursuit of thinness. This is often accompanied by criticism towards those “on the outside”, who are perceived as jealous of anorexic individuals, as can be observed in a post by one community member: “My mom is always telling me to eat, but that’s because she’s gotten so huge. She’s jealous because I have ana and she doesn’t. We can do this, ladies!” (*ibid.*). Group encouragement in the face of the threat of stigmatization from close-tie relationships is therefore believed to “foster group intimacy and trust against an outside environment of disapproval and perceived misunderstanding” (*ibid.*). Thus, encouragement from other pro-ana community members seems to strengthen the divide between ingroup and outgroup, further isolating anorexic individuals and alienating them from their real-life, close-tie relationships.

Boero and Pascoe (2012) provided a characterization of pro-ana communities which is somewhat different from the one which has been detailed thus far. According to this alternative analysis, “the pro-ana anorexic does not seek to hide her body or her disorder, often acts aggressively, actively searches out membership in a pro-ana community, and shows ambivalence about both anorexia and recovery”. While the desire to belong in the pro-ana community has already been highlighted as

a direct consequence of the stigmatization faced by the anorexic individual, the notion of violence as one of the internal dynamics within the community is quite striking, especially since Haas et al. (2011) mentioned frequent displays of inter-group affection as one of the defining characteristics of digital pro-ana spaces. In particular, Boero and Pascoe (2012: 39) focused on the figure of the wannarexic, someone whom the community perceives as unauthentic in their pursuit of thinness and in their commitment to the eating disorder. The authors stressed the competitive nature of the community, wherein members continuously feel the need to prove themselves in order to avoid the scourge of being labelled as a wannarexic: “To be pro-anorexic, group members also need to demonstrate that they are familiar with typical eating disordered strategies for weight loss. Revealing a gap in that knowledge leaves a person open to being labelled a wannarexic” (40). Moreover, the study reported that wannarexics are routinely exposed as such by the members of the community, who “tease or respond to them with sarcasm and false information, a sort of ‘wanna-baiting’ in which non-wannarexic members can lead on wannarexics and then expose them” (*ibid.*).

Aside from the aggression directed towards wannarexics, Boero and Pascoe also investigated the prevalence of self-aggression and aggression as group motivation. Self-aggression, which is akin to what Haas et al. (2011) described as self-loathing, primarily revolves around the practice of calling oneself fat, ugly or any similar pejorative. Self-aggression is routinely employed by bloggers to motivate themselves to more extreme food intake restriction, exercise or purging practices. Furthermore, it is believed that such self-loathing practices are also a means “to signal to other members one’s dedication and status as a true anorexic, not a wannarexic or someone trying to lose a few pounds for vanity’s sake” (47). It is worth pointing out that the phenomenon of adolescent girls calling themselves fat is not exclusive to those suffering from anorexia nervosa. As highlighted by Ambjornsson (2005: 117), “fat talk” is rife amongst young females, and it constitutes a sort of tool for community building: “the experience of worrying about fat is normalized; it is something you face because you are a girl. Expressing dissatisfaction with one’s body becomes, in this sense, an important way of performing one’s identity as a girl”. However, while “fat talk” is indeed

commonplace for young women, pro-ana self-deprecating body talk has been found to contain a “greater level of aggressiveness” (Boero & Pascoe, 2012: 47). Moreover, this peculiar form of self-disparagement is met by a response that is not one of reassurance, as one would expect in real-life situations, but rather one of encouragement to persevere in the quest to thinness.

Aggression as motivation is a practice by means of which members of the community resort to insults and slurs to motivate each other in their pursuit of extreme restriction and weight-loss. Boero and Pascoe (*ibid.*) reported numerous instances of this behaviour in their analysis of MySpace’s pro-ana communities, as in the example below, where a member is praised by another for the effectiveness of her aggressive motivation:

Jessie: Oioi fatties. Yeh u all better be fasting. Cos ur all fat as fuck and need to!!!! So put that piece of cake down and go run, and i don’t want u back til ur legs are guna fall off and ur 10 pounds lighter. Haha i feel so mean for writing things like that. But u all know I don’t mean it. Just a continuation from the other ur fat thread. xxxx.

I know more than You: See, that’s the sort of motivation i need lol like constantly keep going keep going keep going.

According to Boero and Pascoe (*ibid.*), misinterpretation of such exchanges as instances of ill-intentioned hostility signals that an individual has very little knowledge of the norms of the community: indeed, every pro-ana blogger knows that such interactions are meant to inspire and motivate, rather than to upset other members. Since the publication of Boero and Pascoe’s research in 2012, this peculiar definitory characteristic of the pro-ana community has come to be known under the portmanteau of “meanspo”, a word resulting from the blending of the terms “mean” and “inspiration”. Lai et al. (2021: 4), in an analysis of the most frequent keywords characterizing discourse within the pro-ana blogosphere, highlighted the prevalence of “meanspo” as one of the most recurring lemmas.

Finally, one last relevant feature of pro-ana communities is the pursuit of authenticity through reliance on rituals of various kinds. The three main rituals mentioned by Boero and Pascoe (42) are “posting pictures, check-ins (statistics and

food reports) and group activities (fasts and surveys)”. Posting pictures is obviously considered to be the most straightforward strategy to establish authenticity, with members uploading photos of their most emaciated body parts in order to prove they are actually thin. However, according to Boero and Pascoe, such a practice does not completely settle the question of authenticity and embodiment: indeed, as is often the case on the Internet, photos can be fake, outdated or photoshopped. For this reason, pro-ana bloggers feel that other types of rituals are required, such as check-ins in the form of food logs and weight statistics. Interestingly, these practices are characterized by a series of symbols, as it appears evident in this excerpt from Boero and Pascoe’s research (44):

Name: Stacy / Age: Almost 16 / CW: 95 / LW: 92 /
HW: 120-125 / Height: 5’3”.5-5’4” / ED: Anorexia Nervosa / GW1: 90 / GW2: 85 /
GW3: 80 (It just keeps getting lower ...) / Fun Fact:
I recently dyed my hair bleach-ish blonde ^_^./

Acronyms such as “HW” (highest weight), “LW” (lowest weight), “CW” (current weight), “GW” (goal weight), are indeed familiar to all the members of the community, while they may appear as rather obscure to outsiders. This discursive practice therefore contributes to further deepening the divide between the ingroup and the outgroup, between those who easily understand the pro-ana jargon, and those who do not. Finally, special “authentication practices” (45) are sometimes collectively undertaken by subsets of the community to strengthen group ties: among them are “fasts, taking surveys or agreeing to wear a particular bracelet colour (usually red) to indicate their membership in a pro-anorexic group” (*ibid.*). Collective fasts appear to be particularly effective as far as ingroup cohesion is concerned: whenever an individual asks others to fast with them, community members respond excitedly and enthusiastically.

Finally, one more interesting analysis of the main features of pro-ana communities is provided by Stapleton et al. (2019), who investigated the discursive representation of anorexia in the pro-ana blogosphere, along with the conceptual metaphors underlying said representation. Following a 47-day analysis of message exchanges on one pro-ana website, it was observed that there existed an important

religious, specifically Christian, component to the interactions between members of the community. The most striking observation in the study concerns the personification of Ana as an entity “having agency and intention, and as experiencing emotions and including love, satisfaction and anger” (334), someone who can exert a significant degree of power over her followers, in a manner very similar to that of the Christian God in religious discourse. Ambivalent representations of Ana as a loving or a punitive deity were also found to be rife in the posts taken into consideration by Stapleton et al. (*ibid.*), who highlighted how Ana was presented “as rewarding those who followed her commands [...] through, for example, weight loss and associated life satisfaction. However, in other places, she was presented as harsh, exacting and (justifiably) punitive to those who failed to maintain their ED”. While the association between food, fasting and religiosity has been a constant throughout history, the representation of anorexia as a religion appears to be unique to the pro-ana movement. According to Stapleton et al. (322-323), such a peculiar framing of the eating disorder may have serious consequences as far as treatment and recovery are concerned: it may indeed “valorise self-perceptions and understandings of the ED, [...] and provide a sense of purpose and code of practice”, all of which contributes to strengthen ingroup relations and to discourage members from seeking professional help. Although this analysis is quite insightful as concerns one of the most intriguing and distinctive features of the pro-ana community, it should be pointed out that it is exclusively limited to a primarily Western and Christian context: it would certainly be interesting to verify whether this religious metaphor remains constant in non-Western, non-Christian pro-ana communities, with a religious framework adapted for “a different set of beliefs and deities” (337). Unfortunately, as of today, the lack of research into possible non-Western ramifications of the pro-ana phenomenon renders such a contrastive analysis impossible.

As noted above, this brief overview of the pro-ana phenomenon offers a useful insight into the community at large. However, it has been emphasized how different studies have reported significantly different findings insofar as some basic characteristics of the community are concerned: the most striking difference is certainly the one between an account of pro-anorexics as supportive and affectionate towards each other (Haas et al., 2011), and one where violence and aggression are

considered to be central to the community as a way of establishing authenticity and marking the divide between the ingroup and the outgroup (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). It should be kept in mind that, as previously highlighted, although the pro-anorexic community is often referred to in the singular, it is rather constituted by a constellation of different communities, each with its peculiar characteristics. Furthermore, as stressed in the previous Section, most analyses of this phenomenon are quite Western-centric in nature. While it is reasonable to assume that the majority of members of pro-ana communities live in Western countries, it is also necessary to point out again that anorexia, especially in the past few decades, has been on the rise all over the world: therefore, the possibility that pro-ana communities have begun emerging in a non-Western context is entirely reasonable and should not be excluded. However, a non-Western ramification of the pro-ana phenomenon has not yet been accounted for, which renders the present overview all the more partial.

Despite the impossibility of providing a perfectly clear-cut analysis which encapsulates the whole pro-ana blogosphere, it is certainly useful to focus on the existence of a common thread which links together all the communities which have been investigated thus far in the relevant literature. Indeed, despite individual peculiarities of each subset, the pro-ana phenomenon as a whole is deeply subversive of the traditional notion of anorexia as an individual psychopathology: “although traditional and clinical analyses of eating disordered people have often painted a picture of isolation and secrecy, in the online discussion groups [...], relationality was central to the construction of a pro-anorexic identity” (Boero & Pascoe, 2012: 38). This search for community, for a “circle of lament” (Goffman, 1963: 20) which can support an individual otherwise stigmatized in the offline world, can therefore be regarded as the one constant and overarching characteristic of the pro-ana community.

1.4. A Typology of Current Pro-Ana Communities

As illustrated in Section Three, one of the reasons why researchers have struggled to represent the pro-ana phenomenon as a monolith is its spread across a variety of different media, each with its own characteristics and features, all of which tend to have an impact on how the community organizes and interacts on that specific

platform. This is especially relevant considering the recent rise of a motley array of social networks, most of which consistently host some form of a pro-ana community. Although the present study strives to examine the discursive practices of the community on one specific social network, i.e., Tumblr, in order to better gauge the general extent of the phenomenon on a web-wide basis, it is suitable to briefly consider the characteristics of some of the most popular social networks to the present day, and the shape of the pro-ana phenomenon associated with each.

As of 2021, 3.02 billion people worldwide reportedly use social networks. A taxonomy of the most popular social networks was proposed by Koukaras et al. (2020: 298), who distinguished, among others, between “online social networking web-based services”, micro-blogging websites, and media sharing ones. The first category includes the likes of Facebook and Myspace, where users primarily interact with “real world friends and acquaintances [...], through status updates, comments, media sharing and messages” (*ibid.*). Twitter and Tumblr are instead examples of micro-blogging websites, where people “contribute textual and multimedia content, arranged in a reverse chronological order” (*ibid.*), generally in a limited form, hence the “micro” prefix. Instagram and Pinterest are considered to be hybrid types of social networks, as they merge a series of features typical of both social networking services (e.g., Facebook) and media sharing ones (e.g., Flickr), although in both cases their “primary utility” (328) is multimedia sharing. What follows from this cursory taxonomy of social media platforms is that the pro-ana community on each website takes a different shape and form based on the social network’s primary utility.

Before proceeding to examine the characteristics of pro-ana discourse on Tumblr, this Section will provide a brief although useful insight into the main features of pro-ana activity on Instagram, which appears necessary on account of this social network’s popularity. Indeed, as of October 2021 Instagram reportedly boasts 1,393 billion users worldwide, with 22.7% of world population aged 13 and above using this platform (DataReportal, 2021). Ging and Garvey (2018) focused on pro-ana activity on Instagram, conducting a content analysis of posts published with hashtags such as #ana, #starve and #fasting. One interesting finding was that, given that a majority of Instagram users follow real-life acquaintances, “almost all pro-ana

Instagram users have separate accounts with a fake (usually eating disorder related) username” (1186). Moreover, it was observed that most pro-ana content on Instagram is (unsurprisingly) visual in nature, and that it can be divided into categories such as “thinspiration”, text-based quotes, tips on maintaining the eating disorder, and selfies by members of the community. Thinspiration, which is estimated to account for 25% of pro-ana content on Instagram (*ibid.*), mainly revolves around “images of underweight or extremely thin female bodies, images of protruding hipbones and/or collarbones, images of slim thighs or ‘thigh gaps’, and images of protruding ribs or extremely flat stomachs and before-and-after weight-loss transformations” (1187). Furthermore, it should be noted that pro-ana images on Instagram were found to frequently overlap with depression, self-harm, and suicide-related images, a consequence of which is that “any user searching for ED or ana-related content is likely also to generate a mixture of self-harm, depression and suicidal content” (1195). Finally, an interesting aspect of this website’s pro-ana community is that, given the diluted and open nature of the platform itself, pro-anorexic content is much more accessible to the general public on Instagram than on other social networks, which results in a lack of authenticity policing from community members: “unlike the more closed pro-ana communities on websites and in private Facebook groups, therefore, this much looser network appears to include many non-anorexics or ‘wannarexics’ who also admire and aspire to the ana aesthetic” (1193).

1.5. Pro-Ana on Tumblr: An Introduction

Given the topic of this dissertation, a more detailed insight will now be provided into the main characteristics of the social network from which the data for the present research were collected. As previously mentioned, Tumblr is a micro-blogging platform which was founded in 2007 by American web developer David Karp. As of October 2021, the website hosts 535.3 million blogs in 18 different languages, with 42% of its user traffic coming from the United States. On average, 10.1 million posts are published every day on the platform (Tumblr, 2021). Unlike Twitter, the leading microblogging platform as of 2021, Tumblr does not impose any length limitations on its users’ posts, “thus leading to higher-quality” (Chang et al., 2014: 25) in terms

of the content posted on the website. Moreover, Tumblr supports a wider range of multimedia posts compared to Twitter, among which text, images, audios and videos, with 92% of posts belonging to the first two categories (22). As opposed to Facebook, “the connections on Tumblr do not require mutual confirmation” (21), i.e., a user can follow other users freely, without the need for follow requests, making it more unidirectional and less socially interactive than the former. Furthermore, a Tumblr account can be set up in under 30 seconds, and it only requires a valid email address, as opposed to social networks such as Facebook and Instagram, which also request that the user provides their first and last name.

As remarked by Wick and Harriger (2018: 14), one of Tumblr’s most interesting characteristics is that its users are shrouded in almost total anonymity:

Tumblr users typically follow individuals that they do not know in real life; this adds to the appeal of the social media website in that users feel they can post anything they want without judgment from their peers (Reeve, 2016). Instead of attempting to portray only the best parts of their lives as is popular on other social media networks such as Instagram and Facebook, Tumblr users openly confess their hardships, often in the form of self-deprecating humor. Themes such as loneliness, self-loathing, self-harm, and suicide are not uncommon.

Indeed, as a result of the leniency of Tumblr’s terms of service, which do not require users to provide personal information such as their real name, this social network has established itself as a sort of “safe haven for teenagers and young adults to express their true selves” (*ibid.*). Through the years, Tumblr has therefore gained a reputation as a digital meeting place characterized by spontaneity and freedom of self-expression, as confirmed by one user’s words in Hillman et al. (2014: 288): “[on Tumblr] users can be themselves in ways that they would not be able to anywhere else. I participate as “me”, and sometimes as how I would like to be in real life. I feel more confident about myself there”.

Content-wise, since its inception Tumblr has come to be known as a lively digital platform which mainly thrives on “fandom”, i.e., fan communities, each associated with its inside jokes and discourse. However, portraying Tumblr as a mere conglomeration of fandom niches would be oversimplistic: indeed, for large swathes

of its userbase, this social network has represented their ushering into the world of social justice, feminism, anti-racism and activism at large. According to Sarappo (2018), “Tumblr was a virtual classroom that put users in contact with ideas and opinions they might not normally encounter—or they might not normally agree with”. The website has thus provided young people with the space and freedom necessary to engage in salient conversations about social issues without fear of judgment from real-life acquaintances, an opportunity which platform such as Facebook and Instagram, with their high levels of exposure and social interactivity, do not seem to offer. As confirmed by Sarappo:

This wasn't a well-oiled propaganda machine; it was a space full of teenagers and young adults clumsily, honestly sharing and sorting through their feelings. They were incredibly—sometimes painfully—open about their personal lives. They posted about how sexism or transphobia impacted their offline lives, or about how good it felt to see characters who looked, sounded, or acted like them as heroes in their favourite media.

However, recent research has posited that the anonymity afforded by Tumblr to its users, among other more positive consequences, has also “led to an increase in content glorifying self-harm on the website, including thinspiration” (Wick & Harriger, 2018: 14). Indeed, in an analysis of over 3,000 posts, Carvazos-Rehg et al. (2017) found blogging about self-hatred and suicidal thoughts to be widespread on the platform. Concerns about the presence of such content were raised in 2014 after several instances of teenagers posting suicide notes on Tumblr before taking their lives, in what was described as “Tumblr’s teen suicide epidemic” (Dewey, 2015). The suicide of 15-year-old London schoolgirl Tallulah Wilson, occurred after months of the teen “accessing blogs about self-harm and suicide on Tumblr” (Hern, 2014) shed light on the potential dangers of the platform, especially for vulnerable individuals who may be more susceptible to copycat suicidal behaviour. As a result of the media attention around Tallulah Wilson’s passing, Mara Miller, British Culture secretary in 2014, called on Tumblr and other social networks to implement stricter rules to prevent the spread of harmful content.

Along with suicidal posts, pro-anorexia ones have also long represented a cause for concern. Wick and Harriger focused on pro-anorexia discourse on Tumblr,

providing a content analysis of hundreds of photos and text posts published under the “thinspiration” hashtag over the course of a week. As for the visual component of this research, it was highlighted that most of it was characterized by pictures of very thin women hailed by bloggers as an inspiration for weight loss. Furthermore, 31.8% of said photos were found to be somewhat sexually objectifying, an interesting observation accounted for in light of the fact that “viewing sexually objectifying images may demonstrate to consumers that they are objects valued for their appearance, encouraging actions that will lead to thinness but not necessarily true contentment” (15). As for text posts, Wick and Harriger noted that Tumblr thinspiration discourse revolved around the promotion of extreme dieting behaviours and weight loss. Body weight guilt and food guilt were also shown to be common themes within the community, “suggesting thinspiration’s use of guilt as a motivator to lose extreme amounts of weight” (*ibid.*). Quite interestingly, Wick and Harriger reported that while “thin praise” was unsurprisingly common in these posts, appearing in more than 20% of them, its counterpart, i.e., “fat stigmatization”, was nearly not as common.

As a result of mounting public and political pressure on the platform to curtail the spread of harmful content of the kind thus far discussed, in February 2012 Tumblr announced a new content policy against blogs promoting self-harm and self-starvation. The announcement read as follows (Tumblr, 2012):

Don’t post content that actively promotes or glorifies self-injury or self-harm. This includes content that urges or encourages readers to cut or mutilate themselves; embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or commit suicide rather than, e.g., seek counselling or treatment for depression or other disorders. Online dialogue about these acts and conditions is incredibly important; this prohibition is intended to reach only those blogs that cross the line into active promotion or glorification.

Users found in violation of this policy were therefore banned from the social network. The main issue with this moderation system was, and still is, that Tumblr “only acts when infringing accounts are brought to its attention” (Hern, 2014), which implies that users are required to flag harmful content themselves for it to be removed. A possible alternative would be the application of machine learning and

natural language processing techniques to conduct automated screenings of concerning posts, a method which has been adopted by Facebook in recent times (De Andrade et al., 2018), but which has not yet been applied to Tumblr. Furthermore, as part of its 2012 attempt at curtailing sensitive content, the website's staff added a public service announcement in the form of a confirmation screen which appears whenever a user searches for tags such as "proana", "anorexia", "anorexic", "thinspiration", and other similar keywords. The announcement directly addresses the user in the following terms: "Everything Okay? If you or someone you know is struggling, you are not alone. There are many support services that are here to help" (Tumblr, 2021). A list of online and telephone resources is provided along with this message.

Similar restrictions on controversial content had already been enforced by AOL and Yahoo in the early 2000s as a result of mounting pressure by the likes of the French government, but these attempts at ridding the web of pro-ana blogs (among other web pages deemed as harmful) were found to be unsuccessful, as the network of French pro-ana and pro-mia websites only continued to grow after the enforcement of the ban (Casilli et al., 2013: 95). In fact, it appears that the paradoxical unintended consequence of such bans is the growth and strengthening of the targeted groups. Indeed, by means of community resilience, the network which is under threat of suppression turns inwards and becomes more entrenched, but it is never completely and effectively eradicated: "bloggers anticipate even potential restrictions by reshaping the structure of their social network in dense, less and less interconnected clusters" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, Casilli et al. (*ibid.*) argued that banning pro-ana content only contributed to making "any health information or awareness campaign [...] less likely to reach out to ana-mia bloggers".

The ineffectiveness of Tumblr's 2012 attempt at censoring pro-anorexia content becomes evident upon consideration of the current levels of activity and engagement within the Tumblr pro-ana community. By way of illustration, 409 posts tagged with #proana were published in the last week of September 2021, and this number only takes into account posts in text format, disregarding pictures and videos which, although not strictly relevant to the present research, would cause a significant increase in the estimate. Furthermore, these 409 posts only include

content published in English, and while this language accounts for most of the daily activity within the community, it is certainly not uncommon to encounter posts in other languages. Finally, it should be noted that #proana is only one of numerous hashtags which are commonly used by members of the community, and although it is one of the more recognizable and straightforward, pro-anorexia content is posted in association with many other hashtags, such as #thinspo, #thinspiration and #ed. The levels of interaction underneath each text post are also quite revealing as to how active and dynamic the Tumblr pro-ana community still is, even after the attempts at curtailing its growth: each week's most popular posts can reach up to thousands of "notes", i.e., interactions which include likes, reblogs and comments by users other than the original poster.

1.6. A Better Way to Deal with Ana: NLP for Eating Disorder Detection

Before proceeding to the next Chapter of the present research, it should be useful to briefly mention a possible alternative approach to the prevention and management of the pro-ana phenomenon, one that relies on state-of-the-art linguistics and machine learning techniques, and that would provide pro-ana bloggers with a form of non-stigmatizing support tailored on their necessities.

Indeed, it was observed that mere censorship of pro-ana blogs on social networks such as Tumblr does not result in a decrease of harmful content of this kind. Somewhat counterintuitively, censorship only seems to strengthen pro-ana communities, which become more tight-knit and less expugnable by means of the traditional moderation operated by server providers. A possible innovative solution to the network resilience displayed by pro-ana bloggers would be to rely on natural language processing (NLP) techniques, since social media data "have been found to contain predictive signals for conditions including major depressive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, schizophrenia, eating disorders [...] and others" (Coppersmith et al., 2018: 2). Additionally, it has been observed that many more people use social media than they interact with the healthcare system, "raising the intriguing possibility that social media data could be used as a screening and/or early detection tool" (*ibid.*). Furthermore, NLP can also be useful insofar as it can offer pro-ana bloggers personalized support and information, which has been proven to be

more effective than its non-tailored counterpart (Calvo et al., 2016: 672). This personalization of materials is attainable by means of natural language generation (NLG) techniques, which allow for the automatic production of informative and educational text tailored on each user's needs. Other possible NLP-based intervention tools include conversational agents which can “can interact and ‘speak’ to humans” (673) in a sort of virtual therapist–patient relationship, possibly encouraging users to seek treatment.

It should be pointed out that the application of NLP to mental health assessment and intervention on social media is still in its infancy, and it is expected that further research will be carried out on this topic as more NLP models are proposed. One last caveat which should be considered is that ethical concerns have been raised as to the use of social media data for online mental health screening and intervention: basically, the identification of people in need of mental health support entails an almost inevitable breach of their privacy, which would become even more severe if information about a user's mental health issues were to be disclosed to their friends or family. Disclosure in fact poses an important challenge to the NLP perspective on mental health: while it would be quite fruitless to stop at mere online identification of people struggling with mental health (i.e., eating disorders) without providing them with any further form of assistance, it is also difficult to decide what to do once potential risk factors have been singled out, and it is especially complex to establish “who should find out that a person is not doing well” (Calvo et al., 2016: 676). Notwithstanding the current limitations of the NLP approach to mental health management, it should be noted that computational techniques would still be more beneficial to curtail the pro-ana phenomenon than the current content moderation system still employed by numerous platforms, one of which is Tumblr, despite its proven ineffectiveness.

This Chapter has presented a theoretical overview of anorexia nervosa, its historical development, and its intersection with the rise of social media. Particular attention has been paid to the phenomenon of pro-anorexia blogs, and especially to the pro-anorexia blogosphere on Tumblr. In the Chapter that follows, an analysis will be provided of a corpus of pro-anorexia posts from this social media platform. Said analysis will be conducted with the aid of Corpus Linguistics tools, and it will take

into consideration the most significant linguistic features of the corpus, thus offering a primarily quantitative analysis of the data at hand.

CHAPTER TWO

A Corpus Approach to Pro-Anorexia Discourse

2. Corpus Linguistics

Before examining the data which were specifically collected for the purpose of this research, it is necessary to provide a theoretical framework of the methodology used in this first Section of the study. The following pages will therefore offer some insight into Corpus Linguistics, its applications and, most importantly, its relevance to this dissertation.

A very general definition of Corpus Linguistics is provided by McEnery and Hardie (2012: 1), who defined it as a “a set of procedures, or methods, for studying language”. McEnery and Hardie emphasized the impossibility to clearly define this area of studies in monolithic terms, stressing that “it is very important to realise that Corpus Linguistics is a heterogeneous field” (*ibid.*). However, despite its heterogeneity, some generalizations can still be made as far as its core features are concerned. First of all, this branch of linguistics always deals with a series of machine-readable texts which are compiled into corpora, which can be defined as collections of language the size of which defies “analysis by hand and eye alone within any reasonable timeframe” (2). Thus, Corpus Linguistics allows researchers to gain valuable insights into language use on a very large scale, which would otherwise be impossible by relying on human intuition or analysis by hand or eye alone.

The second generalization which can be made about Corpus Linguistics is that it always entails the use of a series of tools which enable a researcher to sift through corpora rapidly and effectively. Although in the past Corpus Linguistics has faced strenuous opposition from notable linguists such as Chomsky (25), its contribution to numerous areas of knowledge has proven invaluable: indeed, the use of corpora allows researchers to study natural occurring language instead of relying on artificial examples and/or language produced in controlled contexts. As highlighted by McEnery and Hardie (26), Corpus Linguistics has proven to be useful in numerous research areas: sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, language learning and theoretical

linguistics are only some of the fields which have benefitted from the insights provided by the study of corpora.

As was previously mentioned, the one constant of Corpus Linguistics, along with the requirement of machine-readability for texts, is the use of corpus tools. Although numerous corpus tools can be used in different contexts, depending also on the nature of the corpus itself and the objective of the study, some are considered to be essential to this kind of analysis. Indeed, concordances, which “allow users to look at words in context” (2), and frequency lists, which “list all words appearing in a corpus and specify for each word how many times it occurs” (*ibid.*), are pivotal to any corpus analysis. Through the years, with the development of new and more sophisticated software, other useful tools have become available. Sketch Engine, for instance, provides an excellent example of a software which gives its users the possibility to analyse corpora by means of a vast array of tools, including POS tagging for syntactic purposes, a thesaurus, concordances, frequency and keyword lists.

A useful distinction can be drawn as far as corpus approaches to language research are concerned, that is, the distinction between a corpus-based and a corpus-driven methodology. While the former relies on the corpus “as a source of examples” (Baker, 2006: 16) to verify previously established theories, the latter “proceeds in a more inductive way: the corpus itself is the data [...]” (*ibid.*). To be precise, the corpus-driven methodology should not actually be referred to as a methodology: as highlighted by McEnery and Hardie (2012: 6), “corpus-driven linguistics rejects the characterisation of Corpus Linguistics as a method and claims instead that the corpus itself should be the sole source of our hypotheses about language, [...] that the corpus itself embodies its own theory of language”. This distinction was first introduced by Tognini-Bonelli (2001: 65), who posited that “the term corpus-based is used to refer to a methodology that avails itself of the corpus mainly to expound, test or exemplify theories and descriptions that were formulated before large corpora became available to inform language study”. Again, Tognini-Bonelli (84) emphasized the different role of corpus data in the corpus-driven approach:

[...] In a corpus-driven approach the commitment of the linguist is to the integrity of the data as a whole, and descriptions aim to be comprehensive with respect to corpus evidence. The corpus, therefore, is seen as more than a repository of examples to back pre-existing theories or a probabilistic extension to an already well-defined system.

Before proceeding to the core of the present research, it is worth mentioning the main benefits, along with some potential drawbacks, of the use of Corpus Linguistics. As noted by Biber and Reppen (2015: 1), Corpus Linguistics “facilitates empirical investigations of language variation and use, resulting in research findings that have much greater generalisability and validity than would otherwise be feasible”. It appears to be the case that a corpus approach to any linguistic query, whether it be in the context of syntax, pragmatics, semantics and so on, greatly contributes to an increase in generalisability and researcher objectivity. In fact, while Baker (2006: 10) states that, “it is difficult if not impossible to be truly objective”, the use of a corpus enables researchers “to place a series of constraints on [their] cognitive biases” (12), since dealing with patterns and trends provides less room for selectivity.

Corpus linguistics tools are especially beneficial in the context of discourse analysis. Indeed, although researcher intuition can be useful to hypothesize the existence of a discourse¹, it is not enough to account for whether said discourse is hegemonic or resistant. As proposed by Staubbs (2001: 215), a hegemonic discourse consists of meanings that are “widely shared in a discourse community”. The repeated patterns detected by corpus tools are therefore useful to distinguish between meanings which are “merely personal and idiosyncratic” (*ibid.*) and those which are actually part of a hegemonic discourse. Moreover, as posited by Baker (2006: 14), corpus tools are very advantageous insofar as they can also uncover instances of resistant discourse:

¹ It is worth mentioning that the notion of discourse which will be adopted throughout this paper is the one provided by Michel Foucault, who defined discourse as a series of “practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak” (1972: 49). A similar interpretation was also given by Burr (1995: 48, cit. in Baker, 2006: 4), who defined discourse as the “set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories, statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events”.

As well as being able to establish that repeated patterns of language use demonstrate evidence of particular hegemonic discourses or majority “common-sense” ways of viewing the world, corpus data can also reveal the opposite – the presence of counter-examples which are much less likely to be uncovered via smaller-scale studies.

Despite the overall usefulness of Corpus Linguistics in different research areas not being in question, some attention should also be paid to the possible limitations which can arise while relying on this research methodology. Representativeness and sampling criteria are two of the central issues posed by Corpus Linguistics. As highlighted by Tognini-Bonelli (57), linguists generally agree that a corpus “should be representative of a certain population and that the statements derived from the analysis of the corpus will be largely applicable to a larger sample or to the language as a whole”. However, representativeness is quite difficult to both achieve and assess, since “at present we have no means of ensuring it, or even evaluating it objectively” (*ibid.*).

The issue of sampling arises during the designing of a corpus, and it is largely interconnected with the aforementioned problem of representativeness. Although it has been established that a corpus should be representative of the target language population, numerous practical questions arise as to how to achieve a satisfactory level of representativeness. Sampling issues concern the “kind of texts [which] are to be selected, the number of texts, the selection of particular texts, the selection of text samples from within texts and the length of text samples” (59). Therefore, it follows that any sampling decision inevitably involves a theoretical stance on the part of the researcher. As suggested by Tognini-Bonelli, the only possible solution to this issue is that “the criteria according to which the corpus is assembled should always be made explicit and accessible to the corpus users: even though users normally cannot alter the contents of a corpus [...], they should always be in a position to evaluate the corpus [...]” (*ibid.*).

2.1. Corpus Linguistics for Pro-Anorexia Discourse

The approach adopted in this study is a mixed one which relies on both quantitative and qualitative methods. As for the quantitative side of this research, corpus tools

will provide a solid foundation for the analysis of the data at hand, which will then be further investigated by means of Critical Discourse Analysis techniques. The corpus tools which will be adopted are those mentioned by Tognini-Bonelli, Baker, and McEnery and Hardie.

This mixed approach was chosen in light of the sensitive subject matter investigated in this research: indeed, in order to provide an objective account of the pro-anorexia phenomenon, an account which aims to be untouched by the stigma surrounding this topic, the merging of corpus and discourse techniques was deemed the most appropriate course of action. In fact, this choice is in keeping with Baker's (2006: 10) assertion that while true objectivity "is difficult if not impossible", using corpus tools on research data contributes to the reduction of any cognitive biases which often hinder discourse analysis when conducted on its own.

Another reason why this methodological approach was chosen for the analysis of the pro-anorexia community on Tumblr is that, as previously mentioned, corpus-based discourse linguistics is particularly useful to identify hegemonic and resistant discourses. As remarked by Baker, "it can sometimes be difficult to tell whether such a discourse is typical or not" (13) when relying only on intuition. Furthermore, identifying discourses and establishing whether they are typical or atypical proves even more complex for individuals outside the discourse community. This is especially true when, as in the case of the pro-ana blogosphere, discursive practices are profoundly entrenched in group-specific symbology. For this reason, corpus tools which automatically track patterns can provide the researcher with quantitative evidence of the existence and frequency of a specific discourse construction. Moreover, corpus tools also allow for a sort of triangulation by means of comparison between the specialized corpus at hand and a large reference one, which can provide further confirmation of the existence of group-specific discourses which are otherwise generally atypical.

Finally, it should be pointed out that the present research relies on a corpus-driven discourse analysis approach rather than on a corpus-based one². In the case of

² However, it should be pointed out that for the sake of simplicity the title of the present work does not operate this distinction, as it makes use of the expression "corpus-based discourse analysis" as an

this study, the corpus-driven approach was deemed preferable considering that, as highlighted in previous Sections, the pro-ana blogosphere represents a constellation of extremely complex and mutable discourse communities. Therefore, while existing theories can certainly be useful as a means to familiarize with the topic at hand, any assumption that they perfectly fit the specific community investigated in this paper is to be discarded. Thus, a more effective way to delve into the discursive practices of the Tumblr pro-ana community is to regard the corpus in question as the primary source of data, while keeping in mind that the theoretical information expounded in Chapter One serves as a useful reference as to which discourse constructions are typical or atypical, i.e., which have already been observed in other pro-ana communities by other researchers.

2.2. The Collection of the Corpus: Methodology

The research data for the present study were collected from the Tumblr platform. As previously mentioned, the pro-anorexia community on this social network relies on a motley array of hashtags to identify their posts. Given the practical constraints of this dissertation, and in order to avoid overlapping between posts, the data were exclusively gathered with reference to the most distinctive and straightforward hashtag, which is #proana.

Due to the nature of this research, which essentially strives to outline the most salient linguistic characteristics of pro-anorexia discourse on Tumblr, posts containing visual imagery and videos were not taken into consideration through the data collection process. Indeed, the Tumblr interface conveniently allows its users to search for a specific hashtag and filter the results based on the format of each post. The “proana” hashtag was therefore entered into the search bar function, and all returning posts were filtered so as to exclude photos and videos. In order to build a representative sample of the pro-ana activity on this social network, all text posts published in the span of one month, from September 1st, 2021, to September 30th, 2021, were included in the data for this research. Text posts in languages other than English were not taken into consideration.

umbrella term indicating a CDA approach to the study of discourse which also relies on Corpus Linguistics methodologies.

After the application of the aforementioned criteria, the resulting text posts were rendered into .txt format. Each post was then stored in a folder under a file name identifying it through its date of publication and the username of its original poster, amounting to a total of 1,228 posts. A zipped version of the folder was then uploaded onto Sketch Engine and compiled into a corpus. The compiled corpus consists of 60,733 words, with the longest text post containing 3229 words, and the shortest just a single word.

2.3. Corpus Frequencies

Pursuant to Baker's (2006: 47) assertion that frequency lists are "a good starting point for the analysis of any type of corpus", the first tool which was used in this study was the Wordlist, whose output is a list of the most frequent words in a corpus. Indeed, frequency lists can lay the groundwork for further and more detailed analysis by establishing an initial and somewhat general lexical profile of the discourse community at hand.

Sketch Engine allows for the selection of the minimal unit a frequency list should be based on. Thus, the first Wordlist was produced with reference to the word form category. A word form is the fully inflected form of a word: as illustrated on the Sketch Engine Website (2022), a word form is "one of the forms that a lemma can take, e.g. the lemma GO can take the word forms GO, WENT, GONE, GOES, GOING. A list of word forms is a list where each of GO, WENT, GONE, GOES, GOING is listed separately and their frequencies are also calculated separately". Unsurprisingly, the highest-ranking spots in such a list are occupied by function words and punctuation marks. Given the irrelevance of the aforementioned items for the purpose of this research, a list of stop words³ was applied to the Wordlist tool before running it on the corpus.

Figure 1 below provides an overview of the 50 most frequent word forms in the corpus. It should be already pointed out that the presence of numbers in the following table is not a mere oversight in the corpus filtering process: digits have indeed been deliberately omitted from the stop list. An explanation for this will be provided in the following paragraphs.

³ The stop list used in the context of this research was borrowed from the English version of [Voyant Tools](#).

Rank	Item	Frequency	Rank	Item	Frequency
1	weight	305	26	2	105
2	eat	299	27	ca	104
3	today	294	28	fast	102
4	day	246	29	hate	102
5	calories	243	30	fat	101
6	feel	242	31	ate	100
7	want	226	32	lunch	95
8	food	182	33	gonna	95
9	cals	176	34	body	93
10	eating	170	35	week	90
11	really	169	36	got	89
12	know	167	37	people	89
13	im	162	38	days	89
14	going	144	39	diet	88
15	good	139	40	fucking	88
16	cal	138	41	make	85
17	time	134	42	lost	83
18	need	129	43	breakfast	83
19	think	128	44	1	83
20	lose	126	45	doing	81
21	Ed	119	46	skinny	79
22	water	110	47	love	79
23	total	109	48	look	76
24	dinner	106	49	work	74
25	binge	106	50	better	73

Figure 1: Frequency list – word forms

In general, as can be expected given the nature of the discourse community this research focuses on, the resulting frequencies primarily revolve around food and body talk. This finding is clearly in agreement with the observations on the core characteristics of pro-ana discourse proposed by Boero and Pascoe (2012) and other researchers. Moreover, such findings also match the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) definition of anorexia, which stresses the extreme preoccupation of anorexic patients with food and weight. In order to gain a better understanding of the main thematic areas in the corpus, the word frequencies in Figure 1 can be divided into five main categories: weight/body, food, disordered eating, time and calories.

As for the weight/body nucleus, the most frequent words are WEIGHT, LOSE, FAT, BODY, SKINNY, LOOK. It should be noted that WEIGHT is indeed the most frequent word form in the whole corpus, with 305 occurrences. Another interesting observation is

that the adjective *FAT* (101 occurrences) is more frequent than its antonym *SKINNY* (79 occurrences). Although the prevalence of “fat talk” as opposed to “skinny talk” may appear surprising in a community so focused on the thin ideal, such a finding is consistent with Ambjornsson’s (2005) assessment that talking about being fat is commonplace among young females. Furthermore, “fat talk” has been found to be even more rife among anorexic individuals who, as observed by Haas (2011), often engage in self-loathing in the form of calling themselves fat.

Regarding the food category of the frequency list, some relevant words are the following: *EAT*, *FOOD*, *EATING*, *ATE*, *WATER*. Although superficially none of these words are particularly indicative of the anorexic blogger’s relationship with food, the frequency of *WATER* (110 occurrences) is quite revealing. Indeed, it should be highlighted that while *FOOD*, with 182 occurrences, is one of the most frequent words in the corpus, the bloggers do not often seem to make mention of specific food. The first food which appears in the frequency list of the corpus is *CHICKEN*, in rank position 91, with 48 occurrences. The second food in the list is *MEAT*, several frequency classes later, in place 202 with 25 occurrences, followed by *APPLE*, appearing 23 times in the corpus. The high frequency of the word *WATER* is therefore quite striking if compared to the scarcity of specific food talk in the corpus. It is possible to hypothesize that this peculiarity is owing to the fact that water is often mentioned by the pro-anorexia bloggers in their “food logs” as a substitute for food, something they use to achieve the feeling of fullness without actually eating.

The disordered eating category encompasses words such as *ED*, *FAST*, *BINGE* and *DIET*. Such words either designate the disorder itself (i.e., *ED*, short for *EATING DISORDER*, with 119 occurrences), or unhealthy eating behaviours such as fasting and binge eating. For the purpose of this analysis, the word *DIET* has been included in this category despite the fact that, by its dictionary definition, it does not inherently imply a disordered eating regimen. However, it is hypothesized that a pro-ana blogger’s definition of dieting is linked with specific connotations which make it possible for it to be equated with disordered eating behaviours such as binging and fasting. Furthermore, although the frequency of the word *BINGE* (106 occurrences) may appear somewhat surprising to some given that the community at hand revolves around anorexia nervosa, it is useful to keep in mind that anorexia often exists at the

intersection between different eating disorders. Thus, anorexic individuals, and specifically the pro-anorexia bloggers on Tumblr, may indeed engage in bingeing behaviours, given that, as asserted by the American Psychiatric Association, different subtypes of anorexia also entail binge/purge patterns. However, another hypothesis is that what these bloggers describe as a binge is merely a normal, or even less than normal, intake of food. Indeed, as it was emphasized in previous Sections, an anorexic's judgment about appearance, weight and food intake is often severely impacted by the disease itself. Whether this is the case in the present corpus will be established in the forthcoming Sections by means of concordances and collocates.

A final observation about the disordered eating subclass is that while the word ED is quite frequent (119 occurrences), a notable absence among the 50 most frequent words is that of the term ANOREXIA/ANA itself. In fact, the word ana ranks 70th with 55 occurrences, while ANOREXIA only appears 13 times. This finding is, at least superficially, in contrast with what has been hypothesized by other researchers as far as the core features of pro-anorexia communities: as a matter of fact, such an observation contradicts Stapleton et al.'s (2019) remarks on the personification of the disorder. Within the Tumblr community there seems to be no Ana as a personified entity: indeed, aside from the relative scarcity in the use of the word itself, no capitalized occurrences of the word are registered in the corpus. Anyhow, a more detailed and in-depth analysis will be conducted in the following Sections to assess the accuracy of this initial observation.

The time category is quite an interesting one. This subclass includes the frequencies of the following words: TODAY, DAY, TIME, DINNER, LUNCH, DAYS, BREAKFAST, WEEK and DAYS. It should be pointed out that BREAKFAST, LUNCH and DINNER have been momentarily included in this category for the sake of simplicity, as it is assumed that they refer to mealtimes. Overall, the most striking observation to emerge from this subclass is that time words are particularly widespread in the present corpus: indeed, TODAY and DAY, with respectively 294 and 246 occurrences, appear more frequently than words such as FOOD and CALORIES. One possible explanation for the pervasiveness of the concept of time in this corpus is that, as previously stated, pro-anorexia bloggers often keep a detailed diary of what they eat, a sort of food log where they account for any food they ingest at any given time.

The calories subgroup is also rather intriguing. At first glance, only three words seem to belong to this class: CALORIES (243 occurrences), CALS (176 occurrences) and TOTAL (109 occurrences). However, this is where the numbers which were omitted from the stop list become relevant. As can be seen in Figure 2 below, once a Wordlist is derived with reference to lemmas rather than individual word forms, numbers actually occupy the highest-ranking spot in the frequency list.

Rank	Item	Frequency	Rank	Item	Frequency
1	[number]	1725	26	hate	116
2	eat	552	27	say	115
3	feel	357	28	total	111
4	day	333	29	water	110
5	weight	316	30	binge	109
6	today	300	31	fat	108
7	cal	298	32	dinner	106
8	want	289	33	tell	104
9	calorie	281	34	lunch	96
10	lose	241	35	body	96
11	food	207	36	gonna	95
12	know	206	37	skinny	95
13	make	199	38	diet	94
14	good	198	39	people	93
15	think	179	40	love	93
16	fuck	170	41	gain	93
17	really	169	42	friend	88
18	start	154	43	drink	87
19	time	147	44	help	86
20	need	147	45	bad	85
21	look	147	46	breakfast	83
22	fast	144	47	way	82
23	try	140	48	burn	82
24	work	127	49	exercise	81
25	week	124	50	hour	80

Figure 2: Frequency list - lemmas

An assumption can be made as to the fact that numbers have such a high frequency in this corpus because of the calorie-tracking practice that, as reported by Lai et al. (2021: 2), is especially common in online pro-anorexia spaces.

The lemma frequency list in Figure 2 offers further interesting insights when compared to the word form frequency list in Figure 1. Among the most relevant new entries in this Wordlist are FRIEND (88 occurrences), HELP (86 occurrences), BURN (82 occurrences) and EXERCISE (81), none of which previously appeared in the word

It is possible to compare the frequencies in one wordlist [i.e., frequency list] against another in order to determine which words occur *statistically* more often in wordlist A when compared with wordlist B and vice versa. Then all of the words that do occur more often than expected in one file when compared to another are compiled together into another list, called a keyword list. And it is this keyword list which is likely to be more useful in suggesting lexical items that could warrant further examination. A keyword list therefore gives a measure of *saliency*, whereas a simple word list only provides *frequency*.

Indeed, a keyword list provides a clearer picture of a corpus's most distinctive linguistic features by comparing the corpus at hand against another corpus. As opposed to the frequency lists analysed in the previous section, which convey raw frequencies in a sort of decontextualized vacuum, keyword lists supply the missing context and highlight the items which are peculiar to the corpus in question. In essence, as stated by Baker, keyword lists provide saliency over simple frequency.

The choice of a second corpus against which to compare the first corpus' frequencies in order to derive a list of keywords mainly depends on a study's objectives. In the case of the present research, the primary aim is to identify and analyse the core linguistic features of pro-anorexia discourse on the Tumblr platform. For this reason, it is useful to compare the corpus at hand, i.e., the target corpus, against a general reference one. In fact, general reference corpora are those which strive to be representative of a language as a whole. In order to capture the aforementioned peculiar characteristics of pro-anorexia discourse within the Tumblr community, it is therefore necessary to compare the use that this community makes of language against English language at large.

The reference corpus which was adopted for this study is the enTenTen20, which is a large corpus consisting of 38 billion words collected from the English web. Although Sketch Engine automatically selects the enTenTen15 (i.e., the 2015 version of the English web) as a reference corpus for compiling keyword lists, the choice for the newly updated version of the enTenTen is owing to some significant differences in the keywords these two reference corpora return. By way of example, the enTenTen15 returns the word COVID as a keyword, since there is obviously no

mention of this word in the 2015 English web, while the keyword results obtained by comparing the pro-ana corpus against the enTenTen20 include no such word, since the word COVID is not particularly unexpected with reference to the 2020 English web.

Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	cal	26	ugh
2	binge	27	cw
3	thinspo	28	rn
4	binging	29	kcal
5	binged	30	ngl
6	kcal	31	bloated
7	idk	32	fuck
8	calorie	33	abt
9	ugw	34	eat
10	skinny	35	sooo
11	meanspo	36	fml
12	lmao	37	tiktok
13	proana	38	ik
14	cals	39	lw
15	gw	40	tho
16	tw	41	eating
17	yall	42	stepmom
18	tumblr	43	bulimia
19	anorexic	44	disgusting
20	ana	45	collarbone
21	purge	46	omg
22	tbh	47	yeehaw
23	laxative	48	reblog
24	starve	49	aight
25	anorexia	50	burned

Figure 4: Keyword list

Figure 4 above presents the keywords obtained through the comparison of the Tumblr pro-ana corpus against the enTenTen20. One remark can be made right away as far as some of the keywords are concerned. Indeed, some of the items in the list, such as IDK, LMAO, YALL, TBH, RN, NGL, OMG, are not strictly related to the topic of anorexia, and they are not particularly telling as far as the inner workings of the Tumblr pro-ana community are concerned. However, they do represent meaningful markers of a strong diastratic variation, that is, they are instances of a youth idiolect

which makes it possible to hypothesize that this discourse community is mainly composed of very young individuals.

An initial observation which can be made with reference to these keywords is that while numerous lemmas in this list also appeared in the frequency lists in Figure 1 and 2, here there are some interesting new entries such as MEANSPO and THINSPO. These two keywords are particularly revealing, as they unveil the presence of two peculiar discursive practices concealed by the frequency lists analysed above. Indeed, as previously mentioned, thinspiration/thinspo can be defined as “content advocating extreme weight loss by means of images and/or text posts” (Wick & Harriger, 2018: 1). Meanspo, as can be inferred from the portmanteau itself, represents a mean-spirited version of thinspiration, one which relies on aggression as a form of group motivation within the community. The presence of this keyword is quite insightful, as it hints at the peculiar tension between affection and aggression which was mentioned in Chapter One as typical of pro-anorexia communities.

The keywords UGW, GW, CW and LW are also quite interesting. Although superficially they may seem like simple instances of an obscure youth jargon, if not completely nonsensical words, these acronyms actually represent a common discursive practice within pro-anorexia communities, that is, the use of a specialized ingroup symbology otherwise unfamiliar to outsiders. In fact, UGW stands for ultimate goal weight, GW for goal weight, CW means current weight, while LW refers to the lowest weight the user has ever reached. Apart from being linguistically economical, the frequent use of such acronyms also signals the community members’ need for a shared set of symbols, a language which only those who belong to the ingroup are privy to.

It should be noted that the keyword list above was generated by omitting non-alphabetic tokens, that is, by excluding numeric keywords. As can be seen from Figure 5, another keyword list was generated which also takes into consideration words that do not necessarily start with a letter of the alphabet.

Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	cal	26	purge
2	binge	27	2l
3	thinspo	28	5l
4	binging	29	4kg
5	binged	30	tbh
6	kcal	31	laxative
7	idk	32	starve
8	calorie	33	anorexia
9	ugw	34	ugh
10	120lbs	35	5kg
11	skinny	36	3kg
12	meanspo	37	cw
13	lmao	38	1500kcal
14	700kcal	39	rn
15	10lbs	40	kcal
16	proana	41	ngl
17	cals	42	45kg
18	gw	43	bloated
19	tw	44	fuck
20	yall	45	abt
21	2100ml	46	eat
22	tumblr	47	sooo
23	anorexic	48	fml
24	ana	49	tiktok
25	2kg	50	ik

Figure 5: Keyword list - alphanumeric

Although no new alphabetic items appear in this keyword list, the presence of several different numeric entries is quite revealing. These numeric keywords can be distinguished between those which refer to bodyweight, i.e., 120LBS, 10LBS, 2KG, 4KG, 5KG, 3KG, 45KG, and those which indicate calories and food/water quantities, such as 700KCAL, 2100ML, 2L, 5L, and 1500KCAL. On account of the numeric entries in this updated keyword list it can be posited that weight-tracking and food logs are common practices within the Tumblr pro-anorexia community, as was suggested by, among others, Haas et al. (2011), Boero and Pascoe (2012), and Lai et al. (2021).

As a short excursus, it is also interesting to point to the different units of measurement which are used to refer to weight, that is, pounds and kilos. The alternation between these two metrics indicates that even though, as noted in the previous Chapter, 42% of Tumblr users are American, the geographic segmentation of those partaking in pro-anorexia discourse on this platform is actually quite varied.

However, on account of the high degree of anonymity afforded by the website, it is fairly difficult to draw a precise demographic profile of the users within the community. While it was easier to posit that most members of the Tumblr pro-ana community are youngsters, considering their use of youth idiolect and the statistics on the prevalence of anorexia nervosa, any hypothesis about their country of origin is much more difficult to make. On this matter, the Dreamscape tool by Voyant Tools can scan a corpus for any mentions of geographical locations. In the case of the present corpus, only two American cities are mentioned: Baltimore and Providence.



Figure 6: Dreamscape tool results. Source: Voyant Tools

However, the use of different systems of measurement observed by means of the alphanumeric keyword list serves as a subtle hint to the fact that the demographic composition of the Tumblr pro-ana discourse community is much more varied than it superficially appears.

Returning to keywords, further insight into the corpus at hand can be obtained by producing a keyword list of multi-word terms. Multi-word terms, also frequently referred to as lexical bundles or n-grams, are “recurring word sequences which have collocational relationships” (Biber & Reppen, 2015: 95). The analysis of multi-word units proves particularly useful insofar as it provides “evidence of recurrent metaphors and/or intertextuality which may not be discernible from single-word results, and [...] pragmatic and discursive aspects of dialogue and narrative” (*ibid.*). Figure 7 provides a keyword list of the 50 most relevant multi-word units in the

Tumblr pro-ana corpus, once again relying on the enTenTen20 as the general reference to compare it against.

Rank	Word	Rank	Word
1	goal weight	26	pro ana
2	food log	27	rice cake
3	calorie log	28	diet coke
4	water today	29	cal lunch
5	net limit	30	calories exercise
6	much weight	31	coke zero
7	eating disorder	32	chicken tender
8	ana coach	33	counting calorie
9	safe food	34	good today
10	intake limit	35	amount of calories
11	losing weight	36	mental breakdown
12	calories today	37	cals school
13	ana buddy	38	cals dinner
14	calorie limit	39	ed buddy
15	thigh gap	40	cal dinner
16	body check	41	calories breakfast
17	nothing lunch	42	first goal weight
18	cals today	43	energy drink
19	water lunch	44	starting weight
20	safe everyone	45	daily total
21	many calorie	46	fat girl
22	hip bone	47	water weight
23	cal exercise	48	much today
24	first gw	49	new diet
25	water dinner	50	protein bar

Figure 7: Multi-word keyword list

Most lexical bundles in the above keyword list are consistent with previous findings. Indeed, multi-unit keywords such as GOAL WEIGHT, FIRST GW, FIRST GOAL WEIGHT and STARTING WEIGHT represent extended versions of keywords already identified in Figure 5. Likewise, ngrams such as FOOD LOG, CALORIE LOG, INTAKE LIMIT, CALORIE LIMIT, CALS TODAY and several others underscore the pervasive nature of calorie-tracking practices within the community. Nonetheless, numerous keywords reveal the existence of previously concealed discourse elements, thus validating Biber and Reppen's assertion as to the usefulness of ngrams in uncovering discursive aspects which would otherwise be invisible to single-unit keyword lists.

The keywords ANA COACH, ANA BUDDY and ED BUDDY specifically highlight the existence of peculiar ingroup dynamics within the Tumblr pro-anorexia community. Indeed, it would appear that pro-ana bloggers frequently act as motivating figures to each other in their pursuit of extreme thinness. Such a finding is consistent with the concept of the pro-anorexia blogosphere as a communal space where bloggers provide support and guidance to each other, thus defying the traditional image of anorexia as an individual psychopathology. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the idea of an ANOREXIA COACH entails the existence of an ingroup hierarchy by which some members of the community have more experience with the eating disorder than others, and they are therefore entitled to impart advice to less knowledgeable users. An interesting point which will be further explored in the following Section is whether any difference exists in the discourse revolving around the ANA COACH and ANA/ED BUDDY keywords, seeing as the dictionary meaning of “buddy” lacks the hierarchical component which instead characterizes the term “coach”.

Another keyword which is worth considering in this list is the lexical bundle SAFE FOOD. The concept of safe food is usefully defined as follows by an eating disorder treatment facility (Casa Palmera Website, 2015):

The idea of “safe foods” vs “fear foods” is often a topic of discussion. Safe foods have a couple different meanings. Either they are safe because they won’t cause weight gain, or they are safe because they do not pose the risk of overeating. Fear foods are avoided because of the threat of weight gain or because the food is too hard to resist and overeating is likely to occur. Common fear foods include: cake, cookies, doughnuts, candy, ice cream, pasta, pizza, chips.

This keyword also provides a potential explanation for the presence of otherwise obscure lexical bundles such as RICE CAKE, DIET COKE, COKE ZERO, CHICKEN TENDER, ENERGY DRINK and PROTEIN BAR. Indeed, these foods and beverages are amongst those which are most frequently deemed “safe” by anorexic individuals, as can be inferred from discussion threads on pro-ana platforms such as the MyProAna forum, where users provide lists of their safe foods/beverages and exchange opinions on them. By way of example, a user’s list of safe foods/beverages is quite reminiscent of the

abovementioned lexical bundles: “porridge, chicken breast, every kind of vegetables, water, cola zero/light, soup, protein shakes, crispbread, apples, protein bars, 0,1% milk, fat free joghurt, ham, eggs, rice cakes” (MyProAna, 2018).

Furthermore, the THIGH GAP, BODY CHECK and HIP BONE lexical bundles indicate the presence of recurrent discourse surrounding specific body parts and their appearance, which anorexic individuals are in the habit of assessing by means of compulsive body checking. Indeed, as stated by the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 341), anorexic individuals are “concerned that certain body parts, particularly the abdomen, buttocks, and thighs, are “too fat.” They may employ a variety of techniques [...], including frequent weighing, obsessive measuring of body parts, and persistent use of a mirror to check for perceived areas of “fat””.

The keyword THIGH GAP is especially interesting: a thigh gap is “the space some women have between their inner thighs when they stand with their feet together” (Leboeuf, 2019: 1). Although this body trait is relatively uncommon, as it is dictated by genetics and found “in only a small percentage of healthy, well-nourished female body types” (Wolf, 2016), the pursuit of the thigh gap in the past decade or so has become a common endeavour, especially among teenage girls. According to Ma (2015), “the thigh gap obsession is an alarming new trend focused on achieving and maintaining this space between the thighs, and it’s particularly prevalent among females who are in their teens through their early 20s”. As highlighted by Leboeuf (2019: 7), the thigh gap fixation is only one instance of the segmentation of the body which is typical of current female beauty standards, and which “takes on even greater proportions in thinspo culture”. Such an observation easily finds confirmation in the presence of the bigram HIP BONE in the lexical bundle keyword list.

Finally, it should be noted that another ngram in Figure 7 offers some further insights into the dynamics of the Tumblr pro-anorexia community. In fact, the multi-unit keyword SAFE EVERYONE, which is used in the corpus as part of the larger expression STAY SAFE EVERYONE, seems to suggest that members of the community routinely display apprehension surrounding each other’s well-being, thus signalling that Haas et al.’s (2011: 51) assertion concerning the common use of “expressions of affection for the group as a whole” does indeed hold true for the Tumblr pro-

anorexia community. On the other hand, this finding is somewhat puzzling once other previously mentioned keywords such as MEANSPO are taken into consideration: once again, it appears that there exists a dichotomy within this discourse community between affection and aggression.

2.5. Collocations and Concordances

Throughout Sections Three and Four of Chapter Two a useful overview was provided of both the most frequent and the most salient words (i.e., keywords) in the Tumblr pro-anorexia corpus. Despite the relatively superficial nature of this analysis, some recurring themes were identified as consistently underlying this community's discourse practices. In order to fully account for some of the most relevant findings expounded thus far, a more detailed analysis will be subsequently provided by means of the examination of some of the collocations in the corpus. As defined by Baker (2006: 95), collocates are "words which co-occur with each other to some degree". Performing a collocational analysis on the words in a corpus is therefore useful as it provides both a co-text and a context for said words, rather than simply analysing them in a vacuum. Indeed, as notably asserted by John Rupert Firth, "you shall know a word by the company it keeps" (Firth, 1957 in Baker, 2006: 96).

Before proceeding with the aforementioned collocational analysis, it seems appropriate to present a schematic summary of some the most relevant linguistic items detected thus far, along with an overview of the discourse categories they can be associated with for the sake of simplicity. Figure 8 below displays five different discourse categories: the first four are based on the linguistic items which were mentioned in Sections 3 and 4 as the most relevant findings from the frequency and keyword analyses. The fifth category, OUTGROUP DYNAMICS, is not based on any previous linguistic findings (with the exception of the word FRIEND, which appeared in the lemma frequency list in Figure 2), but it is rather included in light of the possibility of uncovering interesting discourse constructions surrounding the pro-ana bloggers' relationships with those outside the community. The words which will be investigated with reference to this category therefore indicate typical close-tie relationships (e.g., FAMILY, MOM, DAD).

Discourse Category	Linguistic Items
Body	BODY, FAT, SKINNY
Weight	WEIGHT
Food	EAT, FOOD, CALORIE
Ingroup dynamics	ANA COACH, ANA BUDDY
Outgroup dynamics	FRIEND, FAMILY, MOM, DAD

Figure 8: Discourse Categories and Relative Linguistic Items

The first discourse category which will be considered is the one concerning the body, which, as was previously mentioned in the introduction to the present dissertation, represents the primary object of concern for an anorexic individual. The lemmas selected for this discourse category are BODY, FAT and SKINNY.

The lemma BODY appears 96 times as a noun in the corpus. Figure 9 below shows its most frequent collocates, categorized based on its part of speech.

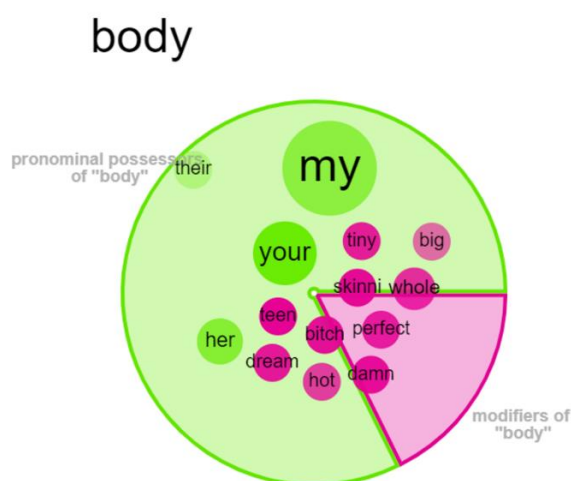


Figure 9: Collocates of the lemma "body". Source: Sketch Engine

As for the pronominal possessors which most frequently accompany the lemma, the first-person possessive MY, with 37 instances, is unsurprisingly the most common. Such a finding is indeed quite consistent with the analysis of anorexia as a self-referential disorder which engenders a “perpetual and unrelenting self-focus” (Zucker et al., 2015: 1) as a result of the individual’s obsession with the appearance of their body.

The 11 occurrences of the possessive adjective YOUR, on the other hand, uncover another type of discourse. Although it primarily appears to have a generic

use (i.e., “your body” as in “the body”), in one instance the bigram YOUR BODY is used by a blogger to give advice and instruct fellow community members. This advice-giving practice is indeed present in the following line: “tip: the days before fasting slowly decrease the amount of water you are drinking so when you fast then YOUR BODY won't retain the water”. Clearly, this bigram signals the existence in the present corpus of the practices of advice-seeking and advice-giving as a form of social support, a communication strategy which Haas et al. (2011: 49) highlighted as typical of pro-anorexia communities.

Among the other collocates of the lemma BODY, it should be mentioned that the adjectives which modify it are quite revealing as well. SKINNY, TINY, PERFECT, HOT and NEW all refer to the anorexic individual’s ideal physique. On the other hand, DAMN and BIG both attribute a negative connotation to the lemma they accompany. This can be seen in the case of the following concordance line, where the user expresses concerningly negative emotions towards their body: “I want my whole DAMN BODY covered in big ugly scars just to be more useless”. It appears that an inherent dichotomy exists between the users’ attitude towards the body: on the one hand, the skinny body is idealized and celebrated, on the other hand, a body which is not perceived as skinny is relentlessly disparaged.

A similar observation can be made upon consideration of the collocates of the adjectives FAT and SKINNY. Indeed, Sketch Engine allows for a comparison to be drawn between the collocates of any two lemmas, which in this case can be useful to further attest to the existence within the corpus of diametrically opposed attitudes towards the body. Figure 10 below illustrates how the adjective FAT is primarily associated with collocates such as UGLY, BIG and DISGUSTING, all of which convey a markedly negative connotation. On the other hand, the adjective SKINNY is accompanied by collocates such as GORGEOUS and CUTE, which convey a diametrically opposed attitude towards a body which is deemed as thin.

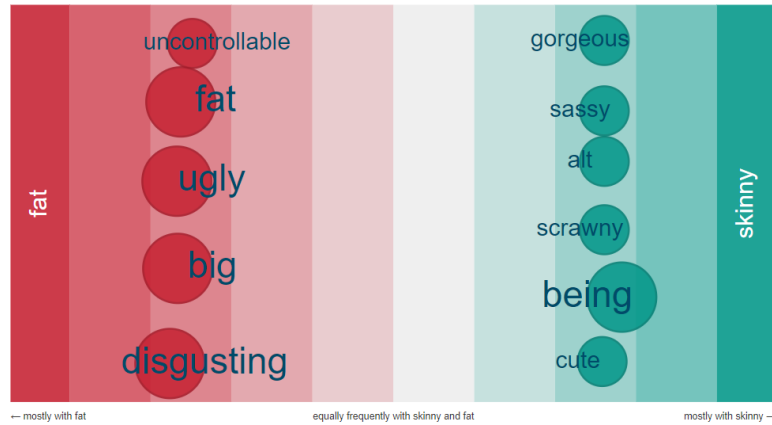


Figure 10: Collocational comparison between "fat" and "skinny". Source: Sketch Engine

As for the weight discourse category, it is particularly useful to consider the modifiers of the lemma WEIGHT, along with the verbs which take it as an object. Indeed, as can be seen in Figure 11 below, the verb LOSE, with 84 occurrences, is the one which most frequently accompanies the lemma in question. It should be pointed out that in six cases the verb is also misspelled as LOOSE. Its antonym, GAIN, appears as a collocate of the node word WEIGHT 27 times.



Figure 11: Collocates of the lemma "weight". Source: Sketch Engine

As expected, a brief look at the concordance lines for these two opposing collocational pairs reveals the existence of two deeply contrasting discourse prosodies. Discourse prosody, or semantic prosody, consists in “the attitude [...] of a

speaker/writer in an authentic text” (Hu, 2015: 117), and it is conveyed through the fixed patterns of co-occurrence displayed by each node word and its collocates. In the case of the bigram LOSE WEIGHT, it is evident that pro-ana bloggers perceive weight loss as a priority, a goal which is to be attained by all means necessary. By way of example, the following concordance line highlights how weight loss is experienced by anorexic individuals as a source of joy and personal satisfaction:

ive been doing so good recently, ive been restricting and LOSING WEIGHT!! i was so excited 2day bc i just got a new scale, it was a perfect day. ofc some1 had 2 go and ruin it. fuck me. my grandma forced me 2 get something from dq [Dairy Queen], so i panicked and got a kids cone.

A similar discourse construction emerges in another concordance line containing the LOSE WEIGHT collocational pair. As in the previous instance, in this excerpt the blogger expresses the necessity of losing weight for their own personal satisfaction. Once again, weight loss is conveyed as a necessary pursuit which must be achieved despite any external interferences:

I wanna restrict again but my girlfriend asks me if i ate alllllllllllllll the time and i cant lie to her. Idk what to do im such a disappointment, Im disappointment her when i dont eat but when i do eat i disappoint myself. How do i LOSE WEIGHT without her finding out?

The discourse prosody surrounding the collocational pair GAIN WEIGHT, on the other hand, is characterized by strongly negative connotations. As it appears evident from the following excerpt, weight gain is perceived by bloggers as a sort of moral failure which must be atoned for by means of restriction:

i think im gunna get some low calorie foods and be super strict on myself now. i GAINED so much WEIGHT over the past month and im disgusted in myself.

One more revealing collocate of the lemma WEIGHT is the noun GOAL, which modifies the lemma on 28 occurrences. As was previously illustrated, members of the

community often disclose their weight loss objective, i.e., their GOAL WEIGHT or ULTIMATE GOAL WEIGHT, in order to hold themselves accountable in their pursuit of thinness. Interestingly, the weights indicated by the bloggers as their targets are quite disparate. One blogger divulges the following information about their body measurements:

What bmi is too low? I know i can go a bit past 18 right? would I still be safe if my bmi is 15? cause that's what my GOAL WEIGHT would get me to. Bro im currently 5'6-5'7 and 170 lbs how do i lose weight quick.

Indeed, with a height of 170 centimetres (5'7" ft) and a weight of 77 kilos (170 lbs), this community member does not satisfy the physiological diagnostic criterion for anorexia nervosa, i.e., a weight “that is less than minimally normal” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 339). On the other hand, other bloggers set their goal weights at much lower figures, as in the following example: “[...] this is going to be my weight loss journey, my GOAL WEIGHT is 40 kgs by Christmas 2021 and if you have any tips healthy or unhealthy please dm me I am desperate”. Other goal weights mentioned in the corpus are 45 kgs, 46 kgs, 153 (69 kgs), 147 lbs (66 kgs), 145 lbs (65 kgs) and 120 lbs (54 kgs).

An observation which can be made with reference to this finding is that the members of this community do not all necessarily display the physiological characteristics of anorexia nervosa, among which, most notably, a dangerously low bodyweight. Indeed, among the weights indicated as the final objectives of their weight loss journey, numerous bloggers mention bodyweights which would not be labelled as unhealthy by the definition of anorexia provided by the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 339). However, the totality of pro-ana bloggers on Tumblr seem to satisfy the psychological criteria for a diagnosis of anorexia, among which “fear of becoming fat” (340), “concern about weight gain” (*ibid.*), and “obsessive measuring” (339) of bodyweight.

Moving on to the food discourse category, Figure 12 displays the most frequent collocates of the lemma EAT.



Figure 12: Collocates of the lemma "eat". Source: Sketch Engine

As can be seen in the pie chart above, with 67 occurrences, the negation NOT is the most frequent collocate of the lemma EAT. Such a finding is consistent with the core component of this eating disorder, i.e., the anorexic individual’s oppositional attitude towards food. By way of example, a concordance line containing the NOT EAT collocational pair was obtained through the Sketch Engine random sample tool:

I've been binging for weeks straight and now ive decided its gotta stop rn so what are your too tips to get back to restricting? Tysm i am so exhausted I can't leave my house so I don't know how much I'm weighing. I don't know what to do, I just DON'T EAT 5 days a week soooooo If someone would be so kind to give me extreme diets I would be very grateful.

In this sample the blogger expresses their frustration surrounding their struggle with food, and subsequently requests fellow bloggers to provide them with tips on how to “get back to restricting” without binging. Indeed, the advice-seeking discourse strategy is once again central to this post, along with the tension between restriction and binge eating, which appears to be a recurring theme within the discourse community, as is expected in light of the fact that, as stated in the *DSM-5*, one of the subtypes of anorexia is the binge-eating/purging one, which manifests itself in “recurrent episodes of binge eating or purging behaviour” (339).

The word TODAY appears as a collocate of EAT in 20 instances. As can be ascertained by taking into account the concordance lines displaying this collocational pair, the frequency in the co-occurrence of these two lemmas is due to the bloggers' habit of keeping a food diary of some sort, wherein they provide detailed accounts of their food intake. A random sample containing the aforementioned collocational pair in fact confirms this pattern:

This is all I ATE TODAY: Breakfast: nothing Lunch: 371 cal lettuce (13 cal) Parmesan cheese (63 cal) Caesar dressing (60 cal) Dark Chocolate pudding (60 cal) Breaktime cookies (175 cal) Snacks: 267 homemade salsa (12 cal) Chips (165 cal) Halo Top Popsicle (90) Dinner: 404 calories Penne noodles (280 cal) butter (12 cal) Olive oil (40 cal) Shrimp (72 cal) Total: 1042 calories

As far as the lemma FOOD is concerned, the findings of the collocational analysis are in keeping with the account presented thus far. As illustrated by Figure 13 below, with 16 co-occurrences, FOOD most frequently modifies the noun LOG. The practice of keeping a food log, i.e., a food diary, is, as previously mentioned, one of the tenets of the pro-anorexia community on Tumblr.

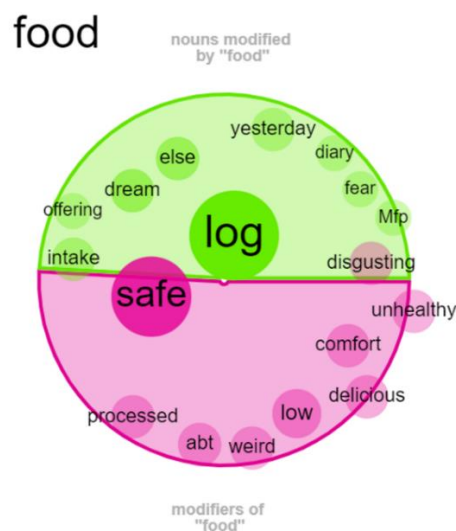


Figure 13: Collocates of the lemma "food". Source: Sketch Engine

Furthermore, the lemma is modified in 12 occurrences by the adjective SAFE. As mentioned in Section Four of this Chapter, a safe food is a food which an anorexic

individual feels comfortable eating, as it is perceived as not conducive to weight gain. A random sample containing the lexical bundle SAFE FOOD reads as follows:

I need this community to teach me SAFE FOOD and control. I want to be skinny for summer and I want to be perfect for him. I want to find ways to stop bingeing and purging. I want to not feel this weak and out of control and guilty.

The blogger in question once again seeks advice from fellow community members: in this instance, the advice sought specifically concerns safe foods. This request for support and guidance appears to stem from a feeling of genuine frustration over the blogger's difficult relationship with their eating behaviours. Moreover, the blogger frames their need to lose weight as a necessary condition to achieve fulfilment and romantic affection. Such a connection, i.e., the one between thinness and the attainment of self-realization, is one which is often present in the narratives of anorexic individuals: as stated by Gilbert (2014: 9), people suffering from anorexia nervosa generally believe that "in order to be loved, admired and respected it is important to be slim".

The collocates of the lemma CALORIE are also interesting, insofar as they highlight the pervasiveness of the aforementioned food logging practice. As can be seen from Figure 14 below, the verbs which take CALORIE as an object primarily revolve around the act of counting how many calories have been ingested or burned through exercise.

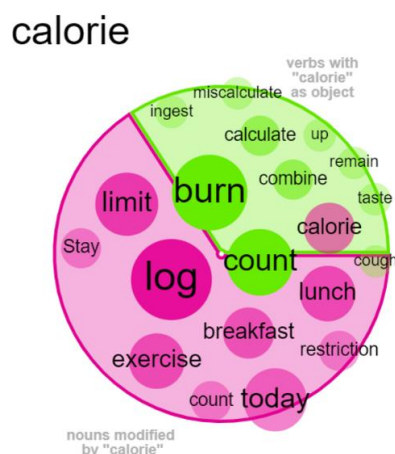


Figure 14: Collocates of the lemma "calorie". Source: Sketch Engine

Nouns modified by the lemma further confirm the existence of a widespread calorie-tracking phenomenon, wherein bloggers chronicle each day by evaluating the extent to which they have managed to restrict their caloric intake for each meal they have consumed. A clear example of this discursive practice is provided by the following extract:

CALORIES 09/08/2021 - one green apple (97) breakfast total: 97 cal - peach yogurt (100) lunch total: 100 cal - mac and cheese (690) dinner total: 690 cal. grand total: 887 cal today was okay but i need to find a bunch of low cal dinner recipes with protein! does anyone have any to share?

As remarked above, the blogger presents a moral evaluation of their day, which in this particular instance is deemed as “okay”, based on the amount of food consumed, and specifically on the caloric intake relative to their food consumption.

Calorie counting indeed appears to be profoundly ingrained in the lifestyle of an anorexia nervosa sufferer. According to Levinson et al. (2017: 14), such a practice represents a factor conducive to further exacerbation of the disease: “individuals with eating disorders often become obsessive and perfectionistic about counting calories, which can lead to increased eating disorder behaviours and clinical impairment”.

The discourse category concerning ingroup dynamics is of particular interest. As it has been stressed throughout Chapter One of the present work, one of the distinctive characteristics of the online pro-anorexia phenomenon is that it has enabled anorexic individuals to form communities where the eating disorder has become a shared experience, thus defying its traditional depiction as an exclusively individual psychopathology. This newfound communality has been found to have interesting implications as far as the interactions between sufferers of the eating disorder are concerned.

As illustrated in Chapter One, Haas et al. (2011) and Boero and Pascoe (2012), among others, have proposed thorough, although somewhat contrasting, accounts of the ingroup dynamics within pro-anorexia communities. In order to provide an updated overview of said dynamics which is also specifically tailored to the community the present corpus is based on, the collocates of the following lemmas will be taken into consideration: ANA COACH, ANA BUDDY and MEANSPO. The relevance

of the aforementioned lemmas previously emerged from the keyword analyses presented in Figures 4, 5 and 7.

The bigram ANA COACH occurs nine times in the corpus as a noun. In three out of nine instances, the lemma appears as the object of the verb NEED, while in one occurrence it is the direct object of the verb WANT. The word PLEASE also modifies the bigram in three distinct occurrences. The main observation which can be made with reference to this collocational analysis is that bloggers often vehemently request the assistance of another anorexic individual to guide them through their own pro-ana journey. An example of the discourse construction surrounding this bigram was obtained by means of the Sketch Engine's random sample tool:

Going home tomorrow tho so that's a plus starting the abc diet today and being as strict as i can. hopefully i'll be able to finish it this time SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME!!! I NEED TO GET BETTER, I NEED AN ANA COACH, PLEASEEEEE.

As it can be observed from the extract above, an ana coach is someone who is expected to provide guidance and support to the blogger, encouraging them to “get better” at dieting and restricting their food intake.

The same collocational analysis was carried out with reference to the bigram ANA BUDDY, so as to verify whether any observable difference exists between the discourse constructions relative to this lexical bundle as opposed to the ANA COACH one. The present bigram occurs eight times. In three occurrences it appears as the object of the verb WANT, just as the previously mentioned bigram. A brief look at a random concordance line containing this lexical bundle indeed indicates that the discourse prosody surrounding this bigram is quite similar to that of the analogous ANA COACH:

if youre a female between the ages of 14-17 and want to be ANA BUDDIES reply to this, im 90% not sending any progress pics unless im fully dressed in case anything gets leaked yk. MUST be a girl. i will not reveal my name or any private info. only send meanspo/egspo if i consent. idm if you send progress pics as long as youre not nude.

The blogger in question requests an ana buddy who fits a very specific description: a female adolescent who will agree to respect boundaries such as not sending nude pictures. It should be noted that this specific call for an ana buddy is welcomed by 25 interactions by different users, five of whom also enthusiastically reply to the original poster with responses such as: “pls i need someone” and “hi i need some more ana mates”.

Moving on to the discourse category concerning outgroup dynamics, the first lemma which can be taken into account is the noun FAMILY, which occurs 50 times in the corpus. In 25 out of 50 instances, this noun is modified by the collocate MY. Upon analysing a few sample concordance lines relative to this collocational pair, it appears clear that the discourse construction which emerges from the use of this collocational pair is strongly characterized by the representation of the blogger’s family as an obstacle to the pursuit of thinness. Indeed, one blogger writes: “wish me luck I have to eat mcdonalds with MY FAMILY later :(Anybody have any tips on how to eat as little as possible?? im desperate”. Preoccupation about having to eat in the presence of relatives in fact emerges as a particularly common theme, and it is often accompanied by requests for assistance in finding solutions which would allow the individual to eat as little as possible.

Furthermore, the theme of isolation from one’s close-tie relationships as a result of disordered eating behaviours can also be observed in the concordance lines associated with the bigram MY FAMILY. For instance, one blogger conveys their wish of living alone so as to avoid eating the same foods, labelled as binge foods, as their family:

i can't wait till i live alone and can go grocery shopping for just me and get all the stuff i actually need to make low-cal recipes and have my cupboards not constantly stuffed with binge foods MY FAMILY has normally.

Another lemma associated with the outgroup dynamics discourse category is the noun MOM, which occurs 68 times in the corpus. As can be observed from Figure 15 below, the most frequent collocates of this lemma further confirm the existence of a specific discourse construction wherein close-tie relationships are viewed by

anorexic individuals as inconveniencing in the process of maintaining the eating disorder.

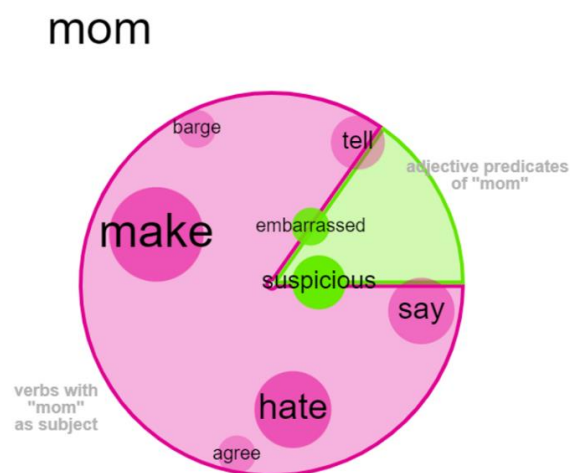


Figure 15: Collocates of "mom". Source: Sketch Engine

With reference to the collocational pair MOM HATES, the following concordance line is quite telling: “[...] if I don't eat the bread then she'll notice and question me. This is why really think that my MOM just HATES me and wants me to be fat”. The blogger in question indeed expresses feelings of deep frustration at being pressured to eat bread, claiming that their mother’s attempt to get them to eat represents a sort of sabotage of their effort to become thin.

The same discourse construction also emerges from the collocational pair consisting of the lemmas MOM and MAKE. Indeed, the concordance lines associated with this bigram frequently refer to the blogger’s mother cooking food, which is viewed as a threat to the poster’s anorexic lifestyle: “i had online school again this whole week so it was harder to restrict mainly because my MOM MAKES food even though i always tell her i don't want her to cook for me”. As can be observed from another concordance line, the inability to avoid eating food prepared by others often results in deeply negative feelings: “I did so awful today I feel disgusting, I just wasn't feeling good and my MOM MADE chicken masala and before I knew it, I had eaten”.

Moreover, as shown in Figure 16, the findings of the collocational analysis relative to the lemma DAD, which is indeed representative of another typical close-tie

relationship, further confirm the existence of a deeply negative discourse prosody surrounding an anorexic individual's attitude towards their real-life network.

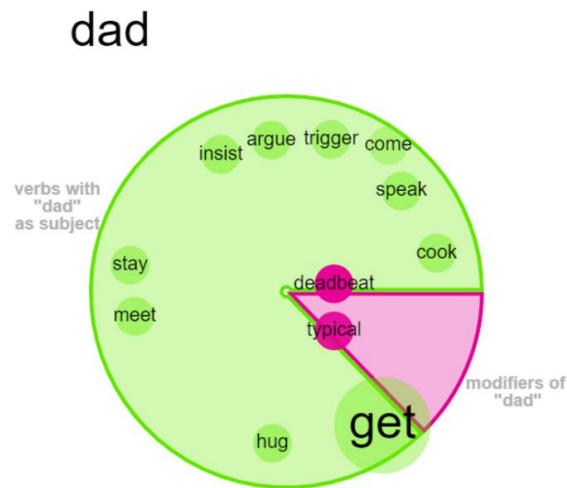


Figure 16: Collocates of "dad". Source: Sketch Engine

Randomly generated concordance lines pertaining to this lemma's collocates once again highlight the existence of the aforementioned discourse construction wherein the anorexic individual regards their family as a threat to the upkeep of their lifestyle. Indeed, one user writes as follows: "oh my god my parents are making me eat breakfast. DAD IS INSISTING on putting milk my porridge instead of water. send help".

It is also quite interesting to note that one more tendency emerging from the analysis of the collocates of this lemma is that of bloggers sharing personal details of their family lives with the other users on the platform. This is best exemplified by two sample concordance lines relative to the lemma dad, one with the collocate DEADBEAT, and the other with the collocate IS:

So really it's just the typical, DEADBEAT DAD who only comes around when he needs something or when he feels obligated to. And then my mom who's stressed out dealing with four kids on her own for the most part.

My DAD'S always in and out of my life. My mom wants nothing to do with me. My siblings are alright but they are always going to pick my mom over me. I actually used to be really close with my grandma on my mom's side, prior to the pandemic. [...]

As it appears evident from these examples, bloggers seem inclined to share their most private experiences, even ones which are not necessarily related to their eating disorder, with other community members. Such a level of disclosure can be seen as indicative of the “group intimacy and trust” (Haas et al., 2011: 51) which underlie the pro-ana blogosphere.

Finally, with reference to the outgroup dynamics category, the collocates of the lemma FRIEND, which occurs 88 times in the corpus, offer further confirmation that one of the main characteristics of the Tumblr pro-ana space is that of being framed in discourse by ingroup individuals as a refuge from “the pressures and anxiety resulting from relationships with close-tie individuals” (50). Indeed, the most frequent collocate of this lemma is the possessive determiner MY, which modifies the lemma 46 times. Two random samples containing this bigram confirm the existence of a deep discursive demarcation between the ingroup and the outgroup:

it feels like everything is blowing up around me but all i can think about is food and nothing else. all MY FRIENDS are getting angry at me and it's really getting me down lol. i wish i wasn't like this.

why do i even try to rant to MY FRIENDS they always try to give me some shitty advice like "Omg u have to eat" "U should talk to someone!" "You should try to get better" Oh my god why didnt i think of that

It appears evident that the perception of being misunderstood and/or antagonized by friends or family serves as a unifying force within the community, seeing as pro-ana bloggers are ultimately led to seek understanding from members of the community whose experiences they feel they can relate to.

Overall, the results presented in this Chapter indicate the existence of a series of recurring discursive constructions within the Tumblr pro-ana community. Firstly, by taking into account the keywords, collocates and concordances associated with the body and weight discourse categories, it was observed that, unsurprisingly, thinness tends to be overwhelmingly linked to positive connotations, while any body composition perceived as not skinny is consistently characterized by disparaging connotations conveyed by collocates with a negative semantic prosody.

An interesting finding which emerged with reference to this discourse category is that not all bloggers who partake in pro-ana activity on the platform actually qualify as anorexic according to the physiological definitory criterion for the eating disorder, i.e., a “bodyweight that is less than minimally normal” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 339). Indeed, by analysing their WEIGHT LOGS, it appears that individuals who classify as having a weight within a normal BMI range, or even overweight individuals, actively participate in community discourse.

However, it should be noted that although these individuals do not necessarily qualify as anorexic based on the physiological diagnostic criterion, they do in fact display a heightened concern about weight and an obsessive preoccupation with the appearance of their body, which, according to the American Psychiatric Association (340), represent the main psychological diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa. It is therefore interesting to point out that there seems to be evidence for the existence of a grey area of the eating disorder, defined as “atypical anorexia nervosa” (353), wherein individuals do not display the physical symptoms of the illness, while still experiencing its psychological effects.

As for the discourse constructions surrounding the topic of food and food consumption, in this Chapter it was highlighted that there seem to exist community-wide practices which most members engage in, such as that of keeping food logs/diaries, which consist in detailed daily reports of every food and beverage which a blogger has consumed. The aforementioned food logs, which are minutely and attentively curated, were observed to be quite revealing as to the disordered eating behaviours of pro-ana community members, seeing as they contain precise information about the calories each blogger consumes at any given meal.

Another interesting theme which emerged with reference to the discourse category surrounding food is the widespread and commonly accepted dichotomy between safe foods and fear foods. Indeed, it was possible to observe how pro-ana bloggers generally perceive food as having a deep emotional impact on their lives: the consumption of fear foods was found to lead to feelings of guilt and shame, as opposed to the comfort of only consuming safe foods. It should be remarked that the definition of fear foods as opposed to safe foods is a fundamentally individual one, thus depending mostly on each blogger’s personal relationship with food. However,

it was highlighted that a generally accepted interpretation of this dichotomy is one wherein foods are considered safe by anorexic individuals if they “do not cause weight gain, or [...] do not pose the risk of overeating” (Casa Palmera Website, 2015), while fear foods are those which should be avoided “because of the threat of weight gain or because the food is too hard to resist and overeating is likely to occur” (*ibid.*).

Finally, two more discourse categories were analysed, namely the ones associated with ingroup and outgroup dynamics. Indeed, by parsing the frequencies, keywords and collocates relative to the aforementioned categories, it was observed that pro-ana bloggers consistently tend to seek guidance and encouragement from other community members, relying on each other for advice and emotional support despite the anonymity in which all community members are shrouded. Furthermore, it was found that bloggers are keen to chronicle their lives and share deeply personal anecdotes with other members, anecdotes which are not always necessarily related to their eating disorder, thus confirming the existence of an important group intimacy component within the community.

It should be noted that the aggressive characteristics which Boero and Pascoe (2012) observed as central in the dynamics of the pro-ana communities they analysed were not found to be prominent in the data relative to the present corpus. Indeed, this finding fundamentally solidifies the notion of the impossibility of representing pro-ana communities as an individual monolith which consistently displays homogeneous characteristics.

As far as the discourse category pertaining to outgroup dynamics is concerned, it should be emphasized that the findings which emerged in this Chapter are consistent with the scientific literature on the social behaviours of individuals with anorexia nervosa. In fact, it was seen that community members tend to experience profound distress over their relationships with non-anorexic individuals, especially in contexts where friends or family members require them to eat food which they do not consider as safe. Indeed, family members and friends alike were found to be consistently described by bloggers as unsympathetic or even insensitive towards their struggles. Most interactions with outgroup individuals were found to be characterized

as a hindrance to the anorexic's pursuit of thinness, an inconvenience which is to be avoided at all costs.

It was especially interesting to consider the discourse constructions surrounding this category in light of the previously mentioned ingroup dynamics discourse category. It is in fact plausible to hypothesize that the negative discourse prosody which was observed to be consistently associated with discussions of close-tie relationships serves to further reinforce ingroup intimacy and trust. In this sense, the dichotomy between the positive and negative semantic prosodies linked to outgroup and ingroup dynamics seems to constitute one of the main driving factors for cohesiveness within the community. Indeed, such an analysis is consistent with the description of the inner workings of stigmatized communities proposed by Goffman (1963: 20), who argued that individuals who are, or perceive themselves to be, ostracized by society tend to retreat to "a circle of lament" where they can find support from more understanding individuals who share their experiences.

The results in this Chapter provide important insights into the inner workings of the Tumblr pro-ana community, suggesting that although it is not feasible to offer a unitary and monolithic description of the community which consistently applies to all of its members, it is however possible to identify numerous recurring discursive practices taking place in this digital space. The detection of said recurring themes is quite important, as it offers an opportunity to gain otherwise unavailable insights into the narratives which anorexic individuals construct about themselves and about their illness as they go through their daily lives.

The next Chapter moves on to provide a more in-depth Critical Discourse Analysis of a sample of posts in the corpus at hand, so as to present a more detailed and contextualized examination of the discursive practices detected in this Chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

A Critical Discourse Analysis Approach to the Tumblr Pro-Anorexia Community

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis, also known as CDA, can be defined as a “particular strand of discourse analysis that focuses on the role of language in society” (Bouvier & Machin, 2018: 178). The adjective “critical” is extremely important in providing a definition for this field of study: indeed, the primary characteristic of CDA, as noted by Van Dijk (2015: 467), is that “rather than merely describe discourse structures, it tries to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure”. Fundamentally, critical discourse analysts strive to study discourse structures by taking into account the social and political contexts in which they are originated.

Critical Discourse Analysis thus focuses on discourse “in terms of complex communicative events” (470) consisting of “such categories as setting (time, place); ongoing actions (including discourses and discourse genres); and the participants in various communicative, social, or institutional roles and identities, as well as their goals, knowledge, opinions, attitudes, and ideologies” (*ibid.*). As a result of this far-reaching and all-encompassing approach to discourse, CDA is a deeply multidisciplinary field of study, drawing from tools pertaining to different branches of linguistics: morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics all contribute in varying degrees to the critical analysis of discourses in context.

Historically, since its inception at the end of the 1970s (467), Critical Discourse Analysis has been applied to a remarkably large number of research fields. As mentioned by Van Dijk (476-479), some of the most notable applications of CDA have been in the context of the study of gender inequality, ethnocentrism, nationalism, racism, media discourse and political discourse. It appears evident that CDA is particularly useful when it comes to the analysis of the degree to which society and culture are shaped by discourse, which is thus deemed as a “form of social action” (467), seeing as it continuously constructs and reconstructs the discursive structures through which individuals navigate their daily lives.

An interesting development in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis has been brought about by the rise of social media. Indeed, as highlighted by Bouvier and Machin (2018: 179), the traditional CDA approach was to “to target texts produced by elites and powerful institutions, such as news and political speeches, with a view to revealing the kinds of discourses used to maintain power and sustain existing social relations”. However, beginning in the early 2000s, the rise of the Internet and the subsequent spread of numerous social media platforms have engendered a need for renewal in CDA practices.

It has been observed that the rise of social media has caused a profound societal shift whereby the “highly centralized and monolithic media” (182) such as newspapers and television have faced a seemingly inexorable decline in their ability to influence discourse. In fact, said media have been “replaced by the niched, yet fragmented and overlapping, patterns of connectivity created by social media, comprising bundles of entertainment, consumerism, and more localized interests” (183). As pointed out by Gunther Kress (2005: 19), “when everyone can be an author authority is severely challenged”: by bestowing upon every single individual the power of authorship, social media have profoundly and irreversibly altered social dynamics and the discourses which convey them.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that, at present, social media communication is primarily multimodal: pictures, videos, emoticons, and graphics of all kinds have become an integral part of discourse on most social media platforms. Thus, “multimodal analysis of social media must be a fundamental part of analysis rather than an add-on” (Bouvier & Machin, 2018: 185).

The aforementioned state of affairs poses a very interesting challenge for CDA practitioners. In fact, it would not be feasible nowadays to conduct Critical Discourse Analysis without considering the impact of the Internet on the dissemination of discourse. Furthermore, the democratization of authorship brought about by the rise of the Internet and social media entails that discourse is becoming increasingly fragmented and dynamic, seeing as the Internet as a medium is incredibly flexible, and “it reacts with unprecedented speed and precision to social change” (Albert & Salam, 2013: 2). Although this requires CDA practitioners to face the challenge of analysing an ever-growing variety of discourse practices which are also profoundly

mutable, such a scenario offers numerous new possibilities to gain insights into previously inaccessible discourse communities.

3.1. CDA and Pro-Anorexia Discourse

As mentioned in the previous Section, Critical Discourse Analysis originated in the 1970s as a research approach investigating the impact of discourse on social dynamics and power structures, thus focusing primarily on discourse produced by institutions and traditional media. However, considering the aforementioned societal upheaval brought about by the rise of the Internet, CDA has become increasingly important for the study of phenomena which transcend these traditional areas. One such phenomenon is the inception of digital pro-anorexia communities.

Pro-anorexia digital spaces indeed represent a very interesting example of “sub-cultural sites” (Day & Keys, 2008: 5), wherein members of these communities “are engaged in counter-hegemonic work, resisting and challenging the dominant ways in which they, their interests and activities are represented” (*ibid.*). The peculiar nature of these digital communities has therefore piqued the interest of numerous CDA practitioners who have recognized that these platforms offer the possibility of exploring the “fairly well-worn topic” (*ibid.*) of anorexia nervosa from an entirely new perspective, i.e., “by examining the ‘sense-making’ that occurs within these spaces, outside of a therapeutic or ‘face-to-face’ research context” (*ibid.*).

From this point of view, Critical Discourse Analysis appears to be the most fitting research approach to the study of these communities. In fact, an analysis of the discourse taking place in these digital spaces cannot be conceivably conducted without considering the socio-cultural dynamics which underlie the very existence of such communities. Which is to say that a mere linguistic analysis of pro-anorexia content would not suffice to account for the discourse practices and sense-making strategies which are produced in these digital spaces. It is therefore useful to apply the tools and practices of CDA to this entirely new context, notwithstanding the fact that this research approach was previously limited to the analysis of more traditional institutions and media.

It can be argued that the application of the Critical Discourse Analysis methodology to the study of pro-anorexia communities on social media has a twofold

advantage. Firstly, it provides the necessary tools to analyse these discourse communities in a contextualized manner. Secondly, it contributes to the renewal of the field of Critical Discourse Analysis itself, proving that this research approach should not be limited to the study of discourse produced by traditional media, as it is also perfectly suitable for the analysis of more hybrid and less conventional forms of discourse, which are characteristic of the age of the Internet and social media.

3.2. Sample Selection Criteria and CDA Tools

As stated in Section Two of Chapter Two, the corpus at hand consists of 1,228 posts published by bloggers in the span of one month, for a total of 60,733 words. Due to practical constraints, the present research cannot provide a comprehensive analysis of each of the aforementioned 1,228 posts. For this reason, a sample was selected to be further investigated through the use of Critical Discourse Analysis. Indeed, as highlighted by Gabrielatos and Baker (2008: 6), sampling can be useful to “create a more manageable number of texts for CDA”.

Although the need for sampling of corpus texts in order to enable a more in-depth investigation of the discourse community at hand is quite evident, it is also necessary to establish selection criteria which can ensure the representativeness of the sample which will be subject to further investigation. As a selection criterion for the present study, all posts published by bloggers on the first day of this corpus’s data collection phase, i.e., on September 1st, 2021, will be analysed by means of CDA tools. The resulting sample consists of 34 posts of varying lengths published on Tumblr in the span of 24 hours.

More specifically, these 34 posts amount to a total of 1,782 words, with the longest post consisting of 229 words and the shortest only 14 words. The majority of these posts were published by distinct users, with the exception of bloggers ‘blackdots-coldspots’ and ‘sho0tingst4r’, who both published two posts with the pro-ana hashtag in the span of 24 hours. Taking these data into account, it can be concluded that 32 distinct bloggers⁴ were active in the pro-ana subsection of the

⁴ It should be pointed out that the data collection process for this research did not include any posts in languages other than English. However, it is important to acknowledge once again that pro-anorexia

Tumblr platform on September 1st, 2021. Such are the characteristics of the sample which will be analysed by means of CDA tools.

In order to provide a comprehensive and informative analysis of the narratives and discourse practices produced by the Tumblr pro-ana community, the present dissertation will rely on an array of tools which will function as the backbone of this Section of the study. Despite the existence of a large number of different theories of Critical Discourse Analysis, the approach adopted for this research is the one presented by James Paul Gee (2014) in the second edition of his CDA toolkit. Said approach has numerous attractive features, but it is primarily useful in light of its practical, how-to stance on research, which is best exemplified by the 27 tools listed in the toolkit, which are described by Gee in terms of specific questions which should be asked about any discourse to gain a critical insight into it.

As is expected from any research approach within the highly multidisciplinary field of Critical Discourse Analysis, the 27 tools presented by Gee draw from all branches of linguistics: deixis, vocabulary, topics, coordination and subordination are only few of the linguistic elements which are investigated by means of these tools. Because of the practical constraints of this research, these CDA tools as illustrated by Gee will not be presented individually here, but they will be expounded in the next Section in a more contextualized manner, i.e., with reference to the data within the sample.

3.3. Intertextuality, Advice-Giving, and Advice-Seeking

The first post in the Tumblr pro-ana section on September 1st, 2021, was published by user ‘dyings0ftly’. The post in question is a particularly concise one, as it consists of only 21 words. In it, the blogger states: “deciding whether i should be nina from black swan mentally ill or rue from euphoria mentally ill hmmm what to choose”.

The first interesting aspect of the aforementioned post is the presence of intertextuality, which is what Gee defines as the phenomenon occurring “when one text [...] quotes, refers to, or alludes to another text” (171). In this instance a reference is made to two pieces of media, more specifically the movie *Black Swan*

activity on the Tumblr platform is not limited to English, although posts in English outnumber those in any other language.

(Aronofsky, 2010) and the television show *Euphoria* (Levinson, 2019). Both characters the blogger refers to, i.e., Nina and Rue, are mentally ill young women who are consistently portrayed as engaging in substance abuse, self-harm, and other such behaviours. The presence of these “echoes” (Gee, 2014: 172) in the blogger’s post indicates that this instance of discourse is directed at a specific demographic, i.e., people who understand the reference which is being alluded to. Given the popularity of these two pieces of media among teenagers and young adults, it can be assumed that the use of intertextuality here serves to narrow down the post’s scope to these two demographics.

Furthermore, it is interesting to note that the phrasing of the sentence implies that the blogger perceives mental illness as an unavoidable reality: no other option is mentioned but to accept its inexorability. However, as can be observed from the use of the verb “to decide”, within the confines of a condition perceived as inescapable, this blogger expresses a belief in their ability to shape their illness in whatever way they prefer. It is conceivable to hypothesize that such a framing of their mental illness provided by the blogger’s self-narrative is conducive to a lower propensity to seek support and professional help, as the possibility of recovery appears to be completely out of the question.

The second post in this sample was published by user ‘shakylittlestarvingkittens’, and it consists of the following 48 words:

Little pro tip but if youre craving something...eat a little bit of it. For example, I was reallllyyyy craving authentic Mexican tacos. So instead, I ate a piece of fresh onion. Eat an element of what you crave and it might subside those intense feelings and impulses.

The most striking aspect of the text above is the presence of the advice-giving practice which, as highlighted throughout Chapter One and Chapter Two, has been observed as typical of pro-anorexia spaces. In this specific instance, the blogger addresses the community at large, giving other community members a “little pro tip” on how to eat less despite hunger and food cravings.

Furthermore, it is quite interesting to analyse the discursive implications of this post through the lens of Gee’s tools for CDA, specifically relying on the “Identities

Building Tool” (202) and the “Relationships Building Tool” (*ibid.*). Indeed, as suggested by the author, these tools should guide the CDA practitioner in an analysis of “how the speaker is positioning others, what identities the speaker is “inviting” them to take up” (*ibid.*), more specifically focusing on “how words and various grammatical devices are being used to build and sustain or change relationships of various sorts among the speaker, other people, social groups, cultures, and/or institutions” (*ibid.*).

In the case of the aforementioned post, it appears evident that this instance of discourse serves to reinforce the relational dynamics which underlie the inner workings of the pro-anorexia community at large. Indeed, while such an example of unwarranted advice-giving would be perceived as unacceptable in other contexts, within the confines of the pro-ana blogosphere such an instance of discourse only contributes to strengthening ingroup relations. The use of the imperative mood therefore requires no reliance on mitigating politeness strategies, seeing as community members are not expected to perceive it as a face-threatening act in light of their shared common ground. Indeed, bloggers appear to be aware of the fact that advice-giving is part and parcel of belonging to the pro-ana community, and thus take no offence at receiving unwarranted instructions on how to conduct themselves in their daily lives.

Two more posts in the September 1st sample resonate with the aforementioned advice-giving practice. User ‘hypertullip’ authored the following textpost: “hey everyone! Today at coles I found the BEST PANCAKES EVER. They’re only around 63CAL per pancake. Here’s the link! I’m obsessed and I hope this helps someone, I recommend adding a splash of vanilla essence”. In this instance, the blogger appears to urge fellow community members to purchase a specific food given its low caloric intake.

Again, as was the case with reference to the previous textpost, the blogger’s tone appears to be peculiarly familiar. This unwarranted piece of advice about buying “the BEST PANCAKES EVER” would be perceived as somewhat odd in any other exchange taking place between strangers, but it appears clear that despite the anonymity in which these nameless individuals are shrouded, by general tacit

agreement, they interact with each other as one would with a relative or a close acquaintance.

Finally, one of two textposts published by user ‘blackdots-coldspots’ on September 1st is markedly characterized by the above-mentioned advice-giving discursive practice. The 173-word textpost reads as follows:

nice thoughts for ed peeps who're rilly going through it rn
literally everything you do burns calories, laughing, sleeping, dancing, singing, even
just sitting there, you're burning calories right now just by existing, thats neat
you probably have some form of body dysmorphia if u have an ed so no matter how
big you think you are you're def just focusing on ur flaws, a fresh pair of eyes on you
most likely see you way thinner than you see yourself
a 10 minute workout is amazing compared to no workout, and just 100 calories over ur
limit vs thousands is awesome too, just because you fell backwards a bit doesn't mean
you lost everything you worked for, you're still farther than you were weeks ago and
that should mean something
every day is a new day and a new chance, if you messed up, the little reset button is
pressed in a few hours and you have a chance to forget abt the past and focus on the
now. you're doing great.

The blogger in the above post directly addresses fellow community members who are struggling, i.e., “going through it”, with their eating disorder: they offer reassurance that “literally everything you do burns calories”, and that most fellow bloggers are probably “way thinner” than they perceive themselves to be. As expected, the user relies on a discursive framework wherein food consumption and calorie expenditure are imbued with a quasi-moral connotation: eating a certain number of calories over a pre-established limit means that “you messed up” or that “you fell backwards”, and you should press “the little reset button” the following day. Working out even for a few minutes, on the other hand, is described as “amazing”.

Furthermore, it can also be observed that, once again, the advice which is being provided in this post is generally spontaneous and unprompted, and it would be perceived as misplaced in other contexts given the sensitive subject matter it deals

with. However, this small decalogue on dealing with anorexia appears to be perfectly congruous with this community's unspoken, yet widely agreed-upon, guidelines: no advice on the upkeep of the eating disorder is considered too personal or unwarranted.

User 'ijustwanttobethinohmygod' published a 48-word post which reads as follows:

Ugh I had a 500 cal binge last night. Not the worst but upsetting cause I did so good all day yesterday :(
How do you guys balance drinking and restricting because it feels like every time i drink i get ridiculously insanely hungry and end up bingeing

In the above post, the user expresses their frustration over having had a “500 cal binge”. Firstly, it should be pointed out that consuming 500 calories, which is fewer calories than is recommended per meal for an adult woman (Livestrong Website, 2019), does not fulfil the criterion for binge eating as indicated in the DSM-5, which states that binge eating is characterized by “eating, in a discrete period of time (e.g., within any 2-hour period), an amount of food that is definitely larger than what most people would eat in a similar period of time under similar circumstances” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 350).

Secondly, the post in question contains an instance of advice-seeking. As was mentioned in previous paragraphs, advice-seeking represents one of the most common discursive practices within the community. When viewed through the lens of Gee's Relationships and Identities Building Tools, it is quite clear that, as was the case for the advice-giving practice, this discursive construction is used by bloggers to position themselves on a par with other community members, who are not regarded as mere strangers on the Internet, but rather as understanding confidants.

Finally, it is interesting to highlight that the request for advice in this blogger's post contains a presupposition. Presuppositions can be defined as “something like the background beliefs of the speaker, propositions whose truth he takes for granted, or seems to take for granted, in making his statement” (Stalnaker et al., 1977: 136). While the pragmatic phenomenon of presupposition can be triggered by numerous linguistic elements, in this specific case the interrogative “how do you guys balance

drinking and restricting” is responsible for licensing a presupposition to the effect that the original poster assumes that their struggle is a universal one among members of the community. Indeed, by making this inquiry the blogger simply requests advice on coping methods for their struggle, assuming that other members will be able to provide said advice on account of their shared experience. The presence of this instance of presupposition is testament to the community-wide belief that pro-ana bloggers on the platform, as opposed to outgroup individuals, all share common life experiences, a belief which functions as a powerful bonding and community-strengthening factor.

User ‘skinny-kitten1512’ writes: “i don’t know what to do. i literally wanna eat everything i can find”. This brief 14-word post, although extremely concise, conveys the blogger’s anxiety over their own desire to eat. The dichotomic attitude towards food displayed by this blogger, i.e., a ravenous desire to eat and an intense fear of doing so, can be explained as one of a number of consequences of low-calorie diets. Indeed, the Minnesota Starvation Experiment, a study conducted between 1944 and 1945, wherein “thirty-six volunteers were placed on an extended low-calorie diet” (Wolf, 1991: 193) of circa 1,560 calories a day, proved that the psychological impact of low-calorie dietary regimens is extremely significant: subjects “became increasingly preoccupied with food and eating, to the extent that they ruminated obsessively about meals and food, collected recipes and cookbooks, and showed abnormal food rituals, such as excessively slow eating and hoarding of food related objects” (194). Having analysed some of the bloggers’ food logs, it should be pointed out that these individuals’ caloric intake is often much lower than 1,560 calories. Thus, the recurring feelings of distress and anxiety concerning their obsession with food can be conceivably accounted for as consequences of their restrictive diets.

Aside from the above observations, it should be pointed out that this post contains a deeply personal account of the blogger’s struggle with their eating disorder, along with an implicit request for help addressed to fellow community members. The level of emotional disclosure and openness underlying such a blunt admission of helplessness once again points to the interesting relational dynamics existing within this community of strangers who feel particularly at ease among each other. Such dynamics appear to be all the more peculiar if placed in juxtaposition

with the findings presented throughout Chapter Two regarding these individuals' unwillingness to disclose details of their condition to friends and/or family.

Further examples of the help/advice-seeking discursive practice within the September 1st sample can be found in posts by four more bloggers. User 'eatmoresalad' published the following textpost: "I eat less than 500 cal a day and somehow still feel like i'm bingeing/faking my ed. help". Once again, it can be observed that this individual's perception about their disordered eating behaviours is profoundly skewed: by their own admission, they feel like their extremely restrictive diet is not enough to qualify them as someone suffering from anorexia nervosa. A request for help directed to fellow community members thus ensues.

Users 'kiyoko-1' and 'sandscreamsintothevoid' also appear to seek guidance from other bloggers. The former user's 19-word textpost reads as follows: "Hiiiya! I really need a weight loss buddy to keep me accountable! Please message meee if you are interested". The blogger requests a weight loss buddy, a figure peculiar to the community which was previously mentioned in Chapter Two. It can be observed that, once again, a fundamental assumption underlies this appeal: indeed, such a request rests on a presupposition that fellow community members are equipped to support this individual in their struggle with the eating disorder, despite the fact that they are not medical professionals and that, given their presence in the community, it is safe to assume that they too are suffering from some form of disordered eating.

Furthermore, it is interesting to consider the bloggers' willingness to receive guidance and advice from other users in juxtaposition with the general reluctance of anorexic individuals towards seeking medical treatment. The reason for the existence of such a stark contrast can be traced back to the stigmatisation faced by anorexic individuals, which often results in an intense "fear of others knowing about their eating disorder" (Becker et al., 2004: 160). However, as was pointed out throughout previous Chapters, the pro-ana blogosphere poses itself as a refuge from said stigmatisation, thus enabling individuals to feel comfortable enough to request aid and guidance from each other.

One final observation to be made about the textpost in question concerns the blogger's lexical choice in using the adjective "accountable". Indeed, as stated by Gee (2014: 59), "using language is all about making choices about what and how to

build (design choices) so that we can mean what we want to mean”. In this specific instance, the use of the adjective “accountable” conveys the idea of weight loss being the blogger’s duty and responsibility, a sort of moral imperative they feel the need to fulfil.

User ‘sandscreamsintothevoid’ also published a texpost requesting help from fellow community members: “does anyone have those monster high seven-day diets?”. As with most instances of discourse on the platform, the meaning of this sentence may not be clear to outsiders, but it appears evident that in asking the question the blogger relies on the assumption that other community members will immediately understand what they mean. In fact, the use of the deictic “those” is quite revealing in this sense, as it indicates that the so-called “monster high seven-day diets” are already known to the readers of the post.

For the sake of clarity, it should be pointed out that the expression “monster high seven-day diets” refers to a series of makeshift, highly restrictive dietary regimens created by bloggers themselves and published on platforms such as Tumblr in the form of pictures with illustrations taken from the Monster High doll franchise. An example of such an extreme diet can be observed in the picture below:



Figure 17: Monster High Diet. Source: Tumblr

As can be seen, this eating plan entails an extremely low intake of calories for each day of the week, up to a day of complete fasting. Such a dangerous dietary regimen

would clearly be frowned upon by outgroup individuals, but it appears clear that the straightforward request posed by the user in question requires no further explanation in the context of the Tumblr pro-ana community.

3.4. The Highs and Lows of Anorexia

The next post in the sample was published by user 'skinandribs101', and it consists of the following 223 words:

Things I've found from losing ≈35 pounds. (SW156/4-120) 5'3

-I lost 6 inches off my waist

-I lost 3 inches off my thighs

-I can sit more comfortably since I like curling up

-It hurts to sit down for long periods of time on a school chair

-Its hard to sleep on my side because of my hip bones

-My old rings are falling off or are extremely loose

-I feel less bloated

-I don't feel as embarrassed

-I can see the veins on my hand

-I get cold really easy (wish me luck guys its almost winter in the Midwest)

-It really does get easier to say no to food

-Even just losing 3 pounds during the 130-124 stage really makes a difference

-My hands shake like crazy

-I'm more determined than ever

This whole process happened over 14 months roughly, I started getting more into ed territory around November of 2020 tho. I've had lots of trial and error, setbacks and binges. I don't really exercise anymore but I think I'm going to try again. I also try and limit my cals from 0-1200 a day. I do make a lot of mistakes, its hard but I'm really proud of how far I've come even if it isn't as fast as others on this site.

Stay safe guys! Xoxo

In the above textpost the blogger proceeds to make an evaluation of their weight loss journey, which, as they explain, took place in the span of 14 months, and resulted in a 35-pound (ca. 16 kgs) weight loss. A list of physical and psychological consequences of this process is thus presented by the blogger, from reducing their

waist circumference to feeling less embarrassed. The most striking aspect of this piece of discourse is the dissonance between the blogger's tone and the contents of the post itself: although they mention objectively negative consequences to their weight loss, i.e., sleep problems, pain while sitting down, a heightened sensitivity to cold, and shaking hands, the blogger states that they are proud of the "how far" they have come, and "more determined than ever".

Another textpost in the vein of the aforementioned one was published by user 'backagainig'. The post comprises 12 words and reads as follows: "not me losing 2lbs in a day and a half LETS GOOOOO". As it can be surmised from the capitalised "LETS GOOOOO", the blogger feels particularly enthusiastic about their achievement of losing two lbs (one kilo) in a single day, despite the fact that such a drastic drop in bodyweight in such a narrow time window is considered unsafe: indeed, "the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC, recommends that people lose weight gradually, approximately 1 to 2 pounds per week" (Livestrong Website, 2018). This instance of discourse represents a further example of a pro-ana blogger framing an objectively unsafe and unhealthy behaviour as a positive, happiness-inducing experience.

Users 'pansypiggy' and 'weightofthin' also engage in similar discourses. Indeed, the former published the following 64-word textpost:

It's getting harder to think that anorexia isnt doing me favors when I am more confident when I haven't eaten all day. I was confident enough to talk to someone I like, and even was being more talkative with coworkers just because I knew I was dropping in weight and hadn't had a truly full meal in days.

Good things happen when im starving.

The latter contributed with this 52-word post:

Thinspo af

So today I posted a pic of myself and my friend replied with "you've gotten so skinny" and it was like the greatest thinspo ever. I've never been told that before and it was so great. Even if I can't see it. It gave me more motivation to keep going.

The most striking aspect of both instances of discourse is the association which these bloggers strive to establish between their eating disorder and any positive occurrence in their daily lives. A heightened sense of self-confidence and better social relations are both believed to be direct consequences of their anorexia-induced weight loss.

One more textpost in the September 1st sample resonates with this semantic prosody. User ‘sweet-lavender-nothing’, in fact, authored the following 76-word post:

TODAY WAS AMAZING!!!!

I did yoga today for the first time in a while and it was so calming,, but i burnt almost 100 cal!! when i got home i kind of ate a little more than i wanted,, but i worked out after and my workouts are getting much more bearable. i'm also pretty sure i burnt close to what i ate,, so thats good. i didn't eat dinner tonight either! oh,, and i lost another pound! so things are going well for me today,,hopefully i can somehow make tomorrow better than today,, i do know i need to get my eating under control when i get home from school and stuff, but i feel like i'm doing much better than i was compared to the start of the week.

The user in question provides an account of their day in which they highlight several specific reasons why they believe it was “AMAZING!!!!”. The blogger states that they “kind of ate a little more” than they wanted, but immediately proceeds to add that they “worked out after” and “didn’t eat dinner [...] either”, thus concluding that, all things considered, their day was indeed “amazing”.

The syntactic structure of the present textpost is quite revealing as far as the blogger’s attitude towards eating is concerned: the proposition in which they state that they have eaten more than planned is immediately counterbalanced by another which is introduced by an adversative conjunction, i.e., “but”, wherein they express a certain degree of satisfaction for having burned all excess calories by means of physical activity. Indeed, as stated by Gee (2014: 68), it is worth considering “what perspectives are being communicated by the way in which information is packaged into main, subordinate, and embedded clauses”. In this sense, the syntactic packaging of the post in question conveys the idea that eating is, at its core, a sort of failure

which can only be remedied by means of restriction or considerable levels of physical activity.

The obvious result of the discursive constructions presented thus far is that a strong association is established between, on the one hand, eating and negative emotions and, on the other hand, food restriction and positive feelings. It can be hypothesised that such a dichotomy only contributes to the exacerbation of any disordered eating behaviour, seeing as the bloggers become increasingly convinced that, as stated by user ‘weightofthin’, “good things happen when [they are] starving”.

Several other posts in the September 1st sample resonate with the aforementioned dichotomy. User ‘just-here-till-death’ authored the following statement: “BRB [be right back] going KMS [kill myself] I just went over my calorie limit for the day”. A similar sentiment is also expressed by users ‘rantandrelapse’ and ‘zaptrannydaddy’. The former writes as follows:

Today my head is banging again. I've had about 400 cal and its only 10:10. I wont have anything else now until dinner which I will just make some noodles at 160 cal. At least I've burnt off 200 and by the end of the day I'll have burnt off around 300, maybe 400 if it gets busy! So I can console myself with that.

The latter published the following textpost:

I'm so upset at myself. I binged. I got home from work and couldn't help myself. I was so hungry. I've been doing so fucking good the past 2 weeks at only 700-800 calories and today I went over 2000. Tomorrow I WILL DO BETTER. I am almost to my first goal weight. I can do this. I need to do this.

Indeed, both bloggers appear to vent their frustration about eating an amount of food which they perceive to be excessive. In the case of the first user, ‘rantandrelapse’, they mention consuming a 400-calorie meal as the reason why they will not be able to eat again throughout the rest of the day, with the exception of “some noodles” for dinner. Furthermore, the blogger states that despite their perceived moral failure owing to the aforementioned 400-calorie meal, they can find consolation in the fact that, by the end of the day, they will have burned “around 300, maybe 400” calories.

User ‘zaptrannydaddy’ also expresses feelings of profound frustration, “I’m so upset at myself”, over their failure to consistently meet their goal of only consuming 700 calories a day. Their consumption of over 2000 calories in one day is thus labelled as a “binge”, which prompts the blogger to commit to doing better the following day. It should be pointed out that, as was the case in the previous textpost, the statements these bloggers make as to their perceived excessive consumption of food are not objectively well-founded: indeed, neither eating a 400-calorie meal, nor consuming 2000 calories in one day constitute instances of bingeing and/or overeating.

A similar semantic prosody can be observed in two other posts within the sample. Said posts, published by users ‘anaasang31’ and ‘skinnying’, are also characterised by the expression of profoundly negative emotions, more specifically surrounding the topic of weight. Indeed, the former user’s post reads as follows: “i haven’t weighed myself in like three weeks because i’m too scared of the number”, while the latter’s contains the following statements: “just weighed myself and the scale says fucking 60kg?????? i hope it’s just bloating from drinking too much last night or something i’ll check again later. if it’s still at 60kg i’m going to kill myself”.

As was highlighted throughout Chapters One and Two, frequent weighing is one of the most common characteristics of anorexia nervosa. Indeed, it can be inferred from the two textposts above that bloggers within the Tumblr pro-ana community tend to repeatedly engage in this practice, up to multiple times a day, and that an extended period of time, e.g., three weeks, spent without weighing oneself is considered to be somewhat anomalous and therefore noteworthy. It should be noted that, although the frequent weighing practice is indeed a staple of the pro-ana community, the bloggers’ feelings towards it appear to be quite negative. In fact, this community-wide ritual seems to be particularly dread-inducing, due to the bloggers’ fear of seeing a greater number than expected on the scale.

As can be observed in the textpost by user ‘skinnying’, a weight which is considered excessive (at least by the blogger’s own standards) results in strong emotional reactions: the blogger in question states that they are “going to kill [themselves]” unless their weight decreases by the end of the day. Leaving aside considerations about the veracity of such a strong statement and the actual risk of the

blogger harming themselves⁵, the finding which emerges from analysing these instances of discourse surrounding weighing is that this practice and its outcome exert a considerable emotional leverage on anorexic individuals partaking in pro-ana discourse on Tumblr.

Finally, a similar semantic prosody can also be observed in the following 15-word post published by user ‘already90ne’: “showers aren’t hot enough, blades aren’t sharp enough, thin isn’t thin enough, i’m not enough”. Once again, it appears that the blogger’s conviction of not being adequately thin results in a profoundly negative evaluation of their entire personhood. Thus, one of the recurring themes emerging from these instances of discourse is that of anorexic individuals consistently relying on their weight as an indicator of their human value: not to be “thin enough” means not to be good enough as a person.

Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the aforementioned textpost also mentions hot showers and sharp blades. While the latter are quite self-explanatory in terms of their being a reference to self-harm behaviours, the former may require further explanation. Indeed, as documented by Gutierrez et al. (2002: 134), “people with anorexia nervosa (AN) resort to a surprisingly diverse range of strategies to induce weight loss”, and it may thus be possible to hypothesize that the use of sauna baths be among said strategies. However, it is equally conceivable to posit that an anorexic individual’s reliance on particularly hot showers may be due to their heightened sensitivity to cold temperatures, which, aside from being one of the physiological consequences of the disorder⁶, was also previously mentioned in the textpost by user ‘skinandribs101’.

Regardless of the exact interpretation of the “hot showers” reference in this textpost, it is important to highlight the pervasiveness, within the present sample, of discourse which is indicative of possible comorbidities, such as self-harm behaviours, alcohol abuse, or depressive disorder. Indeed, this finding is consistent

⁵ Guidère (2020) found that suicidal idioms are commonly used in an ironic or metaphorical manner on the Internet, thus resulting in an increased difficulty in evaluating whether a social media post containing apparently suicidal idioms is truly indicative of the poster’s suicidal ideation.

⁶ Hypothermia and cold intolerance are mentioned in the DSM-5 as two of the “physical signs and symptoms of anorexia nervosa [...] attributable to starvation” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 343).

with several diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa proposed by the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 344-345):

Bipolar, depressive, and anxiety disorders commonly co-occur with anorexia nervosa. Many individuals with anorexia nervosa report the presence of either an anxiety disorder or symptoms prior to onset of their eating disorder. OCD is described in some individuals with anorexia nervosa, especially those with the restricting type. Alcohol use disorder and other substance use disorders may also be comorbid with anorexia nervosa, especially among those with the binge-eating/purging type.

3.5. Outgroup Dynamics

As was pointed out throughout Chapters One and Two of the present work, one particularly interesting aspect of the discourse being enacted in pro-anorexia digital spaces is the presence within it of frequent references to the outgroup, i.e., to those who are not suffering from the same condition as the pro-ana bloggers, and who are therefore regarded as outsiders.

The reason for which further investigation of this theme appears to be necessary lies in the unprecedented opportunity offered by the pro-ana blogosphere to gain valuable insights into an array of previously inaccessible discourse constructions. Indeed, while much discourse on anorexia has been produced and disseminated through mainstream media by outgroup individuals, sufferers of anorexia, at least prior to the rise of pro-ana communities, did not have access to platforms where, conversely, they could share their opinions on outgroup individuals. In this sense, the spread of the pro-ana phenomenon seems to have allowed anorexic individuals to end a long history of silence imposed by the previously exclusively individual nature of their illness.

A number of textposts in the September 1st sample contain instances of discourse surrounding the bloggers' relationships with outgroup individuals. User 'hungryhungryhipdips', for example, authored the following contribution: "all of my irl [in real life] friends are definitely on here. And we all know it. But nobody wants to say it because none of us can prove it and it's easier to live in comfortable ignorance :)". In this post, the user seems to suggest that people they are acquainted with "in real life" also struggle with anorexia, and that they too are active in the pro-

anorexia blogosphere. It is useful to notice how the blogger shifts from referring to their “irl friends” using a plural third-person pronoun in the first sentence, to relying on the pronouns “we” and “us” in the second and third sentences. The use of such pronouns solidifies the blogger’s belief that their friends are indeed part of the community as well.

This post is certainly interesting, insofar as it appears to stray from the community-wide narrative surrounding the existence of a clear-cut divide between the ingroup and the outgroup, i.e., anas and non-anas. The blogger’s suspicion as to the presence of their real-life friends on the platform collapses the distance between these two seemingly diametrically opposed realities. The revelation is thus presented with a certain degree of smugness, as can be observed by the final smiling emoticon.

Finally, it is worth noting that the post in question indirectly addresses a topic which is quite relevant in this context, and that is the stigma surrounding individuals suffering from anorexia. As was pointed out in Chapter One, numerous researchers have highlighted that anorexia nervosa is the object of widespread and systematic stigmatisation (Stewart et al, 2006, Brelet et al., 2021), which in turn results in the isolation of the individuals suffering from the eating disorder, and in their attempts to seek “a circle of lament” (Goffman, 1963: 20) consisting of people who can relate to their struggles. The statement made by the blogger, “nobody wants to say it”, is thus poignant insofar as it hints at the aforementioned general attitude towards anorexia nervosa.

User ‘blackdots-coldspots’, published the following 75-word post:

i can't wait till i live alone and can go grocery shopping for just me and get all the stuff i actually need to make low-cal recipes and have my cupboards not constantly stuffed with binge foods my family has normally. i just went with my sister to the store and all i could get while she got dinner ingredients was a monster 0 and a salad that i said was for lunch for school.

As can be inferred from the above instance of discourse, the blogger in question feels enthusiastic (“i can’t wait till i live alone”) about the prospect of leaving the household they share with their family, seeing as they perceive their current living situation as a hindrance to their pursuit of thinness. Their family’s eating habits are

thus presented as a source of anxiety and frustration, which results in the blogger trying to distance themselves from their relatives in order to be able to deprive themselves of food as comfortably as possible.

Two other posts in the September 1st sample are characterised by similar discourse prosodies. User ‘thewannabeskinnyrat’ published the following post:

ok yall have to tell me what to do i want to eat less at school but i dont want to eat nothing cause that would sus out my friends and parents so should i get a full meal and try to eat less of it or just not get anything- i know im over thinking this but like im freaking out ive been having this dilemma since 5th grade and i never eat less unless i pack my lunch (which was basically me just eating bread, water and maybe some hashbrowns and fruit from my friends- so what should i do man

Aside from the advice-seeking practice (“yall have to tell me what to do”, “so what should i do man”) which was mentioned in previous Sections as one of the overarching themes of pro-ana discourse, it can be observed that, once again, the blogger mentions outgroup individuals as obstacles to the attainment of the ideal anorexic lifestyle. This user is therefore caught in the dilemma of not wanting to “sus out”, i.e., raise the suspicion of, family and friends, while also trying to consume as little food as possible.

A post by user ‘sophieacruz’ relies on a similar discursive construction:

calorie log:
breakfast: banana at 1am - 100
lunch: water
dinner: sticky rice - 300
snacks: two small bundt cakes - 420
beef jerky - 100
total: 920
i had to eat the bundt cakes my mom bought them for me i felt so bad after i ate wayyy too much today homecomings on saturday

Indeed, while presenting a meticulous overview of the day’s energy consumption, the blogger appears to feel compelled to justify their eating “two small bundt cakes” for

a total of 420 calories. The reason behind this guilt-inducing (“i felt so bad”) action is that their mother specifically purchased this food for the blogger, who thus felt obligated to eat it. The use of “had to” in this context is particularly revealing, as it underscores how this individual regards the action of eating as a daunting obligation imposed on them by their mother, who is therefore perceived as hindering the user’s process of restricting their caloric intake as much as possible.

Two more users within the September 1st sample authored posts containing references to outgroup individuals. The blogger by the name ‘sho0tingst4r_1’ published the following text:

it feels like everything is blowing up around me but all i can think about is food and nothing else. all my friends are getting angry at me and it’s really getting me down lol.
i wish i wasn’t like this

In this specific instance the user appears to be expressing feelings of dejection about their friends’ anger towards them, and their frustration over their own behaviour (“i wish i wasn’t like this”), which is identified as the cause of their deteriorating relationship with their friends. It is particularly interesting to note that this user seems to be fully conscious of the negative impact which their obsessive behaviour surrounding food and eating has on their relationships. However, the closing line of the post, i.e., “i wish i wasn’t like this”, conveys the idea that the blogger does not believe themselves to be capable of correcting their course of action in order to improve their current situation, which is thus perceived as overwhelmingly irreversible.

Finally, a textpost by user ‘plsndonterminatemeagain’ is also characterised by an underlying negative discourse prosody surrounding the blogger’s relationship with outgroup individuals: “at this point, home means nothing to me, but a cold sky, a ride home in the rain, and this hatred of getting better”. As stated by Gee (2014: 55), “metaphors are important for understanding complex things”: the metaphors contained in this concise yet imagery-filled textpost, i.e., the blogger’s home being equated with “a cold sky” and “a ride home in the rain”, reveal that the blogger perceives their relationship with their home to be quite cold and strained.

Overall, the aforementioned findings and observations highlight the existence of a predominantly negative discourse prosody surrounding the bloggers' relationships and interactions with the outgroup. These individuals appear to consistently frame friends and family members as threats to the upkeep of their anorexic lifestyle, which results in attempts to avoid social interactions so as to minimise the risk of compromising their weight-loss efforts. Such findings are in keeping with the medical literature on anorexia nervosa, which holds that numerous individuals suffering from this eating disorder “demonstrate significant social isolation” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 343) as a result of the illness.

3.6. Humour, Resolutions, and Encouragement

Aside from the discursive practices detected in the September 1st sample which have been expounded thus far, i.e., advice-seeking/giving, accentuation of the outgroup-ingroup divide, discussion of the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the eating disorder, further remarks can be made concerning other common features and discourse constructions which also appear with a certain degree of consistency.

It is interesting to observe that a number of textposts within the sample are characterised by content which is quite humorous in nature. Examples can be found in the contributions published by users ‘catkingcals’, ‘justwanttobebone’, and ‘onedaygracie’. The first authored the following textpost: “might have my coffee hot instead of iced tonight so i can feel fuller and not piss every 2 minutes”. As can be observed, the blogger mentions using coffee in place of food as a means of achieving fullness, which is clearly indicative of a disordered eating behaviour. Furthermore, this remark is followed up by the use of a very informal vernacular to make light of the previous troubling statement.

A similar approach to discussing their illness appears in a post by user ‘justwanttobebone’: “I never did more math in my life before I started to count net calories”. Once again, an assertion regarding this individual’s conflictual relationship with food, and specifically the practice of compulsive calorie tracking, is conveyed through the lens of humour. As highlighted in Chapter Two of the present work, compulsive calorie counting represents a major feature of the anorexic lifestyle. According to Levinson et al. (2017: 14), this practice generally contributes to an

exacerbation of the illness: “individuals with eating disorders often become obsessive and perfectionistic about counting calories, which can lead to increased eating disorder behaviours and clinical impairment”.

User ‘onedaygracie’ published the following post: “Today on: Do I want a binder because of gender identity confusion, or do I want a binder because the size of my boobs makes me feel fat?”. As can be seen, the user’s struggles with gender identity and body dysmorphia are presented as a light-hearted, irony-infused question, even though it can be conceivably hypothesised that the issues mentioned in the post are a source of considerable anxiety and discontent for the blogger.

The three textposts which have been thus far analysed are all characterised by the bloggers’ tendency to acknowledge their struggles and/or unhealthy behaviours while simultaneously making light of them. It is interesting to note that, once again, such a discursive strategy emphasises the divide between the outgroup and the ingroup. Indeed, an outsider, i.e., someone who does not “share the knowledge and assumptions and [...] that render the communication so natural and taken-for-granted by insiders” (Gee, 2014: 199), would generally find such remarks to be inappropriate and highly concerning. Pro-ana bloggers, however, appear to be particularly at ease within their digital community, thus feeling comfortable enough to make jokes about their conditions which would not be well-received outside this niche environment.

Finally, four remaining textposts in the September 1st sample are characterized by a discourse construction which has already been mentioned throughout this Chapter and which is yet worth looking into in more detail, and that is the practice of bloggers making resolutions as far as their eating regimens are concerned. Specifically, textposts by users ‘kmeow’, ‘sho0tingst4r’, ‘my99halloween’, and ‘get-busy-dying’ are all underpinned by said discourse construction.

“I am determined to eat less than 300 cal this week. Wish me luck” is the weekly resolution adopted by blogger ‘kmeow’. As can be garnered from the lexical choice of using the adjective “determined”, the blogger in question appears to feel strongly about the attainment of this demanding self-imposed goal. Although a calorie restriction of the magnitude proposed by the blogger is medically inadvisable and constitutes a clear health hazard, this dangerous resolution is made public without any preamble which could possibly mitigate its seriousness. Once again, a

statement which would be considered cause for concern in any other context is instead presented as entirely ordinary within the pro-ana blogosphere, thus requiring no further explanation. The only acknowledgment of the extreme nature of such a resolution can be observed in the final “wish me luck”, by means of which the blogger indeed recognises their objective as particularly strenuous, while also simultaneously seeking the support which they expect to receive from fellow community members.

User ‘sho0tingst4r’ authored the following textpost: “manifesting everyone loses 15lb this month let’s get it”. As can be seen, the blogger appears to make a community-wide resolution to lose an excessively large amount of weight⁷, i.e., 15 lbs (7 kgs), in the single month of September. No concerns are raised by the blogger about the potentially dangerous implications of such a rapid weight loss, both for their own health and for the health of other community members: this resolution is instead characterised by an overwhelmingly positive and enthusiastic semantic prosody, as can be inferred from the initial use of the term “manifesting”, which denotes “the practice of thinking aspirational thoughts with the purpose of making them real” (Vox Website, 2020), and from the final expression of collective encouragement, i.e., “let’s get it”. It is conceivable to hypothesise that the aforementioned collective resolution is particularly effective in strengthening ingroup ties, seeing as it places a sense of common responsibility on all community members.

A third example of the resolution-making practice can be found in a 97-word textpost published by blogger ‘my99halloween’ on the last day of of September:

9-30-21
Breakfast- none
Lunch- Caramel cold brew - 270
Fruit and cheese box- 350
Dinner- Vegetarian pho- 300
Exercise- 9-hour shift
Total - 920

⁷ According to the Centers for Diseases Control and Prevention, a healthy weight loss consists in losing “about 1 to 2 pounds per week” (CDC Website, 2020), for a total of maximum eight pounds per month.

I reallyyy want to eat rn.. im trying so hard not to binge. But Thursdays are super busy. I have work from 7-3:30 and then school from 6-9. So I did get a lot of exercise on my feet all day so that's something. Ive decided I am going to try to lose 3 pounds per week. So far im 121 so im on track... I just need to keep it up.

The blogger in question provides a detailed account of their day in terms of caloric intake and energy expenditure. As it has frequently been observed to be the case with pro-ana bloggers, this individual's daily dietary regimen appears to be severely lacking in nutrients and calories. The extent to which the blogger reportedly restricts their caloric intake evidently exerts a toll on their physical and mental well-being, as is confirmed by the user's own admission of struggling with the pangs of hunger: "I reallyyy want to eat rn.. im trying so hard not to binge". Interestingly, the term "to binge" is once again used in a less than objective way by a pro-ana blogger: in this case, eating more than 920 calories in response to a natural hunger reaction is perceived as a form of bingeing which is to be avoided at all costs.

Following the evaluation of the daily weight loss efforts, the blogger concludes the above textpost by setting an intention to pursue a weekly weight loss of three pounds (one kilo and a half), which, once again, is not considered a safe amount of weight to lose in such a short period of time. It is particularly interesting to parse out the metaphorical language which is used by the blogger to discuss their dietary resolutions: indeed, it appears that the pursuit of weight loss is framed in terms of what Lakoff and Johnson (2008: 95) described as the "journey metaphor". To lose weight is to be "on track", and thus to make progress towards a goal. Said progress is undoubtedly perceived as positive, as the user feels the necessity to "keep it up".

Finally, another interesting instance of resolution-making can be observed in the following 115-word textpost by user 'get-busy-dying':

TW: ED and Restriction

Please block, don't report

So, based on the advice that I got from my last post, I've decided that it's a stupid ass decision to restrict while my leg is broken because I need to heal.

BUT,

I broke my leg trying to climb into a baby swing, I'm not getting by making smart choices over here.

Please don't do what I do! I'm a certified dumb bitch.

In other news,

I'm down to 180 pounds at 5'6 (82 kilos for my metric friends)

I'm gonna work on posting an essay on trans folks and eating disorders soon because I have experience with it!

Anyways, wish me luck

Drink your water

Firstly, it should be pointed out that, based on the data provided, the blogger in question does not satisfy the physical criterion for a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa, seeing as the body mass index for a weight of 82 kilograms and a height of 167 centimetres is 29.4 kg/m^2 , a value which places this individual in the overweight category. However, as was stressed throughout Chapters One and Two, a minimal bodyweight is neither a necessary nor a sufficient criterion for a diagnosis of anorexia nervosa, due to the fact that there exists an atypical form of anorexia nervosa, wherein the individual experiences the psychological symptoms of the eating disorder, while their weight is, at least at the early stages of the illness, still “within or above the normal range” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013: 353).

As far as the resolution-making element is concerned, it is interesting to note that, as opposed to previously analysed instances of this discursive pattern, this individual publicly announces their decision not to restrict their caloric intake for the time being, so as to allow their broken leg to heal. Furthermore, the blogger appears to have made this specific choice under the guidance of fellow community members, i.e., “based on the advice that I got from my last post”. It can thus be surmised that while community members generally encourage each other to attain thinness by means of food restriction and other unhealthy behaviours, they also show acceptance and understanding towards fellow bloggers who decide not to pursue this path. Indeed, as opposed to the findings presented by Boero and Pascoe (2012), the violent opposition against those who are labelled as wannarexics for their lack of commitment to restriction appears to be completely absent in the Tumblr pro-ana community.

One last remark can be made regarding the use of a series of formulaic phrases by pro-ana bloggers. As can be observed in the post above and in previously analysed textposts, users often conclude their contributions with expressions such as “wish me luck”, “stay safe guys”, “drink your water”, and other variations on these themes. As stated by Gee (2014: 95), “we use language to build and sustain relationships of all different kinds”: in the aforementioned instances, the use of well wishes and other such endearing terms clearly highlights the bloggers’ will to strengthen ingroup connections and to reduce the social distance naturally imposed by the digital medium.

3.7. Discussion

This study was designed to provide an account of the discursive strategies and of the relative linguistic characteristics of the Tumblr pro-anorexia community through an analysis conducted by means of Corpus Linguistics methodologies and Critical Discourse Analysis tools. In reviewing the literature prior to the commencement of the present work, it appeared clear that there is widespread agreement surrounding the impossibility of providing a unitary account suitable for all pro-ana content on the Internet, given the heterogeneity of the constellation of pro-anorexia communities which have formed on the Web since the early 2000s. However, despite the peculiarities which characterise each of these digital spaces, most authors have been able to identify a number of recurring discursive patterns.

Indeed, consistently with the accounts provided by Haas et al. (2011), Boero and Pascoe (2012), and Wick and Harriger (2018), the findings of the present study confirmed that, from a quantitative perspective, most of the exchanges taking place within the Tumblr pro-anorexia blogosphere are unsurprisingly concerned with the topics of food and physical appearance. As was demonstrated by the frequency and keyword lists in Chapter Two, the majority of both the most frequent and the most salient linguistic items in the corpus at hand were found to be related to these two broad thematic areas. It was particularly interesting to notice, however, that the semantic prosody associated with terms pertaining to the topics of food and appearance was quite dichotomous in nature. Indeed, as was shown by the collocational profiles presented in Chapter Two, and as was later confirmed in

Chapter Three through a more in-depth Critical Discourse Analysis, pro-anorexia bloggers appear to associate overwhelmingly negative connotations with what they unobjectively perceive to be excessive food consumption and bodyweight, while they express markedly positive attitudes towards minimal calorie intake and excessive and dangerous weight loss.

Moreover, this dissertation has also highlighted the presence of a very specific discursive framing on the subject of exercise. Indeed, physical activity appears to be consistently viewed by the bloggers as a way of atoning for their food consumption, which is thus perceived as a sort of moral transgression. Bloggers therefore minutely detail their food intake by means of daily calorie logs, recording the number of calories ingested each day, while also calculating their exercise-induced energy expenditure and subtracting it from the daily total. This practice of keeping a daily calorie journal was observed to be quite widespread within the Tumblr pro-ana community, as can be seen from the findings expounded in Chapter Two: indeed, by removing numeric data (digits) from the stop list, it emerged that numbers were amongst the most frequent and the most salient items in the corpus, precisely on account of this daily calorie-logging practice. These findings agree with Haas et al.'s (2011) observations about the prevalence of the calorie- and exercise-logging phenomenon within pro-anorexia communities.

Furthermore, the results of this study also corroborate Haas et al.'s assertion as to the widespread presence within pro-anorexia discourse of discussions surrounding outgroup relationships with family and friends. In fact, the present work found a wealth of linguistic items, quite relevant in both saliency and frequency, pertaining to the thematic area of outgroup dynamics. In accordance with Haas et al.'s findings, the discourse constructions associated with the aforementioned linguistic items, which were particularly expounded in Chapter Three, proved that pro-anorexia bloggers display a general distrust towards outgroup individuals, who are perceived as threats to their strenuous pursuit of thinness. It was hypothesised that this peculiar discursive framing of close-tie relationships contributes to the exacerbation of the bloggers' tendency to isolate themselves not to be foiled in their attempts to maintain the ideal anorexic lifestyle.

Additionally, the present study found that members of the Tumblr pro-anorexia community frequently engage in community-building discourse, insofar as they routinely encourage each other to persevere in their pursuit of extreme thinness. Advice-seeking and advice-giving were observed to be especially recurring discursive patterns in the corpus, with much of the advice being sought and imparted concerning effective and extreme weight loss strategies, along with methods to conceal disordered eating behaviours from friends and family. It should be noted that, as far as ingroup dynamics are concerned, the findings of this study differ noticeably from Boero and Pascoe's (2012) account of a series of pro-anorexia communities, wherein the authors reported that these Internet niches were characterised by widespread aggressive discourse towards those deemed as "wannarexic". No such instances of discourse were identified in the corpus for this research: on the contrary, the bloggers' attitude towards each other was found to be characterised by genuine affection and unconditional support.

The aforementioned discrepancy could certainly be attributed to a series of fundamental differences in the research contexts in question, seeing as Boero and Pascoe's study was conducted in 2012 on the MySpace platform, whereas the present work focused on the Tumblr blogosphere in the year 2021. Indeed, in Chapter One of this study it was pointed out that Tumblr is characterised by a series of peculiarities which make it fundamentally different from other social media platforms. As remarked by Sarappo (2018), this website has come to be known as a sort of refuge for teenagers and young adults who feel the need to engage in earnest, albeit anonymous, discourse about their life experiences and their struggles. It can be hypothesised that this degree of earnestness, paired with the anonymity which characterises the Tumblr platform, generally results in a lack of performativeness and, consequently, in a lack of necessity to assert one's authenticity as a real anorexic. This hypothesis would certainly account for the absence of aggressiveness and fat-shaming (as corroborated by Wick and Harriger (2018)) within this community.

It is also worthwhile to notice that, in contrast with Stapleton et al.'s (2019) findings, the present study found no evidence of a personalisation of the eating disorder, nor did it detect any religious metaphors in the corpus at hand. It did,

however, report on the discursive evidence of the psychological impact which anorexia exerts on bloggers, who were observed to frequently express feelings of either extreme euphoria or extreme anguish over their condition. Indeed, while no personalisation of the disease was found, what emerged from the relevant data was an often-dichotomous relationship with the eating disorder and its effects: on the one hand, numerous bloggers were found to celebrate anorexia and its consequences on account of a conviction that the eating disorder is contributing to a series of improvements in their daily lives. On the other hand, it was highlighted that several bloggers express feelings of extreme emotional distress, frequently mentioning their tendency to engage in unhealthy coping behaviours such as self-harm and excessive alcohol consumption as a consequence of their struggle with the eating disorder.

CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to present a detailed account of language use within the Tumblr pro-anorexia community. The main objective of this research was to determine the peculiarities of this Internet community through the analysis of the language produced by the individuals digitally inhabiting it. Furthermore, the present study strove to parse out the instances of discourse being enacted in this digital space, so as to assess the extent to which the preoccupations and struggles of anorexic individuals are reflected in the narratives they share with fellow bloggers.

As was suggested in Chapter One of the present study, one of the most interesting aspects of the proliferation of pro-anorexia communities starting from the early 2000s has been the possibility to gain access to the narratives and sense-making strategies of anorexic individuals produced in non-medical spaces where no outsiders are present. Indeed, in the century and a half since Louis-Victor Marce's (1859) first account of anorexia nervosa, this disease has been consistently characterised as a purely individual psychopathology, solely made accessible to outsiders through medical accounts of patients undergoing treatment. Furthermore, the systematic stigmatisation of this illness has contributed to the establishment of a culture of silence surrounding anorexic individuals, which has in turn resulted in even greater difficulties in gaining insights into this condition.

However, as highlighted in Chapter One, the pro-anorexia phenomenon appears to have challenged this *status quo*, allowing anorexic individuals to interact with each other outside medical environments, in spaces where they perceive themselves to be safe enough to be uncharacteristically upfront about their struggles with the eating disorder. The spread of these communities has thus opened up the unprecedented opportunity to observe and analyse the discursive practices and the personal narratives of anorexic individuals in their most unadulterated state, thereby providing a chance to gain a better understanding of an otherwise complex and still relatively impenetrable condition.

This study has found that, generally speaking, the pro-anorexia community on the Tumblr platform is quite active, as can be inferred from the 1,228 posts published under the proana hashtag in the sole month of September 2021. Additionally, it

should be once again pointed out that this research only took into consideration text posts in English, thus excluding from the corpus collection process all contributions in any other format (i.e., pictures, videos, etc.), and in any language other than English. Therefore, the first finding to emerge from a general analysis of the corpus specifically built for the present work is that, despite the attempts at policing and censoring pro-anorexia content as per the platform's guidelines, this peculiar digital community seems to thrive relatively undisturbed. Such a finding appears to be consistent with the previous literature on the ineffectiveness of pro-ana content bans on social media, as was mentioned in Chapter One of this dissertation: indeed, in keeping with Casilli et al. (2013: 95), such attempts at repression seem to be particularly counterproductive, as bloggers are not discouraged by possible limitations, but rather they learn to “anticipate even potential restrictions by reshaping the structure of their social network”.

On a general note, the data which was analysed for the present research did not prove to be sufficiently informative to provide a precise demographic profiling of the individuals inhabiting the Tumblr pro-anorexia blogosphere. In fact, it was found that the overwhelmingly majority of users in this digital space never disclose personal information such as their real name, frequently concealing their identities behind eating disorder-related pseudonyms. This lack of disclosure was observed to also extend to the users' age, gender, and nationality. The users' tendency to be generally secretive about their personal details may be attributed to two primary factors: first, as opposed to other social media, anonymity has been found to be one of the main characteristics of the Tumblr platform (Wick & Harriger, 2018), secondly, anorexic individuals have been observed to have a strong preference for weak-tie support (Haas et al., 2011), thus opting for interactions with individuals whom they are not closely acquainted with.

Despite the lack of data concerning the bloggers' personal details, a series of hypotheses were made based on the information at hand. Indeed, a considerable number of textposts in the corpus were observed to contain mentions of family members (especially parents) and school attendance, thus making it possible to hypothesise that the majority of bloggers in the pro-anorexia Tumblr space are teenagers and young adults. Such an assumption was further corroborated by some of

the corpus analysis's findings as presented in Chapter Two, wherein it was remarked that pro-anorexia bloggers on Tumblr display a clear tendency to use diastatically-marked language such as youth jargon (e.g., IDK, LMAO, YALL, TBH, RN, NGL, OMG, which all appeared in the keyword list in Figure 4).

As for the gender and nationality of the bloggers, making hypotheses regarding these two demographic variables proved to be quite complex: although it was possible to conceive that most pro-ana bloggers are female given the statistics on the prevalence of the eating disorder among girls and women, the corpus data at hand did not provide enough evidence to overwhelmingly confirm this assumption. As for nationality, it was pointed out in Chapter One that no mentions were detected in the corpus of specific geographical locations, except for the names of two American cities. Additionally, the use of English as a *lingua franca* made it unfeasible to draw any reasonable conclusions as far as the nationality of the bloggers is concerned.

As for the discursive constructions which characterise the corpus at hand, one of the more significant findings to emerge from this study concerns the unsurprising fixation which bloggers display surrounding the topics of food and weight. Indeed, as it was possible to observe in Chapter Two, words (and numbers) pertaining to these two semantic fields were amongst both the most frequent and the most salient in the corpus. The main reason for this appears to lie in the bloggers' general tendency to obsessively monitor their food intake and any changes in their bodyweight. An interesting aspect of this general pattern is the existence of a highly specialised jargon which is consistently used by bloggers to discuss matters relative to food and weight. Obscure (at least to outgroup individuals) initialisms such as GW, UGW, CW, LW, were found to be amongst both the most frequent and the most salient words in the corpus. Furthermore, a collocational analysis of the keyword FOOD revealed the existence of an interesting discursive distinction operated by bloggers between safe and fear foods, i.e., foods whose consumption or lack of thereof is based on whether or not they are perceived to be conducive to weight gain.

An additional consideration to keep in mind with reference to the aforementioned findings is that, as was frequently highlighted in previous Chapters, bloggers seem to heavily rely on bodyweight and/or calorie consumption as indicators of their human and moral value. Indeed, by parsing out the discursive

practices surrounding discussions of eating and weight, it was found that lower weights and caloric intakes generally correspond to a higher self-esteem and more positive emotions overall. On the other hand, an increase in weight and/or a daily caloric intake deemed to be excessive were observed to be associated with extremely negative evaluations of oneself, sometimes resulting in statements containing indications of possible self-harm or suicidal ideation. As a final remark surrounding this subject, it should be pointed out that bloggers' evaluation of their weight and caloric intake were consistently found to be less than objective, as they frequently refer to extremely low weights and/or caloric intakes as excessive.

Other major findings concern the ingroup dynamics within the platform's pro-anorexia community. It was especially interesting to observe that no textposts in the corpus were found to be characterised by violence and aggression directed at fellow community members. The lack of these dynamics runs counter to the portrayal of pro-ana communities proposed by Boero and Pascoe (2012), who suggested that aggression is one of the mainstays of many of pro-anorexia spaces. The discrepancy between the findings from the present work and those expounded by Boero and Pascoe could be conceivably attributed to the impossibility of relying on a single set of descriptors for all pro-ana communities. Indeed, as was stressed throughout Chapter One of this dissertation, these Internet niches cannot and should not be considered as a monolith, notwithstanding the numerous characteristics they frequently share.

It is interesting to note that the figure of the wannarexic, which was presented by Boero and Pascoe as the main target of violence and aggression in the pro-ana communities they analysed, was not detected in the corpus at hand. Moreover, pro-anorexia bloggers on this platform appeared to be remarkably upfront about their weight, seeing as several of them authored textposts wherein they candidly acknowledged being a normal weight or even overweight. This level of openness surrounding their bodyweight clearly denotes a lack of stigmatisation in the community surrounding anorexic individuals who do not necessarily display the main physical symptom of the eating disorder, i.e., a weight that is lower than normal. Indeed, all bloggers on the platform were found to be quite comfortable in disclosing details of their struggle with the eating disorder, including those who, as

per the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 353), may be classified as suffering from “atypical anorexia”, i.e., the condition wherein individuals do not display the physical symptoms of the illness (e.g., first and foremost, extreme weight loss), while still experiencing its psychological effects.

As far as ingroup dynamics are concerned, it should be noted that not only do bloggers not display aggressive behaviours towards each other, but they were also found to routinely engage in community-strengthening practices such as advice-seeking, advice-giving, and the use of frequent formulaic expressions denoting affection towards each other. The advice-seeking/giving practices on the platform were observed to revolve around topics such as weight loss and food restriction, as expected, but also, more surprisingly, around matters which do not necessarily pertain to the eating disorder, i.e., daily life and relationships, which highlights the degree of familiarity which characterises the bloggers’ interactions with each other. Formulaic expressions frequently used at the end of textposts, such as “stay safe” or “drink your water”, further support the idea of the pro-ana space as a safe haven where individuals take refuge from the stigma they otherwise face in daily life. Once again, these displays of affection run counter to Boero and Pascoe’s characterisation of pro-anorexia spaces as inherently aggression-ridden.

Conversely, other significant findings to emerge from this study concern the bloggers’ relationship with outgroup individuals, i.e., with those who do not partake in their experiences with the eating disorder. As it was possible to observe by means of both frequency and keyword lists, relatives and friends alike are often mentioned in the bloggers’ posts. Furthermore, by relying on the study of collocates, and on Critical Discourse Analysis, it was noted that mentions of outgroup individuals are routinely imbued with primarily negative connotations. Indeed, family members and friends appear to be consistently framed by bloggers as hindrances to their commitment to the eating disorder: from buying food which is deemed as fear food, to expressing concern about the bloggers’ eating habits, outsiders are discursively represented as constantly inconveniencing ingroup individuals.

This study found that a consequence of the aforementioned discursive framing of outgroup individuals is that bloggers frequently express their desire to distance themselves from their real-life close-tie relationships, so as to be as free as possible

in their commitment to their eating disorder. Furthermore, it was conceivable to hypothesise that the bloggers' tendency to isolate themselves, which, as stated by the American Psychiatric Association (2013: 343), is a characteristic often displayed by anorexic individuals, is exacerbated by their belonging to this digital community. Indeed, by forming pseudo-social relationships with fellow community members who are perceived as understanding of their condition, anorexic individuals appear to feel less isolated, and thus less likely to seek support and reassurance from real-life acquaintances.

An obvious implication of the aforementioned findings is the unprecedented possibility for medical professionals to gain further insights into the dynamics of anorexia nervosa outside the confines of a medical environment. Indeed, as it was emphasised throughout the present work, the spread of anorexia nervosa is a relatively modern phenomenon, and although a considerable amount of medical literature has been published about it in the past few decades, many aspects of this pathology remain obscure and unclear. It is conceivable to posit that the stigma and secrecy which characterise this disease and those affected by it represent a great obstacle to the progress in the understanding and treatment of anorexia. In this sense, the study of pro-ana communities can be of vital importance, as it represents an unprecedented opportunity to gain authentic insights into the narratives which anorexic individuals construct for themselves as they weather their disease.

Furthermore, the study of pro-ana communities and their language does not only serve the purpose of acquiring further knowledge about anorexia nervosa as a pathology, but it also enables policy makers to intervene effectively in order to prevent the spread of the pro-anorexia phenomenon itself. Indeed, as it was mentioned on numerous occasions throughout the present work, censorship has been the most common response adopted by policy makers with regards to the concerning rise of pro-ana communities. Said response, however, has been shown to be at best highly ineffective in preventing the spread of these communities, and at worst, it has actually contributed to their strengthening. As was suggested at the end of Chapter One, a better and potentially more effective approach to dealing with these internet communities would be through the application of NLP techniques which, although still in their infancy, have shown promising results when used on other social media

platforms. However, for Natural Language Processing techniques to be effective, models need to be trained on language that is used by actual anorexic individuals: in this sense, pro-anorexia communities offer a wealth of data which can be fed to these machines in order to train them.

However, as was mentioned in Chapter One, one caveat which should be considered with reference to possible NLP applications in this context is that ethical concerns have been raised about the use of social media data for online mental health screening and intervention. Indeed, the identification of people in need of mental health support entails an inevitable breach of their privacy, which would become even more severe if information about a user's mental health struggles were to be disclosed to third parties. Disclosure in fact poses an important challenge to the NLP perspective on mental health: while it would be quite fruitless to stop at mere online identification of people struggling with mental health issues such as eating disorders without providing them with any further form of assistance, it is also difficult to decide what to do once potential risk factors have been singled out. Notwithstanding these ethical and logistical limitations of the NLP approach to mental health management, it is clear that computational techniques would still be more beneficial to curtail the pro-ana phenomenon than the current content moderation system employed by platforms such as Tumblr.

It should be pointed out that the present study and its results are somewhat limited. Firstly, owing to practical constraints, the corpus on which this research was conducted only contains textposts published in the month of September on the Tumblr platform. However, the pro-anorexia phenomenon has been shown to exist in numerous different formats on equally numerous different platforms. Indeed, its characteristics may vary depending on the platform on which a pro-ana community takes root: for example, as was mentioned in Chapter One, the pro-anorexia phenomenon on Instagram and other such websites has been found to be, unsurprisingly, much more visual than discursive in its nature.

Secondly, another limitation of this study lies in the fact that only textposts published in the English language were taken into consideration for the present analysis. Although it appeared clear during the corpus building phase that, at least as far as the Tumblr platform is concerned, the majority of pro-anorexia content is

published in English, the fact that this phenomenon also exists in the non-English-speaking blogosphere should not be overlooked. Indeed, it is conceivable to posit that non-English-speaking pro-ana activity may also be characterised by different linguistic patterns and discursive strategies than the ones which were enucleated throughout this research.

The aforementioned limitations highlight the need to conduct further research into the pro-anorexia phenomenon on a larger scale. Future studies should investigate the characteristics of this community on other social media platforms, with a special focus on currently popular social networks such as Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok. Indeed, in light of the nature of the eating disorder itself, which leads the individual to place a great deal of importance on their appearance, an assessment should be conducted of the characteristics of the pro-ana community on these image-/appearance-based social media. A study of this phenomenon on the aforementioned platforms would doubtlessly be interesting, insofar as it would require researchers to take a multimodal approach to the research data, due to the extremely complex level of integration between text and image which these websites revolve around.

On a final note, a future study investigating the characteristics of non-English pro-anorexia discourse would be quite interesting. Particular attention should be paid to undertaking research surrounding the pro-ana phenomenon in non-Western-centric digital spaces. Indeed, as it was emphasised throughout this research, although anorexia nervosa has often been regarded as a predominantly Western phenomenon, research has shown that this disease has been on the rise on a global scale. Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate whether a non-Western counterpart to the digital pro-anorexia phenomenon does in fact exist, and if so, to uncover which discourse constructions inform its nature. If the research on the pro-anorexia phenomenon and on anorexia nervosa itself is to be moved forward, it is indeed imperative to take a cross-cultural approach to the understanding of the disease and its dynamics.

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