Online violence: Not beautiful enough… not thin enough. Anorectic testimonials in the web

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ABSTRACT

Pro-anorexia is a social and harmful movement on the Web. These Websites are popular among youth who wish to be thinner, because they represent neutral and free judgemental spaces, where one can find support, express their feelings and thoughts around the disturbing anorexic lifestyle. Considering this, during the literature review concerning risky and easily available contents on the Internet, the need arose for an in depth study of pro-anorexia websites, once they appeal to extremely dangerous behaviours and beauty standards that can endanger children's[1] well-being.

This qualitative exploratory content analysis examined Portuguese speaking blogs written by adolescents (boys and girls) between 13 and 19 years old, who use the Web in order to meet like-minded peers, with whom they share diets, tips, tricks, thinspiration material, and dangerous and harmful information about fasting, drugs, self-harm or suicide. The pro-anorexia Weblogs work as a stimulus for starvation and weight loss among youth who share pro-anorexic goals.

Although data cannot be generalized, evidence suggests that these blogs can have undesired and negative effects in young children because they contribute to: i) the increasing of risky contents on the Web; ii) the encouragement of disruptive eating behaviours; iii) the maintenance of a already existing eating disordered behaviour; iv) children's alienation from offline social ties; v) the growth of these communities among young children. With this article we aim to raise awareness about this problem and its impact among children. Nevertheless, further research is needed and should extend to more Portuguese children and male bloggers.

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1. Introduction

Generally speaking, anorexia and bulimia result from obsessive concerns about weight and body image that in turn lead into dangerous yo-yo diets of starving to death followed by binge eating habits that result in harmful cyclical routines of weight loss

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[1] As it is defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

and weight gain. These eating disorders (anorexia and bulimia) are risky and dangerous behaviours that can result in serious psychiatric problems, such as depression, anxiety, cutting, suicidal behaviour and/or drug (ab)use, if not identified and treated in time. Synthetizing, anorexia nervosa is a dangerous disease because i) it is debilitating (Bulik, Reba, Siega-Riz, & Reichborn-Kjennerud, 2005); ii) difficult to treat and iii) "it has the highest mortality rate of all the psychiatric illnesses" (Gremillion, 2003, p. 3); iv) it has biological, psychological and social consequences (Bulik et al., 2005). "Bulimia Nervosa is characterized by repeated episodes of binge eating followed by inappropriate compensatory behaviors such as self-induced vomiting; misuse of laxatives, diuretics, or other medications; fasting; or excessive exercise" (APA, 1994).

Eating Disorders (ED) are no longer considered a white, young and upper class women's disease. Experts believe that ED have a multifactorial origin (Derenne & Beresin, 2006). Based on their research and the data supported by other authors, Williams[2] (2009) and Derenne & Beresin[3] (2006) state that findings suggest that not only cases of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa are increasing, but they are also spreading to other fringes of society such as: i) men, ii) increasingly younger children (eight, nine years old), iii) lower classes, iv) older women, v) other ethnicities and races.

More recently, the integration of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in daily life allowed young consumers to easily and freely access to potentially disruptive, threatening and harmful contents on the Internet. In fact, "the range of content that is of potential concern is vast, including pornography, racist material, violent and gruesome content, self-harm sites (including pro-anorexia and pro-suicide sites) commercially exploitative material and more" (Wold, Aristodemou, Dunkels, & Laouris, 2009, p. 135). Not only it is easier to find contents, but also the democratization of ICT among youth, in particular the Internet, has contributed for the mass consumption, production, dissemination and proliferation of unregulated contents, such as the ones that promote eating disorders, also known on the Web as 'pro-ana' and 'pro-mia' informative material, topics we will address below.

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[2] American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2000; Brumberg, 2000; Simpson, 2002; Rosen, 2003; van Hoeken, Seidell & Hoek, 2005; Bordo, 1999; Soban, 2006; McClelland & Crisp, 2001; Kally & Cumella,2008; cited in Williams, 2009.
[3] Hill, Draper, Stack, 1994; Borzekowski & Bayer, 2005; Brau, Sunday, Huang, et al., 1999; Field, Carmargo,Taylor, et al. 2001; cited in Derenne & Beresin, 2006.

Firstly, it is important to clarify that there is a clear distinction between 'Ana' (short for anorexia) and anorexia (Giles, 2006). 'Ana' is a lifestyle choice (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Davies & Lipsey, 2003; Giles, 2006; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006), grounded on anorexic behaviours (Williams, 2009) that result in "an effective way to diet" (Overbeke, 2008, p. 56) and lose weight. Anorexia, on the other hand, refers to a medical condition (Giles, 2006) diagnosed as a mental illness (APA, 1994).

Secondly, according to Fox, Ward & O'Rourke (2005) 'pro-anorexia' is a social movement that finds expression in the Internet through online Web sites, and its purpose is to honour an anorexic lifestyle as a mean to achieve extremely thin bodies. And this is the reason why 'pro-anorexia' is not listed as a disease (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Whitehead, 2010), because being 'pro-ana' is a choice that people control and not a disease that controls them.

Thirdly, the main audience of these Web pro-anorexia promoting contents are i) ED sufferers who use these spaces to get acquainted with those who understand their suffering; and ii) 'wanarexics', "persons with disordered eating attitudes, but not clinically diagnosable as Eating Disorder (ED) sufferers" (Casili, Tubaro, & Araya, 2012, para.1) "who use the[se] sites as an extreme way of dieting, rather than because of any eating disorder psychopathology" (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Uca, 2004, cited in Williams, 2009)[4], and as a way to cope with problems that are difficult to face (Fox et al., 2005).

Thus, the 'pro-ana' movement is a good example of a social phenomenon that was born with the Internet age (Giles, 2006). And, despite the efforts to censor and remove them, these websites became popular because they offer specific information, enable communication without geographical constraints, and provide a safe sense of community and belonging. As most of the pro-anorexic individuals feel the lack of offline support from health professionals, family or friends, these virtual communities seem to gain importance in their lives, representing for them a safe harbour where no longer they feel the need to hide and where they feel understood and supported. Acting as a sanctuary (Dias, 2003; Giles, 2006; Ward, 2007; Williams, 2009), these virtual communities represent a neutral and free judgemental space (Brotsky & Giles,

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[4] For further reading: Mulveen, R. & Hepworth, J. (2006). An interpretative phenomenological analysis of participation in a pro-anorexia Internet site and its relationship with disordered eating. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11(2),* 283-296. Uca, E. R. (2004). Ana's girls: The essential guide to the underground community online. Authorhouse: USA.

2007; Dias, 2003; Williams, 2009), a safe environment where users can express their feelings (Wold et al., 2009) thoughts and, even, socially unacceptable behaviours (Williams, 2009).

To understand the success of these communities in the Web we also have to take into account that adolescence is a phase of physical, psychological and personality complex changes, during which some life experiences can cause anxiety and even lack of confidence or self-esteem. And when it comes to issues related to standards of beauty and body image fitting in is, without question, an important concern for children. According to Tiggemann, Gardner and Slater "the majority of adolescent girls wish to be thinner" (2000, p. 645), and possibly driven by weight goals, two thirds of adolescent girls search online for information about how to loose weight and eating disorders. Regarding this, evidence suggests that of these, 13% engage in binge eating and purging behaviours (Wilson, Peebles, Hardy, & Litt, 2006) and "many engage in dieting and other weight loss behaviours" (Tiggemann et al., 2000, p. 645).

To sum up, there is enough evidence to trigger our concern about pro-anorexia as a harmful movement (Overbeke, 2008), and also a growing example of a social Web phenomenon unlikely to disappear (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). Moreover, literature points out that "[a]s youth become progressively "Web-savvy," adolescent-developed Web sites that promote anorexia and bulimia are increasingly prevalent" (Wilson, 2006, p.6) and that these websites "provide high-levels of social support for an anti-medical explanatory model that would decrease recovery rates and potentially lead to the death or injury of its participants" (Bell, 2007, p. 449).

Therefore, taking into consideration that i) pro-anorexia Weblogs are easily and publicly available to children on the internet; ii) these blogs not only promote pro-anorexia but also disclose risky and dangerous information about self-inflicted aggressive practices; iii) according to findings from EU KIDS ONLINE project, children can take an active role in the search, production and dissemination of harmful contents; iv) the reception of undesirable content is a major concern for parents (Ponte, Jorge, Simões, & Cardoso, 2012); in the course of our doctoral research, the need for an in depth study of these contents arises once they provide easy access to potentially harmful and risky information.

The present work is part of a doctoral investigation on the disturbing and emerging phenomenon of online violence[5] perpetrated by, with and among children in online

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[5] Online violence is a new and worrying phenomenon that has impacts in the wellbeing of children and their families. Clarifying, in the framework of our research by "online violence" we mean the use of digital devices or Internet to actively engage in physical, verbal, psychological or emotional aggression, that being

environments. The interconnected digital environments, used by children to express their inner selves, search for information, mingle, quarrel, hangout and meet old and new friends, has complex venues and challenging characteristics that concern society, parents, educators and scientists. In order to categorise the risks associated to the use of ICT, the research project EU Kids Online considers that children are encountering online risks regarding to i) content, ii) contact and iii) conduct. Therefore, the aim of our research is to study online episodes of violence arising from these three types of risks connected to the misuse of digital technologies (mobile or not) and the Internet, where children can have a passive or an active role (or both).

The need to conduct this exploratory study arose during the review of literature about pro-ana risky contents easy accessible on the Internet. Thereby, this work is the result of the first part of an exploratory investigation that aims to deepen and study cases of deliberate and sustained violence that endanger the well-being of children, such is the case of pro-anorexia Weblogs while they can be seriously damaging for children who read and/or write those contents, and their families, friends as well as young users it may influence in the future.

The aim of this paper is to analyse Portuguese written pro-anorexia blogs and systematize and categorize their characteristics, content and messages in order to better understand the dynamics of these virtual spaces and why they are so popular among children. To this end, firstly we made an explanation of the purpose and importance of this study and how it fits into the overall theme of our doctoral research. Secondly, we make a brief description of the methodological and ethical choices of this exploratory work. Finally, in order to get an in-depth understanding of the experience of the individuals (Eysenbach & Wyatt, 2002) we present a descriptive and interpretive analysis, followed by the discussion and interpretation of the data collected from the empirical corpus.

2. Method

For several months we have analysed and studied eleven[6] Portuguese speaking blogs (5 from Portugal, and 6 from Brazil) written by teenagers (9 girls and 2 boys), between 13 and 19 years old. Individuals in our sample use the Weblogs as a space

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repeated can lead to serious physical or psychological self-harm or deliberately and intentionally cause harm to another human being.

[6] To date two (of the eleven) weblogs have been removed.

where they i) feel safe to write about their physical insecurities, dreams and goals; ii) meet like-minded peers, and develop real close virtual friendships; iii) search for support and encouragement for maintaining an unhealthy and deadly lifestyle in order to achieve the 'pro-ana' perfection.

In the beginning of this study, during the literature review process, we made a random research on Google using words like "thinspiration", "pro-ana", "ana prayer", and "thin is beautiful". The number of results obtained for each keyword was incredibly astonishing.

Exploring the results of Google searches, one particular blog caught our attention. It was a public blog written by a Portuguese speaking adolescent boy whose posts and comments we read attentively. Then, we followed the digital track of his followers, and followers of followers. During this process, more blogs were selected and studied. Our sample became a small network of eleven interconnected blogs (see Figure 1 below). During our research we established some criteria to select the blogs we intended to analyse: i) be a Portuguese written blog; ii) fit in a youth target age group; iii) the blog must be active; iv) have enough and significant content to analyse; v) being publicly available (without the need for subscription or a registration to access the information).
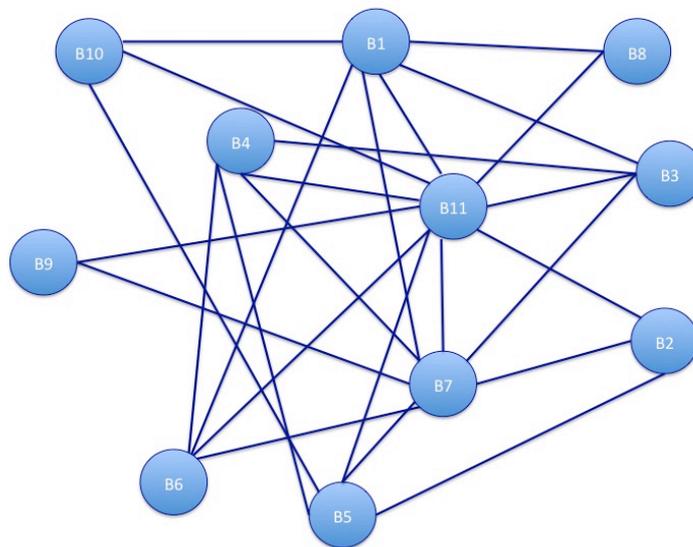

Figure 1. Our blogs network sample (B1 = Blog1 to B11= Blog11).

For each blog we made notes and collected data using print screens, that we then gathered into eleven numbered and encrypted folders[7]. In order to test and deepen theory and gain a better understanding of the pro-anorexic in Portuguese written context, in this exploratory study we used a qualitative content approach to analyse the messages written in the Weblogs.

Because at first we were not aware of what we were going to find in the field, during this exploratory empirical research, we felt the need to safeguard some ethical decisions, which we will explain next.

We agree with Eysenbach & Wyatt (2002) that the Internet is a valuable repository for social scientists without the experimental constraints of the traditional research, because it offers to the researcher new possibilities and the resources to study groups difficult to access (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002), as is the case of the pro-anorexia communities. Interestingly, children and adolescents perceive the concepts "public" and "private" differently from adults. From Stern's experience, "teens think of their communication as "private," when the people they know in real life (e.g., parents, friends, teachers, etc.) do not see, hear or read it, regardless of who else does" (2004, p. 4). But because this is not a peaceful, or linear distinction, we had to make some decisions.

Our first concern was to know the extent to which the data, despite being public available, was public or private. Brownlow and O'Dell (2002), argue that privacy doesn't present itself an ethical problem if i) the data collection job is limited to collecting and analysing the contents of day-to-day conversation; and ii) the researcher plays the role of a silent member and does not request additional information for the investigation. We've found several researchers who did observed and analysed pro-ana Web communities without requesting informed consent to gather and analyse the publicly available data (e.g. Dias, 2003; Giles, 2006; Laksmana, 2002; Lyons, Mehl, & Pennebaker, 2006; Walstrom, 2000). Adding to this, we also had to keep in mind that pro-ana and pro-mia blogs work, so to speak, in a marginal path. And the bloggers try to prevent being recognized in the Web by their parents, siblings, other relatives, friends or classmates, so they disguise their identity, using a nickname[8]. Therefore, unless our goal was to dismantle the community that arose around the blogs, we did not ask for parental consent, or the bloggers consent. First, because, in our defence,

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[7] For several reasons, sometimes these blogs are shut down, and it was important for us to gather the data so we could analyse carefully the content and information of each blog.
[8] Despite these precautions, from time to time, they became more careless and revealed information that could disclose their identity, like names, personal contacts and pictures.

the interest in becoming familiar with the phenomenon is purely scientific; the request would be made via the Internet and could lead to undesired noise in the communication; our intentions could be misinterpreted; ultimately, this could influence the activity of the blog; the patterns of communication between the bloggers, and consequently compromise the results. Regarding this, only public blogs were studied.

Considering i) that the Internet hides traps that can easily violate the privacy of individuals (Eysenbach & Till, 2001); ii) the particularities and vulnerabilities of the target group of our analysis; iii) the sensitivity of the issues addressed; iv) that our major concern are the individuals, we made some decisions to protect the safety of the bloggers. For this purpose i) bloggers real identity and nicknames we'll be kept in secrecy; ii) the URL addresses will remain undisclosed; iii) we won't disclose names (or nicknames), personal photographs, personal information or other material capable of identifying these individuals using a research engine; iv) we will avoid a complete verbatim transcript of opinions or excerpts that can be easily found in a search engine; v) a code has been assigned for each blog (from B1 to B11).

Moreover, according to Eysenbach & Till (2001), there is evidence that more careless researchers may be perceived as intruders and consequently damage communities. In the observed blogs, we read some public messages left by scientists interested in studying these blogs. None of the bloggers answered or commented those requests (at least, publicly). This supported our choice for using a passive observation with no intervention or interaction with the users. This technique gave an important and reliable perspective to our research, and allowed us to i) access the authentic and spontaneous environment of the blogs (without planning or programming); ii) become acquainted with the pro-ana individual reality; iii) its terminology; and iv) day-to-day life routines and moods of a person with ED behaviours.

From the researcher's point of view it is important to add that, because these are highly psychologically and emotionally complex environments, from time to time, the need arose to interspace the observation task with other tasks in order to ensure an open and detached research.

3. Results

3.1 Common features and contents found in the Portuguese written Weblogs

Supporting the literature, our provisional findings suggest that there are common topics in all weblogs. In this exploratory research we've found shared features and contents such as i) information about anorexia, diets, physical exercises, need for anorexia, cutting and drug information, medical experiences with doctors and treatments; ii) support, solidarity and warning comments; iii) statements expressing feelings of frustration, depression, conflict with parents, suicide thoughts, cutting and drug information; iv) thinspiration material (e.g. quotes, music, videos and photographs of extraordinarily thin women/men, particularly models and celebrities[9] [some of them suffer from ED or died from it], TV miniseries and shows[10]) that work as a stimulus for starving and weight loss; v) tips to lose weight and throw up; tricks to hide the loss of weight from family; ways to deceive parents and friends from controlling what/when they eat; vi) personal information[11] (despite efforts to protect their real identity); vii) more rarely, a notice or disclaimer before entering the website; viii) commitment to follow harsh diets together ('No Food Collective'; 'challenges'[12]); ix) reporting feeling their parents control when using the Internet; x) widgets (hit counter, body mass index - BMI, ideal weight and fat percentage calculators, poll questions); xi) 'stamps' (virtual gifts – jpeg or gif – exchanged inside the community used as a sign of friendship and support; xii) 'pro-ana' terminology used to reinforce the sense of community.

Table 1 shows some of the features and contents that we've found in those blogs. For each blog we have assigned a code (B1 to B11). The blue shaded columns represent the boys, and the pink columns represent the girls.

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[9] Such as the twins Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, Kate Moss, Keira Knightley, Megan Fox, Lindsay Lohan, Taylor Momsen (Gossip Girl), Miranda Kerr, Taylor Swift, Amy Winehouse (†), Nicole Richie or Paris Hilton, Jeremy Gillitzer(†), Avril Lavigne, Nina (character from Black Swan).

[10] Such as 'Skins', 'America's Next Top Model', 'Gossip Girl'.

[11] During our research, of the eleven blogs studied, only two teenagers did not publish personal photographs. Nine users published personal photographs on their blogs. Seven published photographs of face and body (from these seven, two sometimes remove the photos after a while being published, and one always removes them afterwards). Two of them only publish body pictures. The photographs are published i) as evidence of weight lost; ii) to obtain peer approval; iii) as inspiration for other 'pro-anas'.

[12] The 'challenge' is a competition organized by a blogger who establishes the rules for those who whish to follow a harsh programmed diet for a period of time (a few days to a few weeks). These challenges are advertised in the blogs and are very popular in these communities. Some new bloggers use these challenges to make friends or to gain followers. Who wants to participate is obliged to comply with rules that dictate the diet for that challenge. The winner is the participant who has reached (or closest to) the weight value set on his/her goal. Who does not comply with the rules is disqualified. Frequently, the challenges come before an important date or a festive season such as Christmas, holidays or birthdays.

Examples of contents found in the Portuguese written Weblogs	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	B7	B8	B9	B10	B11
Thinspiration (quotes)	•		•	•	•	•	•		•		•
Thinspiration (video/audio)	•		•	•	•	•	•		•		•
Thinspiration (pictures)	•		•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•
Sharing Tips and Tricks	•		•		•		•		•	•	•
Participation in Challenges	•	•	•	•	•		•		•		•
Diet sharing	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•	•	•
Practice of NFC *No food collective		•				•		•	•	•	
Changed the blog URL			•	•		•					
Report feeling parental control in Internet use	•			•		•					
Write about Cutting/punishment practices	•	•	•	•	•	•		•	•	•	•

Table 1. A sample of contents found in the Portuguese written blogs

The data in Table 1 shows that diets, thinspiration material, information about cutting and self-punishments are common contents in almost every blogs. Eight bloggers have already participated in, at least, one challenge. Least common is the practice of 'no food collective' (engage in fasting practices with other blogger). Only three bloggers mentioned feeling that their parents control their use of the Internet, and three changed the blog URL. Interestingly, two of the three who claim feeling parental control on the Web, have changed the blog URL, probably because their parents found out about their blog activity.

3.2. Emotional moods expressed by anorectic bloggers in the Web and the support of their followers

In these Weblogs we were able to read highly intimate, emotional and shocking posts. The testimonials express feelings of profound sadness, pain, loneliness, and even sometimes death wish. Some translated excerpts in Table 2 below, help us to illustrate emotional moods we frequently found in their discourses.

The column in the centre contains the transcription. For each phrase we have identified the feelings associated (column on the left), and the column on the right identifies the blog from which we took the example.

Emotional moods	Examples (*our translation*)	Blog
Fragility Conflict	"I am weak. I cannot stand this... I want to disappear... Nobody understands my pain…"	B9

Misunderstanding Suffering Loneliness		
Conflict Suffering Death wish	"I know I'm killing myself but remaining fat is worse than dying"	B3
Conflict Suffering	"I feel disgusted with myself"	B9
Conflict	"(…) my mother is keeping a close eye on me"	B9
Friendship Trust Belonging Support	"Here I have friends in whom I can trust, and learn who help me a lot"	B2
Friendship Understanding Support	"You are very important to me (...) understood me when nobody did (...) gave me strength (...) when I could not stop crying (...)"	B9
Cutting Relief	"I feel like cutting again (...) When I think of the relief that a cut provides…"	B9
Cutting Punishment	"I cut myself yesterday for being overeating (...)"	B1

Table 2. Examples of emotional moods found in the Portuguese written blogs

This exercise enabled us to find interesting relations between their emotional moods and the topics they write about: they express negative moods about their self-image and positive moods when referring to the pro-ana friends and community. They seem to express more ambivalent feelings when they write about cutting practices.

In the testimonials above, youngsters expose their weaknesses and seek the emotional support, advices, and empathy of their followers. To those posts the faithful readers respond with supportive, solidarity, friendship and encouragement messages.

Examples of support, solidarity, friendship and encouragement messages from the followers (our translation):

"Gorgeous, don't be sad…"

"All the best to you (…)"

"Do not be discouraged friend"

"Glad you're back"

"I'm following you"

3.3. Cutting, Self-punishment practices and death wish

Issues like cutting, self-punishment or death are common and sometimes get an obsessive tone in these blogs. Cutting is a dangerous and hurting practice that seems to give them calm (see Table 2). Self-punishment works as a sanction when they fail to meet the desired goals or fall into temptation eating more than they allow themselves to eat. Throughout the readings, we get the impression that these young people have a religious fundamentalist relation with starvation and death, in which death is always described as better than failing or not achieving their goals. Aware of the dangers that their life choices entail, they face them (death in particular) as a necessary evil.

Therefore, about self-harm, suicide attempt or punishments in the blogs we can find i) information about cutting, how to hide it (e.g. sweaters with long sleeves, bracelets), less visible places of the body to cut (e.g. belly, legs, wrists, ankles), how many times they cut themselves; ii) photographs that prove the cuts; iii) suicidal thoughts and/or episodes of attempted suicide (e.g. using pills).

During our observation, none of these episodes ended tragically[13], but self-harm is a regular practice in nine of the eleven weblogs. In eleven blogs, six describe suicide attempts and two reveal their thoughts about death wish. To posts related to these issues, the followers show empathy with the blogger and concern with his/her life or health status, but they also give advice and admonitions in these self-mutilation issues.

Examples of advice and admonition messages from the followers (our translation):

"Please do not cut ..."

"Think of the friends who support you"

"Me and I. (name) we had no choice but you have! (...)"

3.4 Living with pro-ana, an ambivalent relationship

Maintaining the pro-ana lifestyle is a physical, psychological and emotional fight against ambivalent feelings that haunt them. 'Ana' represents the friend, the enemy, sometimes both. A fight they must undertake if they want their lives to change (they don't explain what this 'change' really means) despite how it can dangerously affect their well-being.

Examples of ambivalent feelings concerning to 'Ana' (our translation):

"I want to be friends with Ana and Mia. They may be the friends that can change my life (...) "(B9)

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[13] In fact, there was one tragic episode that some bloggers wrote about, but after few days they found out that it was a prank. We were unable to ascertain the reasons, but some wrote about it. They seemed quite sure that it was a prank from someone who illegally entered the community pretending to be anorexic.

"I know that Ana is not a toy (...) I only use to achieve a goal (...) Ana is more than a person is part of me" (B2)

[About 'Ana'] "A friend, perhaps enemy. I do not know exactly (...) I cannot live without her. "(B2)

4. Provisional Findings

Ana and Mia are like pet names (Gradim, 2009) used as short names for 'anorexia' and 'bulimia'. This personification gives identity and subjectivity to the ED (Ward, 2007). 'Ana' and 'Mia' personify two 'frienemies'[14], friends and enemies alternately or simultaneously (Williams, 2009). 'Ana' symbolizes the power, control and perfection, the beauty and a wisdom ideal (Williams, 2009). After the binging, 'Mia' is the one that helps the body purifying by throwing up the excesses and putting them back on the path of 'Ana'. This is an ambivalent, complex and risky relationship reinforced by an inner voice that constantly reminds individuals of their weaknesses and inability to prosecute the high and impossible standards of 'Ana' (Ward, 2007). And as more the individuals try to control what they eat and weigh, the more they feel the lack of control. But according to the 'pro-ana' followers, overcoming these fights and physical and emotional pains prove their commitment to 'Ana'.

On the other hand, the lack of social support in the offline environment may explain why they pursue for support on the Web and why they publish these highly emotional and shocking posts about their daily lives and their obsession with 'Ana'.

Also we have to consider that peer, social and media pressures play an important role during adolescence. These influences are represented in the music they hear, the slang they use to communicate, clothes they wear, their hairstyles, or even engaging in risky behaviours. We believe that this kind of pressure have extraordinary influence in children ["this is the law of our society" (B1)] and may trigger risky eating behaviours of this nature. For many adolescents dealing with internal or external conflicts, anorexia and bulimia may be the way to take control of their life. And, although, aware that anorexia "can kill" (B1), they do not hesitate to embrace "the risks and everything" (B2) that involves this lifestyle in favour of a "new beginning" (B9).

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[14] "A "toxic" person who poses as a friend but subconsciously or consciously wishes you harm." (http://www.urbandictionary.com/)

Going through the blogs, some incidents can point us possible causes that may have triggered these behaviours, such as, i) bullying, ii) the 'nobody likes me' feeling, iii) the desire of being a fashion model, iv) obsessive-compulsive disorder (diagnosed in one case), v) depression, vi) social pressures with weight, vii) not accepting the body growth turning into an adult body.

Juarascio et al. (2010) explain that individuals suffering from ED have more difficulty in the establishment of social ties, because they avoid social mingling especially if food is involved, and normally they suffer from depression, emotional confusion, anxiety, obsessions, shyness, lack of social support in the offline world. This may explain why they search for support in the Web and why they find it a safe environment where they can act natural and express themselves. We have noticed that most often the ED acts more as an excuse to address discussions about control, strength, perfection (Overbeke, 2008) or lack of it, but also problems with parents, siblings, boyfriends/girlfriends, friends and school. They express feelings of misunderstanding, frustration, depression, loneliness, insecurity, and the ambivalence they feel regarding to anorexia lifestyle and the reasons may have triggered this kind of behaviour. And to these shocking testimonies of deep sadness, pain, loneliness, and in some cases the will to die, the followers respond with messages of acceptance, support, solidarity, friendship and encouragement. But if, at first, these online communities seem to fulfil a certain affective and social misfit that exists in vulnerable young people, giving them the emotional support and a sense of security, intimacy and understanding that helps them dealing with those external pressures, in the course of time they contribute for maintaining unhealthy habits that make them feel more and more depressed and sick.

As their posts become more disturbed, more frequently they write about issues like cutting or death. These are clearly desperate pleas for help that reflect unbearable emotional pains. Cutting usually is described as a practice that provides them with a sense of relief and calmness. The other bloggers understand why they cut, because most of the times they do (or did) it as well, but they don't express support for those actions. The cuts are made in easily hidden parts of the body (with clothing or bracelets), such as the legs, stomach, ankles and wrists. One of these individuals uses deprivation (of things that one loves) with the same goals, when frustrated or feeling depressed. Two individuals also use intensively working out despite the physical pain or abstaining of things, like for example watching television, as self-punishment.

In this exploratory study although data can not be generalized, evidence suggests that these blogs can play an undesired negative role in: i) the proliferation of easy

available risky contents - "I started researching on the internet about diets and found a blog pro ana and mia (...) after that I created the blog and entered this world" (B9); ii) encouraging to fast or food disruptive behaviours - "(...) holiday means that I'll have more time to search the internet and make my [diet] plans "(B9);", iii) the maintenance of a already existing disorder - "I will delete the blog, is making me ill" (B8), iv) promoting alienation from offline social ties - "this is my little world (...) is all I have."(B2); v) consequently extending the community to new members – "I'm writing this blog to know more people like me!" (B3).

According to Giedd (2012), "the three most robust adolescent behavioural changes are (1) increased risk taking, (2) increased sensation seeking, and (3) a move away from parent toward greater peer affiliation" (2012, p. 101). Pondering this, it is important to add that parents and teachers have an important role throughout this stage in youth development in order to contribute with a safer psychological and social environment that can help preventing risky behaviours (Reina, Oliva, & Parra, 2010). Despite that, it doesn't mean that out of curiosity or the feeling of being in control (Garitaonandia & Garmendia, 2007), children won't enrol in dangerous or unsafe behaviours on the Internet. The Internet is like a Pandora's box that once opened provides a universe of risks (but also of great opportunities). In this case, we consider that pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia blogs disseminate risky contents where children can easily find manuals that encourage food restriction, tricks to fool parents and caregivers, scary "diets" and pharmacological prescriptions (Gradim, 2009) that may influence and endanger children's emotional and physical welfare in unpredictable ways.

4.1. Applications

This exploratory study has contributed to the literature pertaining pro-anorexic Portuguese written risky contents. With this study we aim to encourage the family, school and community to reflect together in order to raise awareness to deal with the emerging expressions of this problem and its impact and to find the policies, guidelines and strategies that can ensure proactive, assertive and balanced preventive attitudes in children.

4.2. Limitations and future developments

Although this study deepens our knowledge about the pro-anorexia social Web movement in Portuguese written blogs, we recognize its limitations. For instance, the

sample is small and mostly female. Additionally, for generalisability purposes, further study is needed but we encourage future research to extend it to more Portuguese children and male bloggers. Conduct individual interviews would provide additional valuable insights from the bloggers point of view. But, regarding to this, we also have to recognize that the complexity of the topic and the vulnerability of these communities difficult the research process.

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