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'My anorexia story': girls constructing narratives of identity on YouTube

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of pro-anorexia ('pro-ana') communities has attracted extensive academic attention over the last 15 years, with feminist scholars fascinated by the political complexities of such cultures. But the internet has also enabled a range of eating disorder recovery cultures to emerge – whether organized around blogs, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube – and such spaces have been largely ignored by feminist scholarship which has fetishized the apparently more resistant and controversial discourses of pro-ana. As such, this article explores a set of videos posted on YouTube under the title of 'My anorexia story' which present narratives of recovery, or efforts to recover, from anorexia. Primarily produced by white, Western, teenage girls, these videos are effectively slide shows made up of written text and photographs, with selfies of the body sitting at their core. The conceptual and political significance of self-representation has been seen as central to the construction of subjectivity within the digital media landscape, with particular attention paid to the ways in which such practices compare, speak back to, or challenge the existing representational discourses of 'dominant' media and wider relations of social power. In this regard, this article explores questions of agency in gendered self-representation, examining what kinds of self-narratives the girls are producing about anorexia. In doing so, it examines how the stories seek to 'author' and regulate the meanings of the anorexic body; how these constructions intersect with dominant constructions of anorexia (such as those offered by medical discourse and the media); as well as the implications of the aesthetic strategies they employ. In considering how the narratives visualize, display and 'expose' the anorexic body, I draw upon a growing area of work which examines the selfie in relation discourses of surveillance, visibility and selfhood.

KEYWORDS Self-representation; Youtube; selfie; anorexia; girlhood; feminism; bodies

Debra Ferreday observes how 'the anorexic body is ... that which cannot be represented for fear of inspiring disgust. For example, it is likely to be left out of family photographs' (2003, p. 290, see also Probyn 1988). When I first read this quote I was struck by the fact that I have almost *no* images of my life growing up with anorexia in the early 1990s. Although my experience

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of anorexia was in many ways intensely public – people stared at me at school, in changing rooms, at the swimming pool – it was also a private affair, associated (in my family context) with embarrassment, confusion and fear. Even in 1990, many people did not really know what anorexia was and thus what was ‘wrong’ with me, and I recall my teenage years as a period of excruciating isolation from my peers. Although there was sometimes mention of public or celebrity figures who were known to suffer with an eating disorder, I knew of no others with anorexia in the ‘real’ world and thus had no sense of myself as part of a social group, identity or community.

The cultural and media context for the contemporary teenage ‘anorexic’¹ is perhaps rather different. Discourses of stigmatization undoubtedly remain, and as this article explores, they are rearticulated in new ways in relation to new media technologies. But in large part due to the rise of online cultures, the concept of the anorexic body as hidden is no longer workable in the contemporary media context. The phenomenon of pro-anorexia (pro-ana) communities has attracted extensive academic attention over the last 15 years, with feminist scholars fascinated by the political complexities of pro-ana, and its apparent challenge to the hegemony of medical discourse which positions self-starvation as an illness or disease (e.g. Ferreday 2003, Day and Keys 2008, Boero and Pascoe 2012). The internet, however, has also encouraged a range of eating disorder *recovery* cultures to emerge, whether organized around blogs, Facebook, Instagram or YouTube. Yet such spaces have been largely ignored in feminist scholarship – perhaps because pro-ana is seen as offering more obvious possibilities for gender resistance and agency.

This article explores a set of videos posted on YouTube under the title of ‘My anorexia story’, or some variant on that phrase. Primarily produced by white, Western, teenage girls, these videos are effectively slide shows made up of written text and photographs, and they present narratives of recovery, or efforts to recover, from anorexia. The conceptual and political significance of self-representation has been seen as central to the construction of subjectivity within the digital media landscape, with particular attention paid to the ways in which such practices compare, speak back to, or challenge the existing representational discourses of ‘dominant’ media (Thumim 2012, Olszanowski 2014). In this regard, and in part prompted by my own historical and personal relationship with anorexia, I set out to explore what kinds of contemporary self-narratives girls diagnosed with anorexia are producing on YouTube, and the implications of such constructions. Indeed, whilst situating the videos as self-representations, I am interested in how these narratives might be understood in relation to wider discourses of gendered power. This is particularly so with regard to (1) medical and media discourses on anorexia and (2) the representation of the (starved) female body. In order to explore how questions of voice and agency play out in the videos (and I include reflection on my own ‘voice’ as a woman who self-starved as part

of this process), I situate my work at the intersection of feminist work on the body, feminist work on eating disorders, and girls' media studies – all of which have been concerned with the construction of bodies and subjectivities within gendered relations of power. In examining how the videos construct narratives through recurring bodily and digital practices, I explore how selfies sit at the core of these constructions, drawing upon a growing area of work which examines the selfie in relation to discourses of surveillance, visibility and selfhood (Brager 2015, p. 1662, Burns 2015, Frosh 2015).

Media girls, media bodies

Girls' media studies has been interested in how girls use popular culture as a resource for identity construction, moving across issues of reception, representation and production (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 2007, Kearney 2011). The idea of girls *producing* media culture has been a particular focus of interest given perceptions of their historically antithetical or 'deficient' relationships with technology (Kearney 2006, Banet-Weiser 2011, p. 280), as well as the ways in which girls have been constructed as 'excessively' invested in the consumption of mass mediated forms. Girls evidently produced media before the advent of the internet, but in early discussions of participatory media, there was a sense of acute optimism that girls might resist 'ideologies of gendered and generational subjectivity by telling their *own* stories of female adolescence [original emphasis]' (Kearney 1998, p. 298). There is certainly evidence to suggest that girls have crafted online identities and used online communication to resist political inequalities, form alliances, critique popular media forms and articulate their voices as citizens (Kearney 2006, Harris 2008, Keller 2015). There is also a limited amount of work dealing with girls producing videos on YouTube which, in terms of the political possibilities of self-representation, draws varied conclusions, depending on the particular nature of the video genre in hand (Banet-Weiser 2011, Dobson 2015, Rossie 2015). But it is also the case that the participatory nature and 'transformative potential' of online communication (Orgad 2005, 143) has been subject to increasing scrutiny within feminist media and girls' media studies, with caution being exercised about the ways in which the production of the public digital self – from blogs, social media networks to YouTube – remains complexly negotiated in relation to material and offline inequalities.

This article is specifically interested in how anorexia is embodied online in a particular set of videos. But the narratives analysed here now circulate within a wider culture of *everyday* digital practices in which the physical body is imaged, surveilled and performed within social media contexts – an example of how the reflexive project of the body has been central to the production of the self in late modernity (Giddens 1991). Yet girls have frequently

been framed in alarmist terms in this regard, and in ways which position the body as a site of risk. From the gendered discourses surrounding the selfie (and its association with narcissism and sexual impropriety) (Burns 2015, p. 1718); the suggestion that viewing bodies on social media is causing a rise in body distress (e.g. Parry 2014); to the idea that *selfies* are now propelling pro-anorexia cultures online (e.g. Bingham 2015); discourses on the relationship between girls, the body and *self*-imaging have made visible a series of heightened anxieties about their 'unsupervised use of digital technologies' (Martinez 2007). Such a persistent emphasis on risk (as well as the insistence on the girl as a consuming subject), directs attention away from questions of media production and *self*-representation, as well as the digital practices through which constructions of the self are actively negotiated and produced.

The relationship between bodies and images evidently has a longer cultural and scholarly history where girls and women are concerned, and these relations have often been framed in negative terms (Budgeon 2003, Frost 2005, Coleman 2009). As Sue Jackson and Tina Vares observe, a 'framing of the body as media-produced has been particularly rife [for girls], explained in part ... by intersections with cultural discourses of the child as vulnerable and prone to influence' (2013, p. 350). Questions of oppression *as well as* embodied agency have been hotly debated within feminist work on the body, and a range of scholars have sought to theorize the body beyond a binary of representation/ materiality (see Budgeon 2003, p. 43), examining the ways in which the complexity of embodied identity transcends this duality. Indeed, with regard to girls, empirical work on the relationship between bodies and media images has suggested that girls often demonstrate a clear awareness of the ways in which their relationship to their bodies is mediated (and the 'normative nature of this mediation'), whilst it has also detailed practices of resistance and agency (Budgeon 2003, p. 40). Such work suggests a process in which bodily ideals are negotiated, and in which the body cannot simply be reduced to an 'effect' of representation and images (Frost 2005, Coleman 2009).

But the debate surrounding the female body as an 'effect of consumption' (Budgeon 2003, p. 42) has also occupied a complex place within critical feminist approaches to anorexia, and this in turn relates to the ways in which such work has understood anorexia in relation to questions of gendered oppression, agency and power. Rather than seeing self-starvation as a mental illness or disease, feminist work on anorexia is united in its suggestion that we should situate eating problems in relation to the socially and culturally constructed nature of female identity (Orbach 1986, Bordo 1993, Malson 1998, Saukko 2008). But it is the issue of what constitutes this social/cultural context – and how it informs the development and experience of body/eating distress – that has occupied a contested place within and across the feminist scholarship. In seeking to account for the increased visibility of

eating disorders in the latter half of the twentieth century, the earlier feminist writers (Orbach 1979, 1986, Chernin 1985, Wolf 1991, Bordo 1993) placed a firm emphasis on both patriarchy and 'the media' as key explanatory frameworks (see Eckermann 2009). Although it would not be fair to suggest that the earlier works offered reductive explanations of anorexia as simply constituted by idealized images of (thin) femininity, later work, particularly that shaped by postmodern and poststructuralist feminism (e.g. Malson 1998, Bray 2005, Malson and Burns 2009), has been especially critical of the extent to which anorexia is reduced to a 'narcissistic' and 'irrational' over-internalization of the thin ideal, or even simply a problem of 'body image' (see Malson 2009).

Influenced by Foucauldian (Foucault 1977) ideas about the regulation and governance of the body (Bordo 1993), as well as the importance of language in shaping the development and maintenance of power (see Eckermann 2009, pp. 12–13), later feminist work on eating disorders has placed a central emphasis on anorexia and bulimia as discursive constructions. This has examined how such categories are actively constituted by medical discourse, as well as a range of other 'normative discursive contexts' which are at work in Western cultures (such as consumerism, postmodernity, or 'healthyism' (see Malson 2009, p. 137). What is key here however is the ways in which 'anorexic' bodies and practices have been understood as *multiply* and complexly constituted (see Bordo 1993, Saukko 2008, Eckermann 2009, Malson 2009 pp. 136–137), playing out discourses of containment and discipline, *as well as embodied agency and resistance.*

The extent to which post-structuralist work on anorexia focused attention on self-starvation as a complex process of 'embodied communication and active identity construction' (Eckermann 2009, 13) is especially clear in the feminist work on pro-ana cultures which, in its examination of how identities are constructed online (Ferreday 2003, Day and Keys 2008, Boero and Pascoe 2012), prefigures my interest in how digital subjectivities are used to craft and express experiences of female self-starvation. A crucial aim of this article is to think about the specificities of the 'My anorexia story' videos as *distinct* from pro-ana material. But pro-ana cultures undoubtedly offered scope to consider girls/women as 'originators' of discourse on anorexia (rather than the 'silent objects' of its power) (Day and Keys 2008, p. 4), dovetailing with my interest in self-representation, and the discursive contexts within which such constructions unfold. Both the YouTube videos and pro-ana cultures also return us to the vexed relationship between anorexia and 'media', as well as the relationship between the material and digital body. Whilst pro-ana cultures have historically traded on 'thinspirational' images from the mass media or images of the subjects' own body, the YouTube videos raise further – and often different – questions about mediated subjectivities, self-representation and gendered forms of corporeal production in teenage girls.

As outlined below, I follow such feminist approaches in conceptualizing the subjectivities in the videos as discursive constructions. But I also acknowledge the concern that such an approach risks reducing anorexia to a 'text' (Lester 1997, p. 481, cited in Probyn 2011 p. 7), or a culturally inscribed surface (Burns 2009) which neglects the experiences of real girls or women (Lester 1997). As someone with personal experience of long-term self-starvation, I share these concerns. Whilst I can only treat the videos here *as* constructions (and certainly find this approach useful), I aim to be mindful of this problematic, and consider the questions they raise about the relationship between the material 'lived' body and the digital body.

Methodology: searching for stories

The 'My anorexia story' videos have many stylistic features in common in ways which position them as a genre, and they form a subset of what have been described as digital 'illness' narratives online (Ellis 2012). The videos also represent a particular incarnation of (gendered) teenage suffering narratives which are posted on YouTube under such titles as 'My bullying story' or 'My self-harm story' (see Dobson 2015). The video sample was retrieved by searching YouTube with the phrases 'My anorexia story' or 'My anorexia journey', and the URLs for the first 35 videos that were returned were saved (to ensure that YouTube's recommendation system did not adapt the search results at a later time). About 35 videos was felt to be an appropriate sample size for the study given that, as quickly became apparent, the videos tend to follow a particular and recurrent formula. It was also after viewing 35 videos that I reached data saturation, with what were only minor variations in story construction being exhausted and repeated.

The videos ranged from 3:24 minutes to 11:31 minutes in length, and recorded viewings ranging from 3,184 to 4,416,124. With many of the videos exceeding well over 300,000 views, it is clear that personal stories of anorexia enjoy a not insignificant visibility on YouTube. The subjects of the videos in the sample were all female, predominantly white (33 out of 35), and aged between 13 and 19 years (according to references to age and school year within the videos themselves). As the search terms clearly created a bias toward videos in English-language speaking countries, the creators of the videos tended to be based in the USA or the UK, which makes this article an analysis of how a particular sector of Western girls construct self-narratives of anorexia. In terms of the identities of the girls involved, the narratives are freely available on YouTube, but the subject matter is clearly sensitive, and the creators of the videos may not wish their material to be analysed and published for an academic readership. As such, the names and user-names of the participants, as well as the video links, will not be disclosed here in a bid to offer a certain level of anonymity.

Following other approaches to the study of YouTube videos (Banet-Weiser 2011, Dobson 2015), I use discursive textual analysis to examine the recurrent narrative and aesthetic structures which construct the self in the stories, including a focus on temporal organization, editing, image, camerawork and sound. But as these videos are effectively slideshows in which the stories are told through a series of photographs, I also focus on the construction of the still image, whether this is a conventional photograph or a selfie. Many of the videos mixed these photographic formats, but the use of the selfie tended to predominate (with many stories containing between 20 and 40 selfies). In doing so, I draw upon emerging work which analyses the selfie as both an aesthetic form and a social practice – the discursive construction and circulation of which has been seen as explicitly gendered on a number of different levels (Burns 2015, Senft and Baym 2015)

With regard to method, I transcribed the written slides which appeared between/ over the images, as well as the textual descriptions of the videos posted by the creators, seeing them as discursive strategies which seek to prefer certain ways of reading the stories. Although I read the comments for each video in order to get a sense of how YouTube users were responding to the videos and the frames in which they were being discussed, I did not undertake a systemic analysis of them (as this would have made the data pool too large). Thus, I only draw on feedback comments when they highlight particular discursive tensions in the potential meanings of the videos, such as when they give rise to debates about what *why* videos were produced and thus how they ‘should’ be interpreted by viewers.

I also fully acknowledge that my own positioning in relation to these stories is complex and multi-faceted. The emphasis on ‘writing the personal’ (Probyn 2011) has been central to the epistemological and political interventions of feminist research, and the relationship between the researcher and the researched has been explored in a number of feminist works which take a qualitative approach to anorexia. This has included discussions of personal experience of self-starvation – and the implication of this experience within the research process – as well as the power relations at stake in such research encounters, and the politics of ‘reading’ and ‘voicing’ the bodies of those who are frequently silenced and pathologized (Malson 1998, Saukko 2008, Probyn 2011, Author 2015).

These issues of personal experience, empathy and power play out in different ways in the context of this article. On the one hand, my interest in the videos pivoted on their apparent *difference* from my own generational experience of anorexia (in which the emaciated body was hidden as a marker of ‘pathology’ and shame) – a distancing which also maps onto discourses of ‘tech-savvy youth’ and the ways in which technology functions to shape the construction of generational identities (Mallon *et al.* 2010). My relationship with anorexia was long-term, lasting for 20 years, and it certainly overlapped

with the rise of ‘new’ media. But I never engaged in any of the digital practices which have brought the anorexic body online, and the girls who made these videos speak to, and are helping to produce, a different generational experience of anorexia(s) of which I have not been part. At the same time, the researching and writing of this article was pervaded by a sense of painful intimacy and recognition in which the ‘visceral aspects of [the].. research material’ (Probyn 2011, p. 5) were recurrently and deeply felt. Watching the stories was often a difficult and upsetting experience, both in terms of moments of sharp and acute recognition, and with regard to viewing (what felt like) an endless procession of young female bodies in acute distress and pain.

But although this acute oscillation between distance and identification might be read as expressive of my particular personal and historical connection with anorexia, it also brings into relief the complex business of how feminism ‘voices’, or even ‘speaks nearby’ (Minh-ha, cited in Kearney 2006, p. 15) the experiences of girls and girlhoods, and the power relations at stake in this process. Whether we are using textual analysis or interview data, we must be mindful not to position ourselves as speaking on behalf of our subjects (regardless of our personal connection to the material), and instead aim to be attentive to how girls voice and represent their identities as well as the conditions under which they are articulated and heard.

Storying anorexia: representation and voice

The videos in the sample exhibit high levels of narrative and aesthetic similarity, so it is useful to outline their textual structures before examining particular themes and discourses in detail. Similar to the eating disorder memoirs which preceded them (see Brien 2013), the creators of the videos often framed their stories, via the textual descriptions which accompanied them, in altruistic terms, expressing a desire to help others through a narrative process of self-disclosure. This altruism could take the form of a warning (‘Think before you say “I just want to lose 5 pounds”’), a desire to improve social understandings of anorexia, or a bid to reach out to fellow sufferers (‘I love you guys, I support you all and hope you can recover as well’). The bid to share experiences of distress with what is clearly imagined as a community of peers can also be read as a desire for empathy, support and understanding in a space away from adult and/or medical supervision (Dobson 2015).

As discussed, the ‘My anorexia story’ videos contain no moving images and are effectively slide shows made up of written text and photographs – whether traditional photographic images or selfies taken on a smart phone. The stories typically begin with a montage of photographs from the time before anorexia was diagnosed: some are taken during early childhood and others start not long before the problem began. The pre-anorexia period is

almost universally presented as a time of happiness, health and joy, with the text on the screen attesting to such perspectives as 'I had a wonderful childhood'/'I was happy and healthy and loved food' (and such statements are often accompanied by images of babies or toddlers covered in food, offering a poignant contrast to the punitive restriction which later occurs). Despite the emphasis on childhood, parents appear little in the films and are only occasionally seen in a final happy family shot. But (in speaking to the ways in which white middle-class girls have often been seen as the most 'classic' or 'textbook' subjects in the demography of anorexia (see Saukko 2008)), the familial contexts implied or imaged in the stories are predominantly white and socially normative. The pre-anorexic days are often filled with abundant images of success and achievement at extra-curricular activities such as swimming, dance and gymnastics, as well as pictures of rites of passage such as proms and school dances. As the agent that then disrupts these narratives, there is little focus on the factors that were seen as informing self-starvation: some stories reference bullying as a trigger (as related to or unrelated to weight), but the viewer is often just informed that 'the [food] restriction started' or 'my life started to change'.

The core visual and narrative focus of the videos is then effectively the 'disappearing' anorexic body (Malson 2009) as imaged through conventional photographs and/ or selfies. A far shorter temporal stretch is subsequently devoted to the gradual process of weight gain, during which time the bodies imaged in the photos remain extremely slim. Indeed, some of the videos end with relatively secure and triumphant images of recovery, but many communicate what are clearly on-going and more precarious efforts to recover. In terms of sound, the use of music varies across the stories. Some soundtracks specifically invoke discourses of, or references to, corporeality, such as Edith Backlund's haunting and chilling track 'Skinny', or Ed Sheeran's cover of 'Skinny Love'. Others songs articulate narratives of female suffering and empowerment, such as Kelly Clarkson's 'Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You)', whilst others still selected explicitly upbeat and life-affirming songs for the portions of video which imaged their recovery.

In the remainder of the article, I seek to address themes or issues raised in this summary in turn, particularly as they relate to my research questions about gender and self-representation. I first explore how the concept of 'voice' might be seen to function in the videos, and how they seek to regulate (and assert control over) the meaning(s) of the anorexic body in such a way that distinguishes them from controversial pro-eating disorder material. I then explore how the videos define and position self-starvation in relation to the dominant discourses of medical/ psychiatric conceptions of anorexia, before moving on to address the use of selfies in the stories, and their complex role in making visible the corporeal production/ destruction of the young female self.

'Ugh I would die to be that skinny': negotiating the meanings of the anorexic body

In line with mainstream media representations (Warin 2010), as well as a good deal of feminist work on anorexia, these narratives position the visibly starved body as existing at the core of anorexia. The affective currency of feelings and emotions, as well as physical consequences of starvation, are sometimes indicated by the written slides of the text. But the body is clearly the central mode of expression here. This fosters an aesthetic context in which, significantly, we never *hear* the girls actually speak. The on-screen text in the videos sometimes appears slowly, one letter at a time, in a similar way to an aesthetic of instant messaging. One video for example begins with three separate sentences that unfold slowly across three successive screens:

My name is [X]
I'm 14 years old and battling anorexia
I thought it was time I shared my story.

The absence of an audible narrator could be read as offering a sense of the subject as quieted or muted, immediately raising questions about agency and voice in what are often presented as opportunities for empowerment and self-representation.² But rather than simply seeing the videos as legitimizing a Cartesian dualism in which female subjectivity is equated with, and defined by, the body (see Malson 1998), feminists have been interested in how bodies signify, 'speak' and come to mean within culture and cultural practices. For example, the idea of female adolescence representing a loss of voice is exactly the context in which feminists have often situated anorexia, with the body enunciating that which cannot be 'said' (Orbach 1986, p. 48). As Susie Orbach explains, the female anorexic 'uses the weapon so often directed against her. She speaks with her body' (1986, p. 48).

Although this still raises the problem of reducing 'anorexic' subjectivity to the inscribed surface of the body (Burns 2009, p. 125), it is important to be mindful of how the videos are constructed, and they do prioritize the body as the key representational signifier. But in relation to Orbach's quote, it would be difficult to argue that the stories have a tone of angry or defiant reclamation. Indeed, whilst there is research that examines how personal 'illness' stories on YouTube may critique the stigmatizing discourses of medicine (Ellis 2012), this is not explicitly evident here. Along with wider eating disorder recovery cultures online, perhaps one of the reasons that these videos have not received either academic or popular attention is because – unlike pro-ana discourse – they do not openly violate dominant medical narratives on anorexia. Whether via the slides on screen or the accompanying textual descriptions, all of the videos firmly *renounce* self-starvation whilst referring to anorexia as a 'very serious and deadly mental illness', a 'genetic illness' or even a 'disease'.

In seeking to distinguish the stories from the history of pro-anorexia cultures online, the video descriptions make such statements as 'I do not promote eating disorders' or 'Eating disorders are not lifestyle choices' – defenses which may also seek to ward off the threat of censorship or intervention (see Ferreday 2003). But such framings also speak to the ways in which the creators of the videos seek to assert authority and control over the meanings of their self-representation. This is important when we consider that these videos ultimately hinge on the spectacle of the starved female body. As such, they pivot on photos which, if it was not for their framing within a narrative of recovery, make them indistinguishable from pro-anorexia material. Although the use of selfies in the videos is addressed later in the article, it is important to note here that there was substantial popular and medical concern in 2015 about the wider use of selfies in anorexia cultures online. According to Dr. Alex Yellowlees, a consultant psychiatrist at the Priory hospital group in London, clinicians had seen a 'worrying trend for online anorexia "diaries", charting people's descent into starvation, complete with photographs ... exposing those susceptible to eating disorders to a new level of psychological pressure' (Bingham 2015). As this suggests, the images in the videos could well have been repurposed from, and used in, other media contexts, and may effectively be an end product of how both anorexia *and* pro-anorexia now circulate on networks such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram.

It is this instability concerning the purpose and appeal of the videos that the written text appears to try to delimit and contain. For example, the videos are often presented as being addressed to a community of supportive peers, and any viewer who appears to diverge from this shared renunciation of self-starvation would find themselves subject to shaming by creator and/or viewers. When one user enquired 'Hello, i want to lose about 10 pounds, how can i do it in a way so i dont become anorexic?' they were forcibly told by the creator 'that is not what this video is here for!.' When another exclaimed after viewing a video 'Ugh I would die to be that skinny', they were abruptly chastened and silenced by others, most notably with the comment: '[Die?] She almost did'.

Such exchanges, and the bid to police the boundaries of the community, are revealing in thinking about how the anorexic body becomes legible (and what it 'says'), whilst they are also indicative of what feminist work has suggested are the polysemic qualities of the starved female body. As part of a narrative of recovery, the videos are at pains to mark the bodies they display as 'sick' or 'wrong' ('I took a wrong turn and was so ill I couldn't get out'), but the user comments above make visible how they are *also* associated with an accrual of cultural capital. The anorexic body might often be marked as 'deviant' and 'ill', but it can also be seen as connoting qualities that are considered to be highly attractive in girls/ women, such as willpower, self-control,

achievement and asceticism (Bordo 1993). Indeed, an acknowledgement of this capital, and the desire to *display* the anorexic body as the product of extreme mental and physical labour, also permeates aspects of the videos themselves. Viewers are sometimes directed how to read images through on-screen cues such as 'look how thin my arms are here'. Furthermore, the videos also draw upon conventional aesthetic strategies for representing the female body as desirable (Mulvey 1975) – such as the frequent use of the slow upward pan on still images of the nearly nude female body. Of course, they might be seen as *frustrating* these conventions given that the content of the image often reveals feet that are blotchy and blue from failing circulation, and angular jutting bones, barely covered by opaque, white skin. Yet the lingering nature of such strategies can also be read as framing the bodies *as* desirable – a tantalizing form of hyper 'thinness porn'.

Rather than confirming what is often presented as the 'faulty' mind-set of anorexia (they 'can't see' how 'sick' and 'ill' they are to think that an emaciated form is desirable), this contradictory rhetoric is actually familiar from mainstream media representations of anorexia, which have frequently used sensationalized images of starved female bodies to illustrate what are presented as recovery or 'warning' stories (Warin 2010). Furthermore, the tensions and disputes over what the videos are for and how they should be read plays out more than a desire to author the meanings of images. Such tensions can also be read as attesting to the deeply contradictory cultural messages that girls/ women receive about the desirability of the (very) thin female body – and the extent to which it might be cultural constructions of femininity that are 'warped', rather than the minds of these individuals themselves. The videos struggle to position the bodies as 'sick' (and not simply 'too thin'), but some of the user comments, as well as the aesthetic strategies that are employed, also position them on a continuum with desirable ideals of *normative* femininity.

A culture clash: defining anorexia

It is the critical feminist approaches to anorexia that have sought to reclaim female self-starvation from the pathologizing discourses of medicine and psychiatry by placing it in relation to the normative construction of western femininities (Malson 2009, p. 137). But as the section above suggests, on an explicit level at least, the videos present anorexia as a clinical entity which has little to do with the everyday construction of femininity. As such, they have no easy relationship with the feminist perspectives.

To be sure, the eagerness to label anorexia as a mental illness here is perhaps indicative of how the creators of the videos want their experiences to be taken seriously: many were evidently only too aware of problematic cultural stereotypes which position them as simply vain, narcissistic or spoilt

(Saukko 2008, p. 6), or which suggest that anorexia is the result of voluntary self-infliction. One for example explains in the description of her story how anorexia, and by extension her video, is not ‘a “fashion” statement [and] it’s not for “attention”’. As this suggests, the cultural explanations about anorexia that *do* exist (in popular discourse) often represent an over-zealous and simplistic application of the feminist perspective (Gremillion 2003, p. 27) which is potentially alienating to sufferers: culture is often reduced to the fashion, diet and media industries in media constructions of anorexia (Malson 2009, p. 133), cementing the notion of anorexics as vulnerable and excessive media consumers (Bray 2005). This is not, perhaps, an attractive subject position to occupy, and the emphasis on anorexia as a mental illness in the videos is often positioned as an answer to what are seen as more ‘trivialising’ and insulting critiques.

But from a feminist perspective, this psychiatric framework is nevertheless limiting and problematic. In the latter, culture is (at best) understood as giving a ‘distinctive form to an already existing underlying pathological condition, *which is medical in its origin* [my emphasis]’ (Burkitt 2001). Despite the long-standing conception of anorexia as a predominantly female problem, mainstream treatments rarely foreground gender politics, nor integrate the perspectives offered by feminist critiques, and the unit of focus remains the individual (Malson 1998, Author 2015). Many of the girls who made the videos had experienced stays in hospital or residential treatment centres, and references to treatment were frequently part of the stories themselves. As such, it is notable that the videos often end by endorsing the idea of anorexia as a purely personal and individualized problem from which ‘only you can save yourself!’ or explain how ‘The only person who can fix you is you’. These perspectives fuse the individualizing trajectory of dominant clinical narratives on anorexia with the neoliberal emphasis on health and success as the domain of *individual* responsibility (Liimakka 2013), both of which omit a broader ‘systemic analysis of young women’s social circumstances’ (Harris 2004, p. 33).

To be clear, this is not a critique of how the girls present their problems in the videos. Rather, it is rather a critique of the often very narrow ways in which girls and women are encouraged to understand the significance of self-starvation within the authority of medical discourse. As scholars in girl studies have noted (Harris 2004, McRobbie 2009, Dobson 2015), this individualizing rhetoric applies to a range of problems – depression, anxiety and self-harm as well as eating disorders – which are ‘being normalised for girls’ within a neo-liberal postfeminist context (Dobson 2015, p. 6), and which are seen to be best ‘managed medically rather than subjected to sustained social scrutiny’ (McRobbie 2009, cited in *Ibid*).

This is a useful political and discursive context when seeking to understand how the problem of anorexia is constructed in these videos, and the limits

within which this occurs. But I am not sure that the stories necessarily (or only) *normalize* or naturalize particular types of young, western, female subjectivity. Rather than seeing digital representations as bringing into being what Amy Dobson critiques as a 'pre-existing "offline" individual girl in pain', we need to be attentive to what affordances are offered by digital visibility and the particular gendered 'narrativisation[s] of suffering' they display (2015, p. 11). As the next section explores, the use of selfies in the videos are key to the construction of these gendered, digital subjectivities, and the way in which these stories negotiate the visibility of the anorexic body.

Selfies: smiling through surveillance

Work on the selfie as an aesthetic form, social practice and cultural artefact (Senft and Baym 2015, p. 1589) is only just beginning to emerge, and feminist work has so far examined the gendered implications of self-imaging for the 'the social order of image production and consumption' (Olszanowski 2014, p. 84), as well as the ways in which such images function to regulate and prescribe gendered subjectivities (Burns 2015). Indeed, as much feminist theorizing has explored, women have historically exerted little control over the representation of their subjectivities and bodies (Senft and Baym 2015, p. 1594). It is thus significant that popular discourse surrounding contemporary *self*-imaging has expressed anxiety about girls' digital practices in particular – anxieties which often seek to re-position them as 'object' of the image. As other scholars have noted (Burns 2015, Senft and Baym 2015), popular discourse has also associated selfies with a culture of narcissism and vanity, or linked such practices to image addiction and pathology. Precisely because their social identities are already seen as being constituted *by* these discourses, Anne Burns observes how 'young women's participation in selfie culture bears an extra burden of representation' (2015, p. 1742).

This is clearly exemplified by the case studies here. When one viewer responded to a video with the comment 'I think you have selfie disorder', the creator retorted 'Lmfao [laugh my fucking ass off] I honestly have no comment for that because you clearly haven't seen 95% of teenage girls in this world', whilst another viewer interjected to support the creator's retort with the insistence: 'That *was the rudest thing* I could possibly hear about an anorexic person [my emphasis]'. This exchange positions selfie culture as a normal and everyday part of teenage girl life, and rejects its role as 'disordered' or devalued. The second comment also exemplifies how the association between selfies and narcissism, pathology and addiction is seen as especially offensive to the girl diagnosed with anorexia given her popular positioning at the very *apex* of the subject position associated with young, devalued and female identities. Indeed, as discussed in relation to the written framing of the videos, the association between image 'addiction',

narcissism and femininity formed part of popular and medical discourse on anorexia (Bray 2005) well before selfie culture emerged.

The selfies in the videos frequently display fragmented body parts (thighs, abdomen and back) and feature mirror selfies in which we see the creator of the video, brow furrowed and face concentrated, in the act of photographing themselves. The idea of the girl appraising herself in the mirror has been central to media representations of anorexia, which have often featured a hugely enlarged version of the girl's body reflected back in the mirror's glass – as testament to her experience of perceptual 'distortion'. In the context of these videos, we do not know what the girls 'see' in the mirror, or in the screen on their phone (although it is interesting that only one refers to the perceptual disturbance that is seen as so central to anorexia). But through these images, we are witnessing girls producing images of themselves via the act of self-scrutiny and self-surveillance. These images are then made visible – and open – to what is effectively another layer of surveillance and judgement through the 'online architecture' of YouTube feedback (Banet-Weiser 2011).

In terms of the display of the anorexic body and the visibility of the processes through which this body is produced, it is the axis of public/private that is being renegotiated here. In her 1993 article 'The Spectacle of Anorexia Nervosa', Carole Spitzack situated the privacy of self-surveillance practices as integral to what she saw as the resistant connotations of the anorexic body and the bid to defy the positioning of femininity as sexual spectacle. Not only was the anorexic body seen as offering a form of corporeality 'stripped of pleasure for the public spectator' (1993, p. 3), but '[b]odily pleasure is privatized for the emaciated girl not only because she rejects the once internalized criteria for evaluation, but because she reveals her body, the reward for her vigilant food refusal, only to herself' (1993, p. 3). Although the advent of 'bone pictures' on pro-ana sites troubled this emphasis on a privatized gaze some time ago, the centrality of the selfie in these videos, and its use as both producer of and witness to, the corporeal 'diary', problematizes this emphasis on the private more acutely. It is also unclear why Spitzack equates the privatized display of anorexic body with the rejection of internalized self-surveillance: the girl/ woman's self-inspection in the bedroom could also be read as testament to the anonymity of disciplinary power and its wide dispersal across private spaces (Foucault 1977, Bartky 1988, p. 75). In this regard, the selfies bring the visual chronicle of starvation into *being*, whilst they *also* function to take us 'behind the scenes' of what was once a private process of body 'work'.

As opposed to the stark contrast between 'before' and 'after' pictures historically used to image anorexic bodies in the popular press and magazines, we are asked in these videos to bear witness to the gradual emaciation of the body, day by day, pound by pound. In this regard, the photos are often

accompanied by written text which anchors the factual weight of the body ('105 lbs', '104' lbs) as it visibly declines. To be sure, as with the before and after picture, we do not see the subject starving, vomiting or exercising, and the temporality of the story is heavily compressed for the viewer. But this framework of repetition – day by day, selfie after selfie, pound after pound – nevertheless gives a sense of process and labour, both of which 'should' be subject to concealment within normative constructions of femininity (Bartky 1988).

The pictures are also alternated or overlaid with written text which informs the viewer of physical deterioration, thus briefly foregrounding affective experiences of embodiment, rather than the body as a script to be observed and 'read'. Slides include such testaments as 'The coldness hurt and stung my body, my fingers turned bright blue and wrinkly'/'My body was shutting down on me as I began to have seizures'/'My hair was falling out'/'My heart was failing. I was dying'. The self-imaging practices continue in the hospitals and treatment centres mentioned in the videos (places in which forms of personal media notably have to be 'won' back as privileges in exchange for 'good' behaviour and weight gain). If we conceive of the smartphone camera as producing a 'reflective image for beholding oneself, resembling ... a pocket ... mirror' (Frosh 2015, p. 1620), the subjects of the videos are essentially 'checking themselves out'. Indeed, the bodily selfies are notably known as 'body checks', which places them on a continuum with visual and cultural practices that are entirely expected and normalized for girls (see Budgeon 2003, Frost 2005). But in editing together images of self-inspection with descriptions of physical deterioration and decline, the stories make it impossible to frame such practices as innocuous and every day. In this regard, they play out the very real and visceral injuries potentially inflicted by self-surveillance and its impact on the lived reality of the material body. Thus, although the theme and focus of these videos might be seen as contributing to a cultural perspective in which certain types of distress are now expected and pervasive for girls (Harris 2004, McRobbie 2009), I am not sure that they 'normalise' or 'naturalise' it. These videos are incredibly shocking, and remain so on repeat viewings.

In suggesting that the videos present the body as literally 'injured' by self-surveillance, I am *not* suggesting that they endorse a linear cause and effect structure with respect to the relationship between bodies and images. The girls in the videos are not presenting themselves as seeking to 'measure up' to a pre-existing cultural ideal; they are both the producer and object of the image here, and they are understanding and producing their bodies *through* mediation. As discussed earlier in the article, feminist work on the body has increasingly sought to avoid conceptualizing bodies and images in binaristic terms. Rather than perceiving the female body as a passive slate awaiting the inscription of oppressive media discourses, it asks us to

consider how girls bodies 'are experienced *through* ... images [my emphasis]' (Coleman 2009, p. 70), and to understand the female body as a process (or event) which unfolds *with* images (Coleman 2009, 1, Budgeon 2003).

But the emphasis on the videos both capturing and denaturalizing practices of self-surveillance does not fully capture how the selfie might be seen to operate here in relation to the construction of the female self. Selfies connote a sense of 'realness' and authenticity due to their amateur status, whilst they are also seen as self-consciously staged artefacts (Hess 2015, p. 1631). As Paul Frosh states, the selfie is 'referential *as an image*. It makes visible its own construction as an act and a product of mediation [original emphasis]' (2015, p. 1621). If selfies show 'a show a self, enacting a self' (2015, p. 1621), this may have particular implications for the imaging and subjectivities of girls/ woman. There is a long history of feminist work on how we are engaged in the 'continuous production of gender identity via visual display' (Butler 1990, Frost 2005, p. 66), and feminist media studies has explored how popular media representations construct, and sometimes expose, an image of femininity as 'masquerade' (Riviere 1929). Rather than positioning women as innately manipulative and duplicitous, the concept of masquerade has been used to explore the ways in which, 'denied cultural validity in [their] ... own right, women are obliged to don a series of masks both to act out conventional versions of femininity and to disguise any personal rebellion against them' (MacDonald 1995, p. 113). As feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane suggests, 'masquerade, in flaunting femininity, holds it at a distance' (cited in Ibid).

In this respect, the use of selfies in the videos, and their rhetoric of self-conscious performance, make visible a series of incongruities between text and photo, body and face. Sandra Bartky explains how practices of female self-surveillance do not simply function to shape the corporeality of the body, but also work to shape gestures of bodily and facial expression (1988, p. 66–7). In her work on selfies, Burns similarly explores how popular discourses on selfie practice 'reflect a wider culture of feminine body discipline ... and the narrow parameters of women's photographic self-expression' (2015, p. 1727). She goes on to quote from YouTube presenter Michelle Phan on how 'successful' female selfies should include 'discreet body display, restricted spatiality and grace' (Phan, cited in Burns 2015, p. 1728) – effectively demonstrating the ways in which the selfie is a form of expression *and* discipline simultaneously (Frosh 2015, p. 1614). The oscillation between expression and discipline notably also concurs with constructions of anorexia, and by extension, discourses on the relationship between female body and appetite. Indeed, it is highly pertinent here that Burns links discourses of selfie discipline (women are encouraged not to 'over-indulge') (2015, p. 1729) to a culture of *corporeal* discipline, in which women are urged to exercise self-denial, restraint and abstinence (Bordo 1993).

This contradictory dialectic, in which selfies function as both a means of self-regulation and expression, can be seen to be at work in the videos themselves. For example, a number of the stories refer to the experience of 'faking a smile'. 'Before' or early stage self-starvation pictures which display smiling group or couple shots from proms (and in which the body approximates an aspirational thin 'ideal') are re-written, undermined and reframed through such statements as 'I was actually eating less than 800 calories a day'. Similarly, montages of smiling selfies, which often conform in visual terms to the narrow limitations of women's 'ideal' photographic self-expression (Burns 2015, p. 1728), are crossed over with statements such as 'How I hated myself/ I was lost' (as the angry tones of Miley Cyrus's 'Wrecking Ball' accompany the written text). In this regard, whilst the selfies of the body are used to authenticate the physical self (this is me, here, now, at this weight), the authenticity of photographed self could elsewhere be questioned by its placement in the narrative and its relationship to the temporality of eating distress.

This question of self-performance and staging is raised most acutely in the display of the process through which 'private' selfies are taken. The mirror selfies in the videos often take advantage of the smartphone's flipped camera function – in which the subject is either looking *into* the camera in front of the mirror or holding the phone camera *out* towards it. In one example of the former, we see the emaciated body of an attractive, blonde-haired 18 year old in her underwear, sitting sideways in front a full-length mirror, with one knee bent up and her head-cocked to the side. She beams fixedly yet brightly into the phone before her, a prominent jawbone framing her smile as she waits for the digital click to capture her in the frame. Given that this photo is essentially about the staging of this image, what is immediately striking is the utter *incongruity* between facial expression and body. The visibly cold skin of the body covers a form that is failing and fading as it feeds on its own muscle stores to survive. But the face displays large expectant eyes and a polite and deferent smile: indeed this is all that would be seen in the shot if the camera were facing the other way. On one level the photo can be read as imaging a situation in which a young woman is complicit in her own subjugation and surveillance – 'willingly' and eagerly seeking to style herself according to oppressive discourses on femininity which she has 'obsessively' taken 'too far'. But in visualizing a 'self enacting a self' (Frosh 2015, p. 1621), the image also makes an uncomfortable spectacle of femininity *as* a self-conscious performance, and the very real cost that such an appealing presentation may involve.

Conclusion

I began this article by referring to my own history of anorexia and its relative invisibility in relation to public, media and mediated culture. In exploring the

particular types of visibility the videos afford, it is not my intention to reinforce the popular truism that growing up girl is so much harder now. As a middle-aged female academic, I cannot possibly know, and even if a comparison were possible, my focus has been on the digital subjectivities and bodies that the *videos* construct (which cannot provide access to how the creators' identities are embodied and lived outside of their narratives). I also acknowledge how my personal history in this regard has framed and shaped my analysis of the stories. I often had to work hard to think about anorexia outside of what I experienced as a deeply oppressive, isolating and painful regime in order to be attentive to the potentially contradictory ways in which the bodies and selves were constructed and displayed. I also recognize how the act of analysing these stories – seeking to look at how anorexia is constructed as an object of discourse which is then itself 'disciplined' by analysis and argument – is part of my own 'recovery story' (five years in, at this moment in time).

Given that the voices of girls diagnosed with anorexia have frequently been pathologized and marked as existing 'outside of the true' (Saukko 2008, p. 6), it is important and significant that such narratives are being created at all. At the same time, visibility alone does not represent agency and 'empowerment' – as scholars of representation have long since explored (Hall 2013). But as Mary Celeste Kearney argues in *Girls Make Media*, all girl-made texts, and not just those created by female youth who are disenfranchised by wider hegemonic ideologies of identity (such as race, sexuality and class) negotiate with dominant discourses in their visual and narrative construction (2006, p. 15). This is clear with regard to the narratives analysed here: they offer complex discursive constructions of female self-starvation which twist and turn on (an always slippery) continuum of containment and/or resistance.

Unlike the discourses associated with pro-ana cultures, the videos play out the dominance of medical and psychiatric frameworks in the conceptualization and treatment of anorexia, and the often very narrow – and individualizing – ways in which girls are encouraged to understand the significance of self-starvation. They also tend to reduce anorexia primarily to the body (thus echoing the history of mainstream media representations of anorexia), and can be seen to attest, to some extent unavoidably, to the ways in which the body is a 'medium' through which oppressive cultural norms of femininity are expressed. But as an example of gendered digital subjectivity production (Dobson 2015), there are also ways in which the videos complicate existing representations of, and discourses on, anorexia, and by extension, girlhood.

Feminist work has argued for the need to situate anorexia on a continuum with normative femininities as a political strategy of depathologization. One of the videos begins with the statement 'I stared out like most of you. A happy healthy child', and as this comment suggests, this story could belong to 'any'

girl (and it was/is/could have been mine). Locating anorexia on this plain, as I have aimed to do throughout this article, can also function to render more everyday feminine practices/ subjectivities 'strange' or problematic, injurious or chilling. The self-referentiality of the videos, in which the selfies both expose and literalize practices that have historically been more 'private' and naturalized, is crucial here. The use of the selfies, particularly those centred on facial expression, also function to draw attention to the ways in which normative femininity is (required to be) *produced and performed*, foregrounding the ways in which self-imaging circulates in regimes of communication and control, expression and discipline (Burns 2015, Frosh 2015).

That is not to replicate and endorse arguments in which the equation between girls, bodies and images primarily equals 'risk' and harm. Indeed, the construction of these videos (in which the body both takes and 'makes' a photograph) offers a visual testament to the need to move beyond the binaries of body/ image, representation/materiality (Budgeon 2003, Coleman 2009), especially in an era of pervasive self-imaging. As Dobson observes, to privilege only a discourse of risk in relation to girls' digital expressions of pain further silences the socio-political in their self-constructions, and the ways in which these both produce and resist gendered subjectivities (2015, p. 5).

Notes

1. The use of inverted commas around the word 'anorexic' acknowledges the debates – particularly in the feminist work – that it is problematic to label someone as such. Some feminist work also rejects (or places inverted commas around) the term anorexia, given that it is medical in origin. I do not choose to do so here as this is part of the language used in the videos themselves. But I do alternate the term with 'self-starvation', to show that it is contentious.
2. See also Dobson's (2015) discussion of 'pain memes' on YouTube. These are videos in which girls hold up hand-written flashcards – set to music – to narrate experiences of anxiety, bullying, abuse and self-harm, in which Dobson offers a different political reading of silence and voice.

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