



# Managing a marginalised identity in pro-anorexia and fat acceptance cybercommunities

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## Abstract

This study examines how members of pro-anorexia (PA) and fat acceptance (FA) cybercommunities manage their ascribed 'offline' socially marginalised identity in an 'online' environment. While much of the sociological literature continues to focus on the corporeal or face-to-face practices of socially marginalised groups, we use online non-participant observation to explore how members of these sites use the internet to manage their marginalised identities. We find that cybercommunities provide a safe place for identity management where members come together to understand, negotiate and, at times, reject the marginalised identity ascribed to them in their offline environment. From the accounts of the PA and FA members we studied, we find that online and offline identities are mutually reinforcing and collectively inform and shape identity. However, the online environment provides an anonymised space for identity work, emotional support and an acceptance of their body, whatever their shape or size.

## Keywords

cybercommunities, deviance, fat acceptance, identity, identity management, pro-anorexia

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The growth of cybercommunities creates fertile ground for varied sociological research and has reinvigorated debates concerning the nature and definition of 'community'. Though some continue to argue that cybercommunities create disembodied, fragmented and disengaged subjects (Robins, 2007), studies increasingly demonstrate that cybercommunities provide a forum where online and offline experiences are linked, and a space where identity can be explored and managed (Bakardjieva, 2005, 2007; Castells, 1997; Turkle, 1996). This is particularly true for socially marginalised groups (see Adler and Adler, 2005, 2008). For those experiencing social marginalisation in the 'real' world, belonging to a cybercommunity may improve wellbeing and provide a 'safe' space to explore and manage an identity that stands outside the norm.

Cybercommunities are a distinct forum for community building and identity management, and, although they can be anonymous, they are embedded in daily life. Unlike social network sites like Facebook or Twitter, which are structured for the development of personal networks, cybercommunities are those that emerge around topics where members may or may not reveal their identity (see boyd and Ellison, 2007). Cybercommunities therefore have the capacity to augment traditional sources of social support and identity construction as they provide users with space to create and understand themselves. While this can also be achieved through face-to-face and other forms of communication, the interactive, archival and anonymised properties of cybercommunities offer a unique space for identity management for those seeking to understand ascribed socially marginalised identities.

With the increasing intertwining of online and offline identities, the internet is an important site for empirical sociological research to interrogate the practices of identity management. However, while interest in the uses and utilities of social network sites (Ellison et al., 2011; Hargittai and Hsieh, 2011) is growing, few consider the ways in which socially marginalised individuals use cybercommunities to understand and contest their status. This means that the technologically facilitated avenues that individuals use to understand their socially marginalised status remain largely unexamined. As technology is now a banal feature of everyday life within developed countries, we argue that scholarship must seriously engage with these media as important sites of identity work.

The aim of this study is to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which members explore, negotiate and manage a marginalised identity in an online environment. Drawing on online non-participant observation using naturally occurring data, we consider these sites as safe spaces for identity management. We also examine how they are structured and maintained and how participants use these forums to enact their sense of self. Here we focus on pro-ana or pro-anorexia (PA) and 'fat acceptance' (FA) cybercommunities. PA cybercommunities comprise individuals who have an eating disorder (anorexia, bulimia or eating disorder not otherwise specified) and are not in recovery. Discussion is primarily focused on matters related to eating disorders. FA cybercommunities comprise members who protest against the medical model of healthy weight. Existing online in a loosely affiliated network dubbed 'the Fatosphere' by its members, the focus of FA cybercommunities is to encourage an acceptance of 'fat' and to promote 'health at every size'. They exhort members to stop dieting and start accepting their bodies. In contrast to medical discourses that construct obesity as a disease, FA cybercommunities critique mainstream definitions of obesity.

PA and FA cybercommunities were chosen for this study as they represent unique sites that allow for a deeper understanding of how people manage an offline, ascribed and marginalised identity in an online environment. Members of both sites are ascribed a deviant status in mainstream society and, although they do not purportedly engage in law-violating or criminally deviant behaviour, they transgress commonly held cultural norms concerning the 'healthy body'. Members also embrace or encourage practices that go against the advice of health experts. Additionally, the comparison of PA and FA cybercommunities illustrates how members use anonymous online spaces to manage an identity that has an offline, corporeal reality. Members of both PA and FA cybercommunities have bodies that are deemed biologically and culturally unacceptable and, unlike tattoo enthusiasts or self harmers (Adler and Adler, 2005; Atkinson, 2003), those who are too thin or too fat cannot hide their 'markers' of difference in the offline world. Thus, their identity as a fat or a thin person is not easily concealed from the gaze of others. Finally, both PA and FA cybercommunities are essentially amalgamations of what would be traditionally described as 'loner deviants' (Adler and Adler, 2005: 347), where one's deviance is independent of the presence or support of other persons. Until the advent of cybercommunities, there was little opportunity for potential PA or FA members to come together to discuss their attitudes, behaviours and marginalised status with like-minded others. The comparison of these sites therefore provides an opportunity to identify the interactive identity work that takes place among members of groups with a distinct offline corporeal identity in online environments.

In what follows we provide a brief review of the PA and FA literature, and comparable cybercommunities of 'loner deviants' (Adler and Adler, 2005: 347; Dobson, 2008). We then discuss our research design and present our findings. Drawing on the accounts of PA and FA members, we suggest that cybercommunities provide a safe place for identity management where members can come together to understand, negotiate and, at times, reject the marginalised identity ascribed to them in their offline environment. While online and offline identities are mutually reinforcing and collectively inform and shape identity, our study shows that the online environment may be particularly important for the identity work that occurs among the members of these socially marginalised groups.

## **Deviant identities, deviant bodies and the role of cybercommunities**

Though some scholars are beginning to recognise the importance of cybercommunities for identity formation, few have examined how marginalised identities are managed and negotiated in an online environment (Adler and Adler, 2008; Dobson, 2008; Wilson and Atkinson, 2005). This is not surprising as the literature on marginalised or subcultural identities primarily centres on physical co-presence as a central element in the acquisition and negotiation of identity. Like the classical approach to understanding community, traditional theories of deviance also highlight, at least implicitly, the idea of corporeality and the importance of the actor/audience interaction (see Goffman, 1963; Lemert, 1951, 1967).

Subcultural communities are acknowledged as important for the negotiation of marginalised identities as they provide an alternate normative framework that may replace or

supplement common cultural understandings of certain practices (Atkinson, 2003; Dickins et al., 2011). Though there is a limited amount of research that expressly examines online subcultural and/or socially marginalised groups, what does exist indicates that online identity construction processes are similar to those that occur in offline settings. This is evidenced in Adler and Adler's (2008) study of the cybercommunities of self-injurers. Self-injury is viewed as a pathological behaviour and is defined as the 'deliberate, non-suicidal destruction of one's own body tissues ... such as self-cutting, burning, branding ... biting ... hitting ... and bone breaking' (Adler and Adler, 2008: 34). Until recently, people who engage in self-harm had few, if any, opportunities to seek support and interaction with others. In their research, Adler and Adler (2005, 2008) find that cybercommunities provide a safe space for self-injurers to connect in a non-judgemental environment. Adler and Adler (2008) conclude that cybercommunities provide 'back places' (see Goffman, 1963) where individual pathology need not be concealed.

A similar pattern is evident in Dobson's (2008) examination of cam girl websites,<sup>1</sup> where she finds that participants use the affordances of the internet to perform their identity in a way not previously available. As the work of Adler and Adler (2008) and Dobson (2008) suggests, the anonymity of online interactions lowers the social risk of communicating (see also Baym, 2010). We argue that PA and FA cybercommunities can be considered 'back places' (Goffman, 1963) as they allow members to discuss behaviours or attitudes that are regarded by society as pathological or irresponsible.<sup>2</sup> They are also policed as 'back places', as evidenced by their frequent censorship and the declassification of their internet sites (Boero and Pascoe, 2012; Dias, 2003; Giles, 2006; Reaves, 2001). While we do not categorise PA and FA as subcultural groups, we suggest that drawing on the subcultural literature helps to better understand how and why members of PA and FA cybercommunities seek out companionship with like-minded others.

There is considerable scholarship concerning the gendered aspect of deviant bodies – in particular, fat and anorexic bodies (Bordo, 2003). Most notable is the feminist literature concerning anorexia or bulimia that critically explores the social and cultural processes that lead to self-starvation (Day and Keys, 2008). For example, Day and Keys (2008) detail the culturally bound expectations espoused by PA members and touch on the identity work of 'rebels' who promote an alternative understanding of the thin body. Similarly, scholarly work on 'fatness' demonstrates the way in which individuals understand 'fat' as a stigmatised and culturally prescribed identity that requires ongoing management (Dickins et al., 2011; Monaghan, 2005). However, what is missing from this work is a focus on the specific strategies that members of PA and FA cybercommunities use to negotiate and manage their deviant corporeal status.

Outside of feminist literature, studies of PA and FA cybercommunities do not engage with the pro-social aspect of group membership but instead examine the pathology or anti-social aspects of individual and group behaviours. Within the PA literature, scholars have examined use of 'thinspiration' pictures – images of extremely thin men and women – that are used to inspire weight loss among PA members (Ferreday, 2003; Gailey, 2009; Giles, 2006; Giles and Brotsky, 2007). Other studies are concerned with PA members' resistance to medical definitions of their illness (Fox et al., 2005: 961), the misuse of pharmaceuticals (Fox et al., 2005) or the sharing of 'tips' and 'tricks' for hiding eating disorders or sustaining weight loss (Giles, 2006). As with the feminist scholarship on this

topic, the development and management of the 'fat' or 'thin' identity is yet to be explored extensively in these studies.

We argue that PA and FA cybercommunities should be examined as sites of critical importance for participants who would otherwise be socially isolated (Adler and Adler, 2005). We extend the scholarship concerned with PA and FA cybercommunities by privileging the active agency of the members as they attempt to make sense of the socio-cultural discourse associated with their bodies. By looking at how processes of identity management play out in an interactive setting, we consider the specific techniques and strategies that PA and FA members employ as they come to terms with what it means to be too fat or too thin in an online environment.

## **The present research: non-participant observation in an online environment**

Researching online is an effective way of exploring the cultures and norms associated with particular groups as it allows for researchers to access socially marginalised groups that may be inaccessible via traditional research methods. One research method gaining recognition is online non-participant observation. This research method allows the researcher to explore unfolding interactions without intervening (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005). This is essential for observing how identities are constructed and maintained in a group setting, as the presence of the researcher may alter group dynamics, and consequently the practices of forming identity, producing misleading results (Barker, 2008; Giles, 2006). Non-participant observation was chosen for this study because of its ability to provide insight into how individuals negotiate identity online as a naturally occurring social phenomenon (see also Barker, 2008).

The use of online non-participant observation raises a unique set of ethical concerns. We note that there is an ongoing debate regarding the obligations of researchers to obtain informed consent and to protect the privacy of participants given the inherently public nature of the internet (Barker, 2008: 25). However, there is no single set of guidelines for internet-based research available to researchers (Convery and Cox, 2012). There are broad principles which guide the use of publicly available online data, though these too are contested. In order to guide our own practice we drew on previous online research that has utilised online non-participant observation without the need to procure informed consent. These studies confirm that 'lurking'<sup>3</sup> is a valid and accepted practice in sociology (see Adler and Adler, 2008; Cheshire and Wickes, 2012; Fox et al., 2005; Giles and Brotsky, 2007). Mendelson (2003) argues that online non-participatory observation has negligible risk for the participants. Insisting on informed consent precludes the study of natural group dynamics, which is the focus of this research (Barker, 2008: 25). As with non-participant observation in a real-world setting, it is simply not appropriate or possible to procure consent from every person who comes into the purview of the researcher (Barker, 2008: 25). Given the intermittent and often infrequent nature of participation in cybercommunities, being granted informed consent from *all* is not physically possible and ignores the public aspects of online communities (Mendelson, 2003: 300).

Noting the ongoing debate around the ethics of internet-based research, our research methodology was guided by several key questions. The first was whether or not there

was any risk of harm to the members of the cybercommunities as a result of our research. The answer was no. Indeed, our research was specifically constructed to highlight the importance of such communities to their members. Second, we considered whether or not we could adequately ensure the anonymity of the members interacting on the various forums. Here the answer is yes. As we focused on populations which may be using the internet as a means of support, we minimised any situation which would be perceived as 'harm' in the undertaking of the research, such as 'outing' any users of the site (Liamputtong and Ezzy, 2005: 241). To limit the risk of any possible public exposure of the participants, all collected data was de-identified, not only of markers that could identify them in the real world, but also of signifiers that may compromise their online identity. In the results presented in this article, quotes from the participants are anonymous and references to the names of the data collection sites are removed and as such are not included in the reference list. The final question we asked was whether or not there was another method that could produce similar results. Our answer was no. The goal of our research was to examine identity negotiation and management through naturally occurring data, thereby privileging the voices and experiences of members of FA and PA communities. As documented in the literature (Giles and Brotsky, 2007), PA communities have become increasingly hostile towards and suspicious of outsiders, including researchers. Thus we argue that the visible presence of a researcher would have been counter-productive in this instance.

## **The research sites**

As stated previously, PA and FA sites were selected because they are intriguing sites for the exploration of identity management and negotiation. Concepts of identity and social marginalisation are linked through these sites to a distinct offline reality (the body) in a way that is not as explicit in other communities. Unlike other subcultural identities, a very thin or fat body cannot be easily hidden. Due to the cultural meaning attached to these bodies (see Bordo, 2003), the 'deviant' status associated with them is an almost inescapable part of lived experience.

The websites were sourced through Google searches. To locate FA sites an initial search was conducted using the terms 'fat acceptance', 'size acceptance' and 'fat activism'. The same strategy was used for PA sites using terms 'pro-anorexia', 'pro-ana', 'pro-ana websites' and 'pro-ana forums'. The sites generated from these searches were then divided into public and private communities. The sites that required registration to enter (i.e. they were private communities) were not examined. Our study was concerned with understanding how identity formation and negotiation evolved naturally through online exchanges. As identifying the researchers would have changed this dynamic, especially among the pro-ana sites (see Giles and Brotsky, 2007), we focused only on those sites open to anyone with access to the internet. The selection from remaining sites was further refined using the following criteria.

- Sites are regularly updated (minimum of weekly posts)
- Sites have archived posts
- Readers have the ability to respond to posts in a comments section

- Sites must be explicitly FA or PA
- Sites must be available for public viewing. The viewer does not have to be a member to see posts.

After applying these criteria, three PA sites and three FA sites were selected for non-participant observation. Data for analysis was collected over a period of two to six months. The time-frame for data collection was dependent on the number of posts in each community. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was reached; that is we continued to source data from these sites until new data no longer contributed to additional insights (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). For example, some FA sites posted weekly, which necessitated extraction of posts over a longer period to gather sufficient data for analysis. In contrast, PA sites often had hundreds of posts in a single day, each with replies from other members, thus depth of data was achieved over a much shorter time period. Overall 425,612 words were collected across six separate sites, each site averaging 70,935 words.

Broadly speaking, the FA sites examined had a few-to-many structure, where a few key members of the community construct and communicate ideology to the majority. However, these structures were not concrete and frequently fluctuated. Depending on need or circumstance, conversations were also many-to-many or few-to-few. In contrast, the PA communities had a many-to-many structure, often resulting in an overwhelming number of posts as community members related personal narratives, opinions and experiences. Due to the 'raw' nature of the data collected, postings by the participants frequently contained spelling and grammar errors. The number of mistakes would necessitate placing [sic] after most words and sentences. In order to preserve the flow of the material and the voice of the participants, these mistakes have not been corrected nor are they indicated with [sic] in the text.

## Analytic approach

In order to analyse the data collected we used the inductive methodology of grounded theory as it focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the participants. In line with this approach, we began our examination of the data using open coding. This process involved a general exploration of the data and the breaking down of data into discrete categories that were then examined, compared and conceptualised (Strauss and Corbin, 1994: 61). This was followed by axial coding, where categories were grouped to reflect the emerging meaning of the data (Ezzy, 2002). As part of this process, categories from open coding were regrouped into theoretically significant themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). We then concluded our analysis with selective coding, which involved selecting a core theoretical category and systematically relating it to other categories, therefore clarifying, validating and refining the relationships that became central to the present research (Strauss and Corbin, 1994).

Very early in the coding period, themes associated with social marginalisation and deviance became prominent. Indeed, these themes were more prevalent in participants' online talk than other markers of identity like gender, class, age or ethnicity. While we acknowledge the importance of these identity markers, especially gender and its relationship to anorexia (see Day and Keys, 2008), the accounts of the FA and

PA members we studied suggested they were secondary to an identity characterised by marginalisation and isolation. For the purpose of this article, we therefore centre our discussion on the management of a marginalised, rather than a gendered identity, in FA and PA cybercommunities.

## Results and discussion

Our research suggests that cybercommunities are important for understanding and negotiating marginalised identities and that this occurs in several ways. First, FA and PA sites provide a place where members can receive support and alternative interpretations of the 'anorexic' or 'fat' self. Second, FA and PA sites have delimited boundaries for belonging and behaviour which protects members from individuals who might seek to challenge this more positive image of the self. Third, FA and PA sites provide an environment that allows for the development of key strategies which either combat normatively held views about participants' bodies or assist members to cope with their illness, as is the case with members of PA cybercommunities. These strategies allow members to understand what it means to be a fat or a thin person. We discuss these in turn below.

### *Cybercommunities: places for support and alternative definitions of the 'self'*

While the negotiation of meaning can occur at an individual level, the online accounts from members of FA and PA communities show that negotiation is also meaningful within a community setting. Cohen (1972) argued that communities allow for ideological dissemination, which in turn enables processes of self-definition. Accounts from participants in this research suggest that this is also true for members of cybercommunities. The FA and PA communities allow the self to be affirmed and witnessed by other members, which may assist in stabilising an identity; something that may not be achieved through self-definition alone. The expressed benefits of 'belonging' for members of FA and PA communities are similar to those reported by the members of the tattooing communities examined by Atkinson (2003). Specifically, membership provides an antidote to their perceived cultural dislocation.

For the FA community members, the 'self' is managed and defined in a variety of different ways. One management strategy is an attempt to expand the boundaries of what is defined as 'normal'. Within the sites examined in this research, individuals are encouraged to cease thinking about themselves as marginalised, defective and imperfect, and to fully embrace life.

I was so worried that people would think I was too fat/ugly/dull/irritating/etc. — mostly fat and ugly — to deserve to take part in whatever fun activity was on the table.

FA members acknowledge that self-acceptance is an ongoing struggle. As one member notes:

my ability to accept my own fat did not come about overnight. It came about over YEARS.



On a personal level, the body is something that must be made peace with. FA communities allow a space for individuals to relate personal narratives. These narratives construct their physical deviation in a positive way, something they may not be able to achieve offline due to a lack of support from others who do not accept their redefinition of their bodies. Moreover, participation in the FA communities allows for the development of offline exchanges that reinforce one's identity, and one's body as normal. This is clearly evidenced in the following post, which describes the experience of being able to accept a jacket from another FA community member.

It seems like such a simple and small thing ... But, like so many things when you're fat, being able to do this simple and small thing is actually a really big freakin' deal ... She offered, I accepted, and bam, I was wearing someone else's jacket. I realize how ridiculous that sounds. But when you've never had that moment of utter normalcy, it is kind of a big damn deal.

In PA communities, members also try to come to terms with their bodies. Contrary to other research that focuses on the harmful elements of PA sites (Ferreday, 2003; Fox et al., 2005; Gailey, 2009), the following comments demonstrate the support members receive as they move towards recovery through the provision of a safe, non-judgemental space.

reading all the heartfelt, completely non-judgmental, supportive and loving comments to my post reminds me of how very much i love you guys. how integral this place is and will be to any steps towards recovery i make.

PA communities also provide a space where members can be their 'true self' without worrying about condemnation. Many feel that the PA community is the only place they can be truly honest about their disease and how they understand themselves:

Right now I am purporting to be 'recovered,' and every day I strive to appear 'normal and healthy' in public knowing full well that I come home and write my REAL story here to you guys.

Additionally, members of PA communities provide emotional support for each other as they attempt to understand their self and their disorder. Members post emotionally distraught messages seeking emotional support, or make use of the PA space to 'vent' their feelings.

i feel dead....i look dead....i am dead....who in the world is gunna wana a sick, fugly girl? am i worth anything in this world?

Some members post messages where they indicate intent to self-harm. For example, one member posted that they had 'been one inch from suicide for about a month'. Within PA sites, self-harm is recognised as a damaging behaviour and discouraged. Yet discouragement comes in the form of supportive messages from the community that persuade the poster not to self-harm. For example, in response to the above post, another member replied with the following:

Don't destroy your life... it's the only one you got. Please PLEASE get help.

The emphasis on harm-minimisation found in the cybercommunities examined in this study differs from previous PA research, which characterised PA sites as places of quasi-feminist protest against established beauty norms (Day, 2010) or positioned PA members as adrenalin-seeking or risk-taking (Gailey, 2009). This may be because much of the previous research focuses predominantly on static representations of PA on various web-sites (Ferreday, 2003) and does not fully consider the interactive construction of discourse and identity in the online environment.

By focusing on the dialogue and discussion between members, we make salient the more nuanced discourses associated with support and harm-minimisation that play out in cybercommunities. As FA and PA sites provide a space for members to communicate and receive support, they allow the self to be affirmed and witnessed by others. This stabilises identity in a way that cannot be achieved through self-definition alone. We argue that the negotiation of meaning that occurs in these communities allows individuals to connect with those who share and support their perception of self. Like the processes noted in studies of marginalised groups in the offline world (see Atkinson, 2003), online interactions among FA and PA members are important avenues for accepting one's identity and affirming one's self.

### *Maintaining community boundaries*

The above section demonstrates the important role of FA and PA cybercommunities in providing a safe place where members can negotiate and understand their marginalised identity. However, there are boundaries to community membership and group identification. For both FA and PA sites, the community structure and the boundaries of acceptable behaviour are closely policed. Boundary maintenance is viewed as necessary to ensure the space remains safe and oriented towards benefiting members. The accounts of FA members reveal that, for this community, boundaries are outwardly focused. That is, policing is directed towards outsiders who may threaten or challenge the community's identity. However, for the PA sites, the boundaries are constructed to regulate members' own behaviours. How anorexia is defined and constructed, practices that relate to eating habits and topics that centre on health, bodily changes and weight loss goals are all strictly monitored. Thus for the PA cybercommunities, boundaries have a distinctly inward focus.

For participation in FA communities, there are clear rules relating to acceptable practice. Indeed all FA sites have specific policies that outline what constitutes tolerable behaviour in community forums, sending a strong message to people who might disagree with the FA community's ideology. This is evidenced in the following warning from an FA community:

You're gonna want to check out the comments policy before you try to join the conversation...I don't publish comments ... promoting weight loss, insulting me, or insulting fat people in general.

Members reinforce the boundaries further by making examples of those who violate the spirit of the site. When a violation occurs, members are invited to mock and otherwise

deride those who post particularly offensive comments, as demonstrated by the following comment from a member of the FA community:

We haven't had a good douchehounding in a while, because trolls get real boring real fast — they're rarely worth the effort...But the three of us are having a grand time kicking this one around, and we thought we'd let you join in the fun.

This response not only reinforces the shared values of the community but also serves to empower members by allowing them to actively construct their own 'acceptable' identity which is unambiguous. This unification allows members to be quickly called into action when it comes to protesting size discrimination. For example, United Airlines introduced a discriminatory policy against overweight people, ruling that they pay for an extra seat if they were deemed 'too large' when checking in. If this was not possible on a full flight, they would not be allowed to fly. FA sites responded to this by encouraging members to complain to United Airlines en masse about this new policy.

I bet we can get 700 complaints to United in a week. Go get 'em.

This type of action is indicative of the visibility and recognition that FA strives for as a community. Through visibility FA can more strongly combat size discrimination.

Unlike FA, PA as a community is less unified and policing boundaries takes a different form. While FA is focused on protecting the community from outsiders, for PA communities, attention is focused on defining a 'true ana'.

theres nothing i hate more than when people flaunt their eating disorders on myspace or facebook, ...its embarassing for all of us with eating disorders who hope that people will take us SERIOUSLY

This emphasis on what constitutes a 'true ana' is echoed across all the PA cybercommunities sampled in this study. In all sites, pretenders were not welcome as members believed 'wannabe' anas damaged the community's intent and purpose. By calling out the 'wannabes', the boundaries of the 'true ana' community are reinforced. However, within the PA community, there are constant efforts to define what anorexia is.

someone with legitimate anorexia doesn't actually get cravings for food. We get cravings for exercise, for hurting ourselves, for perfection... Food is SCARY -it is the evil that harms us by making us fat, no matter how small or healthy the portion.

Universally intolerable in PA communities are those who come to the communities looking for weight loss tips or crash diets tricks. Such requests are met with scorn and derision, as well as announcements that anorexia is a serious condition, not to be taken lightly. Unlike claims from other research in PA communities (Ferreday, 2003; Fox et al., 2005; Gailey, 2009; Giles, 2006; Giles and Brotsky, 2007), our study finds that members understand the severity of their condition and do not encourage people to develop eating disorders. Instead, as the following quote demonstrates, members view anorexia as something people should aspire to avoid, not emulate:

Anonymous has tried every diet and nothing seems to work and is now considering turning to ana ... would I ever advise ... to do the same? No, I would never ADVISE someone to 'try anorexia.' Who in their right mind would? Anorexia kills

Because there remains a lack of agreement concerning what constitutes a 'true ana', the PA community finds it harder to achieve consensus and cohesion when definitional issues arise. The ways in which identity is created, negotiated and managed are less uniform in PA cybercommunities than in FA communities and responses to behaviours that transgress community boundaries vary across PA sites. However, like FA groups, PAs reaffirm their boundaries when encountering the 'Other' (Denegri-Knott and Taylor, 2005), as evidenced in the following post:

somebody SERIOUSLY needs to write up rules on this community. You know, cause people just don't get it, post shit, and we attack them like vultures...

### *Responding to dominant ideologies*

Both FA and PA cybercommunities exist as sites that allow individuals to manage their ascribed marginalised identity, however, each employs different identity management strategies. Members of the FA community use these cybercommunities as a place to challenge their marginalised status.

For the FA community, deviance management can perhaps be best described as 'preaching'. Part of this preaching strategy is to provide members with ways to manage ascribed deviance and by extension their daily life. For FA members this often means challenging the medical discourses concerning their 'deviant' bodies.

Is that not a pretty horrifying reminder, in fact, that the exact number of casualties from WLS [weight loss surgery] is totally fucking unknown? And is it not likewise horrifying to realize that doctors nationwide are proffering WLS willy-nilly as a cure-all solution for their fat patients who suffer from basically any health condition, weight-related or not?

FA acknowledges that the connection between aesthetics, health and moral character is deeply ingrained in western cultural discourse (Jutel, 2005: 119), however, they do not accept this connection uncritically:

Many of us, of many different sizes, have been flat-out told we're fat ... by everyone from complete strangers to our own families... even when you're relatively free of fat harassment in your daily life, you can never be free of it culturally. Even when the real people in your life tell you 'But you're not fat,' a host of forces are out there to tell you 'Yeah, you are.'

Through the posts it is clear that members are vigilant in their attempt to dismantle the negative discourse that surrounds their bodies. When confronted with the perceived 'deviant' image of the fat body, members of FA actively counter this maligned status and encourage others to dress well and challenge the concept of 'moral' food. In this way FA cybercommunities provide information to others that assists in creating new ways to view food and their body.

The point is, I think people may be terrified of unrestricted eating ...But you don't have to eat everything that pops into your head...The point is that refusing yourself nothing is not the same as giving yourself everything. ...Restriction makes you do that, not liberation. And once you've let go of the feast-or-famine mindset, it turns out that food is just like other pleasures and other necessities...

Another key strategy that FA uses to manage their deviance is to call on members to 'come out' as fat people and be visible. In the FA lexicon 'coming out' means being forthright and unashamed about one's body. As part of this process members discourage body talk that includes discussion of dieting or body shaming. This openness is viewed by FAs as the primary way of combating fat phobia, and seeks to disrupt the normative discourses concerning fat bodies. Thus for FA members, being visible is part of rejecting not only the stereotypes about fat people, but the mandate that obese people should work on minimising their bodies and their physical presence.

Being out as a fat person means letting folks around you know that you're not likely to participate in idle diet talk or body shaming, and are, in fact, likely to question or challenge it when you hear it.

This contrasts with previous research that centres on how NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) members negotiate their bodies. For NAAFA, weight is conceptualised as being beyond the individual's control and therefore is thought to have no implications for identity (Gimlin, 2001: 124). The body and self are perceived as unrelated, which disassociates the self from the negative moral implications of the fat body (Gimlin, 2001: 112). From this perspective, to be in possession of a stigmatised body poses a danger to the integrity of the self (Jutel, 2005: 115). Contrastingly, we find that participants of the FA sites studied in the current research do not seek to create distance between the body and the self, but rather to minimise that distance, to become re-embodied, and re-connect body and self in a positive way.

The strategies used for managing normative interpretations of people with anorexia are quite distinct from the FA cybercommunity. In the accounts of members on the sites we examined, PAs are not seeking to combat stereotypes or perceptions surrounding their behaviour. While the FA community attempts to create a public discourse that rejects their marginalised status, PAs are more concerned with the practicalities of their daily lives. PAs make no attempt to renegotiate their identities in the way FAs do. Instead, members of PA cybercommunities manage their identities through 'confession'. They focus on the intimate details of their daily life (such as bodily changes) and use these forums to confess their failures and report their successes. This approach allows fellow members to suggest harm-minimisation techniques, both physical and emotional, to control the extent of physical and emotional damage that comes with anorexia.

I remember a post I saw here, when I first joined. Someone saw a show about how a woman who took over a hour to purge. Everyone commented on how long it took them to purge. I was new, and it honestly broke my heart, to read the comments. Why!?! Because some people said it took them 45 minutes or more to purge. All I could think about is how I wish I could ask how they Were doing it and help (if needed) in harm reduction.

PA cybercommunities therefore serve an important function by providing a place where members can relate and receive sympathy for their successes and failures without running the risk of exposing their behaviour to unsympathetic parties. PA communities provide a place for individuals to hide out, while still receiving emotional support. As part of this, PAs describe their attempts to hide their eating disorder and remain invisible. They confess their transgressions (overeating, lying and manipulation most commonly) to other members of their community, which eases the stress associated with these actions. Within the safety of the PA cybercommunity, members are also able to acknowledge that these behaviours are not purely about weight and body dissatisfaction, but are rooted in more complex personal issues.

I know it seems so trivial thinking about in terms of weight, and i makes me think am i just vain, but then i know deep down that that its way more complicated than just looks.

In our research it was apparent that PA communities offer a place for people with anorexia to share their 'real' life without the pressure to maintain the appearance of normality. This is contrary to other research by Gailey (2009) that suggests the behaviours engaged in by PAs are a type of 'edgework', in which individuals seek to push themselves beyond their limits as a way to test their skills and control. He contends that hospitalised anorexics are no different from men involved in motorcycle accidents due to dangerous speeding. Gailey (2009) perceives anorexia as a voluntary risk-taking behaviour, similar to skydiving or rescue work. By framing PA as a subculture and analysing it through a criminological framework, Gailey (2009) further sensationalises and marginalises a community that is already viewed with suspicion by many parties. As we demonstrate here, such analysis ignores the contested meanings within the PA community itself, its struggle to define and delimit its boundaries, as well as the plurality of experience within the PA community.

## **Conclusion**

Cybercommunities offer a window into the constructed narratives that stand outside of dominant discourses. Examining such narratives in an online setting provides insight into how aspects of society and culture are reflected and negotiated online. Further, it allows for a fuller understanding of how 'identity work' plays out among members of socially marginalised groups as they negotiate, and sometimes redefine, their sense of self.

In this article we considered the ways in which members of PA and FA cybercommunities use these online environments to enact their sense of self, to make sense of their offline identity and at times challenge their ascribed marginalised status. This is especially true for the members of the FA cybercommunities examined. Using naturally occurring data, we examined these communities as dynamic and complex structures and demonstrated how socially marginalised individuals use these spaces to understand their status, their bodies and themselves. From the accounts of the members of the PA and FA communities in our study, we found that anonymous communication and active community engagement are of critical importance for positive identity work.

The findings of our research lead us to conclude that these sites are social spaces for individuals who feel deviant or socially isolated. For example, FA communities provide members with a counterbalance to mainstream discourses. Such alternative discourses privilege them as individuals, regardless of their weight. Similarly, PA sites encourage members to share experiences, to offer and receive support in a way that is often not possible in face-to-face interactions. In current scholarship and policy discussions, the processes of identity management, harm-minimisation and emotional support that occur in these sites is frequently overlooked. Certainly, we acknowledge that at first glance FA and PA communities may appear disturbing, harmful or foreign. However, as we demonstrate, a closer examination of the dynamic exchanges among members illustrates the important functions these communities serve for their participants.

Presently, cybercommunities exist largely untouched by government intervention. This means that groups considered 'deviant' (as opposed to criminal) have access to safe spaces for identity management, both individually and collectively, with regular access to like-minded others. However, current internet censorship measures proposed by the Australian Government (AAP, 2010; Foo, 2010; Kamenev, 2010) may make participation in such cybercommunities difficult, if not impossible. Sociologically, we know that back places are important sites for identity management, a practice that cybercommunities now make partially visible. Though the practices or attitudes expressed in such sites may stand outside the 'norm', attempting to restrict access to these communities because they exist in a socially grey area will only further marginalise individuals and reduce opportunities to understand and manage the self.

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### **Notes**

1. Dobson defines cam girl websites as 'a type of person, amateur Web site focused on a Web cam that allows viewers to see live, moving images of the site owner' (2008: 123). The majority of these sites are run by teenage girls and young women, and the content varies widely (see Dobson, 2008, for further discussion).
2. When considering the strong initiative to reduce obesity in Australia (Australian Government Preventative Health Task Force, 2009) and the well-documented association between excess weight and numerous other chronic health problems and increased mortality, FA can be seen as promoting 'unhealthy' and 'harmful' behaviours (Monaghan et al., 2010). With the exception of Dickins et al. (2011), little research is conducted outside of the NAAFA into how obese individuals negotiate embodied identities in a community setting online (Gimlin, 2001).
3. In this case lurking refers to the practice of reading or 'watching' community spaces online without posting.

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