Boys with ED (Eating Disorders) online

- A study of the website, the forum's services and the users' postings

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Introduction

Internet has opened up the possibility to interact beyond both time and space in different virtual spheres. Individuals, who perhaps never would have met in the offline world, suddenly have the possibility to meet online and discuss issues they share an interest in. This also applies to people with eating disorders. On the Internet, various types of media are integrated. Many browsers are multifunctional, allowing the users to transmit files, to chat, to send e-mails and more (Slevin, 2000:38). As Slevin (2000:37-38) notes, "[...] the world wide web can be used both to receive information and to make it available to others. Using hyperlinks embedded in hypertext, users acting as producers of information link up files containing text, sound and graphics [...] The sources of information linked in this way can be located on any computer that is also a part of the web." People can - on the Internet - make information and other symbolic content available to others, and as a consequence re-embed this content "[...] as part of the project of the self (Slevin, 2000:175)." What happens when boys claiming to have an eating disorder participate in an online context created particularly for them?

This article is based on a study conducted during the spring of 2012. The study's aim was to highlight the website and forum Boys With ED (Eating Disorders), to give us a deeper understanding of the structure, content and member activity of the forum, and to show how these aspects interplay with each other.

Previous research: Internet, eating disorders and pro-ana

Eating disorders

Eating disorders is a problem we face today, both on an individual and a societal level. There is a range of different eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, which all cause severe physical and emotional problems for individuals suffering from them. Historically, "[...] eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia nervosa have been identified as feminised conditions (Drummond, 2009:198)." Most researchers estimate that "[...] between 5 and 10 per cent of people classified as having eating disorders are men (Grogan, 1999:173)." At the same time, some authorities have been stating that anorexia nervosa is becoming more common among men (Crisp & Burns, 1990:77), and physicians have noted that increasingly more men start to have body-image dysfunction, eating disorders and exercise compulsions (Bordo, 1999:221). According to Morrison, Morrison and McCann (2006:28), men report progressively more dissatisfaction with their own bodies.

Pro-ana webspheres

Knowledge about eating disorders per se is crucial, but so is also knowledge about the webspheres where eating disorders are highlighted and/or discussed. Pro-ana (pro-anorexia) webspheres play a special part here, since they contain information on how to initiate or maintain an eating disorder. Sometimes the concept pro-mia (pro-bulimia) is used instead of, or in addition to, the concept pro-ana. Pro-ana websites can easily be put in contrast to recovery sites. Recovery sites have been set up with the intention of helping people who wish to recover from their eating disorder, while pro-ana
sites have been set up with the intention of helping people who wish to engage in practices associated with eating disorders (Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:349). At some pro-ana sites, members are carefully excluded if they do not participate to the fullest in the eating disorder related behaviours (Brotsky & Giles, 2007, cited in Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:350). Therefore, pro-ana sites also give rise to ethical issues, and cannot be said to always be in the users' best interest. In a study of 170 anorexia-related websites, one finding was that "[...] the mean rate of visitors to the pro-ana sites was 34 998, while the mean rate of visitors to the recovery sites was 27 878 (Chesley, Alberts, Klein & Kreipe, 2003, cited in Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:348).” In other words, the high amount of visitors to pro-ana sites points to these sites being a phenomenon worth taking into account.

Previous studies on pro-ana websites tell about sites mainly directed to girls or which mainly have girls as members. Research regarding pro-ana websites directed to boys having eating disorders seems to be lacking. Having searched for pro-ana webspheres directed to boys, where boys have good possibilities to discuss and/or interact with each other, only the online website and forum Boys With ED was found. Other found pro-ana webspheres for boys were a few blogs providing limited possibilities for user interaction.

Pro-ana movement

Sometimes, pro-ana is called a movement, but no clear and final definition of this movement is to be found. One definition of the concept pro-ana is as follows: "Pro-ana refers to individuals with an eating disorder who focus on having an eating disorder as a lifestyle choice as opposed to a psychiatric disorder (Lyons, Mehl & Pennebaker, 2006, cited in Juarascio, Shoaib & Timko, 2010:393).” Another definition of the pro-ana movement is that it has "[...] a radical and largely socially-unacceptable approach to the management of anorexia, and has suffered a powerful media backlash, being characterised as encouraging 'normal' and 'healthy' girls and women to adopt anorexia as a glorified diet (Dias, 2003, Doward & Reilly, 2003, cited in Fox, Ward & O'Rourke, 2005:945).”

Through the Internet, the pro-ana movement has found a space where to communicate beyond geographical constraints, and where it can be free from "[...] the prejudices of a society that sees it as a pernicious and dangerous movement (Fox, Ward & O'Rourke, 2005:966).” Fox, Ward & O'Rourke (2005:945) write that the pro-ana movement "[...] challenges and rejects medical, social and feminist models that regard anorexia nervosa as a condition to be 'cured'.” In other words, the pro-ana movement can be seen as lifting up its members' wish to be accepted for the lifestyle chosen, as well as their belief that an eating disorder is not something that has to be recovered from. The 'lifestyle' of having an eating disorder is more or less seen as something to embrace rather than to reject.

It is though important to note that participation in pro-ana webspheres might not only be for the worse. Rodgers, Skowron and Chabrol (2011:9) have studied motivations for becoming a member of a pro-ana online community, and state that these communities can provide social support (ibid., 2011:9). In their study, members of a pro-ana community described emotional benefits that come from being understood and having a sense of belonging (ibid., 2011:10).

In this article, key theories regarding community platforms, virtual information, virtual togetherness, body image and identification will be raised in connection to the findings of the study. The findings have been divided and put into separate sections later on in this article.
Method

Virtual ethnography

Virtual ethnography was the method used when exploring the website and forum Boys With ED. Hine (2008:263) concludes that virtual ethnography can “[...] benefit from a step back from total technical competence in order to see the steps which precede effective entry and to bring into focus the taken-for-granted qualities of the setting.” Therefore, the functions and services of the forum Boys With ED were studied, before conducting a thematic analysis of the content posted by the members.

According to Hine (2008:259), the key ethnographic principle is the same in virtual ethnography as in traditional ethnography. This principle is about the researcher gaining understanding of a context, through participation and a progressive collection of data. The study of Boys With ED did not consist of online surveys or interviews, only analysis of the online platform itself and the content posted there. The understanding gained from the study was therefore limited to these two blocks, although this in turn gave the study a clearer focus. In addition, no answer was given to how it is to be an actively participating member at the forum.

Some of the benefits of ethnography are lost when a researcher decides to be a lurker, since such an approach ”[...] risks losing the benefits of trying out emergent knowledge in practice that the 'participant' part of participant observation affords (Hine, 2008:262).” At the same time, having told the members of Boys With ED about the study might have had effect upon their participation within the forum. As Hine (2008:263) notes, the ethnographer “[...] needs to attain a level of confidence that what they have observed in the setting is in some sense authentic, in that it represents more than a mere show put on for their benefit.” In summary, one limitation of the study was that it only highlighted material posted by (at some point) active members of one selected forum. Whether the content of the postings is 'true' and based on facts is of second value, since the main interest was to find out what the members actually choose to bring up in this particular online context.

Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis of the content seen at the forum Boys With ED was deductive in the sense that the found themes were connected to theoretical concepts chosen at an earlier stage. The postings in the discussion threads were read, one by one, during three full time work weeks in March 2012, beginning with the oldest thread. By having read the headline of each discussion thread, the posting written by the creator of each discussion thread, and the posted replies, themes were extracted from the material.

Interpretation

In the method of interpretation called hermeneutics, the pre-understanding of the researcher is of highest importance. In hermeneutics, it is assumed that we never look at the world in an unbiased manner (Gilje & Grimmen, 2004:183). An interpreter understands a text according to the language and terms he/she knows, according to the beliefs he/she has about the world, and according to his/her previous experiences (ibid., 2004:184-186). For this reason, the conclusions drawn from the material cannot be generalized, although they do show something of importance. The hermeneutic circle points to that during the interpretation process, the different parts of the material are understood in relation to the whole material, and the whole material is understood in relation to its different parts (ibid., 2004:191). Through the shifting of focus between the different parts of the material and the material as a whole, the study of Boys With ED was conducted.

Ethical considerations

According to the Association of Internet Researchers (2002:5), ”[...] the greater the acknowledged
publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy, confidentiality, right to informed consent, etc.” Also, ”[...] the greater the vulnerability of the author/subject – the greater the obligation of the researcher to protect the author/subject (ibid., 2002:5).” Participation at the forum Boys With ED requires registration, regardless of the fact that the registration process is easy to follow through, which is why the content posted at the forum had to be handled with much greater care. Some of the members of Boys With ED might be minors or, in some cases, children. In order to save the members from unethical exposure, their nicknames and other personal information have not been revealed. In addition, the findings only show themes extracted from the material instead of individual statements.

As a final note, not all members of Boys With ED can be considered being boys, but rather young men or men. This conclusion is drawn from the personal age numbers given by many members in the member profiles, where many of the members claim to be between the age of 18 and 25. In this article, the members are referred to as 'boys' although some of them might be young men. In addition, a few members of the studied online context claim to be girls. The girls' activity and postings have though not been examined during the study.

**Findings**

*The website Boys With ED*

Through Weebly (Weebly, 2012), which is a website host providing website building opportunities, it is possible to create a website or blog for free. At the Weebly website Boys With ED, content such as tips and tricks for increasing your metabolism, thinspiration, information about the 'pro-ana unity' and media material (music, videos etc.) related to eating disorders can be found. As can be seen on the first page of the Weebly website (Boys With ED, 2012a), the original site was banned: ”It's been a long while that Boys With ED has been down, unfortunately the original site got banned. But we’re back, and stronger than ever!” No information is found regarding who banned the original website, how this was done or on what grounds. What this points to is though that the original website probably was seen as showing unsuitable content, which seems not to be uncommon when it comes to pro-ana websites.

Boys With ED is an online space where the members are said to be allowed to 'be who they are': “We do not promote eating disorders, this is a place for people who have an eating disorder and like to be accepted for who they are (Boys With ED, 2012a).” The creator behind Boys With ED does consider the website as neither pro-ana nor anti: “We do not like to label this website as a Pro-Ana website, but we are certainly not anti. We accept everyone's choice (Boys With ED, 2012a).” In summary, members of Boys With ED are free to discuss both disorder maintenance behaviour and recovery issues within this virtual sphere.

*The forum Boys With ED*

When clicking on a tab called 'Forum' at the Weebly website Boys With ED, two discussion forums are seen: A newer forum and the 'old' forum. Since the new forum only had 13 postings on the 29th of March 2012, only the old forum (where the discussions were more active) was studied. The old forum was created through Forumotion (Forumotion, 2012), which is a forum host giving people the opportunity to create their own forum for free. On the 16th of August 2007, the oldest found posting at the forum Boys With ED was written (Boys With ED, 2012b). There were 28045 messages and 1126 registered users on the 6th of January 2012 (ibid., 2012b). At the 2nd of April 2012, there were 28371 messages and 1144 registered users (ibid., 2012b). The amount of members at the forum seems in other words to have increased somewhat during the study.

There are several headlines at the forum, to which the discussion threads are connected. The headlines are as follows: Welcome to BWE (Boys With ED, author's note)/ The forum/
Introductions/ Questions and suggestions/ General stuff/ Good reads/ Art and self-expression/ Eating disorders (general)/ Anorexia Nervosa/ Bulimia Nervosa/ C.O.E/B.E.D. (Compulsive Overeating/Binge-Eating Disorder, author's note)/ ED-NOS (Eating Disorders Not Otherwise Specified, author's note)/ Other ED behavior/ Treatment and recovery/ Diets and nutrition/ Recipes/ Thinspiration (Content produced with the aim to inspire people in their strive for thinness, author's note)/ Emotional Support/ Relationships/ Daily Journal. By clicking on these headlines, members can post their own comments in discussion threads where these particular themes are supposed to be in focus. It is typical of pro-ana websites to contain thinspiration material and a language where words such as 'ana' and 'mia' are used (Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:350). At Boys With ED, all these aspects can be seen.

Media Reference Model

Different services provided at an online community platform delimit the possible interactions among the users of the platform (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002:73). During the study of the forum Boys With ED, Stanoevska-Slabeva's (2002) work concerning community platforms - a work based on Lechner and Schmid's (2000) Media Reference Model (MRM) - was used. The choice to use Stanoevska-Slabeva's work was made because the forum Boys With ED consists of many of the elements brought up in the MRM. The forum has effect on the member activity seen there, since the member activity of an Internet platform can never be fully detached from the platform itself. This does not stand in contrast to the fact that members of Boys With ED can choose to bring in (almost) what they want within the already fixed framework.

The MRM distinguishes four views when examining community-oriented design (Lechner & Schmid, 2000:3): The community view, the process view, the service view and the infra-structure view. The features of the community view are: Roles in the community/ Valid rules for communication/ A description of community participants/ The common language (Stanoevska-Slabeva, 2002:75). The process view refers to the dynamic aspects of a community's organisational structure, such as: The registration process/ The process of participation in discussions and events/ The process of gaming in virtual worlds (ibid., 2002:75-76). The features of the service view are: Knowledge services/ Intention services/ Negotiation and contracting services/ Settlement services (ibid., 2002:76-77). Lastly, the infra-structure view points to how the requirements for a community-supporting platform are matched by available software such as chats and videoconferencing (ibid., 2002:77).

When put in relation to the MRM, it became clear that the forum Boys With ED is a virtual sphere consisting of many of the possible community functions and services. These functions and services might all steer the member activity in a certain direction. Firstly, the members might describe themselves in their personal profiles or in a pre-made introduction sheet, or decide to leave the forum if they do not fulfill the criteria a person has to fulfill in order to be said to have an eating disorder. Secondly, members might choose to participate at the forum by posting their own written material, art work or media productions, or integrate media material from other sources. They might also choose to only be passive observers of the already posted material. Thirdly, members might use the forum's search field in order to find topics of their interest, or choose to communicate with other members through PM:s (Private Messages) or other communication platforms such as MSN Messenger. Fourthly, they might put restraint on what they are posting since there are moderators at the forum who are entitled to ban them from the forum if they do not follow the forum's rules, or since they do not want to become unpopular among other members.

However, some community functions or services are missing, or not being frequently used. Knowledge services are rare and games cannot be found, and the forum is not matched by many other available software. In the service for negotiation and contracting called 'Questions and suggestions' (Boys With ED, 2012b), only one post is written. In summary, the activity held at Boys
With ED seems to be more about the discussions and the togetherness among the members than the use of many different software or different platform functions, although the platform's presumed effect on the member activity cannot be neglected.

Virtual information

Participation within the virtual world can look different with regard to sociability. In the book *Internet Society – The Internet in the Everyday Life*, Bakardjieva (2005:169-180) highlights various forms of approaching the Internet among Internet users. After having interviewed Internet users about "[...]
how and why the Internet connection had arrived in their homes and how its use had gradually taken shape (Bakardjieva, 2005:82)”, Bakardjieva saw different Internet usage patterns. One group of people belong to the *infosumption* category. These users upheld a rationalistic ideal of information production and exchange, and do not find human contact or intimacy as "[...] legitimate motives for using the Internet (ibid., 2005:170).” Another group of people belong to the category of *instrumental interaction*. These people interact with other people in order to gain information, not in order to get to know people. They might enter virtual social spheres in order to get experiences illuminated, to have a problem solved or perhaps a question answered. A third group of people are *exploring ideas* in virtual public spheres. They are interested in the information gained from the discussions held on the Internet, as well as socializing with other users as discussion partners/interpreters/knowers (ibid., 2005:172).

At Boys With ED, almost every part of the information given is in some way connected to eating disorders. Some of the questions asked at the forum are questions the members probably would not receive answers to in other online contexts, especially since some of the questions are related to eating disorder maintenance. The members have perhaps in Boys With ED found a place where they actually want and dare to ask these kinds of questions. Had the boys been asking similar questions in their offline lives, they would perhaps not receive answers, at least not from people who know about their presumed health condition. Asking these questions in other contexts might have consequences for the members, since it then might become obvious for other people what condition these boys are in. Members of Boys With ED seem to receive answers to their questions up to a certain limit from the other members. If a member is posting questions about eating disorder maintenance, he often receives answers up to the point where other members write that providing more information might be harmful to that member. Hence, the members seems to be somewhat careful regarding what questions they choose to answer. Below is a list of the main themes the members ask about, give information about and/or discuss at the forum:

*Information about how to maintain the eating disorder*. Members discuss how to get the bodies they wish to have, how to increase the body metabolism, how to manage hunger, how to use drugs/nicotine/medicines in order to lose weight, how to purge, how to hide an eating disorder from other people, or how to have people who know about your condition to stop worrying.

*Information about the upsides and things you gain from having an eating disorder*. Members discuss how they feel empowered and being in control when losing weight or achieving goals.

*Information about the downsides and risks of having an eating disorder*. Members discuss how difficult it can be to have an eating disorder, how an eating disorder can make you increasingly lonely, how bodily functions can worsen, or which risks there are having an eating disorder regarding health issues in general.

*Information about recovery issues*. Members discuss how it is/was to be in treatment, how you can recover from an eating disorder, what it takes to get a place at a recovery facility, and what benefits you get from recovering from an eating disorder.

*Information about food*. Members give information about low calorie recipes, how to handle your cravings for food, how much food you should eat in order to lose the biggest amount of weight, how you can keep yourself from buying food, how you know when your stomach is “empty”, and how you can 'eat and spit' in order to fool your body that you have been eating.
**Information about the members' day.** As expected, the content of this theme is mostly about the members' diet plans, what they have been eating during the day, the amount of calories they have been taking in, their current body weight statistics, and the exercise they have done during the day. Members often write about themselves being angry at themselves for not being able to restrict their food intake, or happy because they were able to.

**Information about 'stats'.** Members give information about and/or discuss their current weight numbers, their goal weight, and other people's weight. Information is also given regarding how much calories the members have eaten or how much they aim at eating. Numbers are often shared regarding the body or food intake in general.

**Information about different eating disorders.** Members give information about and/or discuss how you can tell you have a certain eating disorder, and how it is to have a certain eating disorder.

**Information about non eating disorder related issues.** This information tells about a variety of things, such as the members' identities apart from their eating disorders or the question of love. Put under this theme are also written texts or art expressions not related to eating disorders.

**Virtual togetherness**

At one point, Bakardjieva (2005:173) saw a qualitative break with the rationalistic model explained above. She saw models of Internet communication where sociability is of central value. To be in a virtual world can be a way to connect or make a commitment (ibid., 2005:176). One of Bakardjieva's (2005:177) respondents was a good example of this, since her motivation to become an Internet user was to find information and help through an Internet support group. This respondent discovered that thousands of other people were going through the same experience as she was, and that nobody in their offline lives could understand what they were going through. When this respondent wrote something about a negative experience to the people in the Internet support group, the others gave her supportive responses: "What distinguished Ellen's experience from other, more detached, forms of learning like those described by previous respondents was the fact that the people she was interacting with online had come to constitute a collective entity with its own distinctive culture. Her virtual group had a relatively stable membership communicating on a daily basis and feeling responsible for each other's well-being (ibid., 2005:178).” According to Bakardjieva (2005:179), a particular situation, such as a rare disease among the members, was required in order for this "[...] rather extreme form of online community involvement to materialize.”

It is difficult to say whether Boys With ED has a distinctive culture, but from what can be seen at the forum, the members support each other in their life choices, life choices which seldom lead to good health. At the same time, they show a certain responsibility for each other's well-being by stating that other members should take care of themselves. The membership at Boys With ED seems to be quite stable over time, which might have the consequence that the members have the courage to open up more to other members than would otherwise be the case. This possibly has the consequence of increasing the virtual togetherness, since the members perhaps come closer to each other in this way. Boys With ED might be a place for its members where they find a certain kind of support and togetherness not found in the outside world, and this might in some way be beneficial for their mental health. On the other hand, being at a forum where more or less no one tells them to stop their actions, may cause the members to continue their presumed high risk behaviour.

Orbach (1993) as cited in Grogan (1999:173) claims that the "[...] usual explanation of the lower incidence of male anorexics is that social pressure on men works against extreme thinness (the mesomorphic body type is the most valued for men) so that men getting thin are likely to face negative social responses, whereas women may face encouragement and praise in the early stages of anorexia, as being effective dieters.” In other words, social reinforcement may be one reason for why men develop eating disorders more seldom than women. At the same time, the increased objectification of the male body may have increased men's focus on their bodies as objects to signal

At Boys With ED, members do encourage each other in their weight loss by congratulating each other in their success. Although these boys might face negative social responses in the offline world, when getting thinner, they might at the same time find positive social responses at Boys With ED for the same reason. When being a member of the forum, while perhaps already having a distorted body image, the strive to get thinner might become reinforced. Cavanagh (2007:124) writes that personal choices in lifestyle, or particular opinions and beliefs, can be amplified into identities among individuals who have similar interests or beliefs, and who meet each other on the Internet. The result can then be greater polarization and extremity. At Boys With ED, members can find some kind of togetherness around the issue of eating disorders, which might make them more extreme in their illness behaviour. Below is a list of the main themes found at the forum; themes that can be understood to express the members' wish to find or uphold a virtual togetherness with the other members:

*Boys who understand/ Boys who feel happy or sad for you.* Some members write that it feels nice to be a part of Boys With ED since this virtual sphere is full of other boys who will understand their situation. Some members write they hope to find support within this online context. If a member writes about his “drawback”, or his bad day, other members write he should look forward, or that they have had similar experiences. If a member writes he feels sad about having to go to a rehabilitation center, where they will have him gaining weight, other members usually answer that he can always lose weight later, and/or that they feel sorry for him. Clearly, when a member writes about him being happy or sad, other members show their support by writing their congratulations or writing that they feel sorry for him, respectively. Some boys at the forum write they appreciate being there, since other forums have mostly girls as members. The virtual togetherness is perhaps heightened because the members are aware they belong to the same sex, and therefore believe they can understand each other better.

*Making friends in the online world/ Being lonely in the offline world.* Members of Boys With ED sometimes write they can PM each other about eating disorder issues, or make friends at the forum. It happens that a member writes in a discussion thread to another member that this other member is welcome to contact him for further support, for example through MSN Messenger. Having a social life while having an eating disorder is an issue frequently discussed within the forum. The conclusion that having an eating disorder can make you lonely is put to the fore. Boys at the forum agree with each other that it is difficult to meet people in real life, since these people for example often want to meet over a dish. The boys also agree with each other that it is problematic to live with your family if you are a minor having an eating disorder, since family members always keep an eye on you or try to feed you. The boys gather around the notion that families can be very annoying. For members of Boys With ED, this online sphere is perhaps a place where they do not feel the need to hide what they are doing or thinking for their virtual friends, for better or for worse.

*Wishing each other good luck/ Keeping each other motivated.* Members congratulate each other or wish each other good luck, whether it be about recovering or reaching goals related to eating disorder maintenance. Sometimes boys at the forum write that keeping an online journal will hopefully keep them motivated, since both themselves and other members can then see how they are doing in achieving their weight goals. This can be compared to when a smoker tells people he will now quit smoking, or if a non-exerciser tells people he will now start exercising, in order to get a social pressure upon him to keep the promise he made to himself. In a similar way, the boys at Boys With ED sometimes seem to use the social forum as a way of forming a virtual social pressure. When knowing, or at least hoping, other members are following their progress, some of the members write that this will keep them motivated. Some members do have a discussion regarding whether it would be motivating if they would insult each other online. They write that if they would tell each other they are fat, this might perhaps keep them motivated to continue losing weight. However, the members seem to have different opinions regarding whether they believe this would help them stay motivated. Boys With ED often seems to be used in this way by its members,
meaning that the forum works as a means for continuing the shaping of the body.

Getting well. Sometimes members write they wish to recover from their eating disorder, or that something good can come out of rehabilitation. It happens that formerly active members come back to the forum after having been away for rehabilitation, in order to tell other members that life is better when you are healthy and that they wish other members the same happiness. They tell other members about a brighter side of life. Clearly, there are members at Boys With ED who care for other members.

Body image

Eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa seem to be connected to a disordered body image (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008:524). Kearney-Cooke and Steichen-Asch (1990:68) write that a man having an eating disorder ”[...] lives in a culture which emphasizes thinness and fitness, and exaggerates the importance of body image as a result.” In their study, men having eating disorders described the “lean, toned, thin” body shape as their ideal body shape (ibid., 1990:55). This can be compared to the most desired body shape among men in general: “There is a general consensus that most men aspire to a muscular mesomorphic shape characterised by average build with well-developed muscles on chest, arms and shoulders, and slim waist and hips [...] (Grogan, 1999:58)” Through interviewing men about body image issues, Drummond (2009:206-211) found that masculinity is seen as an indicator of masculinity. At Boys With ED, some boys write they wish to have a slim and muscular body, while some boys write they wish to have invisible muscles. It is clear that these boys do not wish to have full blown muscles. Whether these members perhaps wish to oppose the general consensus regarding what a masculine body looks like, or whether their desired body shape only comes as a consequence of the mental processes following an eating disorder, are questions yet unanswered. Muscles is perhaps something being discussed more often on Boys With ED than on sites directed to girls having eating disorders, since muscles are connected to the concept of masculinity.

Bordo (1999:70) is of the view that we compare our own bodies with cultural images, and that there can be a gap between our own selves and the cultural images around us. Teenagers today “[...] face a growing discrepancy between their bodies and mediated role models (Hogan & Strasburger, 2008:523).” If we find our bodies to not look like the bodies of the cultural images, dissatisfaction with our own bodies can come as a result (Bordo, 1999:70). Bordo (1999:179) writes that “[...] what's really happened is that women have been the beneficiaries of what might be described as a triumph of pure consumerism - and with it, a burgeoning male fitness and beauty culture - over homophobia and the taboos against male vanity, male “femininity”, and erotic display of the male body that have gone along with it.” Bordo (1999:221) sees a connection between the expansion of the male fitness and beauty culture and the increased amount of men being dissatisfied with their bodies.

When people bring the body into virtual spaces, dominant cultural values around the slender body type is often reproduced, and the potential freedom from the constraints associated with physical bodies might not occur (Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:349). At the forum Boys With ED, members upload pictures or videos of celebrities or models, or other people they write they wish to look like. The bodies in these pictures are always thin, and the pictures are probably meant to 'thinspire'. A word often used within the pro-ana movement is 'thinspiration'; a combination of the two words 'thin' and 'inspiration'. Thinspiration points to the use of media material to encourage and support the pursuit of an eating disorder (Juaraescio, Shoaib & Timko, 2010:402). Through looking at images showing thin celebrities or models, the members of Boys With ED perhaps experience a gap between their own bodies and the cultural images. By posting these images, the members are more or less giving rise to the gap Bordo (1990:70) writes about.

Sometimes, 'before' and 'after' pictures of celebrities are put in the thinspiration section of the forum.
This is the same as pictures showing what the chosen celebrities looked like before and after they lost weight. There are divergent opinions to be seen regarding whether the members find that a certain celebrity looks better in the before or after picture. This is interesting, because this means that the members seem to have higher requirements regarding the look of their own bodies than the look of other people's bodies. Sometimes members write them being disappointed at a celebrity who has gained weight. This could perhaps be reflecting the hardness in which they treat themselves and their own bodies, meaning that it reflects the disappointment they would experience if they gained weight themselves. Or it might reflect members finding it sad that they can no longer use this celebrity as thinspiration while trying to achieve their own weight goals. Quite often, members state that the people in the thinspiration pictures have too muscular bodies. A blurry line is drawn regarding how thin the members think a body can be and still look attractive. The members seem to draw different lines in terms of this issue, meaning that the members have somewhat different ideal body shapes.

Members do also post media material showing people being overweight. This is called 'reverse thinspo', which means that these pictures work as reversed thinspiration. The material is supposed to have people feel fear of how they might come to look if they start gaining fat, and therefore have people feel more motivated to remain thin. By looking at visual material of people being overweight, members of Boys With ED presumably use the material to become motivated to continue their strive for thinness. The members do write they would not want to look that fat and that they become more motivated to never gain weight after having seen the reversed thinspo material.

Pictures probably showing the members' own bodies are continuously posted within the forum's discussion threads. The pictures look like amateur pictures taken by the boys themselves in their own homes. You can tell they are not professionally taken in a studio. Members who post pictures of their own bodies often write they wish to receive comments on how they look. Some of these members write, in connection to the pictures, that they look fat. The other members' comments on these pictures are always positive. They often write that the member in question does not look fat, or that he looks good the way he is and that there is no need for him to become thinner. Often they write that the member looks good or hot, that they envy his looks, or that the pictures 'thinspired' them and will keep them motivated not to eat for the rest of the day. Some members post pictures showing their body as it looked before they developed an eating disorder, as well as pictures showing the body they have today, in order to show the progress. The other members then write that they admire the result. It is difficult to know whether the members' own body images are modified or maintained as a result of the participation at Boys With ED, but the way the members interact with each other online might have some effect upon these individuals' body image.

Riley, Rodham and Gavin (2009:353) write that at the studied pro-ana sites, participants described their own bodies in order to make their bodies 'visible' in these online contexts. In this way, the posters could demonstrate they had a right to belong to the site. In the same way, some members of Boys With ED upload pictures of their own bodies and ask for other members to do the same in order to prove they have a right to be members of the forum. Some members respond by posting pictures of themselves, while others write they are too embarrassed over their bodies to post pictures showing them. This example shows that according to some members, only people who are truly striving for thinness are welcome to the forum.

**Identification**

In order to summarize the findings noted above regarding body image, von Feilitzen's and Linné's (1974) concepts similarity identification and wishful identification are applicable. **Similarity identification** points to a person recognizing him-/herself in a media person, or believing him/herself being similar to the media person, while **wishful identification** points to a person wishing to be like the media person (von Feilitzen & Linné, 1974, cited in von Feilitzen, Filipson,
Rydin & Schyller, 1989:173). Members of Boys With ED compare their own bodies with other people's bodies, whether it be certain celebrities' bodies or other members' bodies. Similarity identification can be seen between members of Boys With ED when they write them finding their own body to be similar to another member's body with regard to bone structure or body measures. Perhaps seeing themselves in other members helps them to renegotiate their body image, for better or for worse. Regarding wishful identification, members often post pictures of people they would want to look like. The comments the members write regarding these pictures do not say much about them wanting to be like this person, but rather them wanting to look like this person. The question of identity is in this way connected to appearance more than other characteristics. In conclusion, the members' identities seem to be tightly connected to their body image.

*Embracing and hating the disorder*

Fox, Ward and O'Rourke (2005:954) write that the pro-ana movement is of contradictory nature, since the anorectic condition is seen as “[...] both a damaging behaviour and as a condition to be maintained.” The pro-ana ethos is partly about staying safe while maintaining the eating disorder you suffer from (Fox, Ward & O'Rourke, 2005:955). At Boys With ED, contradictions of this kind can be seen. According to what members of the forum have written, it is clear that many of them view eating disorders as both harmful and as something to maintain. Sometimes, when a new member enters the forum and writes that he wants to develop an eating disorder in order to get thinner, other members of the forum write that an eating disorder is nothing to wish for. And if a member expressively asks for diet tips, he sometimes gets the answer that the forum is not a diet forum. Members sometimes write about how their lives have become hell after they developed their eating disorder, and under the headline at Boys With ED (2012b) called 'Emotional support', it is written “Because we all know ED's can ruin you.” At the same time, members discuss how thin they can become before it becomes too dangerous for their health, and some members write that their eating disorder give them a good feeling of power and control. Hence, eating disorders are both embraced and hated within this virtual sphere.

There are moments when members discuss whether they should help each other in maintaining their illness behaviour or not, and it is clear that these members find it difficult to decide where to draw the line. On the one hand, members write that they accept everyone's choice and that they want to help other members in achieving whatever they want to achieve, whether it be about recovering or remaining in the same state of illness. On the other hand, members write that they do not wish the other members harm, and that they do not want to encourage other members if they are doing something being dangerous for them. The discussions held at Boys With ED indicate that the members often stand between two positions trying to find a middle path, meaning that the members show concern for other members' wellbeing, while at the same time believing that the other members should have the right to make their own life choices. The discussions show implicitly that the forum is presumably not only helping people to feel better. From an outsider perspective, the forum seems to do more harm than good.

**Conclusions**

Internet technology has opened up the opportunity for people sharing similar interests to gather in the same chosen online context. Within the platform and forum Boys With ED, boys claiming to have an eating disorder can meet and virtually interact beyond national borders. The member activity of a platform can never be fully detached from the platform itself, although the members of Boys With ED can choose to bring in (almost) what they want within the already fixed framework. Therefore, the body image issues seen at Boys With ED, as well as the virtual togetherness, the information part and the identification part, might have been constructed the way they are (by the members) because of the way the forum is built up.

Boys With ED can in many ways be considered pro-ana. The group-specific terminology seen there,
along with the thinspiration material and other material which can be said to encourage eating disorders, points towards Riley, Rodham and Gavin’s work. The authors write that it is typical of pro-ana websites to contain thinspiration material and a language where words such as ‘ana’ and ‘mia’ are used (Riley, Rodham & Gavin, 2009:350). In line with this, Boys With ED cannot be considered a recovery forum, but rather a pro-ana forum, although it has some elements being similar to elements found at recovery forums. After having studied the forum, it is clear that focus lies upon maintaining the eating disorder rather than getting well. Most of the content in the discussion threads tell about issues related to eating disorder maintenance rather than recovery.

One limitation of this study was that no interviews were conducted with members of Boys With ED. During future research, it would be interesting to follow and conduct interviews with these members in order to gain a deeper understanding of the members’ own view of this online context and what it means to them. This study has in many ways laid the groundwork for a study of that kind. At this moment, there are not many virtual spheres for boys having eating disorders. Nevertheless, if researchers are correct in assuming that an increasing amount of men are developing eating disorders, more virtual spheres of this kind might show up. If this happens, studies of these virtual spheres would be even more relevant. Another way to expand the theme of this study would be to compare a forum directed to boys having eating disorders with a forum directed to girls having eating disorders, in order to more thoroughly highlight gender issues.

References


