

TITLE: Media Framing Analysis as a Tool for Bridging the Gap between Community and Clinically Based Research

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Introduction: Eating disorder communities are no longer restricted to support groups and individual therapy—they have also found a new home on social media sites like tumblr, instagram, and pinterest. Googling “thinspo” or “thinspiration” produces thousands of images of severely underweight women and girls, showing the dark side of the online eating disorder culture that encourages sickness. Calls to action have led social media to take a role in censoring the content that can be used on their sites. In February 2012, the first in a series of print articles on the social media censorship of pro-self harm and eating disorder content went live. The purpose of this study is to identify media framing of: (a) censorship of content and (b) causes of poor body image among eating disordered individuals.

Methods: We analyzed six articles over a period of six months utilizing Media Framing Analysis (Giles & Shaw, 2009). With this analysis, we first identified news pegs and key characters. We also noted authors’ linguistic techniques and means of persuasion. Next, we assessed which narratives and generalizations were present. Finally, we identified salient themes that emerged from our analysis. Inter-rater reliability was sufficient, $K=.87$.

Results: Frequent topic frames that emerged include: the use of “thinspiration” images, other pro-eating disorder content, and the use of this content on social media sites. Common value frames include: whether eating disordered behavior can be considered a life-style choice, if the bans would encourage secrecy, and with whom responsibility of censorship of content belongs (four levels: parents, social media, mainstream media, society).

Discussion: All but one of the articles supported the social media regulation of pro-eating disorder content; however, none could point to a source for causes of poor body image among eating disordered individuals. The most dominant themes are an important source for identifying attitudes at multiple levels (local, national, international) toward the larger issue of body dissatisfaction and influences on disordered eating—one of which social media is trying to limit. Integrating this information at both the community and clinical levels is important to keep both prevention and treatment programs as up to date the participants coming into them.