

“Nothing Makes Me Hate Myself More Than a Skinny White Person on Tumblr” :

Evaluating Exclusionary Ideals and Racial Discrimination in Online

Pro-Eating-Disorder Communities

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ABSTRACT

Pro-eating-disorder internet communities extend hegemonic standards of health, beauty, and fatness to inform their cultural ideals, producing a racialized subculture in which marginalized communities are stereotyped and excluded. I present qualitative content and discourse analyses of pro-ED communities on Tumblr, TikTok, X, and Facebook to examine how they reproduce the domination of racialized bodies, providing serious health risks to marginalized users. BIPOC are predominantly excluded from pro-ED communities, lacking representation or being displayed in explicitly discriminatory presentations. The primary pro-ED ideals are: whiteness, youthfulness, sickness, and emaciation. These exclusionary ideals, reinforcing class distinctions, are also evidenced by the production of idealized subject positions that are informed by racial hierarchies: *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, *The Phenom*, and *The Little Doll*. Racialized users are found to internalize the thin white ideal and are enmeshed in moral health discourses which situate them as non-ideal biocitizens, reinforcing structural oppression.

*Lovingly dedicated to every racialized person growing up under the
omnipresent eye of social media; may we have the fortitude to care for
ourselves in spite of it.*

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INTRODUCTION

While online communities are generally assumed to be both socially and emotionally beneficial for those who engage with them, online pro-eating-disorder communities stand as a unique example of networks that paradoxically detriment group members, especially those who are racialized. The present study focuses on addressing the rarely-explored exclusion of Black and Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC) within online eating disorder (ED) communities, encouraging food pathology as a result of discriminatory and racialized conceptions of health, beauty, and fatness. Because people of colour, particularly Black and Indigenous communities, already feel a lack of trust towards health systems because of racial bias in the healthcare sector and examples of medical racism, exclusion within communities that are intended to provide some sort of support can cause additional harm to those marginalized groups, rendering them isolated from the structures that are intended to protect them, as well as their social networks.

This research stems from my personal experience growing up in the advent of social media. Now more than ever, young people are spending an increasing amount of time on the internet and developing social networks through online communities (Vogels et al., 2022). Growing up with unrestricted internet access as a young teenager myself, I would spend hours on social media platforms such as Tumblr and would frequently come across the immensely damaging content from pro-ED communities, without ever intentionally seeking it out. As a South Asian woman, struggling with my racial identity and feelings of isolation because of my skin and body, I was lucky that I did not develop salient disordered eating habits. However, the exclusionary images of emaciated white bodies upheld as a new standard of beauty, along with the pro-ED mantras associating starvation with discipline and moral fortitude, made their mark

on my developing mind and linger with me to this day, against my wishes. Consuming graphic images like those that populate pro-ED communities can have a detrimental effect on young and impressionable users who seek to understand their personhood and body. In this way, even implicit messaging can permeate and have unintended consequences that not only spread damaging content, but also reinforce the exclusionary social structures that underlie the content.

By imbuing a critical race analysis in my exploration of pro-ED internet communities, I contend that these implicit and explicit discriminatory practices affect group acceptance and manifest in the production of a uniquely racialized pro-ED subculture. I find that these groups adopt and extend hegemonic standards of health, beauty, and fatness in the production of their own cultural ideals and values, resulting in hierarchical subjectivities that exclude, stereotype, and essentialize marginalized bodies. It is integral to understand these patterns of exclusion in health oriented communities in order to better understand and challenge the supremacist cultural norms that disproportionately harm people of colour. With the already high and still rising rates of group membership in these online communities, it is imperative to understand the cultural and racial processes at work that subsequently result in *more* exclusion, *more* isolation, and *worsened* health for already systemically marginalized groups. Especially considering that EDs have an inherently competitive and social nature to them, we must identify, unpack, and challenge these exclusionary practices in order to ensure that those who suffer from mental health disorders feel as though they have a social support system that is, in their minds, worth surviving for. By feeling safe within a community, even if that community is encouraging health-threatening behaviour, members can develop social ties and networks that may result in positive affective experiences and provide support. Therefore, community can trigger members to eventually reach

out for meaningful help, and may push them to take a path towards recovery. While it may seem counterintuitive to fight for greater inclusivity in media that is used to actively reinforce behaviour that is antithetical to health and wellbeing, I posit that this is a first step to unpacking and challenging the Eurocentric and exclusionary structures that underlie the content we consume, and thus challenge the existence of this content altogether. My research, through this intersectional analysis, also contributes to a greater transition towards a cultural model of conceptualizing disordered eating and the ideals/practices within online pro-ED communities, rather than obfuscating the influence of dominant Western culture through an excessive medicalization of sufferers.

I present content and discourse analyses that center an ethic of intersectionality in order to critically examine how pro-ED online communities reinforce and reproduce the domination of racialized bodies, providing serious risks and violence to the physical and mental wellbeing of users - in particular marginalized users. I draw upon the fields of feminist and critical race studies to renegotiate how Foucauldian conceptions of biopower and Bourdieusian imaginings of class and capital regulate the discriminatory treatment of subjugated figures in these online groups. I first will detail the academic literature discussing food pathology, the thin white ideal, and pro-ED communities to frame the present study. Next, I will present my content analysis of these communities, examining group acceptance within pro-ED spaces on Facebook, Tumblr, X (formerly known as Twitter), and TikTok, as well as the health risks and benefits posed to racialized community members. I then produce my discourse analysis, evidencing the persistence of a limited set of available subject positions produced in these communities to hierarchically organize groups: *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, *The Phenom*, and *The*

Little Doll. Finally, I discuss the implications of these findings by sowing dialogues surrounding ideal internalization and the production of class distinctions that perpetuate a cycle of discriminatory violence. It is integral to understand these patterns of exclusion in mental health oriented communities in order to better understand and challenge the cultural norms that disproportionately harm people of colour.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of Key Concepts

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, are complex mental illnesses that can lead to serious health effects. They are characterized by food restriction, obsessive thought and behaviour patterns regarding diet, exercise, and one's body, and psychological distress (Marks et al., 2020). Not only do they have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness, but they have been concerningly on the rise over the course of the pandemic as a result of increased social media use and social isolation (Damour, 2021; Wang, 2018). Seventy million individuals worldwide suffer from an eating disorder, and one Chicago-based treatment center reported that between 30 and 50 percent of its teen patients actively used social media to support their EDs in 2012 (Lai, 2022; National Eating Disorder Association, 2022). It is important to note that while statistics demonstrate that 75% of individuals with EDs are women - and exceedingly white women - lower rates of diagnosis among men and BIPOC resulting from medical discrimination, lack of access/trust of doctors, and fear of stigma have perpetuated the misconception that these groups do not suffer from disordered eating (National Eating Disorders Association, 2022). One can assume that participation in online ED communities has only increased in the past decade as social media and technology becomes increasingly accessible to young people, although definitive rates are difficult to measure.

Social Media

Social media technologies refer to digital platforms, applications, and services constructed to facilitate public and private content sharing, communication, and interpersonal

connection (Burgess et al., 2018). Having been established in the mid-1990s, these technologies have become ubiquitous across the world (though unequally distributed), and have significantly influenced our lives by revolutionizing networking, connectivity, and knowledge-sharing processes (Burgess et al., 2018). Social media has been massively industrialized, with each platform offering unique affordances that mediate interaction, such as ‘likes,’ ‘shares,’ ‘reblogs,’ etc. These platforms provide different strategies for user-presence and connection, including photo, video, text posts, and direct messaging, with levels of anonymity and privacy. Tumblr is structured as a “participatory, streambased, microblogging social media platform” which allows users to host a personal blog page and interact with others by ‘favourite-ing’ and ‘reblogging’ others’ posts (Gonzalez-Polledo, 2016: 3). Tumblr hosts over 496 million individual blogs and 171.5 billion posts (Statista, 2019). X (formerly known as Twitter) allows individuals to share and observe photos, videos, and short text posts from people they know, as well as strangers, celebrities, and businesses. X currently boasts over 415 million users (Statista, 2024). TikTok, one of the newer social media platforms (released in 2016) with over 1.7 billion users worldwide, is a short-form video sharing service that utilizes an advanced algorithm to feed users’ with a tailored ‘For You Page’ (Statista, 2023). Facebook allows individuals to typically connect with people from their physical world via posts, direct messages, and groups. The former three frequently utilize hashtags to facilitate connection, allowing users in search of a specific matter to more easily find fitting results. Tags are less prevalent on Facebook. While each of these platforms are exceedingly different, they all host thriving pro-ED communities despite attempts for moderation and censorship.

Online community

Social media technologies have provided a space for the creation of online communities, allowing individuals to connect with others with similar interests, values, and beliefs from the comfort of a screen, making interpersonal connection more accessible. Internet researchers consistently recognize that online communities are distinct to physical communities, defined as relationships where social interaction is made possible via technology for mutual benefit (Brotsky and Giles, 2007; Cărtărescu, 2010). Cărtărescu asserts that belonging to a community promotes group members' positive feelings of belonging, mutual support, and affective ties by providing stability, accessibility, and easier integration into social groups for users (2010). Online communities are not restricted to geographical location as physical communities are, as they allow users from across the world to connect with likeminded people in the absence of proximity. Health-centered support groups are a mainstay of online communities, with countless groups existing to address issues such as cancer, substance use, caregiving for elderly or ill family, smoking cessation, depression, suicide prevention, and many more (Finfgeld, 2000). These groups are advantageous to users over physical support groups as they are generally free to access, they allow relative anonymity, host members of diverse backgrounds and lived experiences, and include archives of older shared content. While these communities have benefits, they also provide risks especially for those experiencing mental health issues. Online support groups may foster internet addiction and social isolation, and are frequently unmoderated by health professionals which may permit dangerous advice to proliferate and perpetuate harmful behaviour (Mishara & Weisstub, 2007). Pro-ED online communities are notorious for this,

encouraging users to maintain and exacerbate their disordered eating habits and promoting health-threatening practices.

Pro-ED Communities

Online pro-ED communities are cybercommunities that are composed of individuals who have an eating disorder and are not in recovery, nor do they seek to recover from their mental illness. Pro-ED groups encompass both the pro-anorexia (pro-ana) and pro-bulimia (pro-mia) subcommunities, while pro-mia communities are markedly less common (Borzekowski et al., 2010; Brotsky & Giles, 2007). They provide a safe space for members who are unhappy with their bodies and actively attempting weight loss to share their discontent, build relationships with other disordered individuals, and encourage each other to continue their ED journey with the end goal of becoming thinner. While support groups oriented on encouraging recovery from eating disorders are prevalent online, pro-ED communities on social media glorify the health-threatening practices of anorexia and bulimia. The discussion within these groups is primarily focused on matters relating to EDs, including individuals' present and goal weights, diet habits, and emotions surrounding their illness. Social media posts include diary entries chronicling affect, food consumption, advice on dieting, photos of users' bodies, and photos of idyllic, aspirational bodies (Brotsky & Giles, 2007). Most sufferers seek emotional and social support from these online communities, however, these groups also promote harmful and health-threatening behaviours, sharing advice on how to best maintain the illness (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2011; Ferreday, 2003). Given the nature of these communities, concerns surrounding the negative health effects of pro-ED rhetoric has led to some social media platforms shutting down pro-ED sites, banning related tags, or redirecting

related searches to pro-recovery support organizations (Brotsky & Giles, 2007). Much of the content within these groups encourages starvation and feelings of self-disgust, and provides tips on how to best hide symptoms from family and peers, to lose additional weight without drawing concern. This creates a contradictory and paradoxical online community that, despite acting as a support group for those suffering from EDs that provides relief from the struggles of feeling inadequate and excluded from outside society, also reinforces behaviour that is antithetical to health and survival.

Thinspiration

Online pro-ED spaces frequently involve the social media phenomenon of “thinspiration,” a portmanteau of “thin” and “inspiration” (‘thinspo’ for short). This refers to visual and written content that seeks to persuade viewers to maintain their EDs with the goal of becoming thinner, most frequently through images of inspirational/aspirational bodies. Thinspo is also broken down into subcategories that address a multitude of body-goals, aesthetic presentations, and motivation strategies. For example, images of athletic, muscular figures are termed ‘fitspo;’ emaciated bodies with angular, protruding bones are titled ‘bonespo;’ insulting mantras are called ‘meanspo;’ and images of end-stage anorexia are termed ‘deathspo.’ Research contends that interacting with thinspo imagery and media that upholds the thin ideal can lead to decreased self-esteem and self-concept (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008; Jett et al., 2010; Mincey & Hollenbaugh, 2022; Rogers et al., 2016).

Research Context

Social Media

Given the monumental rise of social media in the past few decades, it has become increasingly clear that the online world has become an integral agent of socialization (Vogels et al., 2022). Over half of the global population has internet access, and in North America 77 percent of the population has at least one social media account (Statista, 2024; Statista, 2023). Younger and younger individuals are obtaining access to social media, and most of us cannot imagine a world without the online communities we engage in, nor the ways that the internet facilitates our social networks (Vogels et al., 2022). Pew Research Center reports that 54 percent of US teens would find it very hard or somewhat hard to give up social media (Vogels et al., 2022). The images and messaging that we are exposed to and interact with online play a key role in influencing our conceptions of beauty and health, as well as society and norms as a whole. However, these forms of messaging are also deeply informed by and created within a system that upholds white supremacy and other forms of cultural and social hegemony, and as a result, the dominant content that thrives online reflects discriminatory conceptions of race that bolster the domination of racialized peoples. It is well established by scholars that pervasive and consistent multimedia exposure covertly socializes us to uphold certain behaviour, thought, and feelings more than any other force (Daufin, 2019; Potter, 2012). Media representation governs how we behave, what we think about, what values we prop up, and how we interact with the social world at large. Therefore, because media hosts such powerful influence, media justice is a key pillar of social justice (Daufin, 2019). While the internet has, to a certain extent, democratized content creation by providing the general population access to a public forum, online media is highly

moderated by the corporations that develop technology, and at the same time, content reflects the dominant beliefs of broader society (Andrade & Urquhart, 2009). If we can concur that our structures and institutions uphold hegemonic hierarchies that privilege certain groups and ideologies, particularly whiteness, then we must conclude that these biases are inherent within online media as well.

Eating Disorders

Eating disorders are frequent in adolescents and young adults, posing severe mental and physical health concerns. At present, approximately one million Canadians have been diagnosed with an ED, while many more employ disordered eating behaviours but have not been diagnosed (Statistics Canada, 2016). Galmiche et al.'s systematic literature review synthesizes 94 studies on the prevalence of EDs across a range of identity markers, asserting that disordered eating is most prevalent in adolescents, ranging up to 8 percent of total adolescents in studies examined (2019). Anorexia Nervosa has the highest mortality rate compared to other eating disorders and mental illnesses, with deaths that commonly result from medical complications or suicide (Smink et al., 2012). The weighted means of lifetime ED prevalence were 8.4% for women and 2.2% for men, reinforcing the dominant preconception that EDs predominantly afflict women (Galmiche et al., 2019). They find that North American countries tend to have higher prevalence for all EDs (4.6% of point prevalence), followed by Asia (3.5%) and Europe (2.2%), yet they recognize that more recent studies emphasize the prevalence of EDs in East Asia (Galmiche et al., 2019). Galmiche et al.'s work lacks a critical and systematic analysis of ED prevalence in Africa, as does most literature on food pathology (2019).

Eating disorders were broadly considered to only affect wealthy white women until the 1980s, supported by older research on ED prevalence where samples either underrepresented or excluded women of colour entirely (Andersen & Hay, 1985; Jones et al., 1980; Smolak & Striegel-Moore, 2001). This misconception continues to contribute to the widespread invisibilization of racialized people with eating pathology, and prevents diagnosis and treatment of these populations. Research has reported that health professionals are less likely to identify disordered eating patterns in racialized women, and that women of colour are less likely to seek out treatment for their ED (Becker et al., 2003; Marques et al., 2011). ED prevalence variables concerning race are broadly neglected in dominant research, and cross-cultural studies frequently present conflicting results. Many studies have suggested that women of colour experience similar rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder prevalence to white women (Cheng et al., 2019; Cummins, Huang, & Lehman, 2007; Marques et al., 2011; Udo & Grilo, 2018). Taylor et al. found that Black women had equal to or higher rates of binge eating disorder than non-Black women, while Chao et al. argues that there are no statistically significant differences in binge eating disorder by race (Chao et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2013). Cheng et al.'s research compares the prevalence of any threshold or subthreshold EDs across ethnic identities via three studies, and found no significant differences: 19.8% white, 19.9% Hispanic American, 20.7% African American, 21.5% Asian American (2019). Burke et al. critically examines ED prevalence across socioeconomic status, reporting that participants of lower SES had 1.27 times greater prevalence of a positive ED screen than those of higher SES, while race, gender, and sexuality did not provide significant differences (2022). Other studies have suggested that white adults have higher lifelong prevalence for EDs than non-white counterparts, suggesting that this is a result of

Black women having higher levels of self-esteem and experiencing less of an internalization of white hegemonic beauty standards (Bodell et al., 2018; Powell & Kahn, 1995; Streigel-Moore et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2013; Udo et al., 2016; Udo & Grilo, 2018). These findings have been questioned by other scholars in the field of fat studies, arguing that these claims may have been affected by race and class bias (Bordo, 2013; Schott, 2016). Thus, there is currently a striking lack of comprehensive, canonical research elucidating the prevalence of EDs across race. Most research on ED prevalence does not take into account subclinical disordered eating patterns, afflicted individuals who do not seek out diagnosis or health services due to lack of access or trust in the healthcare system, and undetected pathology, which are all most prevalent among marginalized groups including women of colour and men. Therefore, actual rates are likely higher than what researchers have identified, and the absence of concordance in the academic community on this topic is concerning.

The vast majority of literature investigating eating pathology centers a public health approach that intends to identify trends in prevalence, severity, symptom expression, and determinants in order to treat and prevent EDs amidst the obesity epidemic (Beausoleil, 2008; Mustelin et al., 2016; Smink et al., 2014). While scientific and health intervention focused research is integral within the realm of disordered eating and serves a critical purpose in informing the healthcare response, I find that this perspective obfuscates the agency and experiences of individuals who actively live with and suffer from these EDs by overemphasizing recovery through medical intervention. While there is a host of new research which highlights the disordered individual and their identity construction, they tend to focus on online interactions in pro-ED and pro-recovery spaces, or their experiences in treatment (Boero & Pascoe, 2012;

Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2011; Catenacci & Couturier, 2023; Clark et al., 2023; Ferreday, 2003; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Richardson & Paslakis, 2021). For example, Clark et al. study treatment experiences and ED recovery in Indigenous Māori using interview methods, reporting that treatment services inadequately supported Māori experiences as they were culturally incongruent, had financial barriers, and weight-focused discharge criterion (2023). Another critical study challenges the notion of EDs as a women's disorder, identifying that men experience unique symptoms and complications that require unique treatment options that address their unmet needs and preferences (Richardson & Paslakis, 2021). For the most part, empirical research examining EDs excessively centers medical discourses of scientific treatment, hoping to 'fix' individuals with EDs without consideration for the social and cultural influences on eating pathology. These approaches also do not permit disordered individuals to exist in their nuanced, sometimes contradictory, substantive essence, and maintain the myth of cure.

Generally speaking, I find that the existing literature exploring EDs severely lacks an intersectional analysis, with a hyperfocus on the experiences of women (predominantly white women) and female adolescents. This lack of intersectionality has largely gone unquestioned in the sphere, apart from critique centered in fatness pedagogy, while race remains concerningly overlooked. On the rare occasions where race is examined, the research again focuses heavily on public health and quantitative approaches by comparing symptom expression across racial groups, or simply highlighting rates of participation in disordered eating and treatment seeking (Bodell et al., 2018; Burke et al., 2022; Chao, 2016; Franko et al., 2012; LaMarre et al., 2017; Lydecker, 2016; Perez, 2021; Pike, 2001). Rather than exploring the nuanced and descriptive

experiences and beliefs of racialized people/communities with EDs, the existing literature forgoes this cultural and psychosocial realm in favour of questioning prevalence and diagnosis.

Empirical studies are also often restricted to comparing Black versus white women rather than other racial groups (Schott, 2016). Numerous studies on non-white populations in North America highlight the influence of mental health stressors stemming from immigration and alienation from cultural norms/expectations in the development of eating pathology and barriers to treatment-seeking (Goel et al., 2023; Javier & Belgrave, 2019; Mustafa et al., 2017). Authors studying Asian communities report that they are commonly faced with additional cultural expectations in addition to white, Western ideals, which compound the pressure to adhere to thinness and develop disordered eating habits (Cummins et al., 2005; Goel et al., 2023; Jackie et al., 2017; Javier & Belgrave, 2019; Mustafa et al., 2017). Javier and Belgrave examine body image and EDs among young Asian American women, producing a theoretical model that solidifies the influence of both mainstream white culture *and* Asian culture as primary factors in informing body image and food discourse (2019). In their work, one Indian interview participant explained that when living in Kansas, “there were so many girls that were white and pretty and skinny, and it’s just like, I’m not white, I have to be pretty and skinny” (Javier & Belgrave, 2019: 147). Thus, the contradiction between appearance ideals and the exclusionary structures of beauty in North America result in negative self-concept and push Asian women towards eating pathology. For South Asian communities specifically, studies cite social ostracization resulting from mental health stigma as a primary barrier to recovery (Goel et al., 2023; Mustafa et al., 2017). One of the few pieces of research that examined Indigenous groups found that Native American women reported the highest use of obsessive exercise, as well as the use of purging

and laxatives for weight loss compared to other racial groups (Franko et al., 2007). Research examining the experiences of racialized men is scarce, though existing studies suggest that Asian American/Hawaiian/Pacific Islander men experienced significantly heightened appearance and eating concerns, as well as food restriction, compared to both Black and white men, indicating that they might be particularly vulnerable to EDs (Goel et al., 2022; Le, Jin, & Kang, 2023). Internalized racism and sexual racism (for sexual minority Asian American men) were found to be key factors that influence disordered eating (Goel et al., 2022; Le, Jin, & Kang, 2023). There are mixed findings when ED prevalence and symptoms are compared between Black and white men, with some studies suggesting that Black men are significantly at risk of body image disturbances and restriction, and others suggesting Black men have the least incidence of food pathology (Goel et al., 2022; Marais, Wassenaar, & Kramer, 2003). These findings, along with the work of Taylor et al. and Bordo, contrast the dominant perception that only upper class white women suffer from EDs, and highlight the unique, culturally informed processes that push people of colour to develop eating pathology. Clearly there remains much debate within the public health field regarding the role of race in ED prevalence and diagnosis, and there lacks a meaningful consensus and critical examination. Research on racialized populations remains limited, indicating a significant gap in the literature that modern researchers are only just starting to fill.

It is integral to critically study body image, food pathology, and disordered eating behaviours, especially in underrepresented groups, because of these significant and ever-growing prevalence rates, and because these disorders are extremely dangerous and often fatal. EDs may result in severe health complications such as osteoporosis, hair loss, dehydration, cardiac arrest,

decay of tooth enamel, infertility, brain damage, organ failure, and death (Klump et al., 2009; Rome, 2003). Even after recovery, EDs can lead to significant disturbances in physical, cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional wellbeing with long term side effects. Especially considering the barriers to treatment that marginalized communities face, and the lack of consistent findings for disordered experiences in people of colour as a whole, greater research centered on personhood and racial identity in conjunction with disordered eating is necessary.

The Thin, White Ideal

The thin-ideal is a well documented phenomenon which acquaints conventional beauty and thinness with value, playing a significant role in the development of body image concerns and disordered eating practices. Typically, this ideal body, holding particular prominence in Western societies, depicts a slender woman with a traditionally feminine physique with little body fat and a slim waist (Low et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2020). Scholars have consistently found that media messages encouraging thin-ideal internalization have significant detrimental influences to body image and disordered eating practices (Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014; Stice et al., 1994, Tiggemann, 2003). Numerous studies have identified that women exposed to thin-ideal media representation are more likely to compare themselves to these idealized figures, experiencing dissatisfaction, greater depression, and greater anger (Grabe et al., 2008; Pinhas et al., 1999).

Thinness does not exist in a vacuum and is constituted by other compounded features rooted in patriarchal and racist hegemonic structures. Critical race theorists argue that whiteness is a social construction which maintains greater power because of its perceived and intended invisibility (Cobb, 2020; Frankenberg, 1993; Lind, 2019). Lind asserts that white privilege's

invisibility grants itself an insidious subtlety which embeds white supremacy within “the hidden assumptions, the social norms that claim to have nothing to do with race” (2019: 189). In their efforts to build a truly intersectional fatness framework, Lind takes from Coleman’s affirmation that conduct is equally racialized to skin colour (2019; Coleman, 2006). Coleman argues that the constitution of civil conduct naturalizes whiteness and establishes ‘civilized’ codes of conduct as evidence of racial superiority (2006). Lind extends this assertion by claiming that marginalized groups and bodies (including people of colour, fat figures, and women) are positioned as performing civility poorly given that they challenge white supremacist ideals/norms (2019). The thin-ideal is then constituted as more healthy, attractive, and morally superior to larger, ‘uncivil’ bodies (Bordo, 1993; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). Farrell identifies that heteronormative “sexual desire for female thinness was considered to be a civilized form of sexuality, in opposition to beauty ideals in colonial contexts that celebrated corpulence” (2011; Lind, 2019: 189). String’s *Fearing the Black Body* chronicles the racial, colonial histories of fatphobia and the thin-ideal originating in the 1300s, illuminating how the exoticization of Black women paved the way for race ‘scientists’ to denigrate African fatness, and how white thinness was created by racial and religious ideologies that oppress Black women and discipline white women (2019). They explain that the slave trade marked Black people as hypersexual, unattractive, and worthless in size and social status while white women were idealized as pure (Strings, 2019). Therefore, once fatness was irreversibly associated with Blackness and thus supposed physical and mental inferiority, white women were forced to adopt thinness to maintain that chaste attribution (Strings, 2019). Additionally, Asian communities have historically been exoticized, stereotyped as submissive and hypersexual objects, resulting in a unique racialized experience

(Brady et al., 2017). This is critical, as this history and its present legacies entangle thinness with whiteness and its prescribed high moral quality, establishing the thin, white ideal.

Race & Beauty Standards

The literature has consistently documented that beauty standards are decidedly informed by Eurocentric, white supremacist ideals that exclude skin colours, hair types, and features that many racialized people have, in particular Black women (Gentles-Peart, 2018; Robinson-Moore, 2008; Sekayi, 2004; Silvestrini, 2020). The thin white ideal has been established as vastly pervasive, with feminine, slender figures dominating the world through Western cultural imperialism for decades. Unfortunately due to patriarchal domination, women and every facet of their personhood is “fragmented into a series of body parts and reassembled to determine the extent of their beauty” (Mady et al., 2023). Under this fragmentation, hegemonic beauty expectations within the thin white ideal include: symmetrical faces, light skin, youthful features, small noses, long and straight hair, tall posture, and thin able-bodies (Gruber, Kalkbrenner, & Hitter, 2022; Krozer & Gomez, 2023; Rhodes et al., 2001; White, 2005). These features are some of the physical manifestations of whiteness and are intrinsically, intentionally, Eurocentric. Hunter contends that adherence to the white ideal is a form of social capital resulting from the commodification of the body, as ‘redemptory capital’ that may slightly mitigate the deleterious effects of racial discrimination (2011; Garner & Bibi, 2023). Taking from Bourdieusian conceptions of class, they illuminate how light skin and other Eurocentric facial features “can be transformed into social capital (social networks), symbolic capital (esteem or status), or even economic capital (high-paying job or promotion)” (Hunter, 2011: 145). Therefore, the thin, white

ideal - including these physical body standards - is a mechanism for the oppression of non-white communities, as closer proximity to these ideals may yield improved life circumstances and greater status.

Especially in regards to thinness, many racialized groups have a genetic propensity towards a higher weight or body fat composition and slower metabolism, not because of an inherent or biological health failure as white supremacist discourse would have us believe, but largely because of their bodies' adaptations to extreme physical and emotional stress under colonial and imperial oppressive violence (the slave-trade, breeding industries, orchestrated famine and displacement, etc.) (Daufin, 2019; Wells et al., 2016). Thus, these supremacist beauty and body standards are upheld as valuable and of high status partly because of its inaccessibility, and internalizing this ideal (while being unable to attain it) has been associated with body dissatisfaction, worsened self-concept, and eating pathology (Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014; Stice et al., 1994, Tiggemann, 2003). Women have historically engaged in unhealthy, obsessive, and difficult practices in order to meet the Western feminine ideal and grasp onto its associated notions of morality and discipline, including excessive food restriction, compulsive exercise, cosmetic surgery, and skin bleaching and tanning (Lakoff & Scherr, 1984; Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985). Commonly, marginalized people internalize processes of oppression, by believing and acting out exclusionary stereotypes created about their own group by the oppressing class (Daufin, 2019). Therefore, people of colour tend to internalize the thin-ideal, as well as other negative conceptions regarding their body and skin, and frequently reinforce these stereotypes (Daufin, 2019).

The vast majority of literature examining the influence of race on thin-ideal internalization, and resulting experiences of exclusion, primarily studies Black women, while there is inadequate exploration into other racial/ethnic groups. Interestingly, a breadth of research suggests that racialized women, and in particular Black women, may be buffered from the effects of the thin-ideal, as they may identify more with culturally-specific ideals over Western, Eurocentric ideals of beauty and weight (Awad et al., 2015; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2016; White & Warren, 2013). Literature contends that, despite the thin-ideal, Black women tend to have a higher average body mass index than white women, as well as significantly lower body dissatisfaction (Edwards-Hewitt & Gray, 1993; Overstreet et al., 2010; Quick & Byrd-Brenner, 2014; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2016). As is discussed further, though, there is contention in this area of study as well.

Research also proposes that women of colour not only internalize the thin-ideal, but also other, more culturally-relevant, beauty and body ideals. While adherence to thinness is ubiquitous, Black and Latinx women are identified as also idealizing more shapely, ‘curvy’ bodies (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Davis et al., 2010; Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011; Overstreet et al., 2010). Overstreet et al. identifies the valuation of the curvaceous, heavier body ideal, characterized by larger breasts and buttocks contrasted with a slim waist in an hourglass shape (2010). They identified that although both Black and white women idealize the curvy figure, Black women prefer it while white women still favour the thin ideal (Overstreet et al., 2010). The study also contends that Black women consistently found an average body size with larger buttocks attractive, while white women idealized an underweight figure (Overstreet et al., 2010). Research has also identified that Latinx women similarly prefer more full-bodies, considering

them healthy, of high status, and a beneficial alternative to the thin-ideal (Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014; Viladrich et al., 2008). While this different ideal better represents the average woman's body type, especially for racialized communities who tend to be of higher weight, images depicting the curvy ideal have been found by some researchers to still cause harm and worsen self-image as they're often digitally retouched to include unnaturally slim waists (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Capodilupo, 2014; Gruber, Kalkbrenner, & Hitter, 2022; Overstreet et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2011) Betz and colleagues examined body dissatisfaction and self-objectification in both white and non-white women after viewing thin-ideal images, as well as athletic-ideal and curvy-ideal figures, reporting that all three body ideals significantly worsened body esteem (2019). The literature also suggests the notion that Black women define attractiveness in more nuanced, comprehensive ways that include personality, confidence, clothing, and appearance, in addition to body type (Davis et al., 2010; Parker et al., 1995). Further, while Black and Latinx women produce and idealize alternative body standards, Asian women tend to find traditional, hegemonic beauty and body ideals attractive at similar rates to white women (Evans & McConnell, 2003; Nouri, Hill, & Orell-Valante, 2011; Quick & Byrd-Bredbenner, 2014). Despite the prevalence of these alternative conceptions of beauty standards across racial lines, it's evident that body comparison still poses significant threats to the health and wellbeing of all people, and research must move to capture how these ideals are internalized to perpetuate eating pathology.

While a subset of studies consistently suggest that Black women do not internalize white beauty standards to the extent that white women do (Powell & Kahn, 1995; Rogers Wood & Petrie, 2010; Taylor et al., 2013; Udo et al., 2016), other significant literature argues that Black women and all other people of colour equally internalize hegemonic ideals of beauty and are

deeply influenced by them (Robinson-Moore, 2008; Forbes & Frederick, 2008; Frederick et al., 2016; Gentles-Peart, 2018; Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2016; Sekayi, 2004; Stojek & Fischer, 2013). Some studies identify that thin-ideal internalization in Black women specifically induces disordered eating practices (Rakhkovskaya & Warren, 2016). For example, when studying Black and white college students, Stojek & Fischer found that while white women experienced food restriction at higher levels than Black women, both of their eating pathology worsened across their first semester as a result of thin-ideal internalization (2013). Asian American women are found to be more likely to be dissatisfied with their body (specifically breast size and eye appearance) than white and Latinx women (Forbes & Frederick, 2008; Frederick et al., 2016). Barnett and colleagues even suggest that Asian American women have thinner body ideals than white women do (2001). Despite conflicting findings across the literature on the subject, it seems that white ideal beauty standards are indeed internalized by racialized communities, resulting in negative experiences and worsened self-concept.

Authors contend that, across racial and ethnic boundaries, whiteness remains a crucial beauty standard even in communities that idealize curvaceous figures (Akinro & Mbunyuza-Memani, 2019; Gruber, Kalkbrenner, & Hitter, 2022; Javier & Belgrave, 2019; Krozer & Gomez, 2023; Mady et al., 2023; Robinson-Moore, 2008). In Krozer & Gomez' examination of beauty standards in Mexico, it was revealed that whiteness is entwined with class and high status, as women are pressured to whiten their skin in order to adhere to Western beauty standards (2023). These trends were also identified in Nigeria, South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia, Egypt, India, and others, especially in analyses of the beauty industry and skin-lightening products (Chong, 2023; Ghannam, 2008; Rehman, 2019; Saraswati, 2020). While it is critical to recognize that

colourism and the association of light skin with high status predates European presence in Asia, globalization has transformed the permeation of Western ideals across the world and established whiteness as a universal beauty standard (Chong, 2023, Cogeanu, 2015). This internalization results in differentially distributed results, however, individuals whose features stray further from the Eurocentric standard, such as those with dark skin or short, textured hair, experience worsened self-esteem and feelings of isolation (Robinson-Moore, 2008; Sekayi, 2004).

These Eurocentric beauty standards have significant consequences on the psychosocial and interpersonal experiences of racialized peoples. For example, Silvestrini's work examines the effect of racial stereotypes, sexual racism, and beauty ideals on attraction and relationships (2020). Through their research, they learned that exclusionary conceptions of beauty had resulted in sexual racism, causing harmful consequences for racialized participants, such as worsened self-esteem and internalized racism. (Silvestrini, 2020). Watson and colleagues found that African American men evaluated advertising images of light skinned models more positively than dark skinned models (2010). Furthermore, Viglione et al. identified that lighter skinned Black women received more lenient sentencing than dark skinned women, even when prosecuted for the same crime (2011). Another study found that Black adolescent girls with hair and skin colour most unlike those of their white peers were frequently alienated at school and other social locations, leading to greater highschool drop-out rates and reduced achievement (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). It's then evident that racialized beauty standards result in real-world consequences for people of colour, contributing to experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and oppression. The thin, white ideal is then not simply a tool targeting physical presentation, but it exerts violence against non-white communities entirely.

Media Influence on Disordered Eating

Within public health literature as well as studies that take a more cultural approach, the relationship between both social media and mass media on body image and ED risk has been widely explored. Research has consistently demonstrated that traditional media (film, television, and magazines) is one of the most influential sociocultural pressures on issues of body image and symptoms of disordered eating (Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Harrison, 2000; Levine & Murnen, 2009). Media messages have been widely agreed to be promoting the thin-ideal in such a way that is highly detrimental to body image, worsening the self-satisfaction and comparison rates of individuals exposed to this messaging (Grabe et al., 2008; Groesz et al., 2002; Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014). Media presents an opportunity for social comparison, with research identifying that both men and women experienced more body dissatisfaction after viewing magazines/images of thin figures, with worsened effects for those with a history of eating pathology (Derenne & Beresin, 2006; Groesz et al., 2002). There is a wide disparity between the average women's body size and the idealized body presented in dominant media, which works to worsen these social comparative effects (Groesz et al., 2002). Additionally, Western media also promotes and idealizes eating disorders themselves, frequently reporting on celebrities associated with anorexia, or sharing nonfiction and fictionalized accounts of EDs in popular media and documentaries marketed to women (Inch & Merali, 2006). It is evident that traditional media is deeply preoccupied with weight and body shape, persistently portraying a largely unattainable ideal and solidifying disordered eating into the collective consciousness.

Traditional media has been identified to largely worsen self concept and encourage eating pathology across all groups, but has additional affects on racialized communities due to the thin

white ideal. One such study examined perceptions of body ideals in Fiji before and after the introduction of television, noting that prior to the permeation of mass media, local culture valued larger, shapelier figures (Becker et al., 2002). Becker and colleagues report that after the introduction of television, disordered eating behaviours, body dissatisfaction, and purging significantly increased, as the ideal body had fundamentally shifted (2002). Interestingly, Harrison found that exposure to popular media characters that essentialize and stereotype fat bodies worsened body-satisfaction and predicted disordered eating among both adolescent girls and boys, especially older girls and younger boys (2000). Therefore, the influence of the media on ED prevalence and body image issues is not restricted to simply thin-ideal content, but also content that parodies fat bodies and renders them undesirable (Harrison, 2000). Daufin also suggests that the existence of stereotyped fat Black figures in traditional media (such as the fat-girl-always-eating and fat-girl-self-loathing tropes) perpetuates further negative stigma against Black women and their bodies (2019). Additionally, qualitative studies have suggested that Black women feel misrepresented by mainstream media, as depictions of Black women still adhere to white ideals (Capodilupo & Kim, 2014; Kelch-Oliver & Ancis, 2011).

The digital age and the ever presence of internet access, however, has significantly changed and complicated the influence of media pressures on body image and ED prevalence (Derenne & Beresin, 2018). The ability to immediately disseminate and consume content, particularly visual content, has raised widespread concerns about how one appears to others - not just when they're in public but now also alone, in the home (Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Some research has suggested that the thin-ideal is culturally bound and rooted in a Western perspective that may not apply to individuals from other cultures, however,

the global stretch of online, Western influencers has complicated this preconception (Derenne & Beresin, 2018). Derenne & Beresin argue that “selfie culture” and the increased use of face/body altering filters has resulted in an obsession with perfection, worsening pressure to conform to the thin-ideal and thus body dissatisfaction and the development of EDs (2018: 129; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Sidana et al., 2016). Social media has made social comparison far more pervasive and maladaptive, given that users are constantly being bombarded with images of celebrities as well as their peers, worsening self concept especially when the content highlights the body (Ferguson et al., 2014). Smith and colleagues found that maladaptive Facebook use significantly predicted rises in bulimia symptoms, as well as future episodes of binge-eating across all ethnic backgrounds (2013). A large subset of literature reinforces the notion that social media use is positively associated with disordered eating habits and worsened body image, and notes that gender is not a mediating factor in these effects (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016; Marks et al., 2020; Sidana et al., 2016; Wilksch et al., 2020). Marks et al. suggest that it is not just time spent on social media that produces these harmful outcomes, but the content and quality of online interactions that affects mental health and the development of EDs (2020). For example, they cite Lup and colleagues’ findings that following strangers on Instagram, rather than one’s own peers, was associated with higher levels of upward social comparison and depressive symptoms (Lup et al., 2015; Marks et al., 2020). Ging and Garvey assert that Instagram and the platform’s affordances have made pro-ED values mainstream, without much acknowledgment or question (2018). Evidently, both mass media as well as social media have significant affects on the body image, self-esteem, and development of EDs for those who engage with this content,

and this issue has pervasive effects that have only become more problematic as social comparison is made more naturalized.

Pro-Eating-Disorder Communities Online

There is a considerable body of scholarship on pro-ED communities, with some authors taking a public health approach in arguing that these groups are disgusting, harmful, and deserving of elimination (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Lupton, 2017). The majority of scholars, however, recognize that despite the health threatening potential of pro-ED groups and thinspiration, these spaces can provide positive, healthful support by providing community to heal feelings of isolation, emotional and social support, and a safe environment to ‘vent’ and experience catharsis from one's mental health struggles (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Cantó-Milà & Seebach, 2011; Ferreday, 2003; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006). Demographic studies on pro-ED communities suggest that young women and teenaged girls are the most common members of these groups, with 60.5% of adolescent ED patients having visited pro-ED websites - however, these statistics are over 15 years old and may have significantly increased as social media access has become more universal (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006). Bardone-Cone and Cass also found that, of patients who visited pro-ED online communities, 96% reported learning new pathological food restriction and weight loss techniques (2006). In their investigation of pro-ED website users and their quality of life, Peebles et al. found that participants were on average 22 years old, average ED quotient scores were severely concerning, and over 70% of users had purged, binged, or used laxatives to restrict their weight (2012). Arseniev et al., on the other hand, found that the average age of pro-ED

users on X was 17 (2015). Almost one quarter (24.83%) of users were found to be underweight, and only 12.91% were actively in treatment for their ED (Peebles et al., 2012). Further, greater usage of pro-ED sites was associated with the implementation of more extreme ED behaviours, and higher ED quotient scores (Peebles et al., 2012). Therefore, the level of participation in pro-ED communities was a significant predictor of disordered eating behaviours and pathology (Peebles et al., 2012). Medical literature is distinctly opposed to pro-ED groups, as they are concerned with the movements' potential to normalize pathological behaviour and decrease the chances that members will seek health interventions (Ging & Garvey, 2017).

While some researchers abide by a public health, empirical approach in their analysis, such as by measuring the effect of participation in pro-ED spaces on symptoms and comorbidity (Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2019), most scholars in the field are, like myself, interested in the content that populates these sites. This collection of literature attempts to categorize the content within these communities in order to unravel the graphic and objectifying imagery, discourses of discipline and self-disgust, and 'tips and tricks' that are so prevalent on these sites (Branley & Covey, 2017; Day & Keys, 2008; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2014; Ging & Garvey, 2017; Mulveen & Hepworth, 2006; Norris et al., 2006). There are a few studies that have the niche focus of defining and categorizing the terminology and slang used within these communities, as well as how alternative language and orthographic variation has been adopted as a means to circumvent content moderation (Anwar et al., 2022; Cobb, 2017; Lupton, 2017; Stewart et al., 2017). Other unique analytical approaches include Harriger et al.,'s work on how social media algorithms could heighten exposure of pro-ED content to both members *and non-members*, worsening mental and physical health outcomes for impressionable adolescents (2022); Greene and

Brownstone's research on the use of pro-ED sites for self-quantification and tracking (2019); as well as Nova et al.'s network analysis of pro-ED groups on Twitter (2022). Research suggests that users turn to pro-ED communities because they understand them as a judgement free space for them to build interpersonal connection when they would otherwise be isolated, alleviating loneliness (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Csipke & Horne, 2007; Fox et al., 2005; Overbeke, 2008). While these findings are significant in determining the ostensible functions of these communities, research that explores ideas of social support is limited in that it only critically examines exclusion from *broader society*, rather than critically examining experiences of exclusion *within* pro-ED communities themselves. Further, there is a gap in research comparing pro-ED groups across a variety of social media platforms, as most literature narrows in on content from one specific website/platform.

Thematic analyses consistently found that content in pro-ED communities value subjects of control, discipline, and perfection, even using religious metaphors like "the ana creed" or "the thin commandments" to situate the disorder as a way of life rather than an illness (Overbeke, 2008: 52; Day & Keys, 2008; Holland, Dickson, & Dickson, 2018; Norris et al., 2006). Authors contend that the pro-ED community grants users with food pathology agency in that they are able to reframe their disorder away from medical discourses, but as an intentional lifestyle choice that returns power to those who feel excluded from mainstream society (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Overbeke, 2008; Pollack, 2003). Because of the stigmatized nature of these pro-ED communities, they have been pushed into a defensive position, forcing users to secure a group identity and prevent the imposition of outsiders, such as pro-recovery authority figures or 'fakers' (Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Giles, 2006; Tierney, 2006). Day and Keys produce a

poststructuralist discourse analysis that builds upon this agential process, challenging the perception of women with eating pathology as passive victims by identifying two discursive patterns across pro-ED content: one that constructs food restriction as conformity to the thin ideal and in pursuit of social virtue (the saint), and one constructing self-starvation as resistance against medical authority, asserting control over their female bodies amidst structural misogyny (the rebel) (2008). Gailey's work also identifies participation in pro-ED communities and self-starvation as edgework that allows users to regain control over their disputed bodies and lives through fasting (2009). Then, it's evident that participation in pro-ED communities provides isolated users an opportunity to reassert agency and control over their lives when they otherwise feel they are powerless, constructing a culture of kinship and empowerment.

Schott's *Race, Online Space and the Feminine: Unmapping 'Black Girl Thinspiration,'* as well as Cobb's *Negotiating Thinness Online* act as the sole examples of studies on pro-ED internet communities that center race, as the critical race perspective is sorely lacking within the field as a whole (Cobb, 2020; Schott, 2016). Schott argues through her research that Black women's desire to join pro-ED communities is "not an attempt to become Caucasian, but an act of survival in a social climate that valorizes a Eurocentric thin feminine beauty ideal" (2016: 1030). Both Cobb and Schott concur that the strife for women of colour to develop EDs is rooted in their feelings of rejection from the broader social world, given that they feel thinness is valorized (2020; 2016). They believe that by becoming thin through unhealthy means, they can finally attain respect and social status (Cobb, 2020; Schott, 2016). Schott's spatial analysis of YouTube thinspiration illuminates how Black women are able to "demark their racialized bodies" by asserting control, discipline, and mastery over themselves through disordered eating

practices (2016: 1039). By situating themselves as thin and therefore of closer proximity to hegemonic ideals, racialized women can then distinguish themselves as embodying beauty and discipline, and reject their racial othering (Schott, 2016). Schott also contends that engaging in pro-ED groups can grant Black women the capacity to escape from racist stereotypes that characterize their group as the “plump, maternal Mammy who cooks fried chicken and only cares for white people, or as the hyper-sexual, large-bodied Hottentot Venus with voluptuous buttocks” (2016: 1032; Daufin, 2019). These historic, exclusionary stereotypes continue to orientalize and exoticize Black women, so for pro-ED users, adherence to the thin white ideal can be perceived as a way to gain privilege and higher status; potentially even liberation (Daufin, 2019; Schott, 2016). Thus, pro-ED culture sheds light on the racial politics of the body in the mainstream, while drawing on hegemonic bodies to ‘thinspire’ marginalized groups (Cobb, 2020). Cobb’s intersectional analysis in *Negotiating Thinness Online* highlights how thinspo centralizes thin white femininity and the moral, cultural values associated with it (2020). They write:

“The bodies in these spaces may be [fake-] tanned, but they are predominantly white, suggesting firstly, the non-white body, by its very absence, is not thinspirational, and secondly, anorexia is only a concern for white women... As a result, references to bodies which are not white, but are deemed thinspirational, are marked”

(Cobb, 2020: 91).

Cobb’s findings also elucidate how pro-ED communities draw on hegemonic bodies as thinspo, frequently adopting white fictional characters who act as cultural icons of ‘sad girl’ privilege (2020). Fatness and non-whiteness are at best not present and at worst actively chastised in these

communities, so adhering to this Eurocentric ideal is, again, a means for marginalized women to attain legitimacy and respectability in the face of oppression (Cobb, 2020).

While participation in pro-ED communities grants users a supportive, non-judgemental environment to build connections and assert agency, participation in these groups has notably concerning impacts on the wellbeing of members - even when race is not accounted for. Evidently, these communities maintain and encourage disordered eating and health-threatening practices, sabotage treatment efforts, and provide dangerous tips and tricks without any inclusion of the harms associated with purging, laxatives, and other extreme weight loss techniques (Lyons et al., 2006; Norris et al., 2006). Quantitative researchers have also identified that exposure to pro-ED websites resulted in significantly worsened social self-esteem, affect, and eating pathology (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008; Jett et al., 2010; Mincey & Hollenbaugh, 2022; Rogers et al., 2016). One study even found that as little as 2.5 hours of exposure to pro-ED content drastically impacted the eating behaviours of women for at least three weeks (Jett et al., 2010). It is then exceedingly clear that participation in pro-ED communities, while holding the potential for positive interpersonal experiences and improved affect resulting from feelings of control, is also severely damaging to the wellbeing of users. When race is considered more deeply, it's clear that these groups also uphold exclusionary, hegemonic standards that continually isolate people of colour, which may have unprecedented consequences that have not been critically identified in literature.

Theoretical Frameworks

Intersectionality

In order to truly examine the nuanced racialized, gendered, and classed nature of pro-ED communities online, intersectionality must be centered through all stages of analysis. ‘Intersectionality,’ coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, refers to the paradigm needed to examine the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as gender, race, class, sexual identity, and others, as well as how they contribute to social inequality and the relations of domination and oppression (1991). It puts forth the notion that there is not one single axis of oppression, but rather multiple forms of discrimination that intersect and result in a multidimensional experience of oppression and subordination, specifically for non-white women (Crenshaw, 1991). Crucially, these politics of respectability are predominantly covert and encompass all ‘comparable categories,’ including body size and thinness (Cobb, 2020).

Bourdieu and Cultural Capital

For Bourdieu, “the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste,” (1984: 190), but because his examination of social class is restricted by his lack of attention towards race and gender, his theories are valuable solely as a starting point (Cobb, 2020). Bourdieu’s work illuminates how the higher class, or “elites,” work to differentiate themselves from the lower classes, establishing behaviours, tastes, cultural objects, and physical appearances that they then situate as superior to marginalized groups (1984). Through his theorization, he suggests that social class not only emanates through identity categories like gender and race, but through the presentation and treatment of the body entirely, including clothing, behaviour, food, and knowledge of cultural symbols (1997). These social distinctions naturalize social hierarchies into

universal, unquestioned structures that legitimize oppression (1984). His interrelated concepts of disposition, habitus (referring to the embodied system of internalized structures, perceptions, and actions which structure an individual's worldview and lived experiences, reproducing unequal power relations), and capital are central to these conversations regarding groups being made distinct through hierarchical processes (1982). Bourdieusian conceptions of class are a useful tool for the present investigation as his theorization relates to what is considered high and low status within online pro-ED communities, and how that symbolic capital is deeply embodied and can be differentially distributed depending on race (1984). His theory of cultural capital includes institutionalized cultural capital, referring to academic credentials such as educational certificates and degrees; objectified cultural capital, referring to the ownership of cultural goods such as paintings or instruments; and embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Embodied cultural capital cannot be owned, and are the long-lasting dispositions inherent to someone's character (Bourdieu, 1986).

Authors have extended these concepts, particularly embodied cultural capital, to include crystallizations of the body, race, and appearance as classed and positioned hierarchically (Bordo, 2003; Cobb, 2020; Strings, 2019). Strings, for example, shows how racial discourses were produced and employed by white Western powers to produce social distinctions between themselves and fat, racialized others (2019). They explain that the elite class have historically used “diet and weight... as evidence of high-class or low-class standing” (Strings, 2019: 150). To extend Bourdieu's analysis, my work is informed by Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, in which she explores these obsessive body practices, such as excessive dieting or the development of EDs, as a logical (although extreme)

manifestation of the anxieties and ideals fostered by our dominant culture (2003). She argues that EDs cannot be defined strictly from medical or psychological standpoints but must instead be viewed within a cultural context as complex crystallizations of our culture (Bordo, 2003). The present research contributes to this turn towards a cultural model of conceptualizing disordered eating and pro-ED beliefs, rather than limiting analysis to an exclusively medical or psychological perspective that obscures the powerful influence of dominant, Western culture.

Foucault, Biopower, and the Healthy Neoliberal Subject

Foucault's work regarding medicalization, surveillance, and the body are particularly insightful when investigating power relations in health centered communities, as they provide a paradigm for critically examining how power relations are perpetuated onto and reinforced through the politicized body. Foucault's work describes the 'care of the self' as "an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain a certain mode of being" (Foucault, 1997: 282). This self care is a lifelong process of active work on one's body, mind, soul, and presentation as a meaningful social practice, encouraging community and the maintenance of social relationships (Foucault, 1986; Holland, Dickson, & Dickson, 2018). Foucault recognizes that "all subjects act within the constraints of their historical and cultural contexts," and that practices encompassing care of the self are not conducted in a vacuum, but are patterns embodying cultural patterns of power, imposed by authority figures, health structures, and our immediate social groups (Bordo, 2008; Foucault, 1988; Garner & Bibi, 2023: 1062).

Additionally, Foucault's work establishes the centrality of medicine and health discourses in our society as an inherently social, valued collective practice. Crawford's *Health as a*

Meaningful Social Practice builds upon this conception, suggesting that the pursuit of health has become a deeply valued endeavor in modern society “commanding enormous resources and generating an expansive professionalization and commercialization along with attendant hoods, services, and knowledge” (2006: 401). Consequently, health has become a signifying practice that holds moral value under neoliberalism, thus turning health into an individual responsibility for collective wellbeing (Crawford, 2006). In a health-conscious society, being perceived as traditionally ‘healthy’ is constituted as the ideal exercise of individual autonomy and good citizenship, so the adoption of health-positive practices becomes a social priority. Thus, the state has manufactured a hyperfixation on healthiness as a means to position medical control as a valuable, justified social endeavor which embodies desirable neoliberal traits, such as self-control and discipline in the pursuit of thinness (Bordo, 2008; Crawford, 2006).

Foucault’s conception of biopower refers to the practice of modern institutions in regulating the populace through “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (1979: 140). Biopower then includes the practices and beliefs that one must perform to be considered ‘healthy.’ Thus, by being a good neoliberal subject, and by being healthy, one can be a good bio-citizen (Foucault, 1979). This not only is a form of social control, but Crawford writes that this health consciousness, and its moral attachments, worsen health anxiety among the public by producing symbolic capital based on adherence to institutional health standards (2006). Sheppard and Ricciardelli explain that, within Western discourses of health, thinness (and the appearance of health) is equivalent to “responsible bio-citizenry” (2023: 264). Given that medical discourses are exclusionary, the positioning of health, and therefore thinness, as morally good and responsible works to maintain

structural oppression for marginalized communities across race, gender, ability, sexuality, and their intersections (Bordo, 2008). Harjunen's work concretely connects the moralization of health to the production of a standardized 'acceptable body' (2021). They contend that neoliberal societies have a normative body presentation, produced based on the cultural values of self-control, productivity, and morality (Harjunen, 2021). Therefore, the fat body is constructed as being antithetical to neoliberalism as they are unsuccessfully controlled and 'thinned' by governing bodies. I plan to use these concepts to inform my criticism of the inherent racial discrimination within the structures that underlie cultural norms and actions within online pro-ED communities, by highlighting how racialized people are further isolated and rendered valueless. Given that thinness is constructed then as a moral project, it can be argued that the discipline, weight loss, and intentions of EDs can be conceived of as responsible, moral, and legitimate exercises of health.

Feminist critiques of Foucault have questioned and rejected his claims that power and oppression is constitutive of those groups of which it acts upon, as he does not consider power an exercise of violence (Bordo, 2008; Fisher, 1998; Phelan, 1990). Power and violence are central to the feminist project because a critical examination of patriarchal systems and the structural oppression they project onto women, especially with intersecting identities, is necessary in dismantling domination (Fisher, 1998). Therefore, for Foucault to put forth that women and oppressed classes have somehow produced or reinforced their own oppression without a comprehensive discussion of these nuanced forces is a disservice to those groups who are most subjugated under biopower, and allows structural violence to continue without question (Fisher, 1998; Phelan, 1990). Despite these failings, feminists have appropriated and built upon

Foucault's later concepts in ways that better approximate the influence of power and hegemonic relations on women in particular. Bordo's seminal work, "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," suggests that to use Foucault's theorizations effectively when examining womanhood and femininity, we must "abandon the idea of power as something possessed by one group and leveled against another, and we must think instead of the network of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain" (2008; 208). Foucault's conception of marginalized people being 'docile bodies' constituted by power relations makes resistance to those power structures incoherent, which is precisely why feminists suggest alternative conceptions of internalized oppression and agential influences, along with the potential for rebellion (Bordo, 2008; Fisher, 1998). This analytic of power is the framework I employ in the present study.

Fat Studies

Fat studies scholars critically challenge dominant ideas about fat bodies as ugly, morally bankrupt, and pathological by working towards the radical inclusion of recording fat experiences and domination in academia (Wann, 2009). The discipline is inherently social justice oriented and demands fat liberation from structures of oppression that work to stereotype, exclude, and stigmatize large bodies (Pausé & Taylor, 2021; Wann, 2009). The field grapples with processes of medicalization, aesthetics, media representation, morality, and the lived experiences of fat bodies constructed as undesirable, unhealthy, and weak in modern Western society (Harding & Kirby, 2009; Pausé & Taylor, 2021). It's worth noting that fat studies is traditionally dominated by dialogue from and regarding the experiences of white women rather than diverse and intersectional voices, however, the field is still nascent and new scholars are working to remedy

this gap in the literature (Daufin, 2019, Low et al., 2003; Marks et al., 2020; Pausé, 2014). Because pro-ED communities, and the normative values of individuals with food pathology, construct their cultural goals, beliefs, and objects on the supposition that fatness is ‘disgusting, dirty, and undesirable,’ the radical ethic of fat activism employed in fat studies research must be actively employed in the present work.

Research Questions

This study seeks to engage in and extend the scholarly discussions addressing the ways in which online pro-ED communities engage with racialized conceptions of beauty, health, and fatness, and how this results in the inclusion and exclusion of certain groups along the lines of race. In addition, my research will engage with literature discussing Eurocentrism in embodiment and exclusion in Western society as a whole. Rather than taking a public health approach, as is most common in the existing literature on the topic, I center intersectionality through a qualitative content and discourse analysis, in order to highlight the ways in which people of colour are marginalized within these communities across a spectrum of identities, and unpack the cultural norms and ideals prevalent within the pro-ED community as a whole. I recognize that eating disorders are not exclusively a public health issue, but are predominantly a medical and psychological issue impacting the individual patient. In the field of EDs and their supportive online communities, there is severely inadequate exploration into the experiences of people of colour and other marginalized groups, especially in individuals with intersecting identities. The stories of disordered pro-ED users have not sufficiently been told in an inclusive manner, and the cultural goals and ideals within these groups have not been examined with a racial emancipatory

framework. This research will also contribute to a greater transition towards a cultural model of conceptualizing disordered eating and the ideals/practices within pro-ED communities, rather than obfuscating the influence of dominant Western culture through an excessive medicalization of sufferers. This analysis is guided by the following research questions:

- Do pro-eating-disorder images include or exclude individuals/groups along the lines of race? If so, how?
 - Do people of colour create their own eating disorder centered communities?
- How are eating disorder ideals racialized and gendered?
 - What racial stereotypes, if any, are represented in both overt and covert ways in pro-eating-disorder content?
- What are the health risks and benefits to racialized people who engage in online eating disorder communities?
- What subject positions are produced through discourses within pro-eating-disorder content?
 - Which subjectivities are permitted? How are they racialized?

METHOD

Study Design

In order to answer my research questions, I conducted a qualitative content analysis, as well as a discourse analysis, of online pro-ED communities on four social media platforms: TikTok, Tumblr, X, and Facebook. The first two are more visually focused platforms, while the latter two are more textually dense; thus, this selection of platforms provided me with the resources to not only identify group acceptance in community ideals and media, but also compare the ways in which racial biases are made both implicit and explicit through a number of unique strategies according to the site, resulting in the manifestation of a racialized pro-ED subculture. These platforms were also chosen for their large and diverse range of users, and popularity across generations. These multimedia sharing websites offer unique opportunities for data collection that extends past linguistic text-based content (Hewson, 2020). While these social media platforms require a password-protected account to access their content, the data analyzed in this study is publicly available, and not guarded within private online groups/forums that require administrator permission to access.

I understand content analysis as “a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff, 2004: 18). Guided by Krippendorff’s definition, the present content analysis is not strictly an interpretation of data, but it also contextually and culturally situates the online content in such a way that makes explicit the social structures that influence them (2004).

In the present research, I do not subscribe to any particular strategy of discourse analysis, and instead build upon the intuitive methodological strategies posited by ‘garden-variety’

discourse analysts (Brooks-Cleator & Giles, 2020; Currie et al., 2007; Pascale, 2008). My methodology is informed by the Foucauldian processes of questioning how discourse, embedded within power-knowledge relations, constructs subject positions that constitute and limit ways of being (Bischoping & Gazho, 2016). I seek to merge his conceptions of objects/objectification and subjects/subjectification by identifying that the discernible objects produced by power-knowledge relations (such as the pro-ED caricatures I identify) are not only inserting individual people into the available subject positions, but are also tools employed by those individuals through the fluid, malleable process of the agential construction of self (Bischoping & Gazho, 2016; Foucault, 1986). This conceptualization draws upon Currie et al.'s research on identity construction by adolescent girls, as the authors hold paramount that agency and individual capacity allow these girls to choose and subvert subjectivities, despite being entangled within webs of hegemonic discourse and systemic construction (2007). I also draw from the tenets of Critical Discourse Analysis, highlighting the semiotic dimensions to power and inequality, and how discourses reflect and reinforce dominant ideology (Bischoping & Gazho, 2016; Hodes, 2018). Further, I center Black Feminist Methodologies to uplift the knowledge held by racialized, and otherwise marginalized, peoples through their experiences existing in the face of multiple forms of compounding oppression (Parrerson et al., 2016). This work conceives of these agential constructions of the self as holding the potential for resistance against dominant interpretations of identity (Devault, 2004). Thus, through my intuitive methodological process, drawing upon Foucauldian and Critical Discourse Analysis, I was posed to better identify the subject positions produced through discourses within pro-ED communities online, and explore how individuals take up or subvert these subjectivities.

Sampling

In order to collect the data, I created accounts on Tumblr, X, TikTok, and Facebook and used a stratified and purposive sampling technique to extract 50 posts from each social media platform, resulting in a total of 200 units of data. Krippendorff refers to coding units as content directly observed and data collected (2013). For the purposes of this study I sought to investigate the themes and discourses inherent in the content within these communities, therefore, coding units were posts or multi-post threads published by a single author, consisting of text and/or visual imagery, including comments or replies from other accounts. A post thread is defined as “a series of replies to a single post... from the original post’s author or from other users” which are connected and viewed from the original post (Azhar, 2022).

Authors who specialize in qualitative content analysis agree that purposive sampling is a valuable and appropriate method to employ, as it evades unequally informative data, particularly in analyzing internet communities where irrelevant content is increasingly prevalent (Ames et al., 2019; Campbell et al., 2020; Krippendorff, 2019; Sibona et al., 2018). Purposive sampling grants the research an increased power and logic that random sampling fails to provide, resulting in richer data (Campbell et al., 2020; Emmel, 2013). Despite the fact that racialization, gender, and group acceptance are not necessarily explicit in every piece of content within pro-ED communities, these concepts are still ever present and require a more deliberate sampling method that can better identify these themes. To avoid bias, I also report on data that is inconsistent with my expected findings (Breuning, 2011). In analyzing pro-ED communities online, I searched for the key themes, assumptions, and beliefs that inform and covertly produce the content, specifically those that relate to representations and conceptions of race.

Analyzing these pro-ED communities posed the challenge of content moderation and censorship. Each social media platform has unique approaches to moderating content that they perceive to be potentially damaging and harmful, and this is of particular importance given the often graphic nature of pro-ED content. Upon searching hashtags that are associated with the pro-ED community, Tumblr, TikTok, and Facebook each provide users with a content warning and access to mental health resources (X provides no such content warning). While Tumblr and Facebook allow users to “continue to the search results,” which can be relatively unrestricted, TikTok bars access to the results completely, pushing pro-ED users to develop covert hashtags and keywords that circumvent algorithmic moderation. Regardless of the social media platform’s processes for content moderation, censorship does not prevent pro-ED communities from developing and thriving; instead, it simply pushes them further underground, away from regulation, into potentially unsafe territory.

In analyzing these pro-ED communities, I considered, quite broadly, how race, racialization, racism, and group acceptance/exclusion were present in the website’s content. I operationalize group acceptance as: positive or neutral representation in pro-ED content, and inclusion within pro-ED discourses and cultural ideals. In order to assess group acceptance, I asked questions such as: what is the race and gender of the person in the image?; how is the body in the image being racialized?; Are there any racial stereotypes present in this content, embodied or otherwise?; Does the content explicitly or implicitly exclude/reject certain groups, and which groups?; What cultural or hegemonic ideals are present in the content?; Does the content push a certain definition of beauty/thinness, and is that definition exclusionary? I analyzed this content with reference to the ideas of capital, culture, and intersectionality that is recommended by the

literature in order to untangle the ways in which race and exclusion are intimately and covertly existent. By doing so, I was better able to examine how the production/reproduction of racialized hierarchies within pro-ED communities reflects existing discriminatory structures more broadly.

The final sample consists of a range of social media content, including 68 text posts, 63 image posts, four video posts, and 91 posts that combine textual and visual content - all extracted from pro-ED accounts. In all cases, the intent of the post must have been to either promote a pro-ED message, or to interact with the pro-ED community at large. To qualify for the study, all content had to be in the English language.

Data Collection

Data collection involved entering the search terms “proana,” “promia,” “thinspo,” “ed,” “Black thinspo,” “poc thinspo,” “malespo,” “dniifinrecovery” which asks those who have recovered from EDs to ‘not interact,’ as well as variations on the preceding tags as to avoid content moderation and censorship. To inform the focus of the study, I passively observed and took screenshots/screen-recordings of posts within the pro-ED communities on Tumblr, X, TikTok, and Facebook over the span of five consecutive days on a once-daily schedule. An inductive and deductive analytical approach was employed to collect data and identify patterns, which authors agree is most appropriate for organizing qualitative information with the intent to uncover common themes and concepts (Juarisco et al., 2010; Moessner et al., 2018). This approach encouraged meaning to reveal itself within the data intuitively, rather than restricting analysis to set categories that were identified prior to an in-depth engagement with the content (Juarisco et al., 2010). To establish rigour and significance in the collected data, it was critical

that data selection combined purpose and serendipity (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2005). Therefore, I sought out disconfirming cases, and continually reevaluated and replaced collected data that proved to be insignificant. Due to the aforementioned policies of content moderation and censorship, it was integral to preserve collected content. Thus, posts were screenshotted to prevent the loss of data if the post or account was removed from the platform. Data was then deidentified, removing usernames and faces.

Coding Scheme and Analysis Plan

The following variables were coded to address the research questions: post type, post purpose, sex of subject, race of subject, body depiction, aesthetic presentation, and group acceptance. I draw upon Ghaznavi and Taylor's robust and trusted coding scheme, particularly in their categorization of post purpose, but also extend their established processes to better address my research focus (2015). After data collection, each post was examined and hand-coded using inductive open-coding, and deductive codes derived from the literature (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). See Table 1 for a detailed description of each of the coded variables, including their categorization.

Table 1: Description of coded variables.

Code	Categories
Post Type	Text; Image; Video; Combination of Text and Visuals

Post Purpose	<p><i>Trigger</i> (intended to encourage weight loss);</p> <p><i>Reverse Trigger</i> (intended to repel the user, typically with images of indulgent food or obese figures);</p> <p><i>Distractor</i> (intended to provide distraction from hunger);</p> <p><i>Vent / Advice Seeking</i> (users expressing frustration, sadness or pain due to their ED, or seeking advice on how to maintain their weight loss);</p> <p><i>Critique</i> (users providing meta-commentary on the pro-ED community).</p>
Sex of Subject	Male; Female; Multiple; Unknown; N/A
Race of Subject	White; Black; East Asian; South Asian; Latinx; Indigenous; Multiple; N/A
Body Depiction	Full-Figured; Average-Build; Slender; Athletic; Excessively Thin; Emaciated
Aesthetic Presentation	Open-coded inductively.
Group Acceptance	<p><i>No Representation</i>;</p> <p><i>Neutral Representation</i> (marginalized figures are included without commentary);</p> <p><i>Positive Representation</i> (marginalized figures are included with positive reception, or are praised for their characteristics);</p> <p><i>Negative Representation</i> (marginalized figures are persecuted or situated as undesirable).</p>

In order to uncover what subject positions are produced through discourses present within pro-ED communities online, I analyzed the data using descriptive coding methods to produce iconographic caricatures of the permitted subjectivities, with labels that stereotype pro-ED idols. These exaggerated caricature names, such as *The Girl Who has it All* and *The Beautiful Bag-of-*

Bones, best demonstrate and extremify how these subject positions are constructed and imbued with status and morality. Throughout the coding process, I sought to employ an embodied and emotionally attuned approach informed by Maclure's concept of sense (2013). By centering an affective awareness while combing through content, the data that most inspired an embodied sense of energy and inspiration was chosen as particularly powerful (Maclure, 2013).

Ethical Considerations

Technological advances and increased accessibility to the internet over the past decade have presented an exciting opportunity for data collection, although the established canon for approaching research in this realm is still in early stages with much debate (Taylor & Pagliari, 2017). Data collected from online forums and websites thus poses unique ethical considerations, as it involves using content by humans without obtaining informed consent. The online space blurs the boundaries between public and private, and compounded with the lack of concrete ethical and methodological guidelines for research engaging with social media, the burden of ensuring the safety of participants and content-creators falls onto the researcher (Taylor & Pagliari, 2017). While research that uses data collected from public domain forums and websites is exempt from the requirement of informed consent as data is considered ethically justified, some researchers have argued that content posted within these online communities should not be collected without the author receiving permission from the original posters (Sugiura, 2016). However, a number of studies have also concluded that searching for informed consent in online forums can cause more harm to the human participants involved than otherwise, by impeding on the anonymity of internet-users or invading their right to privacy by 'spamming' members in

order to ask for consent (Hewson, 2020; Mosleh et al., 2021; Sugiura, 2016). Some researchers use non-participant observation, in which they create an account posing as a group member, join *private* groups and forums, and ‘lurk,’ observing social interactions and content without participating in the group (Smith et al., 2013). However, there is no single approach taken by researchers when engaging with online content, and it is generally up to the author to determine what is required for their specific project.

For the purposes of my research, I took from Smith et al. in asking a few questions regarding the necessity for informed consent (2013). First, I questioned whether there was any potential risk of harm to the members of the online communities as a result of my research, and I determined there was not. The purpose of this research is not to vilify or place moral value judgements on online pro-ED communities nor the coping mechanisms that those who suffer from EDs employ. Instead, the present research intends to advance inclusivity and community acceptance within mental health oriented communities that provide members with support systems, while also recognizing and challenging the underlying structures that result in discrimination within these groups. I also questioned whether I could adequately ensure the anonymity of the group members on each social media platform, which I determined I could. All collected data was de-identified and anonymized, including photos of the body, in order to erase any markers that can identify their real-world identity, as well as their online persona (Smith et al., 2013). Thus, informed consent was not necessary. By following these robust, tested, and canonical procedures piloted by other researchers in the online space, I am able to establish greater reliability and validity in the present study (Hewson, 2020). Ethics was considered

heavily throughout the research process, and I believe that by ensuring anonymity and privacy at every step, I have avoided the potential ethical risks associated with online research.

Bias

As a racialized person myself, I recognize that I hold a bias in my commitment to producing knowledge that will contribute to the liberation of people of colour from racial oppression in all social and institutional contexts. Standpoint epistemologies acknowledge and invite the influence of social location onto research, because knowledge production is conditioned by and contingent on one's sociocultural context (Harding, 1992). Because of my lived experiences as a woman of colour, I am aware that my standpoint may result in the identification of examples of exclusion or racialization in the data that others with different standpoints may not take note of - but to strive towards the positivist ideal of objectivity is to deny the relationship between the researcher and the object of study, and the ontologies and subjectivities of marginalized groups (Acker et al., 1983; Harding, 1992). Knowledge claims are *always* socially situated, and by failing to critically interrogate the ways that social scientific epistemologies and methodologies have systemically advantaged dominant groups, we stray further away from critical rigor and a socially, historically, culturally situated objectivity (Harding, 1992). Karl Popper made clear that, regardless of the nature of the research and the methods used, observation and thus classification is inherently selective, and that research free from any preconceptions is impossible to achieve (Brotsky & Giles, 2007). This is particularly true in regards to the content analysis of visual images, where interpretation is integral to tease out meaning from the content. I recognize my biases and acknowledge that qualitative analysis is

inherently about interpretation and an iterative exploration of meaning. Ultimately, the goal of qualitative research in this way is to spur on a shift in thinking and in discourse by demystifying the constructs that pervade our social world.

FINDINGS

Content Analysis

Group Acceptance

Throughout my analysis of the collected data, it became clear that pro-ED communities develop cultural ideals surrounding beauty and thinness through social constructions of race, leading to complicated nuances regarding group acceptance which are relatively consistent across social media platforms. Patterns in the cultural goals and values were identified through the analysis of users' social posts, and it became clear that the primary ideals are whiteness, sickness, and youthfulness in appearance. Physical traits associated with excessive thinness and emaciation, such as visible ribs, hip bones, and slim waists, are self-evident and ever present in pro-ED content, however, these other attributes produce layers of exclusion which stem from hegemonic structures. These influences are frequently made clear in users' posts listing their reasons for food restriction. For example, one Tumblr user cites: "to have a gaunt face and look sickly and pale," "my friends will be worried and talk about my weight loss," and "I'll be so clean and look like I have self control" as reasons for their disordered eating. Another user lists:

"I want... a hollow voice. Frail body... Dark circles. Bruises. Pale... Worried glances. Almost fainting when you stand up... It hurts to walk... So caught up in your weight that everything else fades away... Bonespo. Deathspo... "Are you okay?"... Skeletal... Freezing. Perfect."

Pale, white skin is consistently prized as desirable in pro-ED communities, as it is constituted to reflect beauty, discipline, as well as dedication to the disordered lifestyle. One TikTok user exemplifies this, sharing that they feel excitement and pride when adults show concern as to why the users are so pale, and if they're okay. Thus, whiteness is understood in pro-ED spaces as a

sign of virtue and accomplishment, where non-white individuals with EDs are inherently unable to revel in the success and status associated with being pale. On Facebook, one user uses poetry to cope with the difficult frustrations and mental health struggles that stem from their ED. For example, they write: “I’m a ceramic doll. White powdered face, clothing that fits my body. Not a single hair out of place. I want to be the doll that everyone chooses,” and “Empty. My stomach is empty. My head is light. My body weak and shaking. My pale white skin. Bones outline my body frame. My body is dying. Yet I find comfort in the feeling of being empty.” Their poems consistently portray their whiteness as romantic, as something that makes their personhood beautiful, perfect, and is symbolic of their comfort. Therefore, these consistent messages throughout the pro-ED community speak to how whiteness and pale skin are constructed as desirable, assigning moral virtues of discipline and power to individuals who are white. These values are informed by structural white supremacy and cultural hegemony, and consequently exclude all non-white individuals from the pro-ED community and situate them as lesser than.

The appearance of sickness and emaciation is also held in high regard as a cultural ideal in the pro-ED community, as is further discussed in the forthcoming discourse analysis. The aforementioned Tumblr posts again highlight the idolization of the physical manifestations of disordered eating. Pro-ED community members consistently cite their desire to look and feel unwell as it provides reassurance that the users’ restriction practices are ‘working,’ and proof of their discipline. Physical symptoms such as shaking, bruising, exhaustion, and bodily pain are glorified, and many users revel in their non-ED peers’ concern for their health and wellbeing. It’s worth noting that there are some conflicting dialogues surrounding emaciation, with some pro-ED users noting that these extreme skeletal figures often seen in thinspo do not reflect their goals

outside of the internet. For example, one Facebook user asks their pro-ED group what physical feature they admire the most. While many users comment describing visible bone structure, one commenter writes “I wouldn’t wanna look emaciated [because] that’s not attractive in reality.” While there are differing goals in the pro-ED space about body appearance, the physical sensations of sickness remain markers of achievement and are thus structured as cultural ideals.

Physical attributes associated with childish bodies and youth are also frequently held up as ideal within pro-ED communities, as they are positioned as analogous to thinness and beauty. Users across social media platforms consistently include being infantilized, small, and perceived as childlike as reasons for their restriction, as is analyzed in detail within the discourse analysis. Multiple Tumblr users describe their yearning to attain infantine smallness, with one explaining the motivating factors for their disordered eating practices: “To float in my clothes... People telling me I’m so small. Boyfriends being able to pick me up like it’s nothing.” Perceived ‘innocence’ and fragility are also frequently noted as sought after traits.

Because of these established cultural ideals, marginalized communities and BIPOC are predominantly excluded from the pro-ED community, experiencing, for the most part, no group acceptance, neutral representation, or group exclusion. In the collected data depicting human figures, 52.2% of pro-ED content did not include racialized bodies. 33.5% of images neutrally presented BIPOC figures, and 10.7% exhibited explicitly exclusionary and racist presentations/perceptions of people of colour. Only 9.2% of content positively presented racialized experiences. Out of the examined social media platforms, Tumblr was most likely to present BIPOC positively and neutrally, while X was most rife with bigoted and exclusionary content. Further, just over half of all collected data depicted exclusively white bodies (52.2%). East Asian

bodies were the second most presented in pro-ED content, accounting for 22.5% of collected data, and Black figures took up 11.9% of imagery. 10.5% of data included more than one race. South Asian figures were represented in 1.4% of data, and both the Indigenous and Latinx communities only appeared in a meager 0.7% of posts - just once each across all platforms. Facebook and X were by far the top whitest platforms in pro-ED content.

Further, I examined the content of one of X's largest pro-ED accounts, which posts thinspo daily and boasts over 52,000 followers, in order to illuminate group acceptance and racial representation within the community. Out of 889 total posts shared, 91.3% depicted white bodies, 5.5% were of East Asian figures, and only 3.1% were Black or Brown figures. Further, a miniscule 0.04% of thinspo images portrayed male, nonbinary, or otherwise androgynous bodies. Clearly, white female figures dominated pro-ED content and ideals on X, further reinforcing the false notion that eating disorders are only experienced by white women, and erasing the experiences of racialized and marginalized groups both physically and ideologically. While whiteness is still idologically paramount in these communities across platforms, similar analyses of popular hashtags identify that East Asian bodies are more frequently present and commodified on TikTok. For example, an examination of the top 120 posts under the #unhealthywl (in pro-ED communities, 'wl' refers to 'weight loss') tag, boasting a whopping 61.9 million views, illustrated that out of posts that depicted human figures, East Asian bodies were three times more likely to appear than white bodies, and 48 times more likely to appear than Black bodies. Under the #dniifinrecoveryplease tag ('dni' is an acronym for 'do not interact' and is plentiful in online communities that center around triggering content, including the pro-ED community), holding over 1.1 million views, the human figures included among the top 125 posts comprised of 43.2%

East Asian individuals, 36.8% white bodies, and 12.8% Black individuals. All of the people present underneath these hashtags were women.

Given these quantitative findings, it appears that the pro-ED community holds East Asian bodies and identities in similar, or sometimes even higher, regard than white bodies, suggesting that the racialization process is exceedingly different in these groups compared to offline, and that East Asians are maintained as ‘model minorities’ in these spaces. Thus, Black and Brown bodies are not held in the same racial categorization as East Asians, and are situated as undesirable, lesser than, and unattractive in pro-ED communities. This reflects dominant hegemony, systemic and structural racism, and white supremacy. Not only are East Asian figures more popular than other racial and ethnic identities, but it appears that being of East Asian descent is held as more desirable in the community. Multiple X users identified that other members of the pro-ED community frequently “fake their race” online to appear more attractive and legitimate to the group. One post reads: “what’s the point in faking your race on [ED Twitter] of all places too 🙄 does being Korean make your starving tips more significant [and] trustworthy or what?” Further, X users express confusion and concern with the prevalence of East Asian thinspo in their communities, with multiple users communicating that they believe the community is “fetishized” as “conventionally slimmer and more aesthetically pleasing to [white people].” Other users suggest that their bodies are biologically slimmer than those of other races, and that “East Asian beauty standards are to be thin and dainty even if it risks your health, while in most other POC communities ppl wanna be seen as ‘slim thick’ or muscular.” These determinations objectify and commodify the East Asian identity, racializing it as a ‘model

minority' through physical properties, and reducing the culture to only what can be used by the pro-ED community: slim bodies stripped of personhood.

Black, South Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous communities remain rarely represented in the broader pro-ED community and in their cultural ideals, resulting in feelings of exclusion and isolation. In data collection, it became clear that there was a pattern of racialized community members expressing frustration that there is such a lack in BIPOC thinspo. Users write: “wish I saw more latina and/or [asian] th*nsपो, or at least thinsपो of WOC :(” and “we need more POC thinsपो.” On the other hand, other racialized community members believe that such calls for representation obfuscate the fact that thinsपो, and other pro-ED content that encourages health threatening behaviour and restriction, is extremely dangerous. One Tumblr user explains

“it fucks me up when I see calls for more representation in thinsपो. Yes WOC aren't represented in thinsपो at all and that is definitely due to racism and colourism, but thinsपो is a horrible, evil little toxic thing that we participate in as a community. Don't try to promote 'wokeness' in your thinsपो for the sake of it because the glorification of [emaciated] bodies, often of extremely ill people, is horrible and should not be promoted. Regardless, I understand that a lot of us cannot stop using thinsपो but know how damaging it is for the person in it and those consuming it.”

While there are conflicting beliefs amongst BIPOC in the pro-ED community about the importance of representation in thinspiration content, there is no debating that this type of content is scarce across all social media platforms.

Pro-ED content that does include racialized experiences often represents BIPOC in discriminatory ways that reinforce negative, racist stereotypes and position them as lesser than. These data patterns suggest that they are not welcomed or accepted by the community at large as valuable. One X post shares that they “miss when [ED Twitter] was skinny and white,” with

another user replying that “now the Blacks have taken over and ruined it.” This blatantly racist and exclusionary content makes clear that BIPOC are not welcome in the pro-ED community, and reflects a broader pattern amongst these online spaces that, whether made explicit or not, white supremacy is upheld through the cultural values and practices. Another X video places its racist conceptions front and center: it depicts a photo of a larger East Asian woman with dark skin, a wide nose, and small eyes being photoshopped until they are unrecognizable. The figure is made significantly thinner, their skin is whitened, their eyes are made large and round, their lips are made smaller, their hair is replaced, and they are made to wear makeup. Every feature of theirs that contradicts white supremacist conceptions of beauty are erased and replaced with their Eurocentric equivalent, and this change is understood as something to be celebrated.

Two other X posts act as examples of how white supremacist framing exists covertly within thinspo, yet still perpetuate these exclusionary values. These posts each compare two women; in the first, an excessively thin white woman stands next to an obese Black woman; in the second, two women are posed next to each other in the same swimsuit, one pale and excessively thin, and the other slightly heavier (although still thin) and racially ambiguous, posted with the caption “The difference...” Here, the positioning of excessively thin white women alongside darker women with more body fat, within a pro-ED community, clearly uses body comparison to constitute whiteness as more beautiful, desirable, and luxurious. A Tumblr user exhibits the ways that they have internalized racism via the covert and overt exclusion present in the pro-ED community, writing: “I think the fact that I am a WOC yet dislike WOC thinspo says a lot about me.” It’s extremely clear then that these practices of discrimination not only produce content that racially stereotypes and excludes, but they also actively imprint on

racialized people, encouraging self-hatred, worsening self concept, and leading to the lasting effects of internalized racism. Some pro-ED users recognize the scale of this harm, with one Tumblr user writing:

“One thing I really do not like about the ana or thinspo posts I’ve been seeing is the idea that when you’re skinny and dainty and ‘better’ you’ll have perfect pale and porcelain skin. Think about all the Black girls and boys who have EDs. I’m sure they have thoughts like, ‘I can be skinny but I’ll never have that doll perfect skin colour.’ ... We’re all fucked up enough, we don’t really need to be perpetuating the idea that white or pale is prettier than dark or brown.”

The overt and covert racism within pro-ED content have lasting impacts on the community, especially for those already facing systemic oppression, and it’s evident that community members are well aware of these exclusionary cultural values and their repercussions on marginalized groups. These racist ideals consistently position BIPOC as undesirable, unattractive, and unwelcome not just in the pro-ED online space, but in broader society as a whole.

Given that BIPOC are scarcely represented in pro-ED content, it’s integral to interrogate the ways in which they are included and the structures that surround their presentation. One member on X asked their fellow racialized pro-ED community what types of thinspo they most see their own race/ethnicity represented in, and the resulting 145 responses are quite revealing. 48 respondents claimed that they almost never see their race in any form of pro-ED content, citing their racial background as: Arab and North African, South Asian, Latinx/Hispanic, Indigenous, South East Asian, Pacific Islander, and Polynesian. Meanwhile, all East Asian respondents claimed that they had no trouble finding thinspo depicting their race. Black users explained that they predominantly see their race presented in fitspo (thinspiration centered around physical fitness and athleticism), and fatspo (reverse-triggers intended to repel the user

from eating, depicting obese or overweight figures), although they are able to find other forms of thinspo with some effort. Typically presenting the Black community as inherently more athletic than non-Black individuals feeds into long-standing stereotypes of Black athleticism and sport-supremacy which falsely claim that they hold naturally superior physical abilities, essentializing Black peoples. Further, in pro-ED communities, representation in fatspo immediately perpetuates negative associations and affect with the subject, fostering feelings of exclusion and denigration. South Asian and Latinx respondents noted that they see their communities in fatspo as well. Additionally, South Asian and Arab respondents wrote that they also saw their cultural foods represented in ‘gross-spo,’ referring to pro-ED reverse-trigger content that presents food that is perceived as disgusting, extreme, and gluttonous as a means to discourage hunger and temptation to eat. This very clearly suggests that the cultural practices and values stemming from these ethnic communities are rejected by the pro-ED space at large, considered repulsive. My findings across social media platforms reflect the feelings of these respondents, yet I also found that thinspo that neutrally presented Black and Brown individuals was consistently held up to white supremacist and patriarchal ideals. They were not permitted to be unpolished, as white figures frequently were, indicating that the intersections of identity produce unique forms of exclusion stemming from misogynoir. Negative presentation in a group that one turns to when seeking community for an already isolating mental illness can have concerning and detrimental health effects on the individual, as they feel excluded and rejected by a space they expected to be safe.

Further, I found that BIPOC are mostly depicted positively in pro-ED content insofar as they can emphasize and support excessive thinness and the other cultural ideals of the community. For example, an X user shares a photo of an excessively thin Black woman with a


natural afro hair-style along with the caption, “the volume of her hair makes her seem even smaller.” Here, the woman’s natural hair or other features hold no value in their own beauty, but only because they contrast her body size and make her look thinner, and thus closer to the pro-ED community’s ideals. In another case, one TikTok user lists the types of self-care products and practices needed to achieve the group's beauty standards, posting:

“Honey, you aren’t ugly.
Skincare: Korean
Haircare: Indian
Makeup: Chinese
Body care: African
Perfume: Arab
is all you need”

This post presents these practices as though the only thing that these multifaceted cultures are good for are these specific, often historic or religious, traditions that can then be co-opted by pro-ED individuals in order to attain a Eurocentric conception of beauty. By taking up these traditions, rooted in cultural significance which have often been prohibited or stigmatized through colonial oppression, pro-ED users erase the racial identity and personhood from these practices for their own benefit and contribute to structural discrimination.

Gender representation is scant in the broader pro-ED space, even when using specific search terms in attempts to find content that portrays male, nonbinary, and androgynous bodies. Out of 200 total data units collected, only 13 include male, transgender, or nonbinary figures; significantly less are racialized. These gender inclusive posts, termed ‘malespo,’ are most popular on Tumblr, depicting multiple photos of muscular or lean white men. Malespo also frequently includes gay or queer relationships as the focus of the content, with some users citing their desire to attain/retain a romantic relationship as a primary motivating factor for their ED.

For example, one individual posts “I need to be skinny for my boyfriend... I’m so scared of someone taking him from me, someone beautiful and skinny. I need to do better for him. No amount of food is worth losing the love of my life.” While truly diverse pro-ED content is extremely uncommon in the community at large, I did find a few examples of multi-post threads that included a wide breadth of racial, gender, and sexual identities presented positively and permitting a variety of subject positions, however, all such data units were themselves shared by racialized and gender-diverse community members. It’s evident then that inclusive and representative pro-ED content is, for the most part, only created by members who themselves lack representation and feel excluded from the community, creating content for themselves and people like them because they understand that their existence is incongruent with the broader cultural ideals in the pro-ED space.

Embodying and adhering to pro-ED ideals, and thus being accepted into the group, is representative to users as granting a proximity to power, class, and a high social status. For those struggling with disordered eating, being considered thin and beautiful allows individuals who otherwise feel ostracized or marginalized in broader society to feel valued, and this pattern is consistent throughout pro-ED communities across platforms. Alongside a photo of a thin white woman, one X user writes “thinness radiates luxury ,” illuminating how slim white figures are intrinsically associated with wealth and status even when there are no other markers indicating affluence. Numerous users shared that they desire thinness because of the social capital associated with it. For example, in one Tumblr users’ list of reasons for restriction, they list: “to feel powerful,” “to be successful,” and “so people want to be seen with me.” Another writes “if I was skinny everybody would want to be my friend,” and a TikTok user shares that after losing 20

kgs their peers are “happy to be with me cause [before] they always gossiped about my body.” Not only do pro-ED individuals perceive weight loss and thinness to grant proximity to power, but it seems that members who have lost weight recognize that with their thinness comes the privilege of social capital. This is especially true for marginalized folks who already face systemic oppression and barriers to capital; thinness can improve desirability and feel like an escape for their lived experience of discriminatory exclusion. One Black Tumblr user aptly identifies this, writing:

“I restrict to be desirable to literally anyone [who] will show me an inch of kindness. Everyone listens to me when I’m at my thinnest... They view what I have to say as important now that they find me attractive... Men are nicer and a lot more respectful to you when you’re thin. People don’t see me as the ‘angry Black woman’ anymore, they see me as fragile.”

Their comment about the ‘angry Black woman’ trope is particularly poignant, as this user recognizes that their thinness works to alleviate the effect of existing racist stereotypes that subjugate the Black community. While they will never be free from all racial oppression, thinness grants some proximity to hegemonic power as it adheres to white supremacist conceptions of beauty and health, leading to very real changes in their lived experiences at the micro level. Another Black TikTok user shares that they developed their ED after being called “ugly and ratchet” by a peer because of her weight. The derogatory term “ratchet” is coated in racial undertones and has historically been used to oppress and stereotype Black women. Therefore, it seems that this user entered the pro-ED community as a means to escape the racism and discrimination she faced in broader society, and assert a new, higher status for herself. One Tumblr user epitomizes how group acceptance in the pro-ED community results in perceived and real improvements in class and socioeconomic status. They share a simple mantra that rings true

in a society that places value on these hegemonic conceptions of beauty, health, and fatness: “skinny = power, skinny = beauty, skinny = perfect.” It’s exceedingly clear that pro-ED ideals do not exist in an online vacuum, but result from external structures of oppression that inform dominant norms and values. Then, group acceptance within pro-ED communities reflects group acceptance and experiences of domination in broader society, and by embodying these ideals, individuals are able to better attain proximity to power. Therefore, for BIPOC and other marginalized groups who are systemically oppressed, being ostracized and positioned as valueless in pro-ED communities, which are intended as a safe space for those in need of support, threatens to worsen self concept and endanger these groups.

Health Benefits to Participation in Pro-ED Communities

Pro-ED spaces online pose a unique opportunity for individuals who feel ostracized and isolated in broader society to build a community where they can feel welcomed, regain agency over their bodies and self concept, and find support for their mental health struggles. Especially for marginalized groups who face systemic oppression, online pro-ED communities can provide a space for them to access others with similar lived experiences and values, who also encounter similar difficulties that stem from their disorder. For example, posts across platforms frequently include racialized users seeking out other BIPOC within the community, or suggest creating pro-ED group-chats only for people of colour. One Tumblr user asks “If I make a POC ED [group-chat] would anyone join?,” with 63 responses from users supporting the proposition. While these pro-ED communities are often insular and evidently reinforce unhealthy patterns of behaviour and thought, they also provide a meaningful space for individuals to create relationships that can

extend outside of the community itself, into new territory that may eventually lead to recovery. It's well established that support systems play a significant role in managing mental illness, and can be a motivating factor in recognizing one's health threatening behaviours and reaching out for professional help. Further, pro-ED individuals can use the community they build from these online spaces as a means to obtain mutual aid and financial support when facing threats to their safety and wellbeing. One such Facebook user takes up this opportunity, posting "Can anyone please help me feed my kids and get diapers, wipes, and gas? ... I get paid in 3 days. I can pay you back or pay it forward, I just left an abusive marriage and am needing help until I get my check." Another user replies, stating that they can privately message them so they can discuss how to support. Thus, it's evident that pro-ED spaces are beneficial for individuals in need of community and support, providing a space for relationship building and mutual aid.

Despite dominant hegemonic ideals prevailing in these spaces, perpetuating exclusionary cultural norms and erasing the experiences of BIPOC, marginalized pro-ED community members take it upon themselves to create and share resources and thinspo that better fits the needs and values of other subjugated groups. Racialized pro-ED users frequently identify how they are unable to find content that serves them or represents their figures and lived experiences, as was elucidated in the preceding analysis of group acceptance. One Tumblr user illustrates the frustrations stemming from this phenomena, sharing: "looking up 'Black thinspo' and getting thinspo in black clothes... Like I meant Black people." Because of this consistent dilemma, racialized pro-ED members create resources and references for themselves, knowing that otherwise their needs would not be met. As discussed earlier, BIPOC create diverse thinspo multi-post threads representing non-white figures, and regularly take requests from other

racialized users who seek content picturing their ethnicity. Additionally, they create resources to make finding representative content easier. One Tumblr user shares a lengthy post instructing users on “how to search POC thinspo,” writing:

“I’M UPDATING ALL OF MY TAGS to make it easier to search for the thinspo you want! You can always find us under the #pocthinspo tag. I also use #thinpoc & skinnypoc as well as all the standard non-POC thinspo tags. BUT did you know you can also search by ethnicity, body feature, and nationality? So for instance if you are looking for Latina thinspo you can search the tag #latinathinspo but you can also search more specific tags such as #dominicanthinspo, mexicanthinspo, afrobraizilianthinspo, etc... Keep sending asks/requests & I will keep updating to make the blog more searchable.”

These users support racialized community members who desire pro-ED content that is more representative of their figures and lived experiences. While it may seem counterintuitive to make health-threatening content more appealing to a broader audience, engaging with positive representations of aspirational figures can help improve self concept in marginalized users who have internalized racist and exclusionary ideals. These resources support the community when their needs are otherwise not addressed, potentially encouraging positive affect and self perceptions.

Furthermore, some marginalized pro-ED users, particularly Black women, stray outside of the prescribed subject positions and create new ideals for themselves. These alternative cultural ideals and beauty standards speak more closely to their bodies, cultural values and objects, and are understood as more attainable, contradicting hegemonic pro-ED ideals which uphold white supremacy. In this way, online pro-ED communities can provide a space where individuals regain agency over their bodies and self concept, and assert new ways of being for themselves. Some of this content involves Black female figures who have larger, curvier body

types which traditionally would be positioned as undesirable in pro-ED groups. One TikTok user shares photos of their body goals, in alignment with this pattern. They post curvy-ideal body types, but comment on the photos knowing that their “body isn’t going to be exactly like [theirs].” Another Tumblr user shares thinspo of Black women with shapely figures, writing “It’s okay to not want to be stick thin.” In pro-ED spaces, to strive for and uphold beauty ideals that challenge hegemonic conceptions of beauty and thinness, existing beyond emaciation and excessive slimness, is an exercise of agency that contradicts permitted subject positions and allows users to retain control over their identity. Then, participation in pro-ED communities may prove beneficial for disordered individuals as it allows them to assert their identity in the face of persistent subjugation, encouraging positive affect and self concept. These communities also act as meaningful support systems for users to build positive relationships with like minded individuals, and pave the way for recovery.

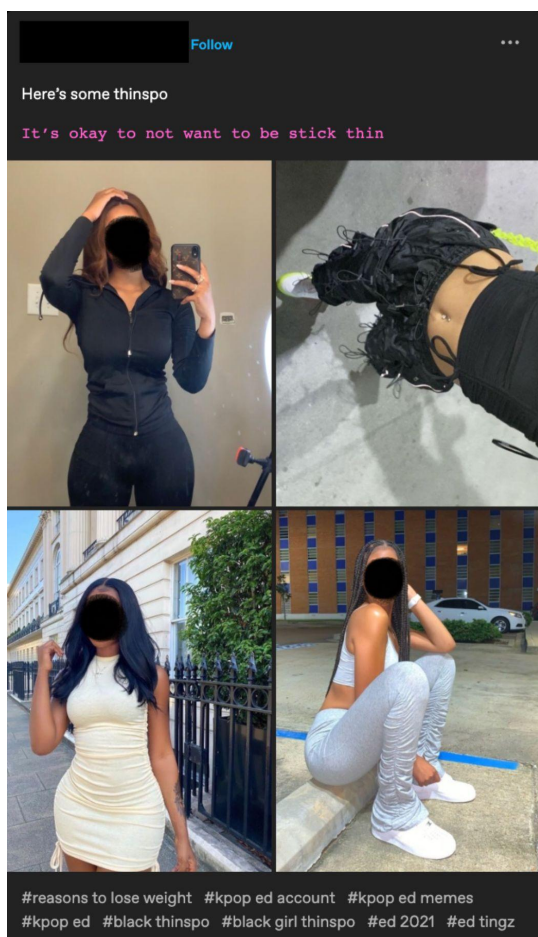


Figure 1. Example of Black women asserting alternative subject positions and pro-ED ideals

Health Risks to Participation in Pro-ED Communities

Engagement in online pro-ED spaces yields overwhelmingly negative physical and mental health consequences for all participants, but particularly racialized users who internalize the hegemonic and exclusionary ideals that populate the social media platforms. Users express developing self-hatred and internalized racism, believing their racial/ethnic backgrounds as inherently incongruent with pro-ED ideals, being isolated and put in the way of negative interactions, and receiving concerning, health-threatening advice that discourages medical intervention.

BIPOC users frequently express frustration and self-disgust at their racial identity, directly stemming from the exclusionary and racist ideals perpetuated in pro-ED content. A vast number of Black and Brown users across platforms specifically identify that being excluded from thinspo, and being assailed by images of white and East Asian women constituted as beautiful and desirable, results in deep insecurity and self-hatred. Tumblr and X users share: “Why is all ‘dainty pretty feminine’ thinspo always rilly pale white girls with long blonde hair... I wanna feel feminine too without having to bleach my skin and kill my curly hair.”; “[Nothing] makes me hate myself more than a skinny white person on Tumblr”; “I do have race dysphoria I feel incredibly disgusted in my brown skin and hairiness and I do wish I was East Asian and I do want to end it all”; and

“I hate seeing all this thinspo of white people. It makes me feel so ugly and makes me hate my skin colour. It makes me feel like POC can’t be skinny and beautiful because there is no representation. I want to have straight hair that covers my eyes. [I want to] look like the stereotype with dark circles under my eyes and pale skin that makes me look like I’m dying. I don’t fit in.”

Some users even share that these white supremacist ideals and cultural norms have caused such anguish and loathing for their appearance that they feel the need to change their race to be perceived as more attractive. One Tumblr post reads “I’m struggling with wanting to change my skin colour, and I’m trying a few things, I wanted to ask you guys if you have any tips for making your skin look more light or pale.” These effects are magnified when marginalized individuals (who experience subjugation not just through their race and gender, but also their mental health struggles) face socioeconomic barriers to attaining pro-ED ideals and are unable to purchase personal-care items associated with class, beauty, and status. It is then exceedingly clear that participating in the pro-ED community and observing thinspiration content has significant detrimental effects on the mental wellbeing and self-perception of racialized users, even pushing BIPOC members who already experience isolation and subjugation to consider extreme actions to erase their racial identity, or even take their own lives.

Racialized pro-ED individuals who have internalized the hegemonic ideals prevalent in the community, believing them as legitimate, often feel as though their racial/ethnic identity and cultures inherently conflict with pro-ED norms and values, consequently presuming their own identities to be valueless. These users describe feeling as though they are alone in breaking cultural traditions in the search for thinness and moral fortitude, positioning their race/ethnicity as insignificant, backwards, unenlightened, and uncivilized. One Tumblr user shares:

“I think it’s going unsaid that Latinas have it difficult when it comes to weight loss and body issues... Growing up in this community, you get used to associating food with love. The idea is literally fed to you. Going to [grandma’s] house: you knew she would gorge you with empanadillas, mamposteo... The list of unhealthy, fried, greasy foods goes on and on. In my country at least, this is how we view food: a way to connect, to please ourselves, a way to show love. It’s a very sick way of viewing food, in my opinion, and even more sickening is the

amount of food that we grow up eating... I myself may have issues with food, but I consider this to be very damaging to our health and our way of living. Food isn't love. It will not fill the emptiness inside you - only you can decide how to fix that."

Another writes:

"There's such a lack of Black thinspo on here and it makes it hard for me to try and reach my [ultimate goal weight] without the right thinspo that caters to my body type and background. Most Black girls/women just settle on becoming more curvy because it's hard to keep weight off. I feel like I'm the only Black girl that wants to be thin. I guess it's because I want to break away from [the 'strong], oppressed, loud, independent' Black woman [trope] that I've been brought up to become. And whenever I bring it up around my other Black friend they look at me as [though] I'm crazy, saying 'why would you want to lose your curves for?' I just feel so alone sometimes."

Both of these users make clear that they disagree with their cultural beliefs and practices surrounding food and thinness, believing them to be unhealthy and corrupting. Interestingly, the traits that these users seem to disagree with are ones that traditionally are constituted as beneficial, convalescent, and community centered. Food is generally appreciated for how it builds connection, and Black peoples historically hold the characteristics of strength and independence as favourable because they are integral in supporting community, self-preservation, and success in the face of structural and systemic oppressive violence. By situating these important values as worthless and inconsistent with pro-ED ideals, white supremacy and cultural hegemony is upheld, continuing the subjugation of marginalized peoples.

Participation in pro-ED communities puts users who are often young, impressionable, and already isolated at greater risk of negative interactions with bad-faith actors who may take advantage of vulnerable individuals and worsen mental health further. One X user posts that members in a pro-ED group-chat are forced to send pictures to prove their race to the other group members, or in their terms, "skin reveal." This is an absurd, humiliating phenomenon which

situates race as an attribute that is inherently shameful and must be justified to others, perpetuating stigma against BIPOC and segregating racialized users. Another primary risk to participating in the pro-ED community stems from users' attempts to build relationships through “ana buddies” or ED coaches. Consistently across social media platforms, individuals make posts in attempts to develop connections with people with EDs as to hold each other accountable in their restriction and weight loss. For example, Facebook posts in this category typically read “Accountability buddy? I need someone to fast with, exercise with, or just do calorie counts with. Setting goals for myself and accomplishing them for myself never gets me anywhere,” or “Ana buddies? ... I really would like someone to message and talk to about calorie consumption and workout plans. I’d like to come up with a plan together so it’s something we can both agree to stick to.” While developing relationships may be beneficial as it allows isolated users to build real world connections with like minded individuals, it also positions users in a vulnerable position where dishonest figures can take advantage of them. One Tumblr user warns the community against bad-faith actors, sharing their experience alongside a screenshot of a phony ED coach and writing “Don’t ever fucking trust any [ana] coach. They are fucking perverts that just want to see girls [naked]... There’s NO [ana] coach on this platform that is not a pervert here. Plus, I wasn’t even looking for an [ana] coach, that’s how u know they’re fake.” For younger users in the community who are less experienced in internet safety, these deceitful figures are positioned to manipulate and take advantage of individuals who see these false pretenses as an attractive opportunity to build relationships. Thus, participating in the pro-ED community online opens one up to potentially hazardous interactions, within an insular community that begets intense and isolating experiences.

Given the nature of the community, content in pro-ED online spaces is inherently health-threatening because of its aims to encourage disordered eating habits, restrictive patterns, and exclusionary beliefs. A central pillar to content in these groups is dangerous and injurious tips and tricks that worsen EDs, with individuals seeking out and sharing harmful advice on how to maintain, hide, and exacerbate their unhealthy practices. These types of posts were most popular on Facebook, as these groups are more concretely established than other social media platforms to act as support systems built to share this type of information. One user was interested in starting disordered eating practices, asking the community for guidance on how to start. While two commenters warned against the health risks and discouraged them from restricting, four others shared advice on how to make restriction easier and suggested fasting. Fasting was also popular advice for TikTok users expressing frustration with their inability to lose weight. Similarly, younger pro-ED individuals on Facebook and TikTok often sought advice on how to hide their EDs from their parents, receiving guidance on how to invisibilize their symptoms and practices so that the extent of their illness is not noticed. Facebook users frequently posted asking for advice on how to carry out harmful actions, such as purging (making oneself vomit to expel food). In response, they receive numerous comments telling them how to trigger their gag-reflex, to drink water mixed with salt and baking soda, and to chug unprescribed emetic syrups. One commenter even goes so far as to tell them “you need to try harder. Especially if you’re new to it it won’t be as easy. It works, you just gotta put effort into it.” Two other Facebook users ask for suggestions on appetite suppressants, with comments listing extremely hazardous suggestions which include nicotine addiction, unprescribed supplements, and even “cocaine.” All of these suggestions are shockingly dangerous and can have long lasting health consequences that

multiply the harms associated with disordered eating to new extremes. In a similar pattern, a TikTok user posted about how excited they were about having lost weight when sick with food poisoning. One commenter responded asking how they can get food poisoning too. This is the scale to which pro-ED patterns of behaviour and thought are capable of distorting hazards to health and safety into aspirational conduct. Individuals here are desperate to achieve their weight loss goals, and engaging in the community at large creates space for them to encounter, seek out, embody, and perfect harmful practices that threaten their wellbeing. For racialized users, who perceive a greater benefit in achieving the thin-ideal due to their experiences of oppression and racial violence, they may be increasingly drawn into these dangerous practices and are at greater risk of harm.

These trends continue to exacerbate health risks, as members of these pro-ED communities effectively convince each other to avoid professional health intervention, even when the symptoms they exhibit are life-threatening or emblematic of end-stage anorexia. Users in medical distress will often post to their online groups before seeking legitimate support, asking such revealing questions as “at what point would you go to the hospital?” This was observed in numerous cases on Facebook, where a user would describe their concerning symptoms (severe fatigue, fainting, tremors, persistent coldness, etc.) and ask for community support, or question how to resolve the symptom without eating. For example, one user writes “I haven’t eaten in 2 days straight. I feel miserable and good at the same time. I keep falling asleep everywhere and feel really cold even though I have layers on and [am] not skinny. Anyone have any suggestions of what to do... that will help me be better and lose weight?” Then, instead of suggesting the user breaks their fast and consume calories to resolve their symptoms, a

commenter answers “I find lots of warm drinks help. I starved for 2 days too this week and felt awful 😞... Try hot drinks and a hot water bottle, sleep when you can to help with feeling tired.”

The individual in a hazardous, potentially life threatening health condition is told to keep pushing harder and to mask their symptoms instead of addressing the cause of her illness. A disabled transgender woman in the community shares her concerning health condition on Facebook as well, expressing the perceived hopelessness of her position rather than remain in hospital. She writes:

“Hi, I have had to change my name to protect myself, I have had an eating disorder all my life. In 2018, I knew finally that I was coming out as a trans woman (I have so much hate directed at me for this). I have been trying to get help for over 4 years for atypical anorexia. Since (a certain date - not talking days) I have not eaten. I live alone. For the last three weeks I have now not been able to keep drinks down. My local doctor has finally secured an assessment for me, however, it is 8 months away. I was in hospital for 48 hours on a drip and 36 hours on a constant anti-sickness [medication]... I had a meeting with a psychiatrist doing an assessment to see how quickly I needed to be seen. The medication I am on is concealing how ill I am, he said. He also said if I don't get help sooner, I will die. I can't even have soup. I am starting to get dehydrated again. I don't have family or many friends. Those who are around me I don't want to be a burden. I got beaten up for being trans and now live in a wheelchair. I am scared. If people would like to message I kindly ask that it's women only.”

This person is struggling with serious, long-term, and comorbid atypical anorexia and has been told by medical professionals that she is, in essence, on the verge of death, and yet, instead of seeking immediate life-saving medical attention, she is sharing her story to a pro-ED community that prioritizes being thin over being alive in attempts to be heard by anyone who will hear her pleas and show her support. For members of the pro-ED community with intersecting marginalized identities and comorbid mental illness, they are already placed at a significantly elevated risk of health complications, mistreatment in the medical sector, and other forms of

systemic oppression. Therefore, when groups intended to be safe spaces fail these subjugated peoples even further, perpetuating health threatening practices and discouraging medical intervention, those individuals who are already positioned as undesirable patients, victims, and figures are situated as collateral damage from the struggle for thinness, beauty, and social capital. In this way, pro-ED communities continually fail marginalized members and push them into life threatening conditions.

Discourse Analysis

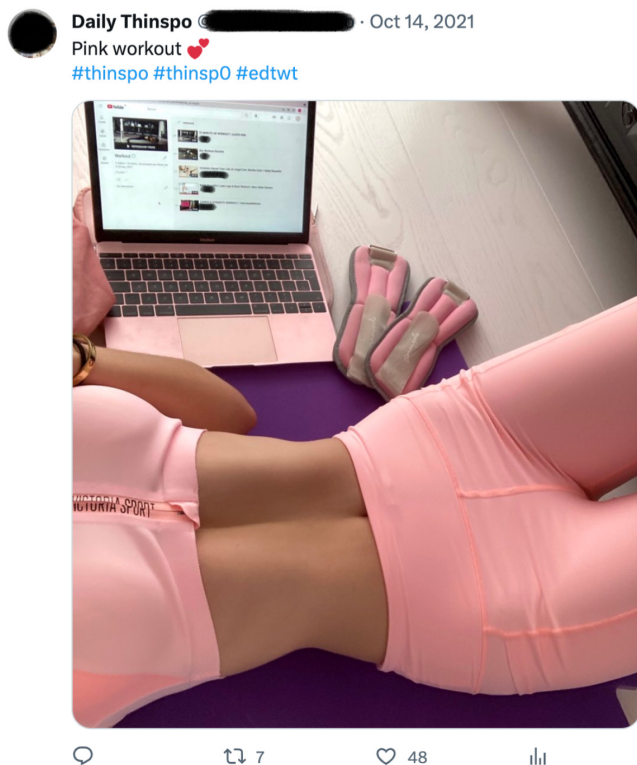
Through the process of discursively analyzing the content of online pro-ED communities, I identified four primary idealized subject positions within pro-ED internet communities emerging within the data: *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, *The Phenom*, and *The Little Doll*. It is critical to recognize that my role in the process of coding and extracting meaning from data was intimate, as I engaged with embodied energies of sense-making while extrapolating patterns. I seek to represent the experiences of pro-ED community members, as well as any person who has suffered from disordered eating, responsibly and with an ethic of care, sharing authentic expressions of meaning with the intent to reveal obscured structures of oppression, and interrogate them. Therefore, I am not placing any value judgements on pro-ED individuals, nor on their thoughts, beliefs, experiences, and practices of maintaining and encouraging weight loss. The exaggerated caricatures are used to represent the ways that power-knowledge relations have restricted the number of subject positions accessible and permitted to individuals - specifically along the lines of race.

The Girl Who Has It All

A common subject position that was presented in pro-ED content online identifies the ideal thin existence: they exercise regularly; they are intelligent, successful in academics, and well read; they are popular with their peers and have a large circle of friends; they're conventionally beautiful, always tasteful in wearing the latest trends - and they love pink; and amongst this delicate balancing act, they are slender, strong, and effortless, making perfection look easy. She is *The Girl Who Has It All*. Often, pro-ED content described the disorder as an all encompassing way of life, rather than strictly a strategy for weight loss. One Tumblr post illustrates many of the central tenets to this subjectivity, presenting images of waifish East Asian women exercising, sitting in classrooms, and posing to emphasize their thin and delicate frames, with one such woman wearing a necklace around her waist. Further, a TikTok user emphasizes this dimension by ascribing to "Wonyoungism," a viral motivation trend developed by fans of the South Korean pop (K-Pop) group IVE's Jang Won-young, originally intended to inspire femininity and self care practices such as exercise and skincare (Tanjila, 2023). While initially arousing positivity, the trend has since been co-opted by the pro-ED community as it primes young fans of Won-young, who already idolize and aspire to be like her, to glorify eating disorders and welcome damaging messaging surrounding food and weight loss. Won-young's extremely slim body-type would be difficult to maintain by healthy means, especially for the average young person who would lack access to the full staff of personal trainers and dieticians that K-Pop idols very likely have. This user posted a montage of images depicting skin care products, makeup, slender East Asian women in athletic clothing, a bowl of fruit, and colourful notebooks accompanied with the text "the next time that somebody tells you 'you can't do that,'

oh yes you can.” While not inherently insidious, by emphasizing the importance of these multiple facets to maintaining an ED, this post illustrates how the ideal disordered eater must be a ‘jack-of-all-trades.’ A number of commenters expressed frustration that their attempts to uphold this lifestyle were “not working,” which perpetuates the assumption that they may turn to more drastic, unhealthy or hazardous practices to achieve their weight loss goals. Thus, Wonyoungism and the preservation of *The Girl Who Has It All* subjectivity may act as mechanisms for converting the aesthetics of self care into damaging practices falling into pro-ED territory. Wonyoungism and the idolization of K-Pop artists within pro-ED communities will be further examined in the analysis of *The Phenom* subject position.

Figure 2 & Figure 3. Examples of *The Girl Who Has It All* subject position



Exercise plays a unique role in *The Girl Who Has It All* subject position, as it does not appear in any other subjectivity within the pro-ED community. Thus, it situates this subject position as inherently morally superior to other personas of disordered eating, as it is outwardly constituted as traditionally healthy. While popular on all social media platforms, this dimension is most present on X, with a breadth of users posting images of white or East Asian women in athletic clothing, either posed while exercising - in positions that emphasize their excessive thinness or slim waists - or otherwise presented as active through their appearance. These photos are often accompanied with text and emojis highlighting the athletic yet delicate nature of the pictured figures, such as “gym-spo 🎀,” “pink workout 💕,” and “ballet body 🍑.”

Interestingly, *The Girl Who Has It All* chooses pilates, at-home-workouts, dance, and yoga - exercises socially constructed as more ‘feminine’ and ‘light’ - over more ‘forceful’ or ‘masculine’ workouts such as weight lifting or cardio. This, in congruence with the consistent pink colouring and conventionally ‘womanly’ white figures, paints this positionality entrenched within traditional, white supremacist, patriarchal values surrounding beauty and femininity. It is worth noting that one such post, featuring an East Asian woman in a ballet studio, has been noticeably photoshopped to widen their eyes and slim their body further, adhering to white, Western beauty standards. Through the establishment of this subject position, it is clear that exercise and its aesthetics have been gendered to an exaggerated extent, where women - and only traditionally feminine women who fit into a specific criteria informed by systematized Western-cultural values - can aspire to be “*The Girl Who Has It All*.”

Style, delicacy, and a natural, effortless sense of beauty and grace are all critical facets that must be mastered by users seeking to position themselves as *The Girl Who Has It All*, as is

illustrated in content across social media platforms. A number of Facebook posts depict white women outdoors, reclining in grassy fields among picnics, holding white flowers in the sunlight, or posing on beaches in swimwear, revealing their slender and toned figures. These images, and the values inherent within them, accentuate how supposed natural beauty is held in the highest regard amongst pro-ED individuals who value this subject position. One Facebook post portrays thinspo of mothers, a group seldom represented in the pro-ED community given its classically younger age demographic. It states “looking at mom thinspo, impatient to be mom thinspo,” above three photos of slim, white, blonde women with their children on the beach. While this positive representation of mothers is appreciated given its rarity, its presentation seems to perpetuate traditional and patriarchal conceptions of beauty and motherhood. Here, a mother, despite just going through the difficult physical demands of pregnancy, is expected to ‘bounce back’ to a slim body type while her children are still infants in order to present as a good mother, and as a beautiful, ‘natural’ woman. This is a decidedly damaging expectation to project as it encourages feelings of failure, shame, and embarrassment in women who do not fit in as *The Girl Who Has It All*.

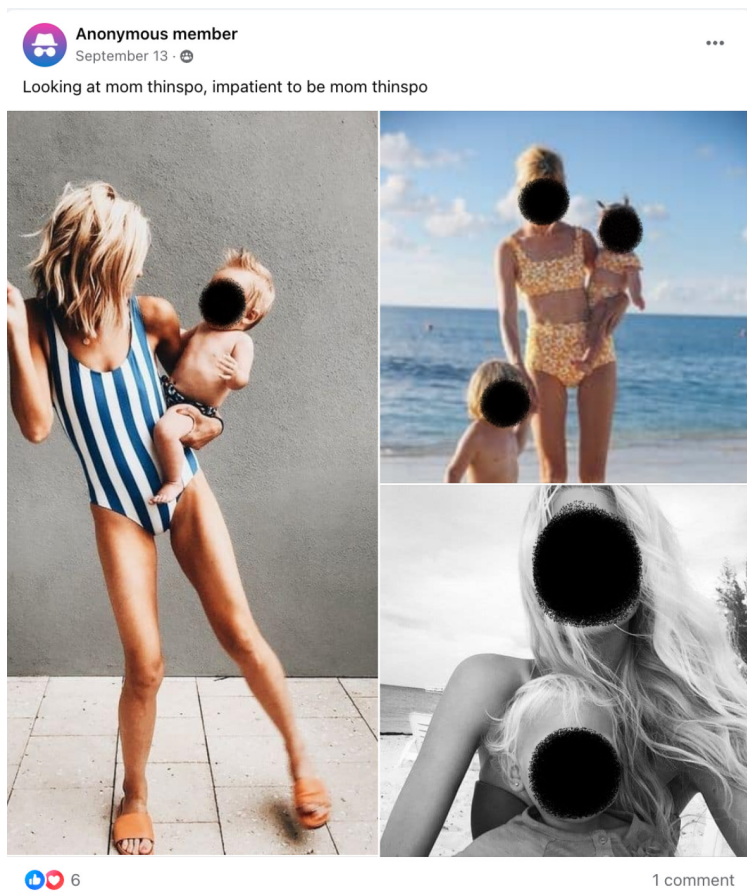


Figure 4. Example of *the Girl Who Has It All* subject position

Building upon the importance of style, one Facebook post notes “I think skinny girls look good in any clothes they wear, I want to look as good as them.” It’s indisputable that across platforms, owning stylish clothing is paramount in pro-ED communities as it best packages the thin body for societal presentation. Thus, to be *The Girl Who Has It All*, one must have wardrobe and accessories to play the part, which includes delicate and feminine silhouettes and fabrics such as lace, silk, and linen, pink athletic-wear, frills and bows, and expensive yet tasteful jewelry. Two TikToks exemplify these requirements, presenting the prescribed clothing upon excessively thin and emaciated white and East Asian women behind soft, dreamlike music. A number of other Facebook posts share similar images of thin women in stylish attire. Thus, the emphasis on style within this subject position not only underscores societal expectations

regarding thinness, but also establishes a subtle yet significant class barrier. Because the idealized image of *The Girl Who Has It All* is intrinsically tied to a specific aesthetic, it creates a standard that can often be financially inaccessible, inherently excluding those individuals from embodying this idealized persona through yet another barrier-to-entry. In this way, this subject position best presents idyllic thinness as an all-encompassing lifestyle.

Black pro-ED users attempt to adopt *The Girl Who Has It All* subjectivity as well, although with limited success as they are pushed to choose thinspo that they can better project their self identity upon. For example, one Tumblr user posts “pics of thin black people from my pinterest that remind me of myself,” alongside photos of fashionable Black women, many of whom stand alongside equally thin and fashionable friends, emphasizing their excessively thin limbs and bodies. The assertion that Black and racialized pro-ED users must produce their own content, drawing from sources external to their primary supportive community (in this case, the social media platform Pinterest), astutely recognizes that the Black community may feel unrepresented in dominant imagery depicting this subjectivity. Content in the pro-ED Wonyoungism space reflects this feeling of exclusion and isolation in Black individuals further. One TikTok user shares a montage of traditional, hyper-feminine self-care practices associated with Wonyoungism, using a TikTok sound stating the vulgar, racist idiom “once you go Black, you never go back” and captioning the post “once you start Wonyoungism, you never go back.” Underneath this post, one user comments “Can I be Black and do Wonyoungism?” Here, it appears that BIPOC members of the community have internalized exclusionary patterns and feel as though they can’t participate in the pro-ED community, and that they can’t be *The Girl Who Has It All*, without express permission from the white and East Asian members of the in-group.

In this way, Black users consistently feel like the unwanted ‘other’ in pro-ED groups. Another TikTok user exemplifies this lifestyle element further, describing their weight loss, social, academic, and personal goals for the new school-year. Some such goals include obtaining an hourglass figure, improving their grades, becoming a cheerleader with a large group of friends, maintaining their appearance through their hair, nails, and makeup, and buying stylish clothing. This user, a Black middle-school student, presents their goals and values alongside thinspo that is, for the most part, perceived as attainable, matching their skin colour and hair type. While racialized pro-ED individuals are steered towards the same idealized subject positions as the broader community, it’s increasingly evident that they still must adjust the benchmarks for their goals, and create their own content, to better represent their unique and intersectional lived experiences, in order to self-actualize their eating disorder.

The construction of *The Girl Who Has It All* subject position within pro-ED communities perpetuates an idealized existence where the disorder goes beyond mere weight loss strategies, encouraging a carefully curated aesthetic surrounding success, health, and lifestyle that obfuscates and glorifies the harmful, dangerous practices normalized in disordered eating. This produces an inherently inaccessible model of the ideal pro-ED individual, rooted in gendered, socio-economic, and racialized values that further exclusionary standards and worsen feelings of inadequacy, consequently isolating marginalized communities even further and pushing them to pursue exceedingly unhealthy and life threatening practices to achieve the desired image. Further, the significance of exercise, self care practices, and diet here constitutes this subject position as health conscious, which situates *The Girl Who Has It All* as healthier and morally superior, obfuscating the extremely dangerous practices that prevail in the pro-ED community.

The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones

Throughout the data, a pattern emerged of pro-ED communities glamorizing extreme emaciation, mental illness, and symptoms of end-stage anorexia as symbols of strength, power, and ethereal beauty. One Tumblr user elucidates the ideals of *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position, writing “I want to look sick. I want to be covered in bruises... I want hollow cheeks. I want to be so pale I look like a ghost. I want to look fragile. I want to be breakable. I want to get dizzy everytime I stand up.” Across platforms, there is a robust and consistent thread of users admiring sickly bodies, distinctly pale from malnourishment, injured, and with accentuated bone protrusion. This form of thinspo is often termed “bone-spo,” combining the terms ‘bone’ and ‘inspiration,’ as it emphasizes the figure’s extreme, skeletal body. Exceptionally white skin is held in particularly high regard, with some users noting how they feel pride when their pale skin is noticed by people outside of the pro-ED community, as it provides a sense of social reward for their dedication to their ED. One such user wrote on Tumblr how they “love pale thinspo” because they can imagine the figures as themselves, boasting: “I swear I’m so pale... I went swimming... and it was a full moon. When I got out of the water and sat down on the bank to dry, I literally reflected the moonlight, it looked like I was glowing.” Here, it’s suggested that pale skin is prized as it exudes a supposedly ethereal, unearthly sense of beauty, considered more attractive and of higher regard than dark skin. Numerous other posts across social media platforms depict white, partially clad, emaciated bodies edited to reduce colour saturation and produce the appearance of even paler skin, highlighting the figure’s ribs, collarbones, or severely gaunt wrists. One such X post is a “bodycheck”¹ of a pale, grotesquely emaciated, nude figure,

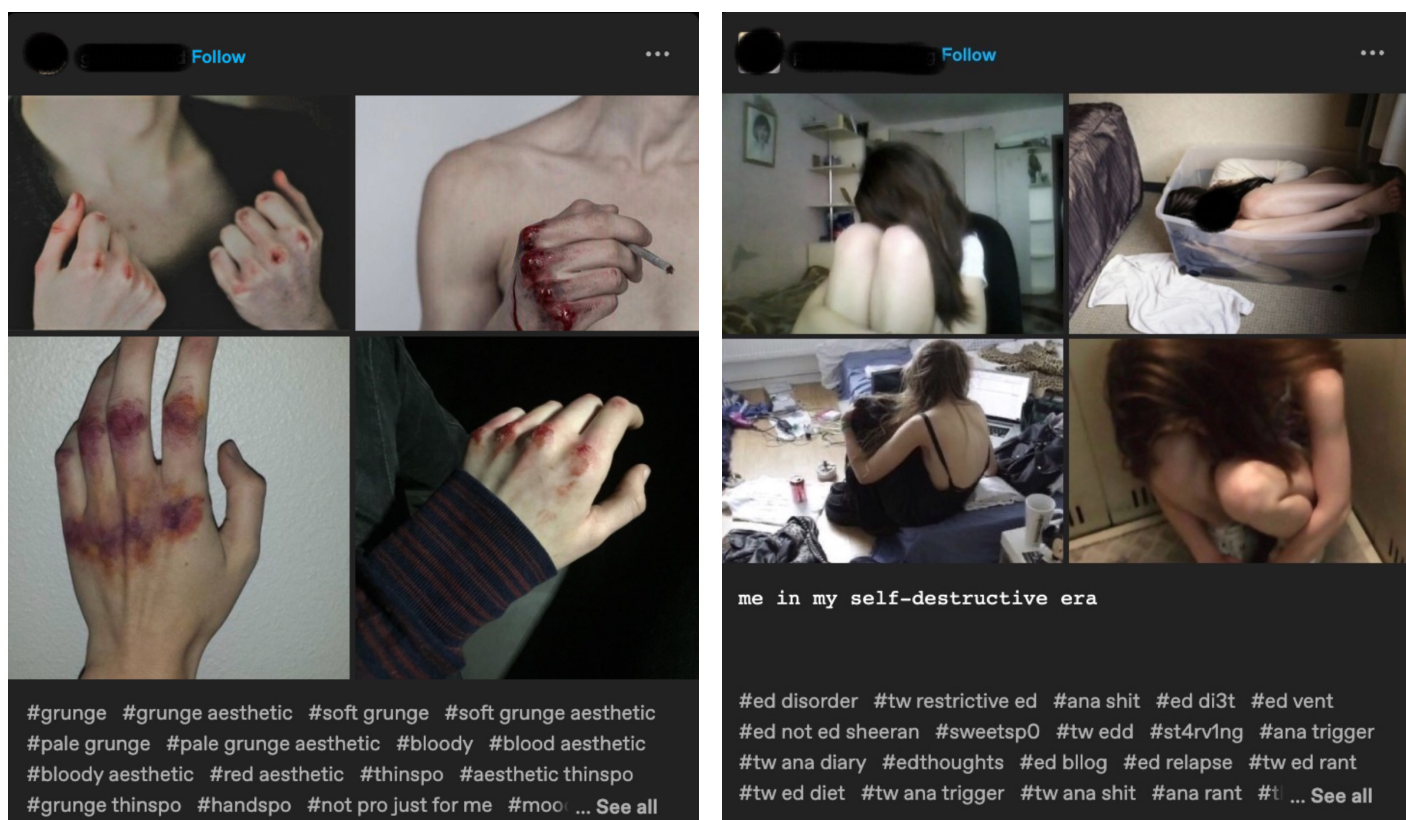
¹ In the pro-ED community, a ‘bodycheck’ refers to a photo/video posted by a user, of themselves, which is used to examine, measure, or monitor their weight or size (White, 2020).

alongside a photo of a realistic, feeble unicorn. The juxtaposition of these two images further perpetuates the significance of ethereality and this inhuman, otherworldly ideal within the pro-ED community as it situates the figure as beautiful because of their fragile, anemic, sickly appearance. *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position then upholds racial hierarchies as it presents whiteness as a prerequisite for thinness and beauty.

Pale skin is also preferred as it causes jutting out bones to look more extreme, it aestheticizes the thinspo to present pro-ED imagery as more artistic and desirable, and it acts as a canvas where self harm cuts, scars, and bruising are more contrasted and apparent. Throughout data collection, I identified a number of multi-post threads dedicated to the depiction of this type of white, injured thinspo. These images, seen most pervasively on X but existent across all platforms, depict dozens of emaciated white bodies covered in bloodied scars and raw bruises, as well as hospital bracelets and bandages, dangerously glamorizing self harm and health threatening behaviour. Other posts present visibly sick bodies, with one Tumblr user sharing two photos of white, sallow bodies reclining on beds in unnatural positions under the caption “tired and cold,” as motivation to further trigger their disorder. These sickly individuals are presented with a severely objectified, and often sexualized appearance, partially clad or nude and treated as though they are props or adjacent to furniture. For example, one X user posts a white, nude, emaciated body hiding their face cramped uncomfortably inside of a small wooden cupboard, emphasizing their small frame and protruding bones. Here, the objectification is so extreme that all elements of humanity are stripped from this person entirely, and they are presented as nothing more than a ghostly figure for users to project their desire for thinness upon. This trend is

consistent within *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position, as aspirational beauty and power are constituted as exclusively resulting from this emaciated and decidedly unhealthy form.

Figure 5 & Figure 6. Examples of *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position, highlighting mental illness and the injured ideal.



Across platforms, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* is depicted as struggling with mental illness, providing identity and a romanticized layer of intensity to this pro-ED ideal. Similarly to how physical sickness is aestheticized in pro-ED communities online, graphic thinspo of emaciated figures are often depicted in crisis or having engaged in self harm, curled into themselves and isolated as though in a depressive episode. On Tumblr, for example, one user

shared four photos of white women in the fetal position, above the caption “me in my self-destructive era.” Here, the poster knows that their behaviour is health threatening and actively worsening their mental and physical condition, yet they glorify it, welcoming the self-destruction as though it provides personal fulfillment. On TikTok, users commonly create stylistically edited videos of mentally ill characters in pop culture and mass media, projecting their own symptoms and frustrations with their eating disorder onto existing characters to further idealize their lived experiences. This trend was so popular that these types of posts constitute 18% of data collected from the platform. These videos depict scenes from popular movies or television shows, such as *Girl Interrupted*, *Skins*, *Gossip Girl*, *Euphoria*, *Shameless*, and *Jennifer’s Body*, where white, female characters, established in-universe to experience mental health issues or drug use, struggle with binge eating, food restriction, insecurity, and hair loss. Captions on such posts include: “me eating everything in the kitchen after [starving] for 3 days,” “me pretending that I don’t know why my hair is falling out but I still can’t stop because this is the only way I’ll ever feel comfortable in my own body,” “me when my father tells me I’m only skin and bones” overtop of a smiling character, and “me walking away from my sister after watching her eat whatever she wants and not gain weight after I spent the last week [starving] myself and still looking double her size,” and many more. Despite most frequently describing negative experiences of pain or misery, these videos are veiled with a sense of desirability, where struggle is glorified and a unifying force for the community. Comments on these videos are filled with other pro-ED community members attaching their experiences to the character’s. For these users, they may be hurting, but they can relate to these beautiful, romantic, and fascinating characters - which provides satisfaction and pride in the struggle.

This projection also extends to real-life celebrities, such as Kate Moss, a British model praised as one of the iconic symbols of the ‘heroin chic’ style popularized in the 1990s, and famous for her comments encouraging disordered eating (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Her motto, “nothing tastes as good as skinny feels,” has been a mantra for the pro-ED community, online and offline, ever since Moss originally shared it in 2009 (BBC, 2018). Given that this style is characterized by traits associated with drug abuse, including pale skin, dark under-eye circles, emaciated figures, and stringy hair, it serves as a popular source of inspiration for the pro-ED community, especially those who seek to represent *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position. One Tumblr post includes six photos of Kate Moss, along with the quote “She’s had plenty of drug problems, and dated some questionable men, she’s been blamed for promoting anorexia and heroin use, and her nicknames include cocaine Kate, and Kate Mess.” By attributing health threatening behaviours like drug use and disordered eating to fame, beauty, and social capital, posts like these help pro-ED individuals glorify their illness and worsen their symptoms in the hopes of achieving success.

Interestingly, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* presents itself as attainable, accessible, and casual in its emaciation. These bodies solely exist within the confines of their bedroom, and perform thinness and desirability in privacy, for an audience that only endures once they post the photo online. The vast majority of pro-ED imagery in this subjectivity are photos taken by the subject themselves as ‘selfies,’ further perpetuating this perception of disordered individuals performing thinness for themselves, and to further fuel their ED. Because these images portray seemingly average individuals who struggle with disordered eating and other mental health struggles, taking photos of their emaciated figures in their ordinary bedrooms, users perceive

these idealized figures as relatable, close to their lived reality, and thus attainable. These photos are popular on all social media platforms, and reflect pro-ED users' desire for thinspo that relates to their lived experience and doesn't shame them for living normal, unglamorous lifestyles; that they can imagine as themselves if they restricted themselves further and reached their weight loss goals.

Figure 7 & Figure 8. Examples of *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subject position



For the pro-ED community, emaciation is an exercise of power and allows individuals who otherwise feel isolated or disempowered to assert agency. One Tumblr user epitomizes this phenomena, writing “You’re not in this to be hot, remember? You’re in this to show everyone who’s ever hurt you they can’t get away with it. You’re in this for the power you’ll get from your emaciated body. That’s why you’re doing this.” For pro-ED individuals, the physical ailments

and weakness caused by emaciation are not health concerns, but instead provide proof of traits perceived as positive such as discipline, focus, commitment, and fortitude. This then feeds the cycle of the eating disorder and encourages further restriction, putting those struggling into potentially life threatening conditions. It's exceedingly clear that this subject position, then, is not simply prized for its perceived ethereal beauty or for its thinness, but rather for the power and strength that it provides. Whiteness is critical to *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, present in every piece of data representing this pattern, which presents a trend that must be interrogated. Emaciation, sickness, and mental illness in this context are all constituted as desirable and even luxurious on white women, however, these very same traits present on Black bodies are socially constructed as undesirable or reflective of poverty and homelessness. Thus, people of colour are not permitted to embody this subject position, and are excluded from the pro-ED community not only in values and ideals, but in practice - isolating racialized individuals and worsening feelings of self-hatred, precarity, and segregation.

The Phenom

Across all social media platforms, a common subject position that appeared through the data was that of *The Phenom*: famous models, celebrities, and musicians holding notoriety and high status in Western popular culture. Out of all subjectivities identified in pro-ED communities, racialized bodies, who rarely appear at all, are most commonly present as these exceptional figures. Although BIPOC are frequently represented as *The Phenom*, white female figures still dominate this subject position, particularly on Facebook which hosts an older demographic than other social media platforms. Here, the most common forms of thinspo represent white bodies posing for professional photography, often partially clad or in clothing

that highlights the model's thigh gap, slim legs, or exceedingly thin waist. One such post shares an image of a pale, gaunt runway model along with the caption "Thigh gap!" The same user posts Twiggy, a model and British cultural icon of the 1960's, famed for her androgynous and gamine frame, with the caption "Vintage thinspo at it's best!" Pro-ED TikTok users also have a predilection for white models, commonly using photos or videos of runway models as thinspo or in combination with text. For example, one user posts their favourite pro-ED mantras overtop of a lingerie runway show, including quotes such as: "suck it up and one day u won't have to suck it in," "[fat] lasts longer than flavour," and "what u eat in private u wear in public." When a commenter warns against the dangerous health-threatening side effects of anorexia, the original poster responds "I'll wear it with pleasure." By placing emphasis on self-control over hunger, these mantras perpetuate feelings of shame, humiliation, and failure in individuals who struggle to maintain these hazardous practices. Then, associating these toxic slogans with models and celebrities who hold acclaim for their beauty and success promotes these harmful pro-ED behaviours further. Physical signs of starvation, such as hair-loss and fainting, are then considered as badges of honour for the pro-ED community, preserving these unhealthy practices and putting users in danger of long-term side-effects or even death.

Interestingly, pro-ED content depicting Black, Brown, and Indigenous *Phenoms* rarely connect thinspo to these unhealthy rituals and mottos. Thinspo of racialized bodies is rare across all social media platforms, however, most pro-ED imagery representing people of colour depict famous models, celebrities, and K-Pop idols who are already popular in the Western world. Therefore, it seems that racialized people are only permitted to be idealized in pro-ED communities if they are already deemed exceptional in their beauty, talent, or fame; if they are

The Phenom. Instead of existing organically in the pro-ED zeitgeist, racialized users take up the responsibility of sharing BIPOC thinspo on their own, as a means to compensate for the lack of representation within the community at large. These users tend to develop lengthy X threads, involving dozens of posts, which generally exhibit thinspo of one specific race or ethnicity. One such user posted “Desi/South Asian thinspo cuz we don’t see enough about it” along with 19 images of slender Brown women, four of which are in traditional South Asian garments. All of these photos appear to be professionally taken of models or ‘influencers’ who exhibit skill in posing, gesture, and expression, especially in showcasing the clothes they wear. One pro-ED user who specializes in curated Black thinspo shares a similar thread including photos of 27 Black women. These posts are shared without necessarily encouraging specific behaviours or health threatening practices, but exist more as a reference for racialized users already in the pro-ED community to strive towards and project themselves upon.

It’s worth noting that the bodies depicted in Black, Brown, and Indigenous thinspo rarely appear emaciated nor *unhealthily* thin; despite the model being an exceptional figure, the body standards present instead appear more attainable to the average person (although still slim). That said, *The Phenom* position necessitates the subject to appear veiled in hyper-feminine aesthetics and clothing in order to maximize their acceptance within the community. This trend is prevalent across TikTok, X, and Tumblr. For example, one Tumblr user shares four photos of slim Black women wearing traditionally feminine silhouettes and delicate fabrics, including long satin dresses and robes, short skirts, and pink clothing. Other posts share South and East Asian women posed for high-fashion magazine spreads, wearing heavy makeup and designer labels. Another Tumblr post shares thinspo of four popular Indigenous models posing outdoors in floral fabrics

and mesh clothing, emphasizing their bust, along with the caption “INDIGENOUS ROCKS!” Throughout the research process, this post was the single presence of Indigenous peoples in pro-ED communities across all platforms, acting as the sole positive representation of this marginalized group. It appears that BIPOC models wearing swimwear in outdoor, beachside, or other nature-focused settings are exceedingly common in content promoting *The Phenom* subject position. One X user shares an image of a Black woman on a beach, wearing floral swimwear, her natural curly hair in an afro style, and wooden waist beads (a jewelry style originating in West Africa). Another Tumblr post includes eight images of women of colour: half wear swimwear, the Black women depicted wear their natural hair, one South Asian woman wears their cultural garments, and bright colours/patterns upon traditionally feminine clothing styles are prevalent. The positioning of these women in swimwear and natural, outdoor settings seems to further exoticize these racialized bodies as organic, unrefined, rural, or even uncivilized. Because racialized communities are already heavily marginalized and excluded not only in greater society, but also within pro-ED communities and cultural ideals, BIPOC bodies must fit into dominant hegemonic structures and value-systems through other avenues, including their clothing and appearance. Black, Brown, and Indigenous women thus are not permitted to engage in alternative styles perceived as ‘unsightly,’ and instead must be presented as desirable through all controllable means - apart from race. BIPOC pro-ED content in *The Phenom* space is uniquely polished, encouraging, and by all counts, feels ‘healthier’ than content depicting other racial backgrounds and subject positions. This ‘healthy’ veil is of course nothing but a facade that obscures the harmful and struggle-filled reality of disordered eating, but it exists to provide racialized individuals a sense of respite from the systemic marginalization they face, allowing

them to strive for full acceptance in the pro-ED community and beyond through conventional, Western standards of beauty and thinness.

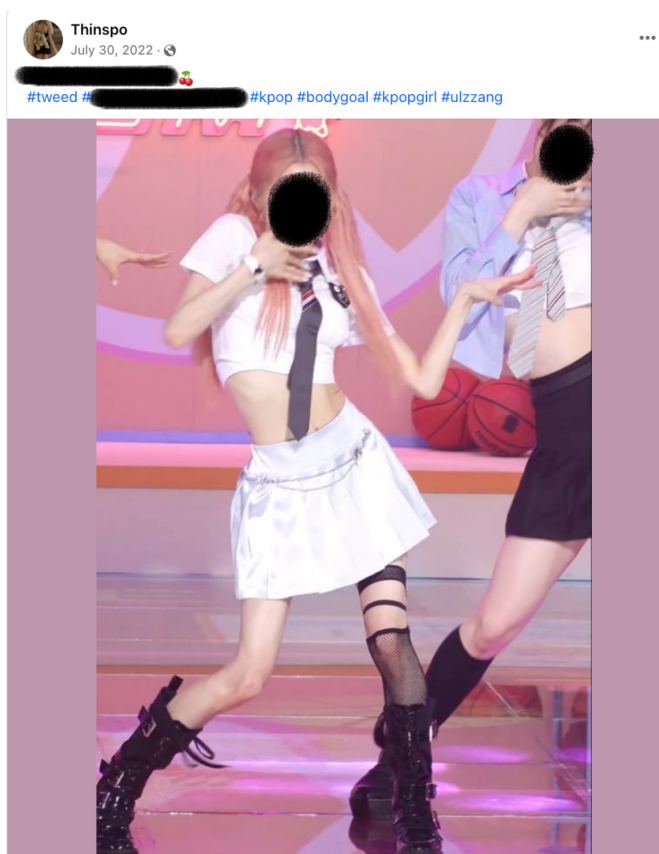
As was discussed when analyzing group acceptance and the racial hierarchy within pro-ED communities, East Asian figures are distinctly held in higher regard than other racialized groups. Thus, thinspo and pro-ED content stemming specifically from Korean pop is widely popular and prominent on all social media platforms, especially on TikTok. Posts fitting into this subject position frequently include the hashtag “#kpopweightloss” as a means to mobilize the community. One thinspo post from Facebook includes two images of a Korean pop idol from the group IZ*ONE, including one where she has her arms lifted in a ‘T-shape’ as her body-measurements are taken, with the caption “([trigger warning]: ed thinspo) imagine being able to wear any clothing with confidence.” Another Facebook user shares a photo of another K-pop star dancing on stage in a sexualized school uniform, with her excessively thin limbs and boney ribs highlighted by the outfit. Again, Jang Won-young is a frequently repeating icon representing *The Phenom* subjectivity, with photos of her posing on stage to accentuate her slim waist and lean figure dominating Facebook, Tumblr, and TikTok. On TikTok, East Asian *Phenoms* are often used as properties rather than people, existing primarily as backdrops to accessorize other post-types with a layer of thinspiration. Just as white runway models were posed in combination with pro-ED mantras, footage of K-pop idols dancing are frequently posted behind similar mottos, vent posts, or user-introductions. In my findings, it seems that the quotes shared alongside East Asian *Phenoms*, however, tend to be more discouraging and focus on denigrating users more so than for other groups, including such phrases as: “Stop crying and whining after not controlling yourself. It’s not that difficult. [People] can do this all the time, what makes you special?”,

“Whatever problem you have, the answer is NOT in the fridge,” and “You aren’t a pig, so stop acting like one and gain some discipline.” Vent posts of users sharing their frustrations overtop of these dance videos include passages such as “GUYS HELP!! ... My scale’s batteries are low so I can’t weigh myself... My parents know how I’m obsessed with that scale so I’m sure they will not buy new batteries. What should I do?” and “Is [losing] 15kgs in 2-3 months possible?... All my friends want to go to the pool a lot and I really want to look good in a bikini, and not only that I just want to feel good being myself.” The presence of these pained pleas and meanspo, juxtaposed by bright, happy, K-pop sounds and dance videos feels unsettling, yet provides a glimpse into the mindset of community members who struggle with disordered eating yet seek to romanticize the experience.

Pro-ED content in *The Phenom* sphere also often shares ‘tips and tricks’ on behaviours to further encourage disordered eating in tandem with thinspo of celebrities with desirable bodies, suggesting to users that if they follow the prescribed health-threatening advice, that they too can look like these idolized figures. Users in these communities also develop practices to help reframe disordered practices as enjoyable and encouraging. One such TikTok user shares advice on “how to romanticize weight loss” overtop of a video of a K-pop star performing. Their suggestions include “pretend[ing] you’re a supermodel who needs to fast... [for] a runway,” “pretend[ing] you’re a bodybuilder,” and “pretend[ing] you’re running a marathon.” Each of these fantasies involve the individual feigning success and fame, as though they were a *Phenom* themselves. Another TikTok post instructs users on “how to weigh [themselves] correctly” to produce the lowest result, overtop of images depicting early-2000s era celebrities and beauty icons, such as Angelina Jolie and Britney Spears. It seems that associating pro-ED beliefs and

practices with well-known figures affords validity to the content and its guidance, by feigning widespread approval for the advice. This is especially common in the pro-ED K-Pop community, where users develop ideologies, lifestyles, and diets solely based off of individual Korean pop idols without that figure's consent or will - such as the aforementioned Wonyoungism. Uniquely, the pro-ED K-pop community takes from the genre's choreography by developing dance-workouts to encourage individuals to burn calories. One TikTok parodies this phenomena, featuring a video of an adult man dancing to a bright K-pop song, with the caption "when the ed kpop stans convinced me to dance to burn calories instead of a 5 hour walk." This post sheds light on the somewhat comical and absurd ways that the pro-ED K-pop community transform the health-threatening, compulsive, and often dark practices tinged with negative affect into practices that are more fun, romantic, and thus accessible to the average person, obfuscating the painful reality of this disorder and presenting the slippery slope into mental illness as more attractive and obscured.

Figure 9. Example of *The Phenom* subject position



While Wonyoungism is not the only pro-ED doctrine stemming from the K-Pop music genre, based on my findings it is certainly the most popular set of principles with the most devoted group of adherents. One Tumblr user chronicled their experience attempting a “Wonyoung Inspired Diet,” where they posted a daily diary including thinspo of Wonyoung, what and how much they ate that day, how they felt about their restriction, and a quote to motivate their continued observance. Interestingly, this diet requires having five strawberries and milk for breakfast, and restricting portions for other meals to limit calorie intake to below 600 per day. Despite claiming inspiration from a South Korean artist, the diet does not represent South Korean/East Asian cultural foods or culinary practices whatsoever, nor does it likely reflect the diet that nutritionists develop for celebrities like Jang Won-Young. Instead, these pro-ED diets are structured to be accessible to the average Western young person, often still living with their parents or otherwise unable to obtain foods from cultures apart from their own. However, this then requires the erasure of *The Phenom’s* ethnicity and cultural identity, in order to ‘whitewash’ their existence for widespread consumption and approval amongst pro-ED spaces. This is a distinctly exclusionary process, where racialized individuals are thus valued only for their thinness, with all other identifying features needing to be omitted so that their likeness can be better used for the benefit of the pro-ED community and their health threatening aims. In the interest of analyzing this Tumblr user’s dieting experience further, on day four they recorded that they ate 621 calories, feeling proud for being “in control” despite feeling “so hungry.” On day eight, they were dismayed after having eaten 1,398 calories (which is still below the recommended daily intake of 1,600-2,000 calories), writing: “I feel like I’m disrespecting Wonyoung’s name [with] how much I’m eating 🙄.” Pro-ED users thus perceive

these idealized figures as authorities on thinness, beauty, and food restriction, regardless of their actual beliefs, statements, and practices. These pro-ED communities feel almost cult-like in their idolization of these famous individuals, developing ardent fanbases who can turn from loving to scolding with a single ‘wrong-move.’ Some online critics of pro-ED communities noted that other K-pop idols that have been held in a similar regard to Wonyoung in these spaces have faced severe condemnation and bullying for gaining healthy weight, as they’ve broken the illusion of their authority and approval of health threatening habits. It is then increasingly clear that *The Phenom* is only as phenomenal as they are skinny, and any personhood attached to the racialized celebrity that contradicts this specific, restrictive conception renders them undesirable and valueless.

Figure 10 & Figure 11. Examples of *The Phenom* subject position



The Phenom is the only subject position that permits the inclusion of racialized men. Across the pro-ED community and all social media platforms, men of colour are scarcely represented, further perpetuating the myth that EDs are a ‘white woman’s disease.’ Therefore, *The Phenom* subverts this dominant conception by asserting that men, including Black and East Asian men, are welcome and capable of attaining acceptance in the pro-ED community. On X, two users post photos of thin, lean and muscular Black men, posed professionally in fashionable clothing with their upper body exposed. Further, East Asian male pop idols are popular figures in the pro-ED community on TikTok as thinspo and as figures for users to project their experiences, feelings, and frustrations upon. For example, one user creates memes of South Korean vocalist Seungmin, sharing reaction-photos of him along with captions such as “me crying over my body,” “me when my mom caught me [purging],” and “me trying to hide myself in any picture I take.” It is then exceedingly clear that *The Phenom* subject position is the most diverse category, despite its adherence to dominant, hegemonic, and traditional conventions regarding beauty, thinness, and gender.

The Little Doll

Throughout the data, there appeared to be a consistent desire within pro-ED communities to appear as small and thin as possible, however, *The Little Doll* ideal extends this longing into extreme infantilization. Thus, pro-ED users associate thinness with childlike and infantine appearances, yearning to infantilize themselves to achieve the skinny ideal. One TikTok user exhibits self-awareness around this desire in their post listing “Weird things EDs make you do,” where they state that disordered eating “makes you... compar[e] yourself to literal toddlers.” Another Twitter user, cognizant of the skewed ways that EDs uphold youth and childish bodies

as desirable, posts a meme acknowledging: “I want to be skinny to regain the feeling of being small and fragile and worthy of love and protection that was stolen from me as a child.” This post not only recognizes that feeling small and fragile, traits associated with children, yields positive affect, but it also connects the presence of disordered eating habits with other forms of comorbid trauma. Experiencing traumatic events, especially as a child as is alluded to in this post, can commonly result in a range of mental health struggles (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Anxiety, Depression, etc.) which may include EDs. Thus, this user suggests that their disordered eating habits are not only a response to their trauma, but also a coping mechanism used to self-soothe in the face of rejection and exclusion. A Black Tumblr user, who identifies the impact that trauma has on causing their ED, lists their reasons for restricting, citing “people don’t see me as the ‘angry Black woman’ anymore, they see me as fragile,” and “the perceived innocence and purity.” Here, it’s not only evident that thinness is associated with a sense of moral and physical ‘cleanliness’ and purity through its proximity to innocence and youth, but for people of colour who face systemic oppression and are pigeonholed in ways that perpetuate harmful stereotypes, disordered eating and the pro-ED community can provide an escape or a pathway to acceptance. Returning to these facets of youth is a means to reclaim agency, purity, and acceptance that has been stripped from them by dominant hegemony.

Thinness is not the only way that pro-ED users seek to take up *The Little Doll* subjectivity; they also dress and otherwise present themselves in infantile aesthetics and clothing in order to appeal to youth further and achieve the ideal. On Tumblr and X, users share photos of white women posed with frilly, light coloured clothing accessorized with ribbons, holding or hugging stuffed toys. On Tumblr, one figure wears angel wings in her photos, adding on an

ethereal element to these youthful photos that evokes imagery of children dressing in costume. Concerningly, these images are very frequently sexualized as well, with figures posing suggestively in revealing clothing. These images also often crop out or obscure the face of the figures, to further persuade viewers of their childlike appearance through their exceedingly small body size, clothing, and environment.

Figure 12 & Figure 13. Examples of *The Little Doll* subject position



One such Twitter post portrays a petite Black woman stuck inside of a clothes washing machine, dressed in a bright pink frilly mini-skirt with a pink shirt patterned with childrens' cartoon characters. She wears bows and childrens' accessories, and is edited to lighten her skin-tone. On the photo, a caption, written in a pink informal font, reads: "so small I fit in the laundry machine 🎀." This photo objectifies the subject to an extreme through their appearance, the present edits, and the premise of the image itself. For an adult woman to fit inside of a washing machine is an absurd and unattainable goal that demands infantilization, and the photos features encourage this childlike perception further. One Tumblr user posts five pictures of girls, with obscured faces, posed sitting in pink feminine appearing clothing, along with the caption "soft... skinny... delicate... easy to snap, like a twig... don't [you] wanna be like that? <3" In one of the images, she sits on the floor playing with a teddybear. The messaging present in this post very clearly romanticizes infantilization, by presenting youth, weakness, and a juvenile state as desirable. Thus, it's evident that pro-ED users seek to return to an infantile and childlike state as a means to achieve the thin ideal, and then engage in content that indulges in this fantasy through their youthful presentation. Consequently, *The Little Doll* is constituted through her childish body shape and delicate nature, her appearance in youthful clothing, and her positioning as an innocent child without real concern living playfully and whimsically.

Often, pro-ED users turn to East Asian, specifically Japanese, characters and 'kawaii' aesthetics to further fuel their fantasy of self-infantilization. The term 'kawaii' refers to the Japanese popular culture of cuteness, which predominantly involves pink pastels, colourful and childish fashion and aesthetics, and cartoon mascot characters (Ashcraft, 2021). *The Little Doll* is frequently coated in these kawaii characters and appearances, co-opting Japanese culture through

self-serving means, and frequently sexualizing it. Sexualization is most common on Tumblr, where images of white women posing provocatively, exposing their chest and buttocks, in revealing childrens' clothing that depict Japanese characters are used as thinspo. In one such post, the user explains that they look forward to buying the outfit from "www.kawaiibabe.com" once they reach their ultimate goal weight. Even when not sexualized, figures clothed in uniquely Japanese kawaii aesthetics are idolized as they further infantilize the body and uphold the appearance of childishness. Another Tumblr post includes four photos of young-looking girls; one wears a pink childrens' vest with the Japanese character Hello Kitty on it; another gestures in a juvenile way; a third poses in infantine accessories featuring other popular Japanese characters. These trends are prevalent across all social media platforms, and are intriguing as they highlight how the pro-ED community will adopt East Asian cultural aesthetics solely in so far as they further encourage the infantilized thin ideal and fuel their disordered eating.

DISCUSSION

Summary

This study critically examines the role of race and racialization processes in sowing exclusionary experiences and subject positions in pro-ED communities across numerous social media platforms, especially as it explores cultural ideals and aesthetics. The collected data makes clear that pro-ED communities develop idealized figures and subject positions informed by dominant, hegemonic constructions of race which work to influence cultural goals and reinforce oppression. Patterns in these cultural values were identified through an analysis of pro-ED social media posts, making clear that marginalized communities experience complex processes of group exclusion, via overt and covert discrimination, and stereotyped subject positions. The primary community ideals are whiteness, youthfulness, visible sickness, and excessive thinness - each of which are glamourized, romanticized, and constructed as valuable. White skin and extreme emaciation are prized as they convey discipline and control over one's body, a virtuous moral accomplishment over the perceived sin of gluttony. Further, marginalized communities, in particular BIPOC, are predominantly excluded from the pro-ED community at large. This is most evident in collected visual data depicting human figures, where more than half (52.2%) of all media solely depicted white bodies. These discerning and colonial processes place value and class distinctions on racial, cultural, gendered, and embodied markers which work to reinforce and reproduce structural oppression. These procedures are also evidenced by the production of four primary idealized subject positions that encompass racial hierarchies and classification processes: *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, *The Phenom*, and *The Little Doll*.

Eating Disorders as a ‘White Woman’s Disorder’

Findings in online pro-ED communities reinforced that the traditional, dominant though outdated myth of EDs as pathology only experienced by white, wealthy women is still perpetuated today, despite its falsity. Visual content in these groups vastly shared white women over any other racial/ethnic identity, with BIPOC users frequently expressing frustration at the overwhelming whiteness of thinspo and exclusion of their own bodies, skin tones, and experiences. If one were to strictly examine thinspo images without the context of racialized users’ critique, you would wrongly receive the impression that most disordered individuals are white women, reinforcing pre-1980s conceptions of EDs (Andersen & Hay, 1985; Jones et al., 1980; Smolak & Strigel-Moore, 2001). In reality, this outdated perspective, as well as the present reinforcement of this myth, continue to obfuscate and silence BIPOC experiences, voices, and victimization in regards to eating pathology, and prevents diagnosis and treatment of those populations. Because racialized bodies are not accepted as valuable or legitimated in pro-ED groups, they are not meaningfully represented in the media and their stories continue to be invisibilized, out of collective consciousness and away from medical acknowledgement - even though racialized people experience similar rates of food pathology to white women (Cheng et al, 2019; Cummins, Huang, & Lehman, 2007). This is not only concerning for racialized groups, but this monolithic representation problematizes men and gender minorities as well, reinforcing stigma against their mental health experiences and discouraging treatment. Although racialized men are suggested to have an additional risk of food pathology, their bodies and experiences are heavily excluded from these pro-ED groups (Goel et al., 2002; Le, Kin, & Kang, 2023; Marais, Wassenaar, & Kramer, 2003). This poses serious concerns for the health and wellbeing of

marginalized communities experiencing disordered eating behaviours. It has long been established that EDs can affect people from all types of backgrounds, so for this myth to continue in the present day is deeply damaging for marginalized groups and bolsters inequitable medical processes that under-serve communities in need.

What Constitutes an Ideal Body, Starver, and Citizen in Pro-ED Communities?

Overall, slender, feminine, and Eurocentric body standards dominate pro-ED content, with users consistently positioning these embodied characteristics as valuable, conducive to moral fortitude, and even healthy. In these pro-ED communities, the same beauty standards of white skin, youth, small noses, straight hair, and symmetrical faces that dominate Western society as a whole are presented as ideal (Gruber, Kalkbrenner, & Hitter, 2022; Krozer & Gomez, 2023; Rhodes et al., 2001; White, 2005). The pervasive thin white ideal remains paramount, if not further extremified, in these groups, especially in *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones* subjectivity. The only virtuous characteristic that is otherwise considered undesirable in broader society is sickness; while the world at large prejudices against illness and differences in ability by pathologizing them and situating them as barriers to being a meaningful and productive biocitizen, pro-ED communities valorize sickness as an extreme yet necessary exercise in discipline and ultimate control over the body (Foucault, 1979). Though, this too has racial implications. White bodies are permitted to starve and have grossly emaciated figures as they, cloaked in racial privilege, project impressions of self-control, discipline, and elegance, associated with fashion models and high-powered executives (Bordo, 1993; Riley, Rodham, & Gavin, 2009). On the other hand, emaciated Black bodies are not permitted in pro-ED online

spaces, as they are stereotyped as diseased and poverty-stricken, reminiscent of the exoticized and orientalized images of starving African children that the Western world is plagued with in dominant media which work to reinforce the monolithic archetype of the African content as poor and uncivilized.

Thus, the pro-ED preoccupation with emaciated white bodies reinforces discriminatory stereotypes and hegemonic belief structures. Alternative presentations of Black and Brown people are not permitted; their bodies are, for the most part, only presented in the collected data as reinforcing white supremacist and patriarchal ideals. The only subject position that they are permitted to adopt is *The Phenom*, suggesting that racialized figures are only worthy of presence in pro-ED groups if they are already considered exceptional in their beauty, talent, and fame. Their hyper-feminine, often partially clad, presentation in thinspiration and lack of assigned value unless they are considered a *Phenom* works to further exoticize and exclude racialized women via misogynoir. Because racialized communities are already heavily marginalized and excluded not only in greater society, but also within pro-ED communities and cultural ideals, BIPOC bodies must fit into dominant hegemonic structures and value-systems through other avenues, including their clothing and appearance. Furthermore, East Asian bodies are similarly exoticized and stereotyped, especially as infantile and submissive (Brady et al., 2017). Although they are positioned as desirable and are plentiful in pro-ED communities, the collected data illuminates how *The Little Doll* and *Phenom* subject positions stereotype East Asians based on Western exaggerated perceptions of their pop culture objects, music, and aesthetics. Thus, racialized bodies are only positioned as acceptable (and idealized at very best) if they maintain

preexisting Western stereotyped and hegemonic conceptions of these oppressed groups (Moore, 2008; Silvestrini, 2020).

Through Foucault's influential work conceptualizing biopower as a practice employed by institutions and forces of authority in society to regulate the public, it was made clear that social structures use health discourses to subjugate and control (1979). As is made clear by authors extending Foucauldian biopower into critical race analysis, these health discourses are themselves exclusionary as they position the thin white ideal as indicative of biological, moral, and social health (Bordo, 2008; Crawford, 2006; Foucault, 1988; Garner & Bibi, 2023; Harjunen, 2021). The present study reinforces the findings of these prior works, as content within pro-ED communities continually reproduces the construction of this moral-imbued 'acceptable body' which inherently excludes the 'other' along the lines of race, fatness, gender, sexual identity, etc. All individuals internalize these discriminatory health discourses, including those who have yet to develop pathologies, as they seek the social and personal benefits of being conceived of as a valuable biocitizen, including attributions of morality and discipline (Crawford, 2006; Harjunen, 2021). So, given that thinness is constructed as a moral project which protects individual and social health, EDs and their goals of weight loss and control are constructed as responsible exercises of health, leading to individuals developing food pathology as care of the self (Foucault, 1997). In the pro-ED consciousness, self-starvation is justified as fulfilling one's public responsibility as a biocitizen and neoliberal subject, and is a practice which suggests discipline and control. Health-threatening practices like restriction, purging, and obsessive exercise are positioned as practices providing care of the self, and act as a pathway towards acceptance in broader society. Although these dominant health discourses would suggest that

having disordered eating habits is inherently unhealthy and should be pathologized/medicalized, pro-ED users exert agency by reframing their disorders as a meaningfully healthful social practice, morally sound, and an individual choice made to boost social capital (Brotsky & Giles, 2007, Overbeke, 2008). This phenomena is present in the subject position, *The Girl Who Has It All*, who embodies the perfect neoliberal subject. They are hardworking, exercise frequently, productive and successful in work/school, attractive, slender and fit, and reinforce patriarchal values. Thus, the inherently exclusionary health discourses that pro-ED communities construct their cultural values upon structures community goals and beliefs as reinforcing those same forces of discrimination.

People of colour who are enmeshed within these discourses and practices in pro-ED communities are positioned as inherently antithetical to neoliberalism as they do not adhere to the normative body presentation (Harjunen, 2021; Lind, 2019). Their marginalized identity prevents them from being a good biocitizen, yet they still actively desire and seek out these embodied traits as is evidenced by the data suggesting that BIPOC internalize and reinforce these hegemonic constructions of moral health. These pro-ED users then reinforce their own oppression by upholding the very same white supremacist and hegemonic ideals that subjugate them outside of pro-ED communities. The ideal body, starver, and citizen in pro-ED communities is then constructed as an excessively thin white woman who takes up health-threatening practices as care of the self, with the aim to be a responsible and moral biocitizen. The ideal starver is then a *Girl Who Has It All*, reinforcing the thin white ideal.

Internalization of the Thin White Ideal

As evidenced in the collected data, white cultural ideals are still held paramount in pro-ED communities, even among racialized group members who do not fit into the normative ‘acceptable body’ (Javier & Belgrave, 2009). BIPOC users consistently describe loathing their racial/ethnic identity and wishing for whiteness, in conjunction with data that suggests that implicit and explicit racial discrimination prevails across pro-ED communities. They describe how external experiences of isolation, discrimination, and pain have pushed them towards unhealthy behaviours that they feel may bring them closer to being valued by others. As a result, racialized community members do indeed internalize the thin white ideal. These findings contradict much of the existing literature purporting that women of colour (particularly Black women) do not internalize the thin ideal to the same extent as white or East Asian women (Awad et al., 2015; Bodell et al., 2018; Powell & Khan, 1995; Rakhovskaya & Warren, 2016; Streigel-Moore et al., 2003; Udo et al., 2016; Udo & Grilo, 2018; White & Warren, 2013), instead suggesting that all marginalized communities internalize this discriminatory ideal at similar levels to white women (Forbes & Frederick, 2018; Gentles-Peart, 2018; Rakhovskaya & Warren, 2016; Robinson-Moore, 2008; Sekayi, 2004; Stojek & Fischer, 2013).

These findings suggest that EDs offer an opportunity for BIPOC to reach towards the thin white ideal, as a means for them to escape the racial discrimination and exclusion they face structurally and interpersonally from broader society as a whole. Thus, the development of EDs and participation in pro-ED online groups is rooted in experiences of rejection and racism in the world at large (Schott, 2016). Adherence to pro-ED ideals, which reflect an extreme form of the thin white ideal, reflects an effort to gain redemptory social capital that may mitigate the effects

of racial discrimination, subjugation, and oppression (Garner & Bibi, 2023; Hunter, 2011). These findings make clear that for racialized pro-ED users, excessive thinness can bring proximity to power, transforming these physical (Eurocentric) traits into social capital (improved and increased social relationships) and symbolic capital (higher status, valorization, and being held in higher esteem) (Bourdieu 1986; Hunter, 2011). The adoption of ED practices and beliefs then has the potential to demark the BIPOC body from its stereotyped and discriminatory stains, allowing racialized users to assert control and discipline over their bodies and gain proximity to the moral biocitizen status (Harjunen, 2021; Schott, 2016). This pattern is evidenced in the collected data as well, as racialized users recognize that being slim provides them with greater social standing and reduces experiences of racial discrimination, which then cyclically reinforces the thin white ideal and their own oppression (Daufin, 2019). However, thinness will never liberate BIPOC from their structural oppression, so marginalized peoples who are unable to truly embody the thin white ideal (potentially due to the confounding influences resulting from other identity intersections) would likely experience worsened self-concept, body dissatisfaction, and mental and physical health outcomes (Daufin, 2019; Pritchard & Cramblitt, 2014; Stice et al., 1995; Tiggemann, 2003).

Black users are found to internalize the thin white ideal, although the data also reinforces the notion that they also internalize and adopt the curvy ideal as a more accessible and representative goal. This is not found to be true for any other racial/ethnic identity, but Black women use the curvy ideal as an opportunity to exercise agency over their bodies and body-related goals. These findings support previous studies wherein Black women value a curvaceous, heavier body ideal with hourglass waists (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Davis et al., 2010; Kelch-Oliver

& Ancis, 2011; Overstreet et al., 2010). While these thinspiration images speak more closely to Black users' bodies, idealizing the curvy figure still has similarly harmful effects on self-image and body dissatisfaction as the thin white ideal (Betz & Ramsey, 2017; Capodilupo, 2014; Gruber, Kalkbrenner, & Hitter, 2022; Overstreet et al., 2010; Yu et al., 2011). However, the present research posits that the curvy ideal does not provide the same opportunity for redemptory capital as thinness, which is why Black women in pro-ED communities still overwhelmingly value and internalize the thin white ideal.

Pro-ED Subject Positions as a Strategy for Distinction

The results of the study demonstrate how elite classes (thin, white women in pro-ED groups) produce and use thinspo and aesthetic subjectivities as a strategy to distinguish themselves from the supposed lower classes of marginalized, BIPOC, and fat individuals (Bourdieu, 1984). Existing racist and discriminatory discourses and structures in broader society that situate racialized people and other oppressed classes as undesirable are then used by pro-ED elites to produce social distinctions away from fat racialized others (Strings, 2019). My findings regarding the stark lack of representation, as well as the implicit and explicit exclusion, of BIPOC in pro-ED online spaces make clear that the allotted idealized subject positions of *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, and *The Little Doll* necessitate light skin and excessive thinness to be considered high class.

Existing hegemonic beauty standards and the thin white ideal inform these hierarchical classes, using tastes, cultural objects, and physical appearances to produce these aesthetic and subjective categories for the ideal pro-ED individual (Bourdieu, 1984). In pro-ED communities,

some of these tastes and cultural objects include: Wonyoungism and radical self-care practices; pop culture icons, celebrities, and media characters to strive towards; and traditionally feminine clothing. Then, the evidence suggests that there is not a single pro-ED habitus, but a multitude of subject positions for pro-ED users to choose from (Bourdieu, 1982). While there is some agency in this way, these categories are structured hierarchically and are constructed through stereotypes, only permitting individuals who uphold exclusionary hegemonic ideals. The collected data from pro-ED communities seems to produce an inherently embodied form of symbolic capital, encompassing figure, race, and gender. These subject positions then naturalize social hierarchies and reinforce, reproduce, and legitimize oppression on and offline.

Health Effects

Overall, the present study is in accordance with findings reported by pro-ED scholars, arguing that pro-ED communities have the potential for users to receive health benefits, specifically because of the opportunities afforded in these groups for community building (Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky & Giles, 2007; Cantó-Milá & Seebach, 2011; Cărtărescu, 2010; Ferreday, 2003). This is especially pertinent for oppressed classes who face ostracization from broader society. BIPOC in online pro-ED spaces frequently build relationships with other racialized individuals who share similar life experiences and struggles.

At the same time, though, the collected data also reinforces the notion put forth by dominant literature that that pro-ED groups overwhelmingly pose serious health risks to users, because they provide an extremified microcosm for social comparison and act to normalize racially discriminatory distinctions (Derenne & Beresin, 2018; Ferguson et al., 2014; Holland &

Tiggemann, 2016; Marks et al., 2020). Because thinspo presents such exaggerated versions of the thin white ideal, the frequency of participation in these social media communities makes social comparison everpresent. I extend the established work on health risks and social comparison by putting forth that the effects of social comparison in pro-ED spaces are worse for BIPOC and other subjugated peoples, given that they are subjected to further racist and discriminatory processes and ideals, with higher stakes involved regarding social ostracization and capital. Then, the present research contends that participation in these pro-ED communities for non-white people worsens self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, and health outcomes far more than has been suggested in existing literature (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008; Jett et al., 2010; Mincey & Hollenbaugh, 2022; Rogers et al., 2016).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

I acknowledge the limitations of the present study. Firstly, all data was collected directly through each social media platform's official API and search tools, which is limited by their respective content moderation policies. Thus, the dataset could only consider those posts that were not suppressed by media algorithms or content censorship processes. Secondly, the present study only examines publicly accessible posts and groups. Therefore, any private pro-ED groups/posts as well as those that have been removed/hidden/deleted by the users themselves or by moderating authorities were not examined, which may have obfuscated users' experiences. Finally, I employed a stratified and purposive sampling technique to extract data from the social media platforms, which could have resulted in the exclusion of certain pro-ED dialogues and narratives, potentially introducing bias into analysis and lacking representativeness.

Future research should produce accounts of recent demographic characteristics including age, sex, race, and geographic location of users in order to more accurately quantify group exclusion. Additionally, engaging with white and BIPOC pro-ED users directly through interview or survey methods would be extremely useful in examining how these subject positions are internalized and upheld in practice, as well as provide insight into the experiences and feelings of discrimination and exclusion that users may face in these online communities.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have contended that pro-ED internet communities have adopted and extended discriminatory, hegemonic standards of health, beauty, and fatness in the production of their own cultural ideals and values, resulting in a uniquely racialized pro-ED subculture. These cultural ideals and prescribed subject positions actively work to exclude, stereotype, and essentialize marginalized communities, especially BIPOC. I argue, then, that these online spaces reinforce and reproduce the domination of racialized bodies, providing serious risks to the physical and mental wellbeing of users. In order to contextualize my content and discourse analyses, I first detailed the academic literature surrounding disordered eating, the thin white ideal, and pro-ED communities. Then, I went on to examine group acceptance in the online pro-ED spaces on Facebook, Tumblr, X, and TikTok, as well as the health risks and benefits posed to racialized community members. I then presented my analysis of the aesthetic subject positions extracted from the data: *The Girl Who Has It All*, *The Beautiful Bag-of-Bones*, *The Phenom*, and *The Little Doll*. The present study made clear that these communities, and the thinspiration within them, reinforce the myth that EDs are a disorder only wealthy white women are afflicted with. It is also evident that racialized group members internalize the thin white ideal and are consequently enmeshed in morally situated health discourses which situate them as non-ideal starvers and biocitizens, being excluded from the pro-ED communities at large.

This study highlights the importance of conceptualizing pro-ED internet communities with a new critical racial lens that has yet to be applied meaningfully to the subject matter. The thin white ideal has been revealed to have much further implications than discussed prior, and the data suggests that Eurocentric ideals trickle down into the available and permitted, racially

constructed subjectivities in these groups. The continued exclusion of subjugated communities in these groups, including BIPOC and gender minorities, speaks to a much larger problem of supremacist and hegemonic ideals reinforcing hierarchical class distinctions that perpetuate a cycle of oppressive violence. This cycle must be disrupted. Health professionals, as well as social media platforms and their governing bodies, must be made aware of these phenomena so that they can better serve subjugated groups and control the spread of dangerous pro-ED content, especially as internet use becomes even further integrated into the lives of young people around the world. At the core, racialized bodies who seek out acceptance, recognition, and liberation from the oppressive structures that render them undesirable through food pathology, in hopes that thinness will free them from their subjugation, are rejected and left in the dust: collateral damage from the war for beauty.

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