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The Cultivation of Eating Disorders through Instagram

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by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my husband, family, friends, and academic leaders. I am

beyond grateful for your continual support in both my studies and my recovery. Thank you,

thank you, thank you.

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Abstract

A profusion of research has been dedicated to the effects of new media on body image. In an attempt to explain the inflation of eating disorders, several researchers have turned to the cultivation theory, postulating that increased interaction with these medias will lead to internalizations of the messages they disseminate. The over presence of extremely thin models and actresses can create a new reality for media users, who begin to equate thinness with beauty, power, femininity and happiness. While an abundance of research has delved into the impact of this thin ideal through television and magazines, the Internet as a potential dissemination medium is relatively new territory. Untrodden further is the field of social media, and particularly Instagram. The aim of this study was to determine the potential of cultivation theory via Instagram and its users.

Chapter One: Introduction

In American culture, the message is clear: thin is ideal. With thinness comes the projection of beauty, power, success, value and love. Any divergence is believed to portray the opposite. Through Barbie, Bratz dolls, television and video game characters, this ideal is implanted into young girls' heads at an increasingly young age. The message is only intensified with maturation. The idea that thin is desirable is propagated through numerous sociocultural influences, of which the media is the most pervasive (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Wykes and Gunter (2005) found that media images play a role in both formulating and reinforcing society's view of idealized physical appearance for both women and men. Research demonstrates that increased exposure to the thin ideal is directly proportional to increased negative body evaluation. As bodies are viewed more negatively, disordered eating symptomology increases (Grabe, et al. 2008; Harrison et al. 2006).

Because of the ubiquitous cultural obsession with weight, a moderate degree of body dissatisfaction is now considered normative (Stice & Shaw, 1994). The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD) reports that the bodies that are representational of the "thin ideal" as seen in advertisements are possessed naturally by only five percent of American females. Despite this knowledge, 91 percent of women surveyed on a college campus had attempted to lose weight through dieting (Shisslak, Crago & Estes, 1995). Additionally, an alarming 81 percent of 10 year-olds are afraid of being fat (Mellin, et al., 1991).

Given that eating disorders carry the highest mortality rate of any mental disorder, studying the

internalization of thin media portrayals is imperative (ANAD).

The aim of this paper is to take a closer look at the impact of Instagram on eating patterns and behaviors. Though this research has been performed through different mediums, including television and magazines, Instagram is a relatively new tool and its effects on body image and self-perception in those suffering with eating disorders is still not clear. Through in-depth interviews, this research attempts to discover whether pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia Instagram accounts have had any impact on the development, recovery or sustainability of patients diagnosed with anorexia and/or bulimia.

1.1 Theory

The cultivation theory illustrates a relationship between media exposure and one's concept of reality. Looking at the cumulative content and frequency of the messages being disseminated through various media outlets, the theory posits that an increase in media exposure will lead to an internalization of these media messages as reality. This theory is often utilized in studies of media and violence, but an ever-increasing amount of research now focuses on body image cultivations. The media is constantly bombarding women with idealized images of extremely thin women (Tiggemann & Pickering, 1996). While 95 percent of women cannot attain these bodies naturally, they have fallen prey to the belief that they are abnormal and that their lives can improve with weight loss (Seid, 1994). Applying cultivation theory to the thin ideal, it can be inferred that the more a woman is exposed to these messages, the more likely she is to feel dissatisfied with her own body. In fact, a 1996 study by Ogden and Mundray found that after being shown images of thin women, surveyed subjects felt less satisfied with their own bodies (Ogden & Mundray, 1996). Stice and Shaw (1994) had similar findings when they randomly

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exposed female undergraduates to pictures from magazines. Results indicated that exposure to pictures of ultra-thin models produced feelings of depression, stress, guilt, shame, insecurity and body dissatisfaction (Stice & Shaw, 1994).

The impacts of cultivated body image realities extend far beyond still images and advertisements, however. There is a lucrative market devoted to encouraging ultra-thin ideals. Aided by the food, diet and fitness industries, the media works to espouse the message that it is the women's responsibility to achieve the ultra-slender body ideal (Hesse-Biber, et al., 2006). These industries work to connect prosperity to thinness, and their messages are repeated through television, radio, magazines and other media outlets. A study by Renée A. Botta (1999) revealed that television images and body image disturbance were indeed connected. Further, a 2009 content analysis showed marked differences in the portrayal of female video game characters versus actual women (Martins, et al., 2009). Video games with high levels of photo-realism, and those largely marketed to children, feature thinner female characters. It is postulated that these normative beliefs lead to an internalization of the thin ideal and, ultimately, excessive dieting in an attempt to be "normal" (Harrison & Hefner, 2008).

Because cultivation theory is applicable to these other media, it would be reasonable to assume that the Internet should also be examined for potential impact. Some scholars have begun to investigate the permeation of the thin ideal into Internet culture, but the field is still relatively unexplored. There is certainly a relationship between body image concern and exposure to the Internet (Tiggemann & Slater, 2013). Increased Internet activity can lead to greater body image concerns. Despite knowing that the Internet has been established as another outlet associated with internalization of the thin ideal, there has been little to no attempts to

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understand which types of web activities inspire cultivation. The aim of this study is to build on the research by Tiggemann and Slater (2013), to discover if and how the thinness ideal is cultivated through Instagram activity.

1.2 Literature Review

To the researcher's knowledge, there have been no studies published that focus on the cultivation theory and body image through Instagram to this point. Thus, the aim of the present study was to delve into this outlet as a venue for reinforcing the thin ideal that has been repeated continuously throughout the mass media industry. While Instagram has not been studied specifically, there have been a sundry of studies focusing on the cultivation theory as applicable to blogs and social medias. The researcher used these past studies, focusing primarily on "pro- ana" blogs, to develop a cohesive understanding of whether and how eating disorders are fueled, encouraged or maintained through Instagram.

Arising in response to the idealism of thinness in Western society, the Internet has seen a recent surge in the development of pro-eating disorder websites. These websites, known as "pro- ana" (for pro-anorexia) or "pro-mia" (for pro-bulimia) sites, are websites that take a positive and encouraging approach to eating disorders. These sites are managed primarily by adolescents and serve as a safe place where people with eating disorders can receive support, offer encouragement and share stories (Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2012). Self-authored, pro-ana blogs often feature narrative text, but users may also choose to include photos, music, poetry, art, videos and various other content. Most of this content is classified as "thinspiration" or "thinspo" (Tong, et al., 2013). These websites, which have sparked great concern and criticism amongst clinicians and other health professionals, are paradoxical in that the authors often

proclaim their eating disorders to be a lifestyle of choice.

The reasoning behind the development and maintenance of such websites has been briefly explored, and authors have proposed several explanations. In their 2013 study, Stephanie Tom Tong and colleagues advance three major reasons for why pro-ana blogs have attained popularity. They focus first on the interactivity of blogs, noting that, unlike static webpages, blogs allow for communication and feedback. Through posts, comments and followers, members of the pro-ana community feel connected and supported (Tong, et al., 2013). Furthermore, blogs allow for free expression and self-disclosure by the author. As a medium, blogs are uniquely suited for sharing thoughts, discussing issues and ventilating feelings. The final reason pro-ana blogs maintain a high following, they allege, is the "masspersonal" nature of blogs, which allow authors themselves to share their personal feelings with a large number of followers (Tong, et al., 2013).

Although there is some controversy over whether eating disorders are indeed mental illnesses, the author contends that they are, and this paper is a reflection of that belief. In saying that, it is important to take note that eating disorders are amongst the most stigmatized of mental illnesses (Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2013). In 2011, Crisp et al. studied stigmatization toward individuals with eating disorders, and found that 38.1% of participants thought that ED (eating disorder) sufferers could "pull themselves together" (Crisp, et al., 2011). Women with anorexia are often characterized as irrational and in denial of their behavior (Dias, 2003). Because society perceives eating disorders as self-imposed, those suffering with the mental illness often feel sequestered. The isolation that accompanies most eating disorders makes the Internet the perfect venue for sufferers to find comfort and connection.

While social interaction is a part of the recovery process, many health care professionals

have warned against these sites, advocating for their removal. Concern has been voiced that visitors to these websites are learning to be anorexic or sustain their disordered eating patterns (Csipke & Horne, 2007). In 2006, Maria Lapinski conducted a content analysis of pro-eating disorder websites. Of the 19 websites reviewed, Lapinski found that 16 exhibited severity messages. These messages typically addressed the dangers of eating and becoming overweight, and were continuously labeled as the "Ana Commandments" or "Thin Commandments." Sample commandments included messages such as "thou shalt not eat without feeling guilty" and "being thin is more important than being healthy" (Lapinski, 2006). A content analysis by Norris et al. (2006) found that most pro-ana websites contained a section devoted to "tips and tricks" which promoted fasts, laxatives and CAM (Complimentary and Alternative Medicine) and constituted the most serious medical risk for individuals (Norris, et al., 2006).

The stark controversy regarding these pro-anorexia websites has been met in response by many website providers and social media platforms. Fearful of negative publicity, Yahoo was the first Internet Service Provider to close down a series of pro-anorexia websites in the summer of 2001. This censorship, in conjunction with pressure from health providers and eating disorder organizations, encouraged many social media websites to follow suit. In February 2012, Tumblr, the popular micro blogging platform and social networking website issued a statement addressing "thinspiration" and other content promoting self-harm. Their community guidelines remind users that Tumblr encourages and celebrates creativity; however there is certain content that Tumblr does not promote and, thus, does not allow on its blogs. Amongst this content is the "promotion and glorification of self-harm" (Tumblr, 2013). Tumblr censorship on this type of content is as follows:

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Promotion and Glorification of Self-Harm. *Don't post content that actively promotes or glorifies self-harm. This includes content that urges or encourages readers to cut or injure themselves; embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or commit suicide rather than, e.g., seeking counseling or treatment, or joining together in supportive conversation with those suffering or recovering from depression or other conditions. Dialogue about these behaviors is incredibly important and online communities can be extraordinarily helpful to people struggling with these difficult conditions. We aim to sustain Tumblr as a place that facilitates awareness, support and recovery, and to remove only those blogs that cross the line into active promotion or glorification of self-harm.*

Shortly after this advisory was issued, Pinterest, an interactive pin-board style photo-sharing website, made similar updates to its Terms of Service. Under its Acceptable Use Policy, Pinterest users must now agree to abstain from posting user content that "creates a risk of harm, loss, physical or mental injury, emotional distress, death, disability, disfigurement, or physical or mental illness to yourself, to any other person, or to any animal" (Pinterest, 2013).

Reflecting on these changes, Instagram also implemented a policy against these behaviors and types of content. On its Community Guidelines page, Instagram users are warned against publicizing self-harm and mental illnesses. Disobedience of this guideline, which is outlined below, can result in a disabled account without warning:

Don't promote or glorify self-harm.

While Instagram is a place where people can share their lives with others through photographs and videos, any account found encouraging or urging users to embrace

anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or to cut, harm themselves, or commit suicide will result in a disabled account without warning. We believe that communication regarding these behaviors in order to create awareness, come together for support and to facilitate recovery is important, but that Instagram is not the place for active promotion or glorification of self-harm.

In order to enforce this policy, Instagram is asking users to help community-police its content, by flagging posts that they believe violate Instagram's Terms of Service. This includes images found to be supporting self-harm, as well as hashtags, profile names and bios. Content relating to self-harm, but lacking support or promotion for that behavior, will require users to tap through a disclaimer prior to viewing the requested content. This warning will inform users that their search "may contain graphic content" and will be accompanied by a promoted URL. Deviating from its competitors, Instagram went a step further in that it also banned the implementation of several hashtags within its search function including "thinspiration," "proanorexia" and "probulimia" (Murphy, 2012).

Despite these controlling efforts, not all scholars believe that censorship is the answer. In fact, some findings suggest that content ban and pro-anorexia censorship only fuels people suffering from eating disorders to better hide their content, thus creating a community of ultimate exclusivity. In her 2012 paper, Eliza Burke calls for a renewed focus on the impact of slender ideals on women consumers and also producers of such images. Describing the pro-ana community as similar to a unique club, Burke recognizes that a good portion of the pro-ana content found online today is geared toward a space where anorexia is socially acceptable in mainstream culture. However, a manifold of pro-

ana content is working toward defining anorexia as a specialized and elite community, which is founded on the capacity to withstand specific levels of distress (Burke, 2012). These individuals, who feel shunned from conventional culture, take pride in belonging to such a community which they feel is aristocratic. They take their membership seriously and are fiercely loyal (Brotsky & Giles, 2007).

Rather than suppressing these websites, researchers should seek first to understand them. Do "thinspiration" and "pro-anorexia" images actually cultivate disordered eating patterns amongst all adolescents, or is it only the mentally ill who thrive off of these websites? If the latter were true, would complete abolition eliminate the longing for connectivity? In order to understand the effects of cultivation theory on disordered eating, scholars need to first assess frequency of related website interaction.

In comprehending how pro-anorexia websites affect the average female, Bardone-Cone and Cass (2007) developed a prototypic pro-anorexia website and then assigned 235 undergraduate females to view either this website, or one of two comparison websites related to female fashion or home décor. Results demonstrated that exposure to pro- anorexia websites have immediate negative effects on young women (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007). When Csipke and Horne (2007) interviewed users of the pro-anorexia websites, they found that nearly half of the respondents visited pro-anorexia websites at least once per day. These frequent visits may be attributed to the sense of belonging and identity these users have developed through their participation. For pro-anas, these visits are part of a ritualistic integration into their daily lives. They have formulated an online identity for themselves as a pro-ana and reflect this identity through their offline behaviors. Visits to these websites may create euphoric feelings, which encourage maintenance of the eating disorder. The sense of

belonging, sense of purpose, or even self-disgust that these users acquire through website usage cannot, and should not, be distinguished from their offline personas (Maloney, 2013).

Moreover, there is some research that shows that pro-anorexic website interaction has various emotional effects on viewers. After visiting these websites, body image is often perceived more negatively. In fact, those in recovery have admitted that their interactions with the websites help to circumvent the recovery process (Csipke & Horne, 2007). Mulveen and Hepworth (2006) explain that the multipurpose nature of these websites creates a dangerous contradiction. Oftentimes, these websites "provide a coping function in relation to extreme weight loss and a place to manage the related emotional burden" (Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006, p.294). However, because much of the content on these websites also promotes pernicious behaviors, the positivity associated with social interaction is countered with negative emotional and physical response. Still, this paradox does not account for site "lurkers," people who view the images and digest the content but do not participate in the conversations or reveal their personalities. For these individuals, there are only negative effects. As individuals continue to expose themselves to pro- anorexic content, they begin to accept these posts as reality (Maloney, 2013).

Chapter Two: Method

The current study attempts to demonstrate how people suffering with an eating disorder are cultivating new realities through their online interaction. Looking specifically at Instagram, the study will review user interaction with specific hashtags, images and text. The study will measure the frequency with which participants have been exposed to this content, in order to aid in determining whether people who do not suffer from eating disorders will be affected by viewing pro-eating disorder Instagram content. Further, it will work to understand, and in turn explain, incentives generated through viewing such content.

RQ1: What are the motivations for individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder to view pro-ana or pro-mia content on Instagram?

2.1 Sample

This thesis project used 8 participants, all diagnosed with anorexia, bulimia or eating disorder not otherwise specified (EDNOS), between 18 to 30 years of age. This age group was used because 18 is the age at which individuals can be interviewed without parental consent. Further, as Millennials, this age group is more likely to be active on social media, and particularly Instagram.

2.2 Research Design

In order to answer the research question, individual interviews were conducted over

the telephone and through Skype. These interviews were 17 questions in length and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. At the end of each interview, the participants were asked to complete a five-question support survey aimed at acquiring demographic information. For confidentiality and privacy reasons, many of the interviewees did not feel comfortable being recorded. For this reason, the researcher did not record each interview, but rather transcribed the responses as each interview was taking place. After all of the interviews were complete, the researcher performed a content analysis on the data that culminated from the surveys and responses. This content analysis allowed the researcher to discover common patterns, themes and trends throughout the interviews. The survey can be found in the appendix of this paper.

The use of interviews was deemed appropriate for this study because they allow for in-depth, personable insight into the psyche of a disordered eater. The knowledge acquired through these interviews allowed for rich, intimate discernment that could not be achieved through other means (Cresswell, 2013). Interviews also allowed the participants a freedom to answer how they wish, so the researcher did not sway the results. From this freedom, greater understanding and valuable results were generated, off of which the researcher hopes future studies will be built.

Chapter Three: Results

The interviews fructified several common themes. Despite many demographic differences, the value derived through Instagram use proved similar for many of the subjects. Likewise, the manner in which Instagram is used proved consistent amongst the interviewees. These themes will be outlined in greater detail below and should be considered by future researchers in explaining the dangers associated with pro-ana and pro- mia content on Instagram for individuals diagnosed with an eating disorder. Instagram is a pervasive medium. Its ubiquity necessitates its impetus.

"Honestly, maybe pathetically, I am always on Instagram. Like always. On the bus. In school. At home. In bed. In treatment. I spend tons of time on Instagram and used to spend tons of time viewing this content," one of the subjects said.

3.1 Sense of Community

The eating disorder community on Instagram is viciously loyal, and as awareness of this community increases, so too does the size of the community itself. Members of this community have formed friendships and bonded over their common struggle with disordered eating. They rely upon each other for support, for belonging and for understanding. Several studies have discussed the isolative nature of eating disorders (Hilt, Roberto and Nolen-Hoeksema, 2013). Many patients have expressed intense loneliness, which seems to be both the cause and result of their disordered eating habits. Some

researchers believe that this isolation is one of the reasons that eating disorder patients are able to recover in a treatment setting but then so often relapse after discharge. The sense of community that the patients get inside these treatment centers helps them see that they are not alone. The eating disorder community on Instagram works in a similar manner. The problem is that this community is not regulated by medical personnel as is a treatment facility. Because of this, oftentimes this Instagram community perpetuates and encourages disordered behaviors as opposed to encouraging recovery.

Interviewees reported feeling "alone," "misunderstood," and "like a freak". When asked why she participated in the Instagram eating disorder community, one interviewee said, "To make myself feel shitty. No, I don't know. I honestly do not know. I guess I find myself on these accounts more when I'm feeling incredibly alone. I'm prone to intense loneliness lately, which sucks. Mostly I just go on to feel less like a freak."

Friends and family members who did not themselves struggle with an eating disorder did not understand the thoughts and habits of the eating disordered individual. In fact, many of the interviewees noted that they were "never fat" and were always "sort of popular" amongst their peers. This caused great confusion amongst their family and friends who did not understand what they had to be insecure about or where their struggles were deriving form. Because others were unable to understand, the interviewees reported a shift to secretive and isolative behaviors. These dissociating behaviors allow the eating disorder to gain even more power. This isolation becomes a "double-edged sword". Through specified hashtags and user profiles, the interviewees were able to find others like themselves, who knew their struggles and understood their behaviors. This sense of community was alluring to the interviewees, who were so used to being alone.

3.2 Ideas

The interviewees reported that in the depths of their disorder, one of their primary uses for interacting with pro-ana, pro-mia and other accounts involved in the Instagram eating disorder community was to "get ideas". They reported several games and challenges that are common amongst the community. One such example was the "pencil test" in which the individual would lie on the floor and place the pencil on the floor next to their body, eraser-end down. If their body extended further than the pencil, they were deemed too fat. One of the interviewees noted that she got this idea scrolling through the '#anasoldier' hashtag, which she noted is actually more of a recovery-focused hashtag than a disease perpetuating one. She remembered taking pictures daily and recording them on her own account. She would get praise from her thin physique but also support when she felt she had "failed" the challenge. "It's tricky because the community can be used however you want it to. If you want something to encourage your eating disorder behaviors, you will find people to support you. You will find ideas. You will find posts that can encourage starvation, over-exercising, and even purging. On the other hand, if you're trying to recover, you can find posts that show you recovery is possible and that a better life is out there. People who don't need to body check every time they pass a mirror and who don't have a panic attack if they eat 50 calories more than they allotted themselves. It is super encouraging, but also super dangerous and it just kind of depends on what place you're in mentally when you view these posts. I know for me, personally, I had to completely delete Instagram when I decided I really wanted to recover. The posts and temptations were too triggering. Even now I don't allow myself to take part in any of that. It just isn't healthy for me."

  In addition to challenges which encouraged viewers to eat "half an apple a day" and

nothing more, many of the interviewees noted that this Instagram community had a strong impact on their eating habits. Here, they got recipe ideas and were exposed to products that were low calorie, low fat and low carb. Many of the interviewees report subsiding off of Diet Coke and calorie-free products, namely Stevia and Walden Farms. This community also provided them with ideas on how to stay fuller longer. Popular responses were to chew sugar-free gum and fill up on water.

Further, this community showed other members how to trick family members, friends and even doctors into believing that they were eating more and gaining weight. A common suggestion was to wear baggy clothes so as to hide the actual size of the eating disordered person's body. Another suggestion was to sew coins inside of clothes and pants to increase the weight on the scale during weigh ins. It was not uncommon for users to provide insight on how to better hide food in pockets, shoes and napkins, etc. Nor was it uncommon for individuals eat large amounts of salted ice, which enabled them to retain water weight without actually eating or putting real weight on.

"I remember scrolling through the ED community on Instagram and reading comments on other girls' posts that said they only ate if it was, like, a forced family dinner or something. I wondered why I never thought of that and immediately started doing the same thing. It was cool 'cause my family thought I was eating, when in reality I was taking in maybe 400 calories a day. The Instagram community is dangerous, because even though these girls were crying out for help, I was able to turn their pleas into suggestions."

3.3 Justification

Interviewees reported that one of the primary reasons they frequented the pro-ana,

pro-mia, eating disorder Instagram accounts was to justify to themselves that what they were doing was normal. Exposure to other people with eating disorders, their habits, their body size and their thoughts allowed them to convince themselves that what they were doing was okay. While the outside world, their family, doctors, and friends told them they were "wrong," "sick" or "needed help" these accounts proved otherwise. This allowed the interviewees to convince themselves that those expressing concerns were lying to them or "trying to make [them] fat." A common belief was that other people were "just jealous."

When the interviewees progressed in their recovery, but were still engaging in habits, this community allowed them to believe that what they were doing wasn't "that" bad. For example, one interviewee said "I eat about 1,000 calories and spend 2 hours in the gym every day, which isn't that bad. I see a lot of girls eating 100 calories, if that, and they practically live in the gym. So I'm okay. I mean, I eat." The reality is, however, that this interviewee is eating less than her total daily expenditure, not even including the added calories burned during exercise. Another interviewee said that she knew she was okay because she was a lot bigger than the girls on these pro-ana and pro-mia accounts. She didn't "weigh, like 60 pounds," so she didn't think she was sick enough to have an eating disorder. "I see these girls connected to IV's and being hospitalized and I feel bad for them, I think how much of a better place I am in than them," reported one interviewee who noted that her current BMI was around 17 and she spent about 90 minutes in the gym daily. The ED community on Instagram blurs the lines between healthy and unhealthy. It allows those suffering with an eating disorder to feel fine and recovered, when in reality they still have a substantial amount of weight to gain and emotional concerns to work out.

3.4 Recovery Raises Awareness of Danger

The final common theme amongst the interviewees was that the further along they were in recovery, the less likely they were to engage in the eating disorder Instagram community. Oftentimes these individuals were hospitalized or placed in a treatment center and were not able to use Internet during this time. These individuals noted two things of primary importance. First, they noted that their encouragement to recover was drastically altered after ceasing to engage in this content. Because so many other factors were involved, it is hard to tell whether disengagement with the content increased motivation to recover, but it is notable that many of the interviewees felt "relief" in no longer being able to view or participate in this community.

"I love shopping- if I hadn't have had an ED I wouldn't have had an appreciation for it that I have right now. You know how there is a health fad in America? I would buy into that. Now I don't pay attention to that it feels more empowering. It was a blessing in disguise," one interviewee noted, highlighting the impact that the thin ideal has on society as a whole.

The second pattern that surfaced in conjunction with recovery was that the interviewees were able to see the danger of their participation in the eating disorder Instagram community. They noted that engagement is a "slippery slope" and said that even "recovery accounts" are harmful to their mental health. Many of the problems the interviewees associated with the eating disorder Instagram community involved the comparison factor. They continuously felt that they were comparing themselves to others in the community, through their food choices, exercise, and body type. This enabled the "eating disorder voice to get louder" and

encouraged unhealthy habits. Additionally, they noted that without continuously scrolling

through posts on the eating disorder community hashtags, they minimized the amount of time

they spent actually thinking about food. "The less time you spend looking at food online, the

less preoccupied you become with food. Soon, the thoughts start to get quieter, and

hopefully, eventually I won't hear them at all," one interviewee noted.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

In conclusion, there is no doubt that the interviewees felt their time spent on Instagram was closely tied to the severity of their eating disorders. These accounts provided them with a sense of community, ideas and an opportunity for justification. Those who were able to seek help for their eating disorder noted that recovery enabled them to see the danger of the eating disorder community on Instagram. They believed that the less time they spent scrolling through pro-ana, pro-mia and even recovery oriented posts and content, the more "free" they felt and the "quieter" their eating disorders became. As referenced earlier, there are many factors at play in conjunction to this study, and so the purposes of this paper was not to determine an exact causation of eating disorders through Instagram use. Instead, this study should be used by future researchers in order to aid in treatment, minimization of eating disorder development and even the role of the cultivation theory in relation to social media.

There are notable limitations to this study, including a relatively limited sample size, a lack of transcription recordings and demographic restrictions. These need to be considered by future researchers attempting to build upon this study. The value derived from this research proves invaluable in the attempt to understand and treat those suffering from and/or susceptible to disordered eating and should be taken into consideration by parents, practitioners and the government alike.

Firstly, parents need to be aware of the implications of Instagram and their child's interaction on the social media platform. While there are clearly beneficial aspects to the application, there are also components that deeply impact eating disorder recovery. One of the

primary benefits derived from Instagram use involves a sense of support and community. Parents can work to replicate this by ensuring that their children are social, and even taking them to support groups.

Secondly, practitioners should be aware of the challenges, tests and ideas circulating throughout the eating disorder community on Instagram. By being aware of the fact that some eating disordered individuals are sewing coins into their pants, salting their ice, or water loading, eating disorder practitioners and specialists can work to cease minimize deception. In doing so, they can help those suffering with eating disorders to recover more effectively and comprehensively.

Third, the government should utilize the results of this study to produce cautionary campaigns on eating disorders and the use of social media. While social media is profoundly revolutionary, there is also a high likelihood that the messages being disseminated throughout the various platforms are toxic to society. While demanding removal of such posts may be an infringement of constitutional rights, the government can work to propagate more positive messages of health and beauty. Additionally, this study can help the government see the importance of eating disorder rehabilitation centers, support groups and recovery services. This may encourage them to work more closely with insurance companies, hospitals, practitioners and others to ensure comprehensive recovery programs are available to all.

As eating disorders become more profound, society needs to work to identify and prevent their development. By being aware of the tactics and platforms currently relied upon by individuals with eating disorders, and also understanding the motivations behind this use, eating disorder treatment can be tailored to better care for those suffering with the disease. Future research can and should build upon this study to work to develop improved treatment

and prevent harmful messages from being dispersed throughout the media.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: IRB Approval Letter

USF
UNIVERSITY OF
SOUTH FLORIDA

RESEARCH INTEGRITY AND COMPLIANCE
Institutional Review Boards, FWA No. 00001669
12901 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., MDC035 ● Tampa, FL 33612-4799
(813) 974-5638 ● FAX (813) 974-7091

March 24, 2015

Kendall O'Brien
Mass
Communication
2865 Chelsea Place North

Clearwater , FL   33759

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#:   Pro00017707
Title: The Cultivation of Eating Disorders Through Instagram

Study Approval Period: 3/23/2015 to 3/23/2016

Dear Mr. O'Brien :

On 3/23/2015 , the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the
above application and all documents outlined below.

**Approved
Item(s): Protocol
Document(s):**
The Cultivation of Eating Disorders Through Instagram

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
Informed Consent.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found
under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid

during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).

It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR

56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon , Ph.D. , Vice
Chairperson USF Institutional Review
Board

Appendix 2: Letter of Consent

<div align="center">

University of South Florida

Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Protocol Title: The Cultivation of Eating Disorders Through Instagram

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Please read this consent form carefully before you decide to participate in this study.

Thank you for taking time to participate in this study. Your participation is completely voluntary, and there is no penalty for refusal to participate.

The answers from this questionnaire will assist the researcher in completing a Master's thesis, with the intention of filling the literature gap in the Mass Communication discipline.

You may terminate completion of this interview at any time if you feel uncomfortable by the content of the questions. You may also refuse to answer a question(s) if you choose. Furthermore, the information you contribute is **private** and **confidential**. Other than the researcher and her faculty advisor, Dr. Roxanne Watson, no one else will have access to the answers you provide.

There are no known risks associated with this study, and there are no direct benefits to you for your participation.

Once again, thank you for your participation.

Appendix 3.1: Interview Questions

1) Do you have anorexia, bulimia, both or another otherwise defined eating disorder?

2) Have you been professionally diagnosed?

3) How often do you use Instagram?

4) Do you have a pro-ana/pro-mia Instagram account?

5) Do you have a pro-recovery Instagram account?

6) If you answered yes to the previous questions, how often do you log on? If no, have you had one in the past or have you ever explored any pro-ana/pro-mia content on Instagram?

7) If yes, how long do you typically spend when you go on these accounts or view these hashtags?

8) Why do you believe you log on to your pro-ana/pro-mia account and/or view pro- ana/pro-mia hashtags and images?

9) Can you name any specific pro-ana/pro-mia hashtags that you have viewed?

10) How does the content categorized through these hashtags make you feel?

11) How did it make you feel before you started recovery?

12) Were your eating habits influenced by what you saw on Instagram?

13) How do you think your body image has affected you and your life options?

14) What is your ideal weight?

15) Before you started recovery, how did your eating habits reflect anorexia/bulimia?

16) Do you think your eating habits have been influenced by what you saw on Instagram?

17) Has the amount of time you log in (to ana and mia sites) changed since you began recovery?

18)

Appendix 3.2: Survey

Please honestly answer the next few questions. Keep in mind you answers will remain confidential.

Current age _____

What is your ethnicity _____

What is your height _____

What did you weigh before your eating disorder began _____

What is your current weight, if known _____

How do you consider your body shape?

How satisfied are you with your body shape?