

Nouse



“Reblog If You Feel Fat Right Now” – the internet’s sick side



By Amy Gibbons, Deputy Editor (2015/16)

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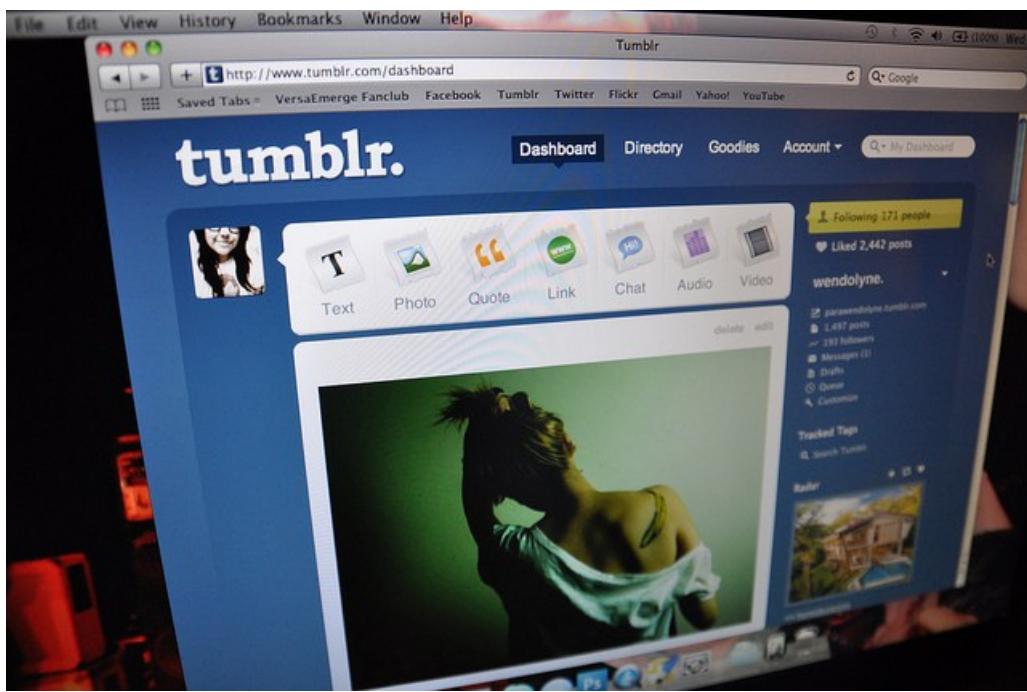


Image: Wendolyne Barrios

In an age when the world is infatuated with tweeting and tumblring, many young people have proved vulnerable to websites or social media accounts that glorify eating disorders.

Life always seems much more manageable when we know that we’re not alone. This seems to be the appeal of what are known as ‘Pro-Ana’ (pro-anorexia) and ‘Pro-Mia’ (pro-bulimia) online communities, that encourage unhealthy behaviour in young users already prone to eating disorders.

When logging into a ‘Pro-Ana’ chatroom, following a ‘Pro-Mia’ user on Twitter or Tumblr, or simply seeking out ‘thinspo’ (‘thinspiration’) online, users feel they are amongst friends. They feel comfortable in the assumption that they will not be judged; on the contrary, they will be supported and encouraged in their attempts to cut their net calorie intakes to nil. These communities are therefore perceived amongst many of their followers as safe and productive places; users won’t feel pressured by parents or ‘real-life’ friends to eat healthily, so can indulge freely in admitting to fasting, purging and over-exercising. They may even be applauded for it!

These communities are in reality, however, frighteningly toxic.

According to the National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders (ANAD), ‘In June 2010, researchers studied the content of 180 sites they discovered while searching for terms like “Pro-Anorexia” and “thin and support.” 83% of the sites they viewed contained suggestions for engaging in

eating disorder behaviors.'

Earlier this year, The Independent on Sunday revealed that 'the number of children and teenagers seeking help for an eating disorder has risen by 110 per cent in the past three years'.

'Pro-Ana' and 'Pro-Mia' sites are particularly problematic because too often they encourage teenagers on the brink of being diagnosed with an eating disorder to engage with those who vouch for being unhealthy. Young people that perhaps only ever intended to seek attention and affection to nurse low self-esteem end up completely unnecessarily committing to an unhealthy lifestyle. On these platforms disorders such as Anorexia and Bulimia are therefore extremely contagious.

So what can we do about it? The most effective cure for this digital epidemic is, of course, prevention. Don't allow it to gain momentum in the first place. Our own university has measures in place – if you, yourself, need advice on coping with an eating disorder, or simply need help for a friend, get in touch with Open Door Team at York on 01904 322140 or via e-mail at opendoor@york.co.uk for confidential support.

Tumblr itself intercepts searches for 'anorexia' and 'bulimia' with a short message to its users, reading: 'Everything okay? If you or someone you know is struggling with an eating disorder, NEDA is here to help: call 1-800-931-2237 or chat with them online.' and then goes on to recommend other platforms for confidential crisis prevention. However, it still gives its users the option to 'view search results' anyway. Twitter, on the other hand, fails to acknowledge the problem at all.

What is perhaps most worrying about 'Pro-Ana' and 'Pro-Mia' sites is that they actively idolize anorexics and bulimics. They support these disorders as lifestyle choices. And judging by the increasing popularity of these communities online, it appears that this season eating disorders are all the rage. Now that, more than anything, really resonates.



One comment

charles

24 Oct '14 at 6:32 pm

Let's be honest eating disorders in America aren't that big of a problem. Start focusing on real health problems like the obesity epidemic that affects a majority of Americans.

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