STIGMATISATION: SEX AND STARVATION – KEY FINDINGS FROM TWO CYBERSPACE STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines and critically engages with some of the issues and implications created by emergent cyber media in the shaping of individual, gendered and collective identities in two separate online community environments. Drawing on qualitative data gathered from two online research projects, this analysis considers the online interactions of traditionally stigmatised and ‘othered’ groups. How people use new media technologies for both risk management and risk-taking behaviours in order to achieve an identity both as individuals and as members of cultural groups is explored. Contemporary visual culture and the multiple ways media content is accessed, merged corporate media and the ever increasing number of globalised online and interactive spaces is considered in relation to the data from online discussion forums. One online environment was a predominantly male space used by men exchanging their ‘real life’ experiences and expectations of using the services of sex workers; whereas the other mainly female online environment was inhabited by women engaging with pro-anorexia/pro-eating disorder websites. This paper explores these two seemingly different research projects and discusses similarities of these stigmatised groups in terms of the development of communities of support in cyberspace, legitimising behaviours and the co-communities of difference through renegotiating acceptable boundaries. The contested nature of intimacy is evident through contributions to online forums as intimate public disclosures of highly secretive offline behaviour creating at times a highly supportive environment. Furthermore this paper crucially engages both the theoretical and practical debates in relation to the cultural contexts and concludes that often seen ‘outsider groups’ are able to share intimacies with their peers, gaining both emotional and practical support from one another in cyberspace that may not otherwise available.

Field of Research: Intimacy, self-identity, stigma, online communities, pro-anorexia

Introduction

This paper examines the main findings of two wider research studies conducted in during 2011 and 2012 that aimed to gain knowledge and understanding of diverse subject matters: the interactions between those that participate in online forums primarily used by those that seek and use the services of sex workers in the United Kingdom and pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) websites and online communities. The use specialist websites and discussion forums enable people all over the world to communicate on a particular topic or shared interest (Tierney, 2006). Sanders (2008, p.62) highlights that there has been a lack of specific research surrounding the use of the virtual environment as a “meeting place for men who buy sex to express and form their sexual and personal identities”. This, together with suggestions that there is a lack of evidence-based online health information related to eating disorders, places people at risk of obtaining inadequate information regarding the clinical characteristics and treatment options available (Smith and
McGowan, 2011) provides impetus for this inquiry. Castells (1996, p.429) eloquently and accurately predicted the all-encompassing nature of technological developments and that through his notion of “timeless time” previously actions and behaviours based upon restrictive practices in offline physical environments will have limited impact to the online environment. This paper examines significant similarities of experiences and support received by users of both the PunterNet public forums and those that engage with pro-ana websites.

In the UK, the first website with the explicit aim of providing a forum that enables those that seek adult sexual services to be linked with a range of service providers was established in January 1999. PunterNet aims to ‘promote better understanding between customers and ladies in hopes that everyone may benefit, with less stressful, more enjoyable and mutually respectful visits’ (www.punternet.com). PunterNet offers an avenue for service providers; service users and lurkers to engage in online marketing, (generic and specific); a review of previous experiences through the posting of ‘field reports’; guidance to both providers and users regarding current legislation and practices of law enforcement agencies and public forums where contributors (service users and providers) can discuss a variety of issues. This paper relates to the analysis of the content from the ‘general discussions forum’ between the 18th July 2011 and 25th July 2011.

There are currently estimated to be between 400-500 pro-ED websites available online Giles, (2006, p.464) and hundreds of individual weblogs and social network sites also claiming to be pro-ana (Bond, 2012). A significant number of sites are actually created by girls under 18 years old (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas & Katzman, 2006) and there is increasing concern over the nature and potentially harmful content of these sites for women. According to Mind (online) (the leading mental health charity for England and Wales), 1 in 100 women aged between 15 and 30 in the UK suffer from anorexia and recent reports show some girls as young as five years of age have weight concerns and think about going on a diet. Anorexia Nervosa is most likely to strike during the mid-teenage years and it affects approximately 1 in 150 fifteen-year-old females, and 1 in 1000 fifteen-year-old males (The Royal College of Psychiatrists, online).

Understanding the context

Giddens (2007, p.130) highlights that in essence intimacy is “above all a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality”. As such, to what extent intimacy can be achieved outside traditional accepted relationships must be considered especially when evidence suggests the lack of an intimate relationship within one’s life can be associated with risk factors relating to the onset of depression, is challenging to social development and physical health (Waring, 1985; Moss & Schwebel, 1993). Also Mattley (2002, p.366) focuses upon Sharron’s (1982) experiential aspect of temporality, identifying three specific “dimensions of time, inner time, concert time and spaced time.” By considering the concept of ‘inner time’, Mattley demonstrates how the flexibility of the mind permits it to link experiences of the past, present and perceived future. Additionally, ‘inner time’ should be acknowledged as being a vital component in understanding emotion as that is where emotion is experienced by the individual. This allows emotion to be seen as temporal as the individual’s emotionality “is informed by his or her entire history and biography” (Mattley, 2002 p.369). A perspective supported by Denzin (1983, p.406) who identifies that the “future, the past and the present are vividly interconnected in the emotional acts of the person.”

However, for society to castigate, socially exclude or limit the opportunities of those engaged in commercial intimate and sexual enterprises would be seen by Reiman (1976, p.41) as a state taking “on the characteristics of a total institution” due to individuals not having ownership of their bodies to do with it as they wish. Although there is a strong feeling from state authorities that sex work is
violence and that off-street sex work should not be under-estimated in terms of “the impact of exploitative and harmful practices in this sector” (Home Office, 2006, p.11), this is far from being universally accepted. Scoular & O’Neill (2007) identify that for many ‘off street’ service providers no coercion takes place, a position supported by Sanders (2008) where their clients are broadly representative of the wider population and rarely violent (Kinnell, 2006). Even though there is a growing body of evidence to support this position, there is still wide public appeal to what Gross (2005, p.288, my addition) identifies as “regulative traditions”, where those that do not conform to moral community values may be “threatened or [even face] actual exclusion” whether this takes the form of symbolic shaming or actual physical exclusion.

Similar to the expansion of online forums relating to sex work, the pro-ana community is substantial (Harshbarger, 2009) and the rise of the popularity of the internet and new media has played a significant part in providing easier access to information on how to diet, stay thin and maintain the anorexia/eating disordered condition. A “pro-eating disorder Website is defined as a collection of Internet pages, all assessed through a domain name or IP address, that deliver content about eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. This content can be conveyed through text, images, or audio, and it encourages knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours to achieve terribly low body weights” (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson & Peebles, 2010, p.1526). Those with eating disorders, especially young people, often lack social support (Tiller, Sloane, Schmidt & Troop, 1997) and this need, combined with technological developments which allow new online communities to develop quickly with little financial cost, has led to the plethora of pro-ED websites, online forums and communities available online. In understanding this phenomena it is important to remember that the young people who use pro-anorexia websites “actually ‘want’ their anorexia because of the positive perception that they have towards it” (Williams and Reid, 2010, p.553) and “in recent years, an array of anorexic narratives has been published on the internet presenting the intimate everyday experiences and nuances of living with an eating disorder” (Rich, 2006, p. 295).

Findings

The research presented here is a collaborative thematic analysis of publicly accessible online forums relating to the services of sex workers and findings from the research study ‘Virtually anorexic: Where’s the harm?’ conducted in 2012. All posts attributed to the ‘general discussions’ forum of PunterNet for one week 18th – 25th July 2011 together with detailed empirical evidence from existing literature on pro-ED, quantitative and qualitative data collected online in 2012 which was systematically analysed, including text and images gathered from 126 selected, publically available pro-ana websites, blogs and online forums. There are risks related to pro-ED websites that are potentially harmful to children that the original research highlights (Bond, 2012) but it should, nevertheless, be noted that that paradoxically participation in these environments also offer potential benefits in the form of social support, online friendship and developing a group identity. This makes the relationship between the globalised online environment and potentially stigmatised individuals a complex one.

The accessibility of the domains on which this paper is based is highlighted by typing PunterNet and ‘pro-anorexia’ into a basic search engine such as Google, but whilst this research strategy was initially straightforward the findings were not. Furthermore to consider risk in terms of a passive audience viewing harmful content would be a too simplistic analysis of the complexity that is both performed and experienced in these diverse online environments.

Websites
The type of virtual environment within which the websites are hosted is important to understanding the content and nature of use of various online spaces. PunterNet is a comprehensive and complex website that provides facilities such as searches for specific services; geographical location and even whether or not the service provider claims to be an independent escort or working for an agency. Additional facilities include advertisements from service providers providing at times explicit images and links to external web-links, public forums and private members chat rooms where participants can interact with fellow punters or ‘working girls’. The significance of the complexity of PunterNet is highlighted when considering the levels of interaction that takes place: for example on 27/1/13 there were 21,772 members, 465,189 posts in the public forums under categories of ‘General Discussion; Requests for Information; Legalities and Legislation; The Rest of the World; Dangerous Punter Warnings; Off-Topic Talk; Hall of Shame and Health and Safety’ (PunterNet online).

Whereas PunterNet was purposively selected due to its specific content and historical value, the pro-ED websites were accessed purely in relation to the results of the Google search. Interestingly, not all pro-ED websites are the same, an assertion that is borne out by the many different types of websites and online communities that were observed and recorded. Some websites are multi-paged, highly sophisticated with a complex array of content and multiple affordances (see Hutchby, 2001) but other websites, although comprising of several pages were far more basic by design and in terms of content. There are also hundreds of social networking sites and individualised weblogs and more image based sites hosted, for example, on YouTube or Tumblr. A significant number of websites are actually created by girls under 18 years old (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas & Katzman, 2006) but this is not really that surprising given that setting up and maintaining a website or Blog requires a basic level of digital skills and many children in primary schools have mastered web design and management.

The more complex sites have hundreds of users from all over the world with different pages for different functions and topics. These multi-pages sites are well ordered, organized and up-to-date claiming sometimes over 2,600 members at the time of the fieldwork. The size of the globalised community is significant to understanding the appeal of the sites as they are active 24 hours a day. According to website statistics there had been 1,580 topics under discussion on some sites in different chat rooms across nearly 15,000 posts. They offer, for example, a new members forum; a forum to talk about different types of eating disorders; a chat room for members who were pro-recovery (which included clear text based instructions requesting users did not post anything that could be considered triggering) and forums for discussions about family issues. Some websites offer tips and advice for hiding symptoms of the eating disorder from family and medical professionals and discussions on traumas, for example, relating to abuse. Opportunities to find an ‘anabuddy’ - an online friend, for support and advice is provided by many websites and users can also exchange email or contact details to communicate with each other away from the more public forum environments. A large proportion of these websites is dedicated to ‘thinspiration’ or ‘thinspo’ with photographs and images, competitions and dieting challenges. Many websites also had forums for discussing issues related to self-harm (this was usually clearly indicated) and also pages dedicated to more mundane, everyday topics such as fashion; media, music and literature as well as art, poems, health and beauty and links to other pro-ED websites.

**Understanding identities online**

Sanders (2008, p.70) highlights that there are no “real time” constraints on punters as the Internet has provided a crucial medium for men to illuminate their feelings, desires and experiences regarding what is primarily seen as “a secret area of men’s private lives” at a time that is suitable to them. This together with the anonymity that a pseudonym within a web presence may provide can be seen to help alleviate any perceived shame associated with their actions. Goffman (1990, p.31) emphasises the role of “sympathetic others” as these individuals also share similar feelings of
stigmatisation and access to web-based forums present an opportunity to be accepted and receive emotional support. For example, a discussion thread highlighted the measures taken by a forum member prior to and after an encounter with a sex worker. This post provided a detailed account of how he hides money from his wife, how he suffers ‘the punter’s delusion that every man knows what I’m doing...’, the anxiety he feels when approaching the property as he feels exposed like ‘Gary Cooper at high noon...’. The post is completed with details of how he worries about how he smells and wonders to what extent his wife will discover his activities because he showered using different shampoo than usual. This post produced 18 responses the majority of which were supportive highlighting that they too go through similar rituals prior to punting. Additional support was provided regarding the concern of being discovered by his wife due to the ‘perfume, the messy hair and the arriving home cleaner smelling than when left...’ and another response highlighted this was ‘not so far from my own pre punt thoughts routines.’

Self-identity is fundamental to understanding why young people develop, manage and use the pro-ED websites and forums. As already discussed individuals with an ED often feel isolated and misunderstood by their family and friends. Goffman (1959) outlines ‘performance’ as the activities of an individual before a set of observers and members of the pro-ED community perform their self-identity and indeed their Eating Disordered or ana identity online. Goffman (1959, p.26) further defines interaction as “the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions in performance, and may be defined as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”. It is these interactions, whether between the individual and web space content or between the individuals and others, which are fundamental to understanding the relationship between those engaging with the pro-ED community and the globalised online spaces. These websites allow stigmatised or socially isolated individuals to share experiences anonymously in a “rich tapestry of identity work” (Giles, 2006, p.474). The young people through their online identity share experiences and form friendships reflecting how

“cyberspace has emerged as a critical context for the construction of alternative identities and narratives relating to eating disorders. In recent years, an array of anorexic narratives has been published on the internet presenting the intimate everyday experiences and nuances of living with an eating disorder”


The personalised narratives performed in virtual environments are often hyperlinked to each other in a recommended or ‘I am following’ list and frequently have images and quotes from text replicated and re-blogged from each other’s sites. The pro-ED community online is, therefore, understood as a “phenomenon that has constructed itself by gradually increasing numbers of websites and their members into a community of practice” (Giles, 2006, p.464).

Thus the constructors, followers and users of the websites obtain and maintain an identity of a successful ‘ana’ or a failing ‘ana’ in detailing their diet activities which are used as identity markers or cues online proving that they are a ‘worthy’ ana. Ana, as part of their self-identity is apparent and ‘letters to ana’; ana creeds and poems reflecting of the thoughts and views of the authors are common. The letters and creeds to ana have a religious like quality to them and many are beautifully illustrated with drawings and other art work. The use of these religious metaphors and the religious or spiritual nature of the sites abound with creeds or letters to ana and also goddess like analogies in relation to ana or to the creator of the site (Norris, Boydell, Pinhas & Katzman, 2006).

This ‘community of practice’ can also be seen within the public forums of PunterNet where support is routinely expressed amongst both ‘punters’ and ‘working girls’ highlighting that individuals are not
alone and that their experiences are very similar. Additionally there are regular ‘threads’ where contributors are seeking guidance rather than just expressing their own experiences for others to enjoy. For example a thread asking for advice on how to meet a ‘working girl’ from someone who had no experience and appeared to be very nervous received 8 responses from ‘working girls’ and ‘punters’. This provided a balance of sensible and pragmatic practical steps ranging from sending emails, the benefits and pitfalls of using ‘saunas’, accessing independent working girls (indie) or agencies together with evaluating their websites in a sensitive manner. Other threads have posters seeking advice relating to the risks of catching sexually transmitted infections (STIs) from ‘working girls’.

Of particular interest was the thread from a ‘service provider’ seeking the opinions of the community regarding the behaviour of particular ‘punter’ at their ‘sauna’. Here a specific punter would expect a ‘working girl’ to weigh herself on scales prior to the encounter so that he could confirm that she had not put any weight on. This specific ‘working girl’ had been attempting with the guidance of her GP to increase her weight and the owners of the ‘sauna’ wondered if the request from the punter should be continued to be facilitated. This post received 55 responses comprehensively, although not universally, criticising the ‘punter’s’ expectations and supported the view that the ‘sauna’ should no longer accept his patronage, a position that was eventually taken by the originator of the thread. This expectation was seen by the majority of respondents as a service ‘to far’ and that anyone who suggested otherwise, for example one respondent stated there was ‘synthetic outrage on this thread’, faced “in-group purification” (Goffman, 1990, p.132) through castigation, where those that participate in stigmatised activities attempt to normalise their behaviour and influence that of others that they engage with.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the surprising similarities between two diverse ‘outsider groups’ and the extent that they are able to provide both practical and emotional support in cyberspace where it may otherwise not be available. “Eating disorders revolve around privacy and secrets” (Kirkwood, 2005, p.119), as does the life of a ‘punter’, the presumed deviant male who pays for sex. Goffman, (1959) suggest that the efforts of stigmatized individuals not only ‘normify’ their own conduct but also encourage others to embody the stigmatised behaviour. This is exemplified in what is termed “back places” (Goffman, 1990, p.102), where those that are stigmatized can openly display their true self without concern. Sharing is important to relationships and is based on trust and intimacy and understanding the reciprocal dependence and familiarity, whether it is in the pro-ana community or social networks that facilitate support surrounding participants of the sex work industry. It is both the secretive nature of the pro-anorexia movement and the intimacy that the young people feel towards the disease itself and one another and that make online environments ripe for self-disclosure (Haas, Irr, Jennings & Wagner, 2011). Thus “concealing anorexic practice is then a symbolic site as these young women struggle not only to reassert their self-determination but also to attempt to regain an identity, albeit an anorexic identity” (Rich, 2006, p.298). For men, the role of male orientated social networking sites such as PunterNet, facilitate “male bonding, for learning about sex market etiquette and as a place to find emotional support” (Sanders 2008, p.ix). Through the establishment of an ‘audience’, bloggers and forum group contributors engage in co-constructing personal identities that are in keeping with the group membership to fit in with the expectations of a perceived audience (Goffman, 1990; Haas, Irr, Jennings & Wagner, 2011). These activities nurture each other’s behaviour (Collins, 2004) and through the sharing of experiences and disclosing intimate feelings, the identities of both groups are strengthened, and the support group gains momentum through message exchange with an anonymous audience.
References


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