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Motives for Visiting “Pro-Ana/Mia” Web sites

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Abstract

Pro-eating disorder 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.

Introduction

- Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites, sites that promote anorexia nervosa (AN) and bulimia nervosa (BN), have fueled controversy in the media. Certain components of these Web sites do encourage unhealthy behavior (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008).
- Common harmful features include “thinspiration”, or pictures of emaciated women that inspire viewers not to eat, tips and tricks about weight loss and concealing a disorder, and new “diet plans” that emphasize severe calorie restriction. (Lapinski, 2006; Norris, Boydell, Pinhas, & Katzman, 2006).
- However, these sites are much more complex than they first appear. Previous research has focused on content analysis and the effect that these Web sites have on viewers. However, this research does not address why people visit these Web sites.
- Many with AN or BN feel that they have formed a new identity which is not accepted by the family and friends of the sufferer, therefore they search for a new environment and support system that fits their new identity (Rich, 2006; Tan, Hope, & Stewart, 2003). This need is possibly fulfilled on Pro-Ana/Mia Web sites.
- This study was developed to address this issue by exploring potential motives for visiting these sites, such as social support, information sharing, and creativity. It was predicted that social support, would be a primary reason for participants to visit these 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, motives and demographic questions.
- The survey was posted on three Pro-Ana/Mia Web site forums and three Pro-Self-Injury site forums (included 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 of 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.

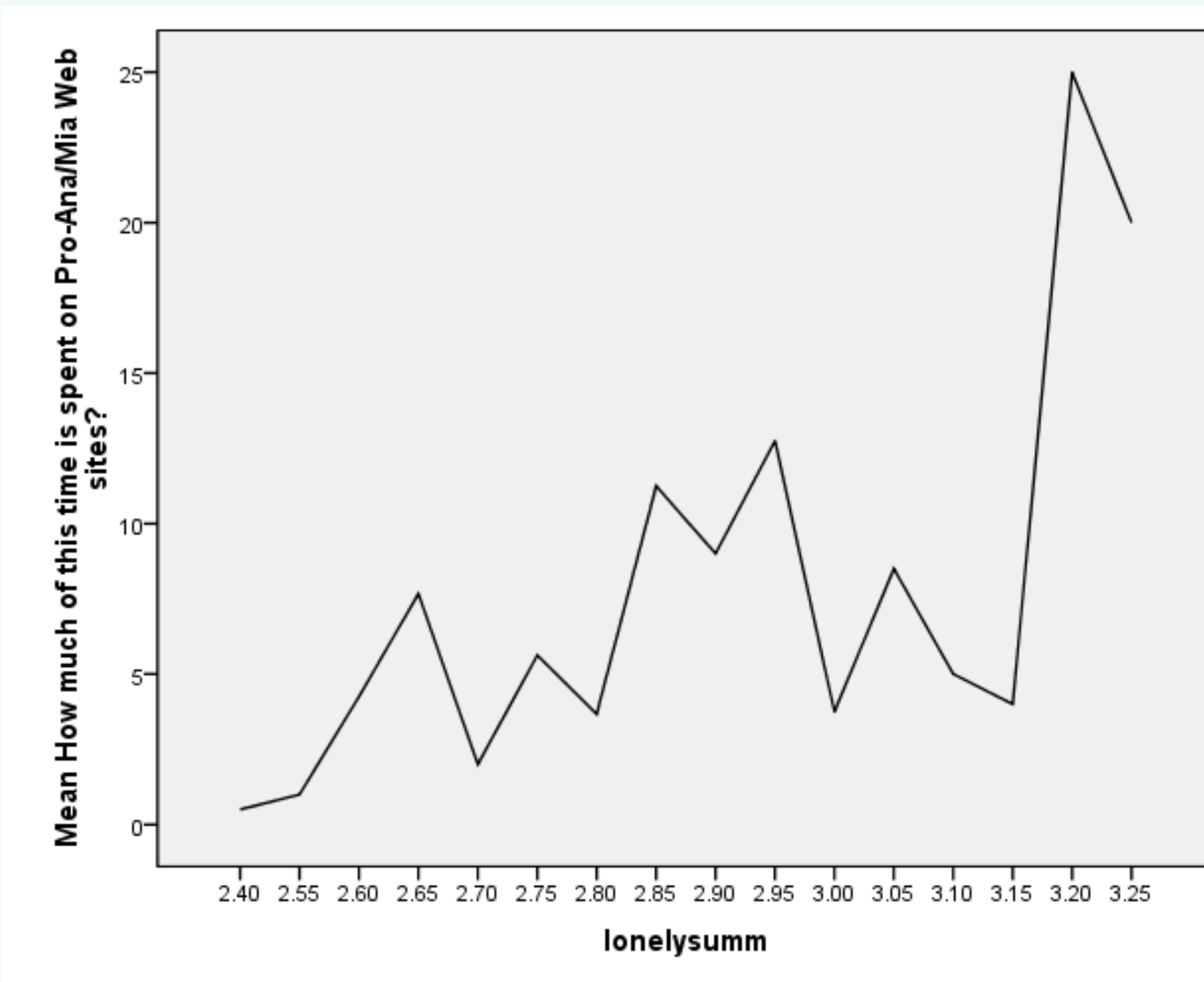


Figure 1: Correlation between loneliness and hours spent of Pro-Ana/Mia or Pro-Self-Injury Web sites

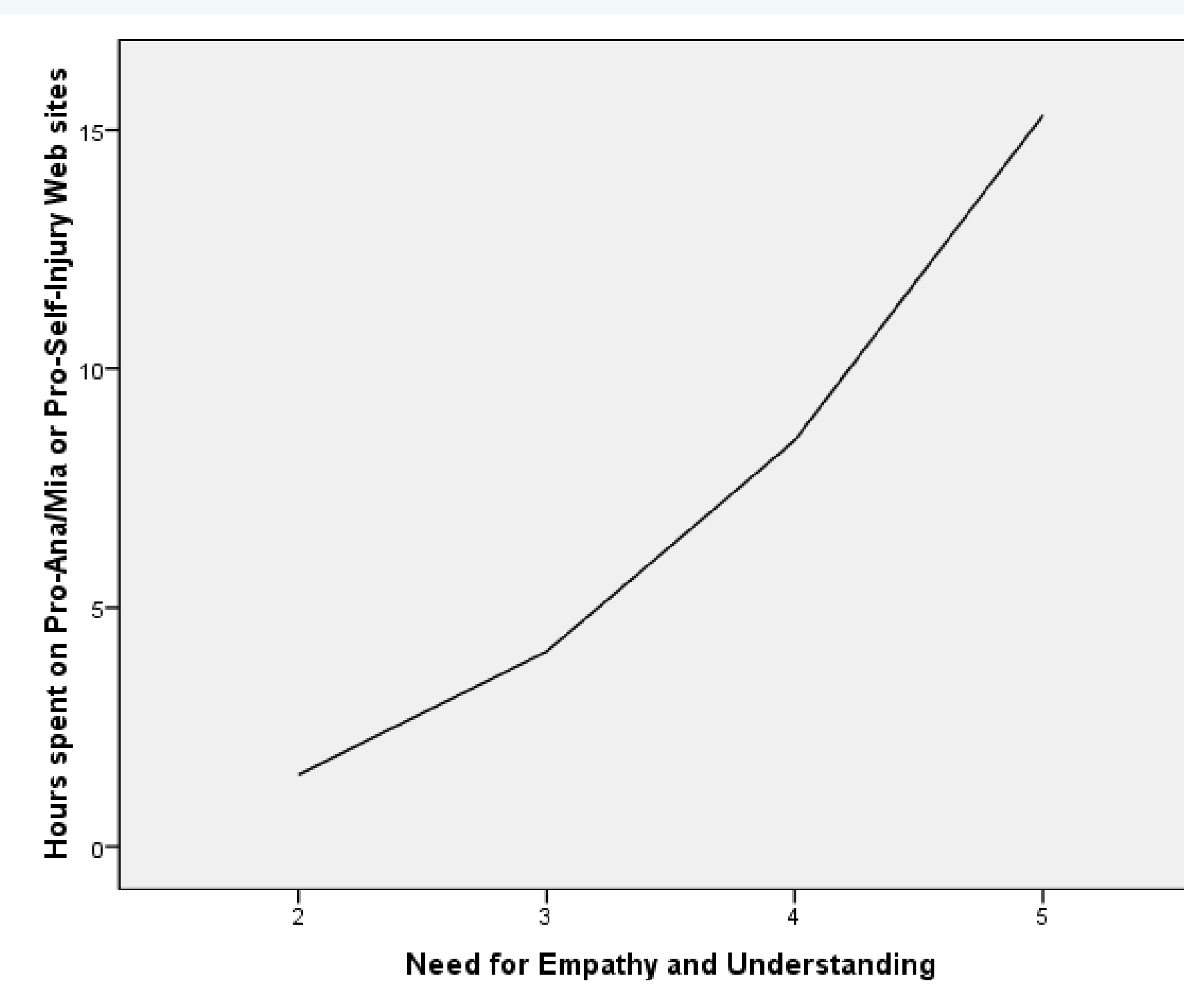


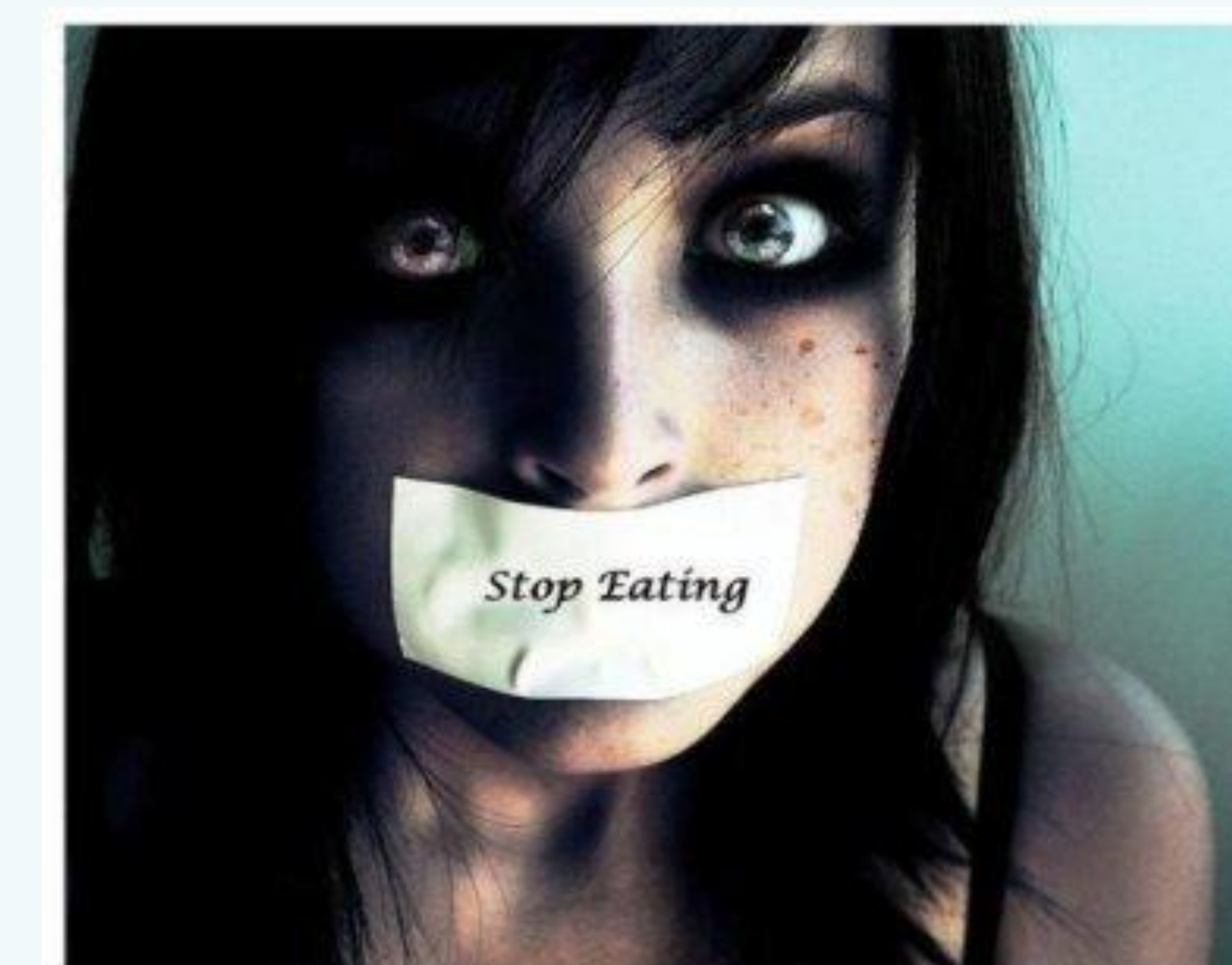
Figure 2: Correlation between need for empathy and understanding and hours spent on Pro-Ana/Mia or Pro-Self-Injury Web sites

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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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Rich (2006) found that when surrounded by others with similar issues, patients felt more able to express themselves without being “hushed up”.

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