From the ABC Diet to "What I Eat in a Day Videos": Using Constructivism to Understand the Persistence of Eating Disorder Culture

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Introduction

An apple for breakfast, a boiled egg for lunch, and sleep for dinner: this diet is not dissimilar from those posted on pro-anorexia (pro-ana) sites. According to "Pro-Anorexia Websites: What They Are and Their Dangers" (Arzt & Westphalen, 2023), diets such as the "ABC diet," or even worse, the "rainbow diet," are posted by people with eating disorders and only harm those who are looking to lose weight by sending them to dangerous extremes. Pro-ana forums work competitively to push each other to attain their unsustainable and unhealthy version of beauty. They are competitive, and they make it a goal to hold each other accountable for eating next to nothing every day; on the eating disorder forum edsupportforum.com, there are many posts similar to user carriebradshawsarm's (2021), where they ask about creating a goal accountability group chat: "does anyone want to make a group chat maybe WhatsApp or text? to talk about ed and help each other to resist urges and cravings? we should probably have similar goals: I'm actively trying to lose weight very quickly."

Scholars have researched social media's impact on eating-disordered behaviors for years now. Time and time again, it has been shown that social media usage makes users more likely to compare themselves to others; therefore, making them more susceptible to developing an eating disorder. For example, Jasmine Fardouly, a postdoctoral researcher at the Centre for Emotional Health, and Lenny R. Vartanian, a psychologist specializing in eating and weight, suggest in "Social Media and Body Image Concerns" (2016) that the amount of time a person spends on social media is correlated to how positively they view their body. They highlight that appearance comparisons connect social media to body image and that as people spend more time online, they internalize the comments they see on other people's bodies and feel inadequate with their appearance. While this is accurate, these authors acknowledge in their work that more research is needed in this field of study. In their conclusion, they explain that "although more experimental evidence is needed, the available evidence suggests that body image and media literacy intervention programs should address the potential impact of social media on its users."

Because there is so much research being done about the relationship between social media usage and eating disorders, it is concerning that this problem still exists: if the issue has been present for so long, why hasn't it been improved upon? The findings in "Social Media and Body Image Concerns" have been corroborated by many different scientists in works such as "Detrimental Effects of Online Pro–Eating Disorder Communities on Weight Loss and Desired Weight" (Feldhege, Moessner, & Bauer, 2021), where it is confirmed that there is a negative correlation in regards to how much time people spend in pro-ana communities, and how much their desired BMI drops: as a person spends more time online, they keep lowering their desired

weight until they reach unhealthy levels. The fact that online communities boost eating disordered behaviors is such a well-known idea that there are guidelines to help people navigate online spaces and negate the effects of the eating disorder culture they see online.

From "teach[ing] others that their self-worth is not related to how they look or how they eat," to "avoid[ing] terms like "junk food," there are many different ways people try to distance themselves from eating disorder culture ("Prevention," 2022). However, these tips are ineffective for those in pro-ana communities who are actively spreading eating disorder culture. People stuck in pro-eating disorder communities are trapped in a mindset that constantly reminds them that thin is more attractive than not, making them look down on those in recovery (Arzt & Westphalen, 2023). People in pro-ana spaces contribute to a hegemony in which thin people are on top. The research that has already been conducted about eating disorders online is incredibly valuable; however, there is a gap in research that specifically addresses why eating disorder communities online hold so much power. Eating disorder culture has spread far beyond eating disorder communities and is impacting social media sites across the web. In this paper, I will be applying a constructivist school of thought on how power is held within a community to illustrate why, despite copious amounts of research, eating disorder communities are only continuing to grow. To do this, I will analyze how the "What I Eat in a Day" trend, on what is supposed to be a safe app, closely resembles pro-ana spaces to demonstrate that there must be a shift in focus regarding how to treat eating disorders from the root of the problem.

Theoretical Foundations

International relations constructivist scholars such as Alexander Wendt (2012) argue that power is ideational and heavily influenced by identity and social norms. In "Anarchy is What States Make of It," Wendt illustrates that states interact with each other based on the relationships they hold with each other. Similarly demonstrated by Ted Hopf in "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory" (1998), the identity of a state determines how that state will act. He explains that "[a] state understands others according to the identity it attributes to them, while simultaneously reproducing its own identity through daily social practice. The crucial observation here is that the producer of the identity is not in control of what it ultimately means to others; the intersubjective structure is the final arbiter of meaning" (Hopf, 1998). This theory explains why the United States feels threatened by North Korean nuclear potential, but safe with the UK's nuclear arsenal, even though the UK could pose a greater threat. The United States feels this reassurance because there are similar liberal ideations shared between the UK and the United States.

Social norms are also an indicator of power and strength within a community. Because social norms are what build up a state's identity, and therefore its reaction to other states, social norms are integral to how a state functions. As explained in "Introducing Constructivism in International Relations Theory" (Theys, 2018), "states that conform to a certain identity are expected to comply with the norms that are associated with that identity. This idea comes with an expectation that some kinds of behavior and action are more acceptable than others." When social norms are incredibly normalized in a country, the country can function more cohesively than when

citizens act all on their own accord. In a state with social norms that apply to everyone, a state's government holds more power, knowing that their actions can be well regarded by everyone who conforms to the national identity and social norms; there is less of a risk to be questioned by citizens, and less threat of insurgency, indicating that a country with a strong collective identity holds is secure with its power.

For example, the United States is largely divided between conservative and liberal citizens, meaning there is not a strong sense of collective identity. Instances such as the January 6th, 2021 Capitol riots demonstrate how a lack of collective identity can undermine a state's security. Countries that oppose democracy were able to use the January 6th riots as support for their governments. One Russian ally of Vladimir Putin stated that "Those who in our country like to refer to their [U.S.] example will also have to reconsider the views that are passed off as advanced" (Ott, 2021). When states are divided and unable to act as one, their power is put into question by others, once again reinforcing how integral social norms and collective identity are to a state's position in global politics.

Lastly, it is important to consider how hegemonic discourse plays into constructivism and international politics. Constructivist scholars label hegemonies as hierarchies that are created by elites of a community when they can create a widespread and usually false belief among a large population of people (Gabler & Schroeder, 2022). Hegemonic discourse, therefore, arises through hegemonic struggles where multiple actors are trying to demonstrate a "correct" way of interpreting identity. "Common sense hegemony," coined by Ted Hopf, in "Common-sense Constructivism and Hegemony in World Politics" (2013), supports the idea that hierarchies are easily enforced when they are easy to believe. Hegemonic discourse is very closely related to collective identity in the sense that if a state is under hegemonic rule, threats to that hegemony lead to threats to that state's collective identity. In the example of the January 6th riots, the actions of the people leading the insurrection could be considered "counter-hegemonic" action, in which the hegemony is being undermined. Counter-hegemonic action is necessary to topple hegemonic structures that oppress certain groups and stop the spread of false beliefs.

Relating to eating disorder culture and forums, there is a sense of collective identity in pro-ana forums, with certain social norms that they follow. As previously stated, people in pro-ana spaces are acting on their identity as people with eating disorders and are encouraging others to live up to the dangerous norms that have been put into place to push each other to be thin. Therefore, people interacting in pro-ana forums further contribute to the belief that thinness is one of the most desirable beauty traits. Because that belief is easily accepted, a hegemon regarding conventional beauty is put into place. Pro-ana forums and other actors perpetuating eating disorder culture hold their power and can easily be analyzed under constructivist lenses.

Analysis: "What I Eat in a Day" Threats to Personal Beauty Standards

In using a constructivist lens, one of the most important ideas is that states interact with each other based on their identities, which forms the way they see threats to their security. When looking at people in eating disorder communities, the security in question is how to secure a person

feels in their own body. In pro-ana communities, a person's security in their own body is constantly being attacked; people in pro-ana spaces use pictures of emaciated people as "thinspiration," while pictures of heavier people are used as "fatspo" ("What 'Thinspo,'" 2022). Heavier people are not considered a threat to people with eating disorders. If someone with an eating disorder looks at someone with a heavier weight, they do not feel the need to compete with that person. As exemplified in "Social Media and Body Image Concerns" (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016), as a person spends more time in eating disorder communities, their desired weight continues to drop, indicating that the thinspo and pro-ana actions seen within these forums act as a threat to how happy users are with their weight, pushing them to continue to lose weight until they are satisfied with their weight. This kind of security threat sustains a dangerous cycle in which people in these communities continue to get thinner and push each other to continuously extreme lengths when it comes to weight loss.

While security threats in pro-ana communities may be easier to spot than in other spaces online, they are still visible elsewhere, as seen in the "What I Eat in a Day" videos. In "Is the 'What I Eat in a Day' Trend Helpful or Harmful" (2012), Isabelle Eyman explains that this trend consists of usually thin people posting what they eat in a day at the request of others who look at the appearance of a thin person and want to follow in their footsteps. In this regard, a thin person threatens the viewer's idea of beauty and threatens the viewer's body confidence, as they wish to replicate the poster's appearance. Pro-ana forums and "What I Eat in a Day" videos both utilize one person's thin appearance to threaten another's level of comfort in their own body. As "What I Eat in a Day" videos continue to be posted by conventionally thin people, diet culture is continuously being pushed onto TikTok users. For example, TikTok user @tamago_aoi garnered over 100,000 views on a video posted in September of 2022, where they boast that they had only eaten 700 calories that day. There are many comments on TikTok congratulating the person who posted, complimenting their looks, and thanking them for posting. For example, user ooooc_0000k comments: "your hand looks so gorgeous omg" (Eyman, 2022). In *Nutrition and Hydration Requirements In Children and Adults* (Faizan & Rouster, 2023)*,* it is stated that eating 700 calories a day is anywhere from 300 to 700 fewer calories than a toddler should be eating. In extreme cases, these "What I Eat in a Day" videos push people to eat less than a toddler should be eating, simply because it threatens a person's healthy perception of what beauty is.

Analysis: "What I Eat in a Day," Hegemonic Discourse, and Social Norms

Thin people are not the only people who post "What I Eat in a Day" videos; however, conventionally thin people are the only ones who receive praise for posting them. In "What You Eat Is Who You Are (Online)" (Melton, 2021), an instance of a heavier person who posted a "What I Eat in a Day" video is described. This person received comments such as: "'That's on heart failure,' 'I thought you had the face stretch filter on,' 'U would look hot asf if u lost like 30 pounds,' 'you'd be so pretty if you weren't so fat omg,' [and] 'grease monger.'". Public reception to heavier people posting "What I Eat in a Day" videos is vastly different from when a thin person posts a similar video. This is incredibly similar to ideas seen in pro-ana spaces: pictures of thin people are something to strive for, while pictures of heavier people are used as a reminder to keep dieting ("What 'Thinspo,'" 2022). In both cases, there is a clear distinction between what is desirable and

what is not, and the idea that thin is beautiful is being spread among communities, creating a hegemony in which thin people hold power over conventional beauty standards.

When thinking back to "common sense hegemony," it can be easy for people to believe that thinness is correlated to beauty. Despite the rise of body positivity, it is demonstrated in "Social Media, Thin-Ideal, Body Dissatisfaction and Disordered Eating Attitudes: An Analysis" (Aparicio-Martinez et al., 2021), that many popular influencers are still conventionally thin. Because celebrities and influencers are looked up to, when many of them are celebrated for their small frames, viewers could easily assume that being thin is what leads to success and beauty. In 2023's London Fashion Week, it was reported that only 39 out of 3,000 models were considered to be plus-sized (Hayward, 2023). As much as body positivity is something that brands claim to focus on, there is very little diversity regarding weight in modeling, further pushing the narrative that thin is the beauty trait that should be considered ideal.

Because body positivity is not practiced in spaces that allow for the reevaluation of beauty standards, there is no room for counter-hegemonic discourse. When looking at responses to heavy people posting "What I Eat in a Day" videos, it is clear that people are not yet willing to accept heavy bodies to be beautiful. Yet again, there are similarities between people in pro-ana communities and the beliefs held across social media: in pro-ana communities, it is a part of their collective identity to oppose the idea that anything other than thin could be beautiful, and in other online spaces, being thin is a conventional beauty standard. In the example of the January 6th riots, state power was not threatened until the differences in social norms had become so divisive that there no longer was a collective identity. Although plus-sized models are being represented in the media, it is unreasonable to say that there are enough of them, In London's Fashion Week, plus-sized models consisted of .013% of all of the models that had modeled during that season (Hayward, 2023). For there to be space for counter-hegemonic discourse, there must be a change in social norms, and as of right now, the social norms put in place are too strong for any push toward impactful body positivity.

Discussion and Importance

In both pro-ana communities and other online spaces, it is clear that the idea of thin as beautiful has become a widely accepted norm. Between the cycle of competition driving people to lower their goal weight and the strength of the social norms put in place, eating disorder culture holds an incredible amount of power. For many of the perpetrators of eating disorder culture, meaning people in pro-ana communities, it is recommended that they go into treatment for their eating disorder. However, it has been documented that only about 30% of people with eating disorders go into treatment, and "[a]mong the 21% of individuals that experience "full recovery," [only] 94% continued to maintain that recovery 2 years after treatment" (Rittenhouse, 2022). As documented in "Between Difference and Belonging: Configuring Self and Others in Inpatient Treatment for Eating Disorders" (Eli, 2014), inpatient treatment is not always helpful, at times being damaging to those seeking help. In the study conducted "participants described clinical recognition of one's eating disorder as both affirming and reductive, fellow patients as both supportive and dangerous, and the boundaries of the ward as both protective and oppressive." In

cases where treatment emphasized psychological recovery and mental well-being, there was an overall feeling of affirmation, as opposed to treatments that only prioritized physical health, indicating that there must be a shift toward counter-hegemonic discourse.

Not only is eating disorder culture becoming increasingly widespread; it has also been incredibly normalized. The similarities between "What I Eat in a Day" videos, which have billions of views, and pro-ana communities are incredibly alarming. When raising awareness for eating disorders, there must be an emphasis placed on counterhegemonic discourse within eating disorder spaces, as opposed to simply applying a focus on psychiatric treatment. With so much research being done regarding eating-disordered behaviors online, the persistent spread of eating disorder culture is wildly concerning. Although the continuation of research regarding eating disorder statistics and what factors online cause eating disorders all have good intentions: there is a gap in research looking for openings for counter-hegemonic discourse in spaces pro-ana spaces that must be prioritized to create actual change.

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