

Research uncovers a secret society connecting through the Internet

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It can be a helpless and heartbreaking situation for families as they try to confront a family member with an eating disorder. What they may not know is that there's a society on the Internet that is dedicated to thwarting any recovery from this dangerous and possibly fatal behavior.

University of Cincinnati communication researchers are reporting on a new type of social support group as social networks grow on the Web. This emerging Online Negative Enabling Support Group (ONESG) surrounding the pro-anorexia movement is reported in the current issue of the journal, *New Media & Society*.

Members of this society embrace [anorexia](#) as a choice rather than acknowledging it as an illness. The ONESG pro-anorexia movement reflects four themes and uses several communication strategies to encourage anorexics to embrace their harmful and dangerous impulses, writes lead author Stephen M. Haas, a UC associate professor of communication. The themes are:

- Staying "true" to the anorexia movement – Forums and blogs invite members to discuss eating, bingeing and exercising, an "online confessional" of sorts where members can confess their guilt if they feel they have eaten too much or have not exercised enough to stay inline with the movement.
- Promoting self-loathing strategies – Websites encourage

communications that not only involving loathing of the physical body, but also of one's inner being in confessing feelings of worthlessness and weakness. These negative rants are embraced by other visitors – a communication technique the authors say is unique to this community. Messages are accepted and not contradicted, building a shared identity in acknowledging each others' failures.

- Pro-anorexia advising – The two most common forms of advice involve dieting and dealing with confrontations from non-anorexics, such as family members who try to encourage healthy eating.
- Pro-anorexia encouragement – The fourth communication theme uncovered in these social networks involves encouragement. This can involve affectionate messages that foster group intimacy, offer tips and techniques to encourage anorexic behavior, and form a barrier against the disapproval of non-anorexic "outsiders."

In ONESG communications, there was a common ambivalence between self-loathing and self-encouragement. "Embracing the ambivalence of self-loathing and self-encouragement is an important strategy because it illustrates the inner turmoil that resides within pro-anorexia participants," the authors write. "They cling relentlessly to the idea that achieving a certain level of thinness will somehow remedy their feelings of worthlessness and undesirability; however, the means by which they attain this sense of value and belonging is stigmatized and deemed undesirable."

The researchers say this secret social network is strengthened by the anonymity of the Internet, which allows the exchange of extreme views. Interactions co-construct potentially dangerous, negative behaviors in a

positive way that allows new, positive identities to be created. Affectionate messages create a bonding experience.

The authors write that as new social media emerges, it will be even more important to understand their role and impact on ONESGs. They add that understanding these communication strategies may also serve as a useful tool to break down obstacles to life-saving therapy.

"By gaining deeper insight, we can potentially increase our efforts to help those whose online interactions revolve around 'communicating thin,'" the authors write.

The researchers gathered their data by exploring general [social networking](#) sites and pro-anorexia specific websites that allowed public access. The websites and blogs were researched over a period dating from October 2006 to May 2007. The collected data was believed to be primarily from Caucasian women between the ages of 13 and 26.

Provided by University of Cincinnati

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