Introduction

Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites, sites that promote anorexia and bulimia, are relatively new phenomena and have been the topic of a growing body of research. However, the focus of these studies has been the negative content of the sites, rather than on the young women who construct and visit them. This study examined motives for visiting these Web sites. A survey, comprised of the UCLA Loneliness Scale-Version 3, UCLA Social Support Inventory, and questions about time spent on these Web sites and possible reasons for visiting them (e.g. creativity, sharing information, connecting with others) were posted on three Pro-Ana/Mia forums as well as three Pro-Self-Injury forums. Results show that the need for social support is an important factor in why people visit these Web sites.

Methods

Thirty-one participants, ages 15 to 27 (M= 20.26, SD= 2.88) participated. Participants were primarily female (with one male and one trans woman) and primarily Caucasian.

The survey created contained the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3), the UCLA Social Support Inventory, questions about time spent on the internet, and demographic questions.

The survey was posted on three Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites and forums and three Pro-Self-Injury site forums (in order to explore whether findings applied to both types of Web sites or were specific to Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites).

Participants were asked to give informed consent, take the survey, and read a debriefing form afterward.

Results

• There was no significant difference found between visitors of Pro-Self-Injury Web sites and Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites with regard to loneliness or need for emotional support.
• Loneliness was significantly correlated with the amount of time spent on Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites, r(49)=.416, p<.05. Amount of time spent on Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites was also significantly correlated with need for empathy and understanding, r(49)=.345, p<.05. (See Figure 1.1)
• Satisfaction with emotional support was significantly correlated with emotional support received from an internet friend, r(49)=.428, p<.05. Interestingly, satisfaction with emotional support was even more highly correlated with emotional support received from parents, r(59)=.521, p<.01, while not being correlated with support received from “real world” friends.

Discussion

• Participation on forums and amounts of loneliness were the same in those with eating disorders and those with another stigmatized mental issue; self-harm. Thus, prevention research about Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites may also be applied to Pro-Self-Injury Web sites.
• As predicted, social support was found to be a primary motive for visiting Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites. However, the type of social support was more specific than predicted as it seemed centered around primarily two types of social support: emotional support, or the ability to express oneself freely and receive empathic feedback, and esteem support, which allows one to be accepted by people who listen empathetically rather than judgmentally (Silver & Wortman, 1980).
• Though it follows the prediction that satisfaction with emotional support would be correlated with support received with online friends rather than support received from “real world” friends, it is surprising that it was highly correlated with support given by parents. It is possible that the emotional support given by parents was about issues other than the participants’ eating disorders. It is also possible that rather than feeling a total isolation, participants felt primarily disconnected from peers. Future research will need to more clearly address this issue.
• Replications of this study using larger sample sizes may be helpful in prevention.

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References


