Hiding in Plain Sight: ‘Secret’ Anorexia Nervosa Communities on Youtubetm

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This research investigates the way in which online public forums are being utilized as a means of sharing ones experiences with Anorexia Nervosa. By adopting a netnographic research approach and Hermeneutic analysis method this research explores the role that personal video logs (vlogs) are being used as a means of public exhibitionism for five sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa.

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ABSTRACT
This research investigates the way in which online public forums are being utilized as a means of sharing one's experiences with Anorexia Nervosa. What is particularly fascinating as well as simultaneously being horrifying, is that many of these accounts are pro-anorexia and used as encouragement for others to continue with their own eating disorders. With the ease of access to online video logging (vlogging) the role of the ‘Vlogosphere’ is growing in importance as a medium for public exhibitionism, even when the content of the posts are of an extremely sensitive nature. By adopting a netnographic research approach and Hermeneutic analysis method this research explores the role that personal video logs (vlogs) are being used as a means of public exhibitionism for five sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa. The findings show that the community that evolves around the sufferers act to maintain the vlogger’s disease by encouraging her in her disorder and simultaneously defending her from attackers who disagree with her actions and vlogs.

INTRODUCTION
The use of web logging (blogging) and video logging (vlogging) as a means of self expression has increased exponentially in recent years (Nardi, Schiano, and Gumbrecht 2004) with the number of active blogs doubling every 6 months between 2003 and 2006 (Green 2007). Universal McCann estimate that 59% of internet users either read or own a blog of some form and 75% watch video clips online (Smith 2008). The potential that online media has as a portal for individual self expression appears limitless. This research focuses specifically on one aspect of online self expression many would define being stigmatized and outside mainstream consumer society. This research examines the way in which sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa use YouTube™ as a medium for expressing thoughts, fears, progress with their therapy, self identity, and other highly personal and sensitive topics to a relatively anonymous public audience with little control over the privacy of their posts. Blood (2002) refers to a blog as a “coffee house conversation in text” (p.1) whilst other researchers define blogging by its format. Walker (2005) defines a blog as being a frequently updated website consisting of dated entries in reverse chronological order so that the most recent post appears first. Blogs are typically posted by individuals having a personal or informal style and wish to produce an online diary (Walker 2005).

Some research has been done on the need for consumers to express their multiple selves through a variety of channels (Lee, Im, and Taylor 2008), whilst others have examined the motives behind ‘online diaries’ (Nardi et al. 2004). One area of interest in the literature is the need for stigmatized users to find ways of expressing themselves freely without judgment as a means of searching for belonging (Baumeister and Leary 1995). However, relatively little research has been conducted on the recent developments of video blogging and the motivations behind its use by internet users, with stigmatized identities such as Anorexia Nervosa. Therefore the research question presented here is: how does video blogging technology, and the community that it has created, motivate those with highly stigmatized identities, such as Anorexia Nervosa, to express their identity to complete strangers?

In achieving this aim we undertake a netnographic methodology (Kozinets 2002) to investigate five YouTube™ vloggers as they post their thoughts and feelings on the public forum. This research comprises data collected from vlogs themselves, viewer, and producer generated comments to specific vlogs and forum posts made by participants about their vlog posts. Hermeneutic analysis is used to explicate the underlying meanings associated with the vlogs as well as to derive a fuller understanding of the context in which the participants choose to adopt vlogging as a means of self expression. Preceding the findings and discussion is a brief review of the extant literature on exhibitionism its role in consumer culture.

BACKGROUND
Self-expression and exhibitionism
The notion of consumers having and expressing multiple selves is well founded in consumer research and psychology (Markus and Kunda 1986; McGuire et al. 1978; Oakes and Shaw 1987; Wylie et al. 1979). The pressure associated with public expectation can lead to self-impersonation and as such, it is argued that consumers carry an arsenal of different masks that reveal different aspects of our ‘self’ (Markus and Nurius 1986). This research focuses more on a specific form of self-expression, that of public exhibitionism of a self that is often stigmatized by mainstream society. Holbrook (2000) defines consumer exhibitionism as going hand in hand with consumer voyeurism. Exhibitionism, as used in this research, is the need for consumers to display, express, and expose a form of themselves (whether it is real or not) so that others (consumer voyeurs) may watch. It is the act of purposefully exposing a part of the self in order for it to be seen. Similar acts that may be concealed from others would not, in this case, be seen as exhibitionism. Therefore, had this research looked at the private diaries of Anorexia Nervosa sufferers for which the only audience is the writer, then the concept of exhibitionism would not be valid.

Much of the psychological literature on exhibitionism defines it as a deviant and abnormal act. The main bodies of research look at sexual exhibitionism and means of treatment (Marshall, Eccles, and Barabarae 1991; Zohar, Kaplan, and Benjamin 1994) and focus heavily on the irrational nature of the behavior. One interesting area of research looks at how sexual exhibitionism in adolescents may not be a psychological disorder, but rather a “strategic interaction” in a search for acceptance and engagement with others (Green 1987). This desire to interact through ‘showing off’ has been linked with an abusive history (Hold-Cavell 1985). More recently, Baslam (2008) shows that female exhibitionism may not necessarily be related to abnormal sexual deviancy but a “normative spectrum for pleasurably active sex seeking and pleasurable procreative desire and fantasy” (pp. 99). Baslam continues by describing how female exhibitionism can be designed not to interact, but to engage onlookers with a sense of envy and yearning, which further affirms the female performer in her role as exhibitionist (Baslam 2008). Again, although motives may be different, the purpose is to engage the voyeur in some way.

Beyond the sexual context of exhibitionism there remains a raft of literature on ‘show off’s that has not permeated into consumer research. Bal (1992) describes the use of displays in museums as a means of asserting dominancy of a culture. That is, by showing wares as a culture one is really showing off as to the superior nature of one culture over another. This notion of exhibitionism as a means of control, power, and even defence of ones identity is found in many contexts. Wilson and Daly’s (1985) research on Detroit youth posits that violence in young men is often incited when a conflict in power exists between perceived competitors and such power struggles are further incensed when competitors show
off their power, whether it be through their physical strength, peer support or weaponry. One could argue that such behaviors found throughout society, from the youth in city streets, to adults in halls of power. Showing off and exhibitionism are, in many cases, about control and power. The following section will look at the relationship between control, power and Anorexia Nervosa in young women.

Anorexia Nervosa and Control

Although the focus of this research is not the etiology of Anorexia Nervosa, it is important to understand some of the basic causes associated with the disorder if we are to fully understand the context associated with the participants in question (Palmer 1969). The DSM-IV classifies Anorexia as being an inability to maintain a healthy body weight combined with a fear of losing control over the sufferer’s weight and becoming ‘fat’. Sufferers often come from abusive and controlling families whereby nurturance is significantly lacking (American Psychiatric Association 2000). Although many treatment plans are effective if the sufferer is diagnosed in time, many are reluctant to undertake treatment as it does mean relinquishing control (American Psychiatric Association 2000). This theme of control is reiterated in a number of studies on anorexia. Indeed, Garner, Olmstead, and Polivy’s (1983) eating disorder inventory includes subscales on both striving for effectiveness (desire to find methods or solutions that are effective in meeting necessary weight-loss goals) as well as idealized perfectionism (searching for a physical perfection, which may be a distorted reality of ones actual size), both items heavily related to control over one’s physical self. Latterly, Morgan, Reid, and Lacey’s (1999) measurement of eating disorders also puts a heavy emphasis on the impact of lost control with regard to the severity of the sufferer’s condition. One of the earliest pieces of psychoanalytic work on Anorexia also notes that the nature of the disease is when a person “embarks on her [his] relentless pursuit of thinness and absolute control over her [his] body” (Sours 1974, p 567). It is clear that control over oneself, one’s body, and a desire for self-control away from a parental control system are all key factors in understanding sufferers of the disease, which links openly with the desire for control by the exhibitionist. Although of significant interest, this research will not focus on understanding why some sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa choose to be exhibitionists whilst others do not – the focus here is to understand their behaviors and actions as exhibitionists. The following section outlines the methodology employed and the findings from the research.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a netnographic approach (Kozinets 2002) as it offers significant advantages in this particular context. In particular it aids in researching sensitive subject areas as the researcher can covertly collect and analyse data without the vlogger feeling subjected to undue inquiry they may not be comfortable with (Langer and Beckmann 2005). This covert approach naturally raises issues of ethicality as participants may not wish their posts to be analysed and disseminated for public academic audiences. Netnography allows researchers to engage in stories presented on a freely available public forum without influencing the research participants. However, the nature of the posts and the research at hand on a public forum also allows the researcher (and anyone else surfing the web) to freely access the posts and ensure that ethicality is maintained as long as the participants is kept anonymous. As such, participants in this study will not be referred to by their actual user names and titles of posts will not be disclosed in this paper.

As much of the data being analysed is freely available on YouTube™ it was deemed appropriate to begin data collection by finding participants [vloggers] who displayed characteristics akin to those suffering from Anorexia (Morgan et al. 1999). The search began by using search terms for “weight loss” which revealed a total of 212 individual vloggers. This search was then further refined with a search for “fast” or “fasting” which resulted in 13 individual vloggers being identified. By examining their initial posts all 13 displayed some characteristics of Anorexia, with 5 specifically mentioned that they have been diagnosed with the disorder. Although the other 8 vloggers may indeed be sufferers it would be imprudent of the researchers to assume the condition without formal psychoanalytic assessment of the vlogger by a specialist. As this is not available at this time these remaining 8 vloggers are not formally analysed as part of this study.

All five of the remaining vloggers were women aged between 20 and 31 at the time of analysis; however, logs made by diagnosed sufferers were identified by girls as young as 8 years old. Although a small proportion of Anorexia Nervosa sufferers are male the sample here are all female. All of the women had a steady partner and either lived at home with their parents or with their partner and (and any children they may have). The netnography began by watching all the vlogs made by the five vloggers, transcribing text and copying any comments made by viewers or vloggers. In total, 249 vlogs were viewed ranging in length from 45 seconds to 15:13 minutes covering a range of topics. The number of views for each vlog varies from vlogger to vlogger. As an indication of the volume of data provided by the vlog creator [vlogger] and vlog voyeurs [viewer] the most prolific vlogger had created 92 vlogs, which were viewed over 190,000 times (as at January 2009) and had over 2,700 regular subscribers who were alerted to any new vlogs being posted. Although these numbers may pale in comparison to the millions of videos available online, it still shows an area of high usage and of importance to online community research.

For interpretation of the collected data a hermeneutic approach was adopted as it offers a greater insight of the stories being told by the vloggers by examining the underlying meanings and context associated with the stories (Palmer 1969; Thompson 1997). By adopting hermeneutic analysis the researcher requires an understanding of the personal history of the textual stories in order to help understand the meanings associated with the stories generated by respondents. This research will therefore look to understand historical notions of control from participants’ perspectives and focus on their own processual desire for greater control through their YouTube™ vlogs. However, themes from other, interrelated subjects will also be drawn into the analysis as it is seen appropriate.

FINDINGS

A number of themes emerged from the analysis of the data. However, due to the limited space associated with this submission we will only concentrate on three major themes, that of acceptance through self-validation, community and control. Other themes not discussed here include the vloggers’ struggle with depression, anxiety, and validation. It is hoped these themes can be elucidated further in a future manuscript.

Acceptance Through Self-Validation

Based on the data collected, YouTube™ seems to be providing those that suffer from Anorexia Nervosa the possibility to express their real selves as well as control the level of expression associated with the posts. YouTube™ provides vloggers with a space in which their identity can be expressed without fear of being unaccepted or misunderstood; something that these vloggers express is impossible outside this setting. Vloggers maintain a heavy control over their posts by enabling the right to delete posts that invalidate their expression or damage their identities. Many of the vloggers express
that their fasting and Anorexia like behaviors are an important aspect of their lives and they feel unable to share it with those that matter to them the most. This indicates that they are fully aware of the controversy that surrounds their behavior but find that through the consumption of YouTube™, they do not risk the possibility of being unloved and unaccepted, as Vlogger A demonstrates here:

“...No one really understands what I go through, my parents would think I’ve gone crazy and send me to THAT clinic but it makes me feel so tired sometimes, and suppressed, and alone. They just don’t understand what it feels like to want something so bad….thank you guys so much, I mean it…all my subscribers….it’s nice to have someone that I can relate to and talk to….love you all and thanks for all your supportive messages… it’s such a relief to finally be able to discuss this without people thinking that I’m a freak!”

(Vlogger A, 31, engaged with one child – fasting for her wedding).

Here Vlogger A offers a clear example of a need for belonging and validation (Baumeister and Leary 1995). When a lack of interpersonal belonging exists in real life for these vloggers they attempt to seek validation and belonging elsewhere. Some vloggers continue to build this need for belonging by further displacing themselves from their real life friends and families. Without a feeling of being understood by their friends and families and a deep sense of vulnerability, they crave the understanding of those on YouTube™. Therefore, as close relationships are formed on YouTube™, face to face relationships progressively diminish:

“I have to spend time with my mother today….not only is she going to complain how I’m not eating but I have to actually have a CONVERSATION with her….I really don’t want to go and want to spend time with you guys….what’s the point anyway?! It’s not like she is going to understand any of my problems or issues; she is just going to start crying and complaining that she doesn’t know how to help me…I DON’T NEED HELP! What’s wrong with her?!! Anyway… I can’t avoid going so I might as well and just have some form of civil conversation…I promise to let you guys know how it went and will be making a video soooon!”

(Vlogger C, 24, living with long-term boyfriend - fasting to lose her “hips”)

The above not only shows the lack of enthusiasm towards face to face interaction but also reveals the closeness of the relationships formed online. The vloggers studied here all show a desire to spend time with their online viewers rather than with their families. This indicates that, YouTube™ users form online relationships that can be of more value than those formed over many years with their parents or partners as the vlogger finds themselves expressing their ‘true’ selves to online viewers, resulting in the formation of a stronger connection and therefore high levels of affection and closeness. This can be also shown in the specific videos made:

“There was this one week when I just did not want to talk to anyone….so I decided to do a “just want to say hi” video. It was too much for me to deal with. I was so depressed all the time. I saw some videos where someone had an eating disorder and it really made me mad. I think that I have an eating disorder and I need help. I want to get help. But I don’t know what to do. I don’t want to go to therapy. I don’t want to go to a doctor. I don’t want to go to the hospital. I don’t want to go to anyone. I just want to be left alone. I want to die.”

(Video of Vlogger C, 24, living with long-term boyfriend - fasting to lose her “hips”)

These bonds with the viewing audience forms a sense of community online that the vloggers crave as a means of offering validation for their situation and endeavors to lose weight.

Community

The more the vlogger engages with the YouTube™ community she has created the greater the ties between her online in-group and the weaker the ties with her offline friends and family (Batson et al. 1997; Tajfel 1982; Turner 1987). Such a creation results in greater reliance on YouTube™ itself and therefore provides a space whereby control of their identity becomes possible:

“It’s so nice to be able to talk to people who know what I’m going through…it’s funny…I spend all day hiding having this eating disorder from people around me and getting stressed about it….and then on here you can actually talk so freely about it…YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW! [laughs]…I guess it’s because you guys know what I’m on about…you won’t just think oh my god she needs help…thanks sweethearts!”

(Vlogger C, 24, living with long-term boyfriend - fasting to lose her “hips”).

Consequently, this reliance results in strong levels of attachment between users and therefore, the need for approval. All of these examples offer evidence of a need for community, acceptance and the exertion of control by the vlogger. Many of the vloggers admit their need for control stems from the lack of control they felt as they grew up:

“It’s not as if it’s something I could have done anything about…HE was just a fucking monster now I think about it…HE was the one who did this to me and now HE’s the one who thinks I’m a perfect angel…well it’s not like that [long pause]. I couldn’t change ‘that’ but I can change ‘this’…this and NOW” [vlogger holds herself and squeezes stomach in so as to appear thinner] (Vlogger E, 21, living at home with parents – fasting to appear more attractive to a boy she likes).

The historical context of the stories offers a greater insight into the way in which the vloggers use exhibitionism as an extension of their need for control, which is again, symptomatic of Anorexia Nervosa sufferers. Vloggers perceive their YouTube™ vlogs as being a portal to an identity and community where they are offered acceptance and protection from the reality of their everyday lives (Noble and Walker 1997; Turner 1964).

As previously discussed, results have shown that vloggers feel that YouTube™ is a place for self expression without judgment. Therefore, they feel at ease with expressing issues of concern and frustration that are related to their weight loss. It is the fact that such expression is directed at viewers that have similar interests and concerns that allows for high levels of support and encouragement in times of distress for the vlogger. Not only does such expression allow for a release of anxiety, but the support it generates allows the video bloggers to feel loved and cared about. This evidently allows for emotions of affiliation and belonging to be experienced:

“I broke my fast today…I’m so angry with myself….IM A FAILURE!!! I ate so much….I’m so disappointed in myself….WHY??! I know this is probably boring for you, but I
need to get this feeling out!! I know you guys will understand...ITS SO FRUSTRATING!! I hope I haven’t put on any weight! I don’t want to step on the scales....” (Vlogger C, 24, living with long-term boyfriend - fasting to lose her “hips”).

In response to this, a viewer commented:

“Don’t worry hunnie, we all have made mistakes. I know you are strong and can cope with this. Don’t let it put you down, keep motivated. I swear you are such an inspiration to me and even though you feel really bad and like a disappointment, you are not! Keep up the fast and you will feel better, don’t let yourself slip and most importantly remember, we have ALL broken a fast at some time or another and what you did is normal. Love you and wish you the best”

Participant C went on to thank the viewer in her next video:

“Thank you so much for your comments!! It’s nice that I can have someone to talk to that relates to my problems.... you made me feel a million times better, you’re a sweet heart and I wish that your fast is going well! Thanks for caring!”

All of these interactions aid the vlogger to exert greater strength and control over her situation and lead her further down the road of fasting as a means of losing weight. It is clear that the online communities offer much needed validation for these ‘private’ fasts and is only exaggerating the effects of the disease through greater need for control and greater desire to lose weight.

Control

In order to control their identity without it being challenged, users tend to lie to friends and family about their eating disorder. In line with this they try just as hard to keep their video blogging activities a secret from those that know them:

“...sorry....I have to keep my voice down....my parents are in the other room and they don’t know about this video making...they would go really mad if they found out...and they would also find out a lot of things that I really don’t want them to know, as you can imagine (sighs)...it’s good that way.......I get to have my own little world with you guys that’s far away from the day to day crap” (Vlogger D, 21, living at home - fasting to look beautiful).

The use of YouTube™ allows for strong levels of supportive interaction, but it also provides many of these women with a form of ‘thinspiration’ through the viewing of other similar online journals:

“I was bored the other day....well I couldn’t sleep....so I went on YouTube™ and watched some videos....I mean.... some of you girls are amazing....your so motivated and strong willed...I also watched a video on a fast and I decided that’s what I need to do...so I’m starting a fast!!! Thanks for the inspiration (deleted word)....I realized how much weight you’re losing and if you can do it....well it just gave me the motivation to try fasting” (Vlogger A, 31, engaged with one child – fasting for her wedding).

This once again emphasises the strong sense of community provided by the consumption of YouTube™, but also shows how the vloggers engage with coping mechanisms to continue their individual fasts. Conversely, when control is lost, the outcome often results in frustration, anger, depression, but also, more heightened levels of exhibitionism. This is shown by one vlogger’s flamboyant outburst online after losing control of her fast:

“...feeling like SHIT right now...really depressed...I mean, I weighed myself this morning and I’ve lost NOTHING!! NOTHING!!.....I’m just really frustrated, I know it’s a bit silly but I just needed to get it out and I can’t seem to sleep.... I don’t know...I guess this really has nothing to do with anything....I just wish I could zone out or disappear”(Vlogger B, 22, living at home with parents – fasting to lose weight).

And again, the sense of frustration comes through with another vlogger, completely unrelated to the first but with a very similar narrative:

“I am so fucking angry!!!! I weighed myself and nothing! NOTHING! (screams)......that’s it I’m not going to post another video till I’ve lost some weight...this is just pathetic and I’m PATHETIC to watch.....I’m so sorry you guys... you’ve been so sweet to me and all I’ve done is let you down.....just watch me I will loose the weight!” (Vlogger E, 21, living at home with parents – fasting to appear more attractive to a boy she likes).

The frustration through lost control is symptomatic of sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa; however, their public, exuberant displays of anger are often not seen due to their fear of losing acceptance (Vitousek and Manke 1994). Sufferers are more likely to recluse from those not in favor of their behavior; but when a support network, such as the YouTube™ communities, exist, the vlogger is able to vent their emotional frustration and draw strength from viewer comments and responses to their situation.

DISCUSSION

This research has looked at the role in which YouTube™ offers sufferers of Anorexia Nervosa the opportunity to seek acceptance, form communities of similarly minded supporters of their behavior and exert greater control over their lives. This research does not aim to offer an understanding for what may have caused their eating disorders nor does it offer contributions for understanding a cure for the disease. What this research is able to show is that technologically savvy consumers are able to find emotional catharsis through exhibitionist behaviors. The loss of control with one side of the vlogger’s life is exaggerated with more and more extroverted presentations of self online. This is in line with Schau and Gilly’s (1995) investigations into online presentational behavior and the desire to show one’s self online in a way that may appeal to viewers. In this case the vloggers are presenting a sign that draws attention and sympathy from viewers, allowing the vloggers to further validate their decision to fast.

The findings here show that the expression of self using vlogs is a form of hyper-expression or exhibitionism compared with personal websites or even blogs. This could be indicative of a coping mechanism to generate validation for their actions and draw encouragement from the community they have created, or it is an extension of their disorder whereby a loss of control in one aspect of the vlogger’s life leads to a need to gain of control by drawing attention to their plight through exhibitionism.
The paradox in this research lies with the fact that many of these sufferers act as though they are sharing their private thoughts in a private setting. The revelations of self they offer become more and more detailed and private in nature, similar to that of a private diary (Nardi et al. 2004), but in a public forum. The desire to exhibit themselves to the outside world, whilst still keeping their affliction hidden from their loved ones offers a significant area of interest for both consumer culture theorists and eating disorder therapists.

The Catharsis Hypothesis suggests that venting one’s emotions can aid in alleviating the emotional anger or pain one is feeling (Feshbagh 1956). However, more recent evidence has shown that vented anger does not often relieve tension, but rather increases anger levels (Bushman 2002; Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips 2001). But, it appears that when the vented emotions are subsequently validated by a strong community spirit to continue unhealthy behavior the vlogger reacts positively to the feeling of catharsis through the support she receives from YouTube™. This cathartic experience is thus harnessed as a means of mood repair. However, the result is a continuation of thoughts and behaviors that further validate the triggers of Anorexia Nervosa.

This research may offer more questions about vlogging behavior than it does answers, but it does highlight the need for awareness of the role that online communities play in self formation and self validation. What is known is that these women are suffering, but they are not suffering in silence and they are not suffering alone. The support rich environment offered by YouTube™ means that these sufferers act as though they are sharing their private thoughts and more detailed and private in nature, similar to that of a private diary (Nardi et al. 2004), but in a public forum. The desire to exhibit themselves to the outside world, whilst still keeping their affliction hidden from their loved ones offers a significant area of interest for both consumer culture theorists and eating disorder therapists.

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