MIND OVER MATTER: EXPRESSIONS OF MIND/BODY DUALISM IN THINSPIRATION

Annamarie O'Brien

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Committee:

Dr. Marilyn Motz, Advisor

Dr. Rebecca Kinney

Dr. Jeremy Wallach

ABSTRACT

Dr. Marilyn Motz, Advisor

Thinspiration images, meant to inspire weight-loss, proliferate online through platforms that encourage the circulation of user-generated content. Despite numerous alarmist critiques in mass media about thinspiration and various academic studies investigating 'pro-anorexia' sites, surprisingly little attention has been given to the processes of creation and the symbolic potential of thinspiration. This thesis analyzes the formal hybridity of thinspiration, and its use as an expressive medium. The particularities of thinspiration (including its visual characteristics, creative processes, and exhibition) may be considered carefully constructed instances of self-representation, hinging on the expression of beliefs regarding the mind and body. While these beliefs are deeply entrenched in popular body management discourse, they also tend to rely on traditional dualist ideologies. Rather than simply emphasizing slenderness or reiterating standard assumptions about beauty, thinspiration often evokes pain and sadness, and employs truisms about the transcendence of flesh and rebellion against social constraints. By harnessing individualist discourse and the values of mind/body dualism, thinspiration becomes a space in which people struggling with disordered eating and body image issues may cast themselves as active agents—contrary to the image of eating disorders proffered by popular and medical discourse.

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"Just as the experience of cognitive dissonance is disturbing, so the experience of consonance in layer after layer of experience and context after context is satisfying. I have argued before that there are pressures to create consonance between the perception of social and physiological levels of experience […]. Some of my friends still find it unconvincing. I hope to bring them round by going much further…."

—Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, 74.

INTRODUCTION

"Only in the metaphor of the body can the concept of pure spirit be grasped at all, and is at the same time cancelled. In their reification the spirits are already negated."

—Theodor Adorno[1]

According to many cultural theorists, the dualistic construction of the human mind and body, explicated by René Descartes with Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian roots,[2] has shaped dominant discourses about health and morality in the United States and Western Europe. In *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism,* Elizabeth Grosz suggests that current understandings of the body are a legacy of mind/body dualism, or the assumption that "there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere."[3] The dualistic model of mind and body often figures the mind as an immaterial entity distinct from, and in charge of, the body. Critics of this conception of mind and body find that the duality creates a binary in which the body is denigrated because of its capacity for material degradation, weakness and temptation.

Deconstruction of the discourse of mind/body dualism has been central in various critiques of contemporary body management practices, and this discourse has even been suggested to be a cause of disordered eating. The body, as text upon which culture is inscribed, may be shaped in both use and form by this dominant framework. Contemporary conceptions of health and body-shape are a legacy of this construction—success (and by extension, happiness) is reserved for people who exhibit discipline, self-abnegation, and strength of will. As evinced in

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[1] Theodor Adorno, *The Stars Down to Earth* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 177.

[2] The term 'Greco-Christian dualism' is used by Susan Bordo to describe the conglomeration of Greco-Roman philosophy and Judeo-Christian traditions that form modern mind/body dualism in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[3] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 6.

both popular weight-loss terminology and the rise of eating disorders, these admirable traits have been symbolically linked with the slender body.[4] Significantly, the assumption that mind/body dualism shapes everyday understandings of the body and encourages unhealthy body management strategies is supported by the dualistic tropes of mind and body employed in online spaces that allow for easy production and circulation of images. "Thinspiration"— primarily consisting of images of women with thin bodies, often accompanied by text, meant to inspire extreme weight-loss—exemplifies the vernacular construction of mind/body dualism.

While there have been various analyses of cultural attitudes regarding mind/body dualism and the female body and their effect on eating disorders, these analyses have often relied on either mass-mediated images or individual case-studies.[5] It is also important to turn critical attention to the discourses produced by those who seem to be intimately affected by this ideology—those circulating and producing thinspiration promoting unhealthy body management techniques. Chapter I of this thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the theoretical and critical interpretations of the body in contemporary society, as well as mind/body dualism, in relation specifically to thinspiration. User-identified 'pro-eating disorder' images or online sites offer an additional means for investigating cultural conceptions regarding the body in contemporary society. People participating in the circulation of thinspiration text and images are not merely passive consumers of this ideology, but are actively involved in shaping both the discourse and materiality of the body. By highlighting the role that users have in producing digital artifacts, it is possible to identify the way in which thinspiration acts as a significant expression of philosophical and political discourses regarding the body.

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[4] See Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993).
[5] The former can often be seen in Susan Bordo's work while the latter is represented in Mary E. Olson's "Listening to the Voices of Anorexia: The Researcher as an "Outsider Witness."

In this analysis of thinspiration imagery on its own terms, as the vernacular expressions of the community and instances of self-presentation, I explore some of these central questions: What underlying messages and cultural myths are being transmitted through thinspiration? How does thinspiration reflect or engage with dominant views of the body and mind? How are the messages encoded in both text and image, and how are they read by users? What role does the internet, as an important space for self-expression, play in all of this? By drawing upon the vast amount of images available publically online, I have analyzed some of the ways in which body management and disordered eating is expressed, consumed, and reproduced through user-generated thinspiration.

The observations of this thesis are based on the textual and visual analysis of thinspiration imagery shared online, and the means of its circulation and production (i.e. re-blogging, collecting, and alterations of thinspiration in hosting communities and personal sites). It is ultimately my contention that the examination of the visual motifs and tropes used in thinspiration can reveal underlying beliefs and aid in the understanding of disordered eating as a rearticulation of cultural values. My interpretations assume a certain amount of agency on the part of the individual users of thinspiration, while acknowledging the very grave nature of eating disorders. The discussion of visual and textual content through the lens of cultural and philosophical discourses about subjecthood and the body should not minimize the effects of disordered eating, or its psychological and medical dimensions. Throughout my analysis I have avoided conclusions that either assume or ignore the individual user's psychological state or intentions. Instead, I rely on the examination of thinspiration in order to inspect not the psychological or physical health of an individual, but the narratives he or she produces online.[6]

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[6] Although all of the images I analyze are available to the public, I feel it is still important to treat the user's personal information sensitively. Rather than referring to the name or personal details of the user, I identify sources by the

The content of thinspiration is often deeply distressing and contains images that illustrate, and arguably encourage, eating disorders and self-injury. Though some readers may be more sensitive to this content than others, the primary material that this thesis analyzes is undoubtedly emotionally exhausting. During the project, I considered the best way to present my work. Some discussions of thinspiration have argued against exposing readers to thinspiration images and contributing to their circulation, but I think that it is important to confront these images (which are often measured portrayals of pain and suffering), rather than simply averting our eyes.

In *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence*, Susie Linfield argues that photographs depicting pain and cruelty demand deep readings and engagement:

> In approaching photographs such as these, the point is not to formally disassemble them as a way of gaining mastery; nor to reject them as feeble, partial truths; nor, certainly, to deny the sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes unfamiliar reactions they elicit. Instead, we can use the photographs' ambiguities as a starting point of discovery [...] Instead of approaching these images as static objects that we either naively accept or scornfully reject, we might see them as part of a process—the beginning of a dialogue, the start of an investigation—into which we thoughtfully, consciously enter.[7]

Linfield's acknowledgement of the complicated interaction between viewer and image sets the stage for the analysis of thinspiration that is ultimately the core of this thesis. While thinspiration is often deeply affecting and has complex real-world implications, this does not mean that it is adequate to simply reject their expression. It is important to go beyond the initial emotional impact of the images, though these are also ripe for examination, in order to engage with the latent implications and underlying messages embedded in them.

Site of Analysis

Tumblr domain name or title and rely on screenshots, editing out personal information and including the hyperlink location with the image. This is meant to provide consistency in the citation of content and accurate contextual information, but also allow a measure of privacy for the users.

[7] Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010) 29-30.

Internet phenomena and new media in general have been approached from many different methodological perspectives, ranging from technical discussions about programming and interface to rhetorical analysis of online communication and cinematographic considerations of the screen and spectatorship.[8] With regards to clearly demarcated pictorial fields online, such as the thinspiration image, visual analysis is a useful tool for observation and discussion. While a quantitative examination of the volume of posts and pages dedicated to thinspiration is likely to yield important insights into the prevalence and use of this type of body management, this analysis focuses on qualitative characteristics. By examining the qualitative aspects of images, the cultural ideologies and conceptual frameworks expressed and coded in thinspiration can be teased out.

Despite numerous alarmist critiques in mass media and academic studies attempting to quantify its harmfulness, surprisingly little attention has been given to the processes of creation and the symbolic potential of thinspiration.[9] This is not unusual; as visual studies scholar Lisa Nakamura observes in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, "visual style and taste are rarely discussed in relation to popular (as opposed to artistic or countercultural) digital forms."[10] The messages communicated through thinspiration images are not identical to the interactions that take place on text-based forums like pro-anorexia sites. The more clearly social and performative aspects of interaction in forums or communities can certainly elucidate some of the underlying attitudes about bodies, gender, and disordered eating. However, the production of visual objects involves a different process and signification system—visual conventions, such as

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[8] A survey and critique of the development of internet culture studies is provided in the introduction of Lisa Nakamura's *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
[9] For an effective deconstruction of the alarmist critiques see Andrea Alden Lewis, "Redefining 'Ana': The Discourse of Resistance on a Pro-Ana Website," *Girls, Cultural Productions, and Resistance*, eds. Michelle S. Bae, Olga Ivashkevich (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).
[10] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 154.

the use of decorative motifs or compositional attributes, can convey important meaning without words. Thinspiration images, like any form of expression, may also be considered the potential objects of identity formation.

Analysis of images and the sites on which the images are hosted will be situated in relation to critiques of contemporary mind/body dualism and the various approaches to eating disorders (outlined in Chapter I), as well as discourse about self-representation online (discussed in Chapter III). Speculation into the "meaning" of these images as instances of social and self-expression is enabled through the close inspection of their content at a visual and textual level. While thinspiration online is very ephemeral in its easy removal by users or sites—it is also constantly shifting in both in its language and aesthetic trends. Visual and textual analysis, as opposed to ethnographic or interview based methods, are important because they can reveal how the various understandings of the body are played out on a symbolic or linguistic level. This approach is necessary to conceptualize the cultural implications of thinspiration imagery in its multi-modal existence and symbolic functions.

Thinspiraton on Tumblr

A broad range of internet sites host thinspiration and pro-eating disorder material; however, quasi-social hosting sites seem to be more popular than others as they provide individual users with personal spaces for the sharing of content. For the purposes of this investigation of the expressive practices of users through the production and curation of thinspiration imagery, pages and accounts hosted by Tumblr will be the primary sites of analysis. Though other sites used for content aggregation and blogging feature similar material, Tumblr stands out among the aforementioned internet repositories of thinspiration material because of its popularity, demographics, and interface.

Tumblr has generated a huge volume of posts and accounts since its inception in February 2007.[11] According to its "About" page, as of November 19, 2012, Tumblr hosted a total of 81.4 million blogs, 36.1 billion posts, and various web analytics sites show that its global web traffic had continually grown up to that point.[12] In the years following its inception, Tumblr became a major locus of teenage expression online. Demographic analyses show that, as of December 2012, the site was especially popular with young women. According to one study generated by Google Insights, in 2012 women made up approximately 60% of Tumblr's overall audience.[13] Women between the ages of 0 and 24 constituted 24% of the Tumblr audience, while only representing 15% of general internet traffic, while men between the ages of 0 and 24 constituted 17% of the Tumblr audience, and 15% of general internet traffic.[14]

The high traffic of young women on Tumblr provides additional impetus for its inclusion in the discussion of thinspiration and pro-eating disorder content as research continues to suggest that the onset of anorexia is almost exclusively before the age of 20 for both men and women, and incidence rates of anorexia and bulimia continue to be 3 times higher for women than men.[15] Additionally, the majority of the users hosting thinspirational material on Tumblr who volunteer gender information on their accounts are women or girls. Though it may be impossible to definitively identify the reasons for this increased appeal of Tumblr to teenaged girls, it is clear that the site is in an important position for the examination of eating disorders partly because of its demographics.

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[11] For information regarding Tumblr's inception see http://www.tumblr.com/about.

[12] Google Analytics: http://www.google.com/trends/explore#q=tumblr, Alexa Traffic Stats: http://www.alexa.com/siteinfor/tumblr.com, Quantcast Summary: http://quantcast.com/tumblr.com, Compete Site Analytics: http://siteanalytics.compete.com/tumblr.com

[13] http://www.ignitesocialmedia.com/social-media-stats/2012-social-network-analysis-report/#Tumblr

[14] http://www.quantcast.com/tumblr.com#!demo&anchor=panel-GENDER (accessed December 3, 2012).

[15] For a detailed analysis of the population rates of eating disorders, see "The Prevalence and Correlates of Eating Disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication" in Biol Psychiatry, 2007 February 1; 61(3): 348–358. (available at http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1892232/).

Tumblr Transience and Identity Formation

There are several considerations in the use of Tumblr as a data source including its ephemerality, censorship, and authenticity. New media, especially digitally transmitted internet based content, is marked by these characteristics. In his landmark book, *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich identifies variability as one of the essential characteristics of new media. Manovich explains that online content is not something "fixed once and for all, but can exist in different, potentially infinite, versions."[16] While the "infinite" nature of digital content is essentially a truism at this point, it is important to consider—especially in the discussion of images freely circulating online. A correlate of this instability of internet-based digital content is its infinite reproducibility, which means that there is rarely one identifiable source. Often it is difficult to prove authorship or ownership of images, and issues of authenticity arise. Some have also pointed out that the ephemerality of representation tactics online decrease their effectiveness in political arenas and eliminate important contextual information.[17] However, according to Manovich, this is simply an effect of the medium, and though it certainly shapes and limits certain experiences online, it should not negate the importance of the content and practices. In an appraisal of the mediascape of the 21st century, "Spreadsheets, Sitemaps, and Search Engines," Sean Cubitt finds that the instability of new media is not something to be mourned at all. Cubitt asserts that this "ephemerality need no longer be considered as a loss, but as becoming."[18] Tumblr and similar sites exemplify this ephemerality in their user-produced and user-aggregated thinspiration content. Thinspiration is especially transient on Tumblr as it has taken measures to

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[16] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001) 56.

[17] It is interesting to note that analog photography has also been discussed in terms of its relation to ephemerality and lack of context. See Part One of Susie Linfield's *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

[18] Sean Cubitt, "Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines", in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 7.

patrol self-harm and pro-eating disorder content,[19] and Tumblr users may at any point edit and delete posts, or disable their accounts.

Additionally, ephemerality must be considered with respect to the constant flux in the popularity and use of various domains online. Although the Pew Internet Project observed that as of August 2012 approximately 11% of young adults use Tumblr, it is likely that these numbers will change and the popularity of Tumblr as a whole might subside in a matter of months or years.[20] However, in this ephemerality, there is vitality. The eventual dissolution of the cultural force that Tumblr and similar sites represent does not diminish its signifying potential. It is important to analyze this site and the content it supports as a historically and socially situated nexus of vernacular expression. In fact, Tumblr's very ephemerality and faddishness makes it especially suited for the reflection of contemporary informally shared cultural beliefs and modes of expressions that are not institutionalized.

Unlike more stable and institutionalized sites that encourage the linking of one's offline identity with one's online account, Tumblr use is potentially anonymous and constantly evolving. In her examination of the expressive potential of less "sophisticated" forms of new media, such as forums and chat icons, Lisa Nakamura notes that there are often fewer infrastructural requirements governing users' production and access in these sites.[21] It is in these unregulated scenarios that people who are often absent in public discourse may express themselves, particularly in ways that may be shunned by dominant culture. In the analysis of

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[19] In February 2012, Tumblr released a statement announcing a new policy that would prohibit blogs that "actively promote self-harm," however this has been controversial and does not totally shut down the exchange. (http://staff.tumblr.com/post/18132624829/self-harm-blogs).

[20] Lee Rainie, Joanna Brenner, Kristen Purcell, Photos and Videos as Social Currency Online, Pew Internet & American Life Project, September 13, 2012, http://pewinternet.org/~/media//Files/Reports/2012/PIP_OnlineLifeinPictures_PDF.pdf, December 2, 2012, 3.

[21] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 164.

informal virtual spaces including pregnancy forums and private internet conversations, Nakamura finds that young women engage in significant and complex forms of "digital subject formation" through the use of buddy icons and avatars, and prove to be avid producers of visual content online.[22] Nakamura's conclusion that deregulated virtual spaces provide greater potential for representation of alternative identities is clearly substantiated through the proliferation of user-produced pro-eating disorder imagery on Tumblr (and its relative absence on more institutional sites like Facebook). The tools provided by Tumblr are consistently employed by users to create themselves as subjects of interaction, demonstrating the fundamental desire to re-form images of the self and present alternative narratives.[23]

Terms

In this thesis, the terms used to refer to the broad spectrum of eating disorders and associated behaviors will necessarily vary depending upon the context. There is a range of tactics used in scholarship to refer to the pathologized behavior and experiences regarding eating and body management. The employment of terms can reflect disciplinary orientation, intended audience, and value judgments. Some authors choose to include scare quotes to denote critical distance from common or institutional usage of terms like "eating disorders," while others employ slashes to elucidate the construction of them (as in "dis/order"). In the investigation of the culture of thinspiration, I have found that the term "disordered eating" is the most apt description in reference to the spectrum of disease and behavior together, and avoids more specific assumptions about the health or mental state of the user.

It is also vital for this examination of expression online to convey the terminology used in the production and consumption of pro-eating disorder content online. For the purposes of this

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[22] Ibid., 48.
[23] Ibid., 38.

discussion, both the colloquial understandings and usages of terms in thinspiration and their relationship to official medical and psychological terminology are employed as they relate to their particular contexts. The language of psychological diagnoses regarding disordered eating is often echoed in the tags for thinspiration material. Among these tags, there are variations on the terms "eating disorder" (pro-ed, ed, etc.), "anorexia" (pro-anorexia, ana, pro-ana, etc.), "bulimia" (pro-bulimia, mia, pro-mia, etc.), and perhaps most interestingly, "eating disorder not otherwise specified" (ednos, ed-nos, pro-ednos). When possible I will note the terminology used in the material to which I am referring before applying extra-textual labels.

Outline

In the analysis of thinspiration, I have brought together three divergent topics: critiques of the medicalization of eating disorders, discourses about contemporary mind/body dualism, and analyses of internet visual cultures. The first chapter, "Construction and Deconstruction of Mind and Body in the Study of Eating Disorders," uses thinspiration as a point of departure to focus on the discursive construction of eating disorders and its link to mind/body dualism. The second chapter, *"*Reading the Body: Visual and Textual Analysis of Thinspiration," analyzes the visual and textual means through which disordered eating and mind/body dualism are expressed in thinspiration. The third chapter, "Self-Fulfillment through Self-Destruction," considers the expression of mind/body dualism and pro-eating disorder sentiment in thinspiration as a means of self-construction. Each of these chapters and approaches is important in understanding thinspiration, as well as disordered eating, and helps to give voice to the complex significations of its imagery.

CHAPTER I. CONSTRUCTION AND DECONSTRUCTION OF MIND AND BODY IN THE
STUDY OF EATING DISORDERS

Thinspiration, as a cultural expression, is a product of multiple divergent discourses. Medical understandings of eating disorders have been reconsidered in the late 20th century in order to uncover social and cultural structures that encourage their emergence. Feminist scholars have identified mind/body dualism as a central theme in contemporary views of the body, especially in relation to eating disorders. Thinspiration offers an important means for the examination of this supposition. After a brief elaboration of the characteristics of mind/body dualism and their relation to body management and scholarship regarding eating disorders, I turn attention to how new media and the internet fit into this framework. Finally, I consider some of the limits in these discussions and how the analysis of thinspiration can help remedy problematic absences in scholarship.

History of the Medicalization of Eating Disorders

Disordered eating, particularly the restrictive type associated with anorexia nervosa, has been analyzed from a medical perspective since the latter part of the 17th century with Richard Morton's account of a case of "nervous consumption."[1] However, it was not until the latter part of the 19th century that "anorexia nervosa" became a distinct object of empirical medical discourse.[2] Although biomedical examinations have created important knowledges about treatment and the physicality of eating disorders, they have also created a specific mythology. In this mythology, the various symptoms of disordered eating become evidence of an individual

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[1] Prior to this, accounts of self-starvation were regarded in a much different light, as fasts were common in religious ascetic practices. See Helen Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 51.

[2] Gail Corrington "Anorexia, Asceticism, and Autonomy: Self-Control as Liberation and Transcendence," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (1986) 53.

dysfunction that is part of a "natural" disease category.[3] This predominant conception of

disordered eating as a distinct clinical entity does not account for the forces outside of the body

that construct it, or for the variety of experiences that it includes (and excludes).

Medical and psychological discourses shape the understanding of eating disorders as an

individual pathology and pre-determined illness but gloss over its construction as a classification

dependent on the social and cultural environment. Helen Malson describes the way in which

medical and psychological discourses "systematically form their objects" of analysis in *The Thin*

Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa. Malson

writes that in this framework "'Anorexia nervosa' thus comes to be seen as a distinct entity

which *causes* many of the problems experienced […] Moreover, as power/knowledges, these

different institutional perspectives on anorexia also regulate these experiences."[4] By examining

thinspiration, I hope to move away from diagnostic dichotomies and open up discussion about

expressions of embodiment associated with unhealthy body management and disordered eating,

rather than continuing to objectify the disordered individual.

Social and Cultural Contextualization of Eating Disorders and the Body

According to some critics, eating disorders are (at least initially) one of many

contemporary rituals, like body modifications and cosmetic procedures that use the body as a

symbol.[5] From this perspective it follows that the visual and textual products of thinspiration that

accompany disordered eating should also be analyzed as symbolic expressions. Although it was

limited and often fraught with dramatic shortcomings in terms of socio-cultural

contextualization, Freudian psychoanalysis was the first discipline to carefully explore the

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[3] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa,* 188.
[4] Ibid., 99.
[5] Liz Eckerman, "Theorising Self-Starvation: Beyond Risk, Governmentality and the Normalizing Gaze" In *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, eds. Helen Malson and Maree Burns (New York: Routledge, 2009) 18.

symbolic potential of eating disorders, rather than focusing on the biophysical symptoms.[6] It is

only since the late 1970s that serious critical attention has been turned to the role that cultural

and societal influences play in disordered eating and unhealthy body management practices.[7]

Prior to these more recent psychological and sociological analyses of disordered eating, however,

the concept of the body has long been analyzed in philosophical, religious, political and popular

discourse.

A wide range of scholars, including Plato, Aristotle, St. Augustine, Thomas Hobbes, Luce

Irigaray, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, and Judith Butler, have been important in

conceptualizing and shaping knowledge of the body. Mary Douglas's analysis of the body as a

symbolic medium "on which the [culture's] central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical

commitments are inscribed and thus reinforced" is considered a central contribution to the field

of anthropology.[8] For Douglas, there are no "natural" symbols or views of matter: they are all

culturally and historically specific. In *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*, Douglas

asserts, "Every culture naturalises a certain view of the human body to make it carry social

meanings…Body symbolism is always in service to social intentions, and the body cannot be

endowed with universal meanings."[9] Thus, as a site of multiple meanings that reflect societal

rules and beliefs, the body and its pathologies cannot be understood outside of social and

historical context.

Many contemporary post-structuralist and feminist discourses about the body elaborate

on Douglas's suggestion by postulating that the physical matter of the body is itself a product of

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[6] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 46.

[7] Helen Malson and Maree Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, eds. Helen Malson and Maree Burns (New York: Routledge, 2009) 1.; Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 47.

[8] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 165.

[9] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 1.

convention and ideology. As Elizabeth Grosz explains in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, bodies are "not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself."[10] The body that is represented in and by the genre of images known as "thinspiration" is also produced through culture, and the symbols that are engaged in its imagery offer an important tool for analysis. The material forms of culture (and the immaterial notions they build upon) create conceptions of what is healthy and normal for the body. Thinspiration has various ideological and symbolic markers that may be discerned, and through these discourses about the symbolic potential and socio-cultural positioning of the body, the examination of these images carries significant political stakes.[11]

Feminist Approaches to Eating Disorders

In "Re-Theorising the Slash of Dis/order," Helen Malson and Maree Burns outline the birth and development of critical feminist discourse regarding eating disorders. According to Malson and Burns, by the 1970s, important feminist thinkers such as Susie Orbach, Kim Chernin, and Marilyn Lawrence began explicating the important connection between body weight and gender.[12] These scholars, according to Malson and Burns, found that "distressed experiences and damaging body management practices of girls and women (and much less often boys and men) can only be adequately understood within the context of the oppressive gender ideologies and inequalities in gender power-relations operating in (western/ised) patriarchal culture."[13] The conceptualization of disordered eating as a culturally situated problem created the

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[10] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) X.
[11] Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 17.
[12] Malson and Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 1.
[13] Ibid., 1.

foundation for a great deal of research into the influence of popular culture on hegemonic gender

roles, and by extension, on body image and eating disorders. This paradigm, sometimes

described in popular discourse as the "cult of thinness," is often grounded in the analysis of

cultural constructions. Conclusions from this line of inquiry found that Western conceptions of

femininity are dependent largely on physical appearance and the subordination of women's

needs.[14] However, in *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social

Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, Helen Malson describes the shortfalls of some socially or

culturally based examinations of eating disorders. Malson explains:

> Many socio-cultural explanations of anorexia are, however, limited to a documentation of
> the increased emphasis on a thin body and the increased prevalence of dieting in
> contemporary society…They tend to focus on thinness and dieting to the exclusion of
> other aspects of anorexia and female subjectivity, and without exploring the complex
> cultural and political significance of female slenderness.[15]

Following this limited solidification of the study of eating disorders as a structural critique of

patriarchal Western culture, Malson and Burns identify an emergence in the late 1990s of critical

feminist approaches influenced by postmodern and post-structuralist theory. Malson and Burns

see these as important in a shifting approach to the study of eating disorders as "discursively

constituted and regulated categories of subjectivity, experience and body-management

practices," which are "fictioned into being within and by a plethora of culturally constituted

discourses, values, 'ideals' and concerns."[16] Rather than viewing eating disorders as discrete

reactions to oppressive patriarchal culture as some earlier scholars might have, these critical

feminist perspectives explicitly avoid pathologizing the individual. Instead, they assume that the

"individual disorder" is "a part and parcel of the (culturally normative) order of things."[17] The

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[14] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 47.
[15] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa,* 93.
[16] Malson and Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 2.
[17] Ibid., 2.

history of feminist work in the study of eating disorders is a vital part of socially and culturally based examinations of the body, and provides an important counter-narrative to medicalized understandings of anorexia and bulimia as individual disorders. Thinspiration also challenges views that disordered eating is an individual pathology, as it is circulated in a wide range of contexts and represents various perspectives.

Constructions of Self through Mind/Body Dualism

The evolution of the socio-cultural approaches to the study of eating disorders turned scholarly attention to the role of constructions of mind and body in relation to the self. One of the central themes in discourses about the body since the beginnings of Greco-Christian philosophy is that of mind/body dualism. Though dominant in contemporary Western thought, it is not universal or even dominant in human conceptualization of mind and body.[18] Elizabeth Grosz succinctly describes dualism as "the assumption that there are two distinct, mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive substances, mind and body, each of which inhabits its own self-contained sphere."[19] This working definition of dualism will be used to examine recurrent themes in thinspiration regarding the mind and body.

René Descartes is often credited with the theorization of dualism. Descartes' famous observation "I think, therefore I am" articulates a conceptual rift between inner subjectivity and external circumstances. Jessica Johnston suggests in *The American Body in Context* that, in Descartes' observation, "to think" "grants a privileged status to the observing reflexive mind over the more instrumental body. The ability to think and be reflexive elevates the status of the

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[18] Alternatives include, according to Jessica Johnston, the holistic systems that emphasize balance or the complementary system relationship of the 'whole' to its 'parts' Jessica Johnston, *The American Body in Context: An Anthology* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001) 8.

[19] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 6.

mind to the definition of the person."[20] The construction of mind and body as separate entities has been discussed in various contexts and is in no way exclusive to weight management tactics or pro-disordered eating content. In fact, various scholars have revealed its presence in everything from prescribed gender roles in television to modernist art.[21] In her book *Unbearable Weight*, Susan Bordo finds that mind/body dualism is common in contemporary understandings about body management and is articulated in weight-loss and exercise programs, as well as plastic surgery.[22] It does not seem incidental that these contemporary iterations of mind/body dualism are repeatedly expressed in varied and complex ways through thinspiration.

Critiques of Mind/Body Dualism

While the consideration of mind and body as two separate but linked entities has been dominant in western culture since the Enlightenment, there have been a host of critiques launched against this assumption. The strict separation between the two spheres in itself is potentially problematic. Judith Butler asserts that bodies cannot be understood simply as objects of thought; they indicate a world beyond themselves, beyond boundaries, and thus cannot be disciplined.[23] Additionally, Jessica Johnston explains that some have found the mind/body split insufficient when addressing the body in "its continual process of transformation, suggesting the body is a self-constituting organism. The body is not a mere static machine, but is, from conception through continual decomposition after death, in a perpetual exchange with the

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[20] Johnston, *The American Body in Context: An Anthology,* 1.

[21] See Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*; Grimshaw, *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*; Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body;* Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism;* Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy*; Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture.*

[22] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body.*

[23] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*(New York: Routledge, 2011; 1993) VII.

environment."[24] The body, in this sense, is processual and fluid and is not a closed system as mechanistic models of the body suggest.

Another central problem in the view of many critics is that the binary of mind and body privileges the mind at the expense of the body. Elizabeth Grosz explains how this dualism has constructed the body as the "other" of the mind:

> Dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart. The subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term, its fall from grace; the primary term defines itself by expelling its other and in this process establishes its own boundaries and borders to create an identity for itself. Body is thus what is not mind... It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its 'integrity.' It is implicitly unruly, disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and other privileged terms within philosophical thought.[25]

This dualism of the mind and body has been paired with a host of other binary oppositions that, according to Grosz, can operate interchangeably at times. For instance, the distinctions between sets like reason and passion, inside and outside, depth and surface, reality and appearance, form and matter, etc. are often fitted to the mind/body dichotomy (for an illustration of this dichotomy as established by Elizabeth Grosz, see Figure 1.1).[26]

Furthermore, the hierarchy of mind over body has been transferred into the valuation of academic disciplines. In her discussion of Irigaray's deconstruction of rationalism, Margaret Whitford parses this connection, identifying it as the (male) imaginary of "Western rationality." This figuration of rationality is heavily invested in: "the principle of identity (also expressed in terms of quantity or ownership); the principle of non-contradiction (in which ambiguity,

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[24] Johnston, *The American Body in Context: An Anthology,* 4.
[25] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 3.
[26] Ibid., 3.

ambivalence or multivalence have been reduced to a minimum); and binarism."[27] According to

Elizabeth Grosz and Genevieve Lloyd in *The Man of Reason*, though Plato and other Greek

philosophers had prefigured mind/body dualism, René Descartes can be credited with the

crystallization of the separation between mind and body.[28] The specific attributes of the

"Cartesian split" between mind and body distinguish the body, considered to be at once

mechanical and an extension of nature, from the rational and truly human mind. This particular

distinction is reflected in the subsequent shift in the valuation of knowledge. Grosz elaborates:

"Descartes, in short, succeeded in linking the mind/body opposition to the foundations of

knowledge itself, a link which places the mind in hierarchical superiority over and above nature,

including the nature of the body."[29] Interestingly, the same mechanistic models used to describe

the body in dualistic terms in philosophical and psychological discourse (most notably through

metaphors that figure the body as a machine, vessel, or animal) are frequently employed in

thinspiration (see Figure 1.2).

Mind	Body
Reason	Passion
Sensibility	Sense
Inside	Outside
Self	Other
Depth	Surface
Reality	Appearance
Vitalism	Mechanism
Transcendence	Immanence
Temporality	Spatiality
Psychology	Physiology
Form	Matter

Figure 1.1 Table depicting Elizabeth Grosz' summary of the dichotomization of mind and body
(based on Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 3).

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[27] Margaret Whitford, "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality," *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*, eds.
Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988) 112.

[28] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 6. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason.*

[29] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 6.

Figure 1.2: Example of how mechanistic models of the body are reflected in thinspiration ("Eat for energy, not for comfort," http://skinny-lust.tumblr.com, 3/31/13)

Mind/Body Dualism as Feminist Lens for Examination of Eating Disorders

In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler notes that feminist philosophers in particular have interest in deconstructing mind/body dualism. Butler explains that feminist philosophers "traditionally sought to show how the body is figured as feminine, or how women have been associated with materiality (whether inert—always already dead—or fecund—ever-living and procreative) where men have been associated with rational mastery."[30] Additionally, Butler establishes that women and animals have traditionally been "the very figures for unmasterable passion," citing Plato's assertion that "if the appetites, those tokens of the soul's materiality, are not successfully mastered, a soul, understood as a man's soul, risks coming back as a woman,

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[30] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* 37.

and then a beast."[31] In this cosmogony, Butler sees that "woman represents a descent into materiality."[32] The critique of mind/body dualism is of particular import to feminist discourse as it, according to Elizabeth Grosz, dismantles "the social devaluing of the body that goes hand in hand with the oppression of women."[33] In *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, Genevieve Lloyd emphasizes that while Descartes by no means invented the mind/body binary, he is important to study in a feminist context because "his influential dualism has interacted with and reinforced the effects of the symbolic opposition between male and female."[34]

While the human body (regardless of gender) is devalued in Cartesian dualism, Susan Bordo contends that the contemporary female body carries further potential for negative cultural signification because of the naturalization of gender binaries and the association of femininity with the body. Long-standing views of women as inherently nurturing instruct women to dedicate their bodies to the service of others. As a consequence, female hunger (for food, public power, and sexual gratification) must be repressed.[35] According to Bordo, this suppression of hunger lends itself easily to restrictive eating (like anorexia) by embedding the association of consumption with shame and fear. Additionally, the dominant view of women as objects of lust in patriarchal society leads them to be more stringently held to bodily ideals and norms. There is a plethora of thinspiration images that reinforce Bordo's connection between self-abnegation and thinness as a marker of femininity. In thinspiration, the thin woman is frail, feminine, desirable, and easily dominated. Further, there are images that connect hunger and sexual appetite, as they figure thinness as restraint from lewd behavior (see Figure 1.3).

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[31] Ibid., 37.
[32] Ibid., 43.
[33] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 10.
[34] Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy,* XVI.
[35] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 171.

Figure 1.3: Image depicting the connection of hunger and sexuality in thinspiration ("Good girls don't swallow," http://imaginethin.tumblr.com/archives, 12/7/11).

Feminist disavowals of the objectivist, rationalist view of the body proffered by mind/body dualism were necessary to support the study of disordered eating in a cultural context. Critical feminist approaches to eating disorders are especially invested in this critique as it helps to problematize "the commonplace objectivist dichotomisation of (cultural) order and (individualised) disorder" and supports the investigation of the political implications of supposedly private affairs.[36] Objectivist conceptions of illness as individual and causal reflect Margaret Whitford's aforementioned description of Western rationality as obsessed with the discreteness of individuality and non-contradiction.[37] According to Elizabeth Grosz, in rationalist views of the body the "unbridgeable gulf between mind and matter" is frequently resolved through reductionism. To her mind, reductionism either attempts to explain the body in terms of

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[36] Malson and Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 2.
[37] Whitford, "Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality," *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*, 112.

the mind (as in rationalism and idealism), or the mind in terms of the body (in empiricism and materialism).[38] The former might be seen in the treatment of disordered eating as an individual mental illness, while the latter might be realized in the attempts to isolate the various genetic traits and biological processes that supposedly cause eating disorders. Neither rationalism nor empiricism is interested in muddying conclusions with cultural norms that do not conform to reductive formulae of cause and effect.

While various explorations of mind/body dualism's influence on eating disorders have been accomplished, there is clearly work to be done in a culture that continuously replicates this model in everything from mass-media advertisements and government sponsored health awareness campaigns[39] to personal expression in online forums. Some of the fundamental questions that dualism must grapple with in order to have internal logical consistency involve fundamental questions about the evident connections between the mind and body. Elizabeth Grosz poses questions which point out the undeniable confluences of mind and body: "How can something that inhabits space affect or be affected by something nonspatial?" or its converse, "How can the body inform the mind of its needs and wishes?"[40] While neurology and psychology deal with these connections to a certain extent, thinspiration is also invested in these questions. By drawing upon these established critiques of dualistic mind/body constructions, I hope to distill the means through which thinspiration imagery symbolically explores this disconnect.

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[38] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 7.
[39] Lee Monaghan, "Extending the Obesity Debate, Repudiating Misrecognition: Politicising Fatness and Health (Practice)," *Social Theory & Health* 11 (2013) 81–105.
[40] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 6-7.

Body Management as Performance of Self in Late-Capitalist Society

Aside from critical feminist scholarship regarding gendered assumptions about the body and disordered eating, analyses of mind/body dualism within the context of late-capitalism and the political economy may also provide a framework for the examination of thinspiration. While Susan Bordo, in *Unbearable Weight*, has connected these two realms by examining the advertisement of the thin bourgeois body as a desirable symbol, many others expanded on the economic underpinnings of this hypothesis. Mike Featherstone's examination of historical and contemporary effects that consumerist ideals have on the body notes that in the 20th century the "reward for ascetic body work ceases to be spiritual salvation or even improved health, but becomes an enhanced appearance and more marketable self… Today, it can be ventured, diet and body maintenance are increasingly regarded as vehicles to release the temptations of flesh."[41] This paradigm, according to Featherstone, is dependent on discursive practices—like the proliferation of terms like "body maintenance" or the idea that exercise is important because it allows one to control one's body. These discourses that proffer the "illusion of technical mastery and even transcendence over the lifespan" are supported by the "calculated hedonism" essential for the functioning of consumer culture."[42]

Another account that addresses the connection between Cartesian dualism and political economy, technology, and the transformation of the body is David Serlin's, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America,* which explores the concept of American identity through the lens of medical technologies. Serlin finds that "the often diametrically opposed experiences of private and public that many Americans have attempted to reconcile through law or medical procedures may well be perceived of as an updated version of the attempt to reconcile

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[41] Mike Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," *The American Body in Context: An Anthology*, 88.
[42] Featherstone, "The Body in Consumer Culture," *The American Body in Context: An Anthology*, 92.

the Cartesian split between mind and body."[43] According to Serlin, technological innovations

after World War II in medical procedures permitted greater alteration of the "natural" body,

allowing people to "thwart social expectations and take control over what was assumed to be

anatomical destiny."[44] In effect, this technologically-enabled possibility of making one's body

"commensurate with what one believed to be one's true self became an established pillar of

American identity."[45] However, scientific advances allowing the alteration of one's body in order

to express interiority may have amplified assumptions that the body *should* be under our control.

Nikolas Rose has identified a similar transformation of understandings of the body in

"Neurochemical Selves," which explores the rise of contemporary understandings of self and

mental processes in terms of neurochemical processes. Rose writes:

> The sense of ourselves as "psychological" individuals that developed across the twentieth century—beings inhabited by a deep internal space shaped by biography and experience, the source of our individuality and the locus of our discontents—is being supplemented or displaced by what I have termed "somatic individuality." By somatic individuality, I mean the tendency to define key aspects of one's individuality in bodily terms… and to understand that body in the language of contemporary biomedicine. To be a "somatic" individual, in this sense, is to code one's hopes and fears in terms of this biomedical body, and to try to reform, cure or improve oneself by acting on that body.[46]

The attempt to "reform, cure or improve oneself" through the body is characteristic of "somatic

individuality" and is connected by Cressida Heyes, in *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics,*

and Normalized Bodies, to Foucault's conceptions of normalization and discursive practice.[47]

Normalization and Rose's speculations about the emergence of "somatic individuality" are

especially accurate in the cases of users who identify themselves online by their eating disorder

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[43] David Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 9.

[44] Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*, 14.

[45] Ibid., 14.

[46] Nikolas Rose, "Neurochemical Selves," *Society* 41, no. 1 (2003) 46.

[47] Cressida Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

diagnoses. In Figure 1.4 the description on the page includes the age and a detailed description of
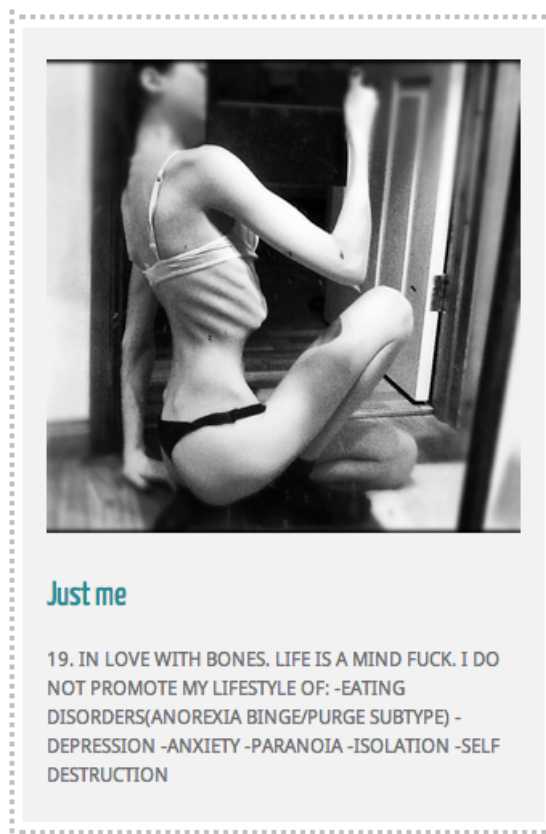
the psychological profile of the user.

Figure 1.4. Image depicting user who describes herself in terms of specific eating disorder
    diagnoses as "somatic individuality" (screenshot from
    http://curvesbetweenmybones.tumblr.com taken on 2/26/13)

According to both Cressida Heyes and Nikolas Rose, the appeal to the notion of

individual control over one's destiny in the United States in the 20th century was often framed in

terms of control over the body. This understanding of selfhood "has found expression in

numerous sectors of its popular culture—most notably […] the discourses of self-discovery and

self-help, of mental health and disorder, and of self-expression through the working body."[48]

Heyes writes that the formulation "of the somatic individual relies on sovereign power—on an

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[48] Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies,* 27.

understanding of the self as monarch, residing within the palace of the body, guiding its

renovation so that its unique status will be made manifest."[49] This model especially resonates

with the common invocation of the self as master and disciplinarian in thinspiration. Figure 1.5 is

a fairly typical thinspiration image that asserts "you" should view yourself as the ruler of "your

body." Each of the aforementioned approaches to the body as an indicator of selfhood draws out

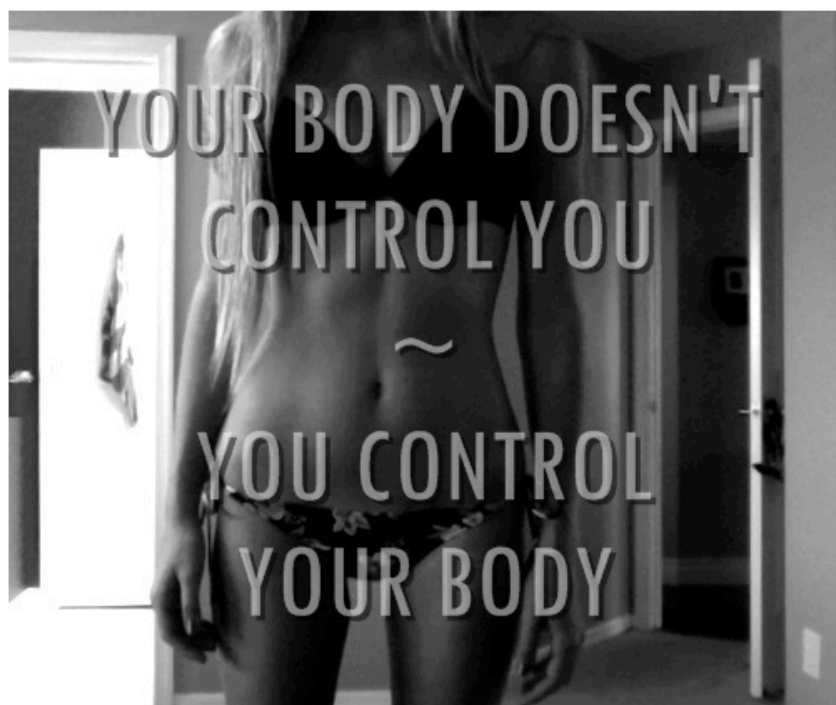particular cultural values and formulations of the self in thinspiration.

Figure 1.5. Example of how the self is figured as the master and disciplinarian of the body in thinspiration ("Your body doesn't control you," http://weheartit.com/entry/23303693, 2/27/13, screenshot).

Many examinations of eating disorders at some point describe the role of embodiment in

the development, or theorization, of eating disorders as a paradox. While the body has been

considered inferior and false as the opposite of the mind or spirit, it has simultaneously been

considered a reflection of the interior of a subject. In this way, flesh, has been endowed with

great symbolic meaning. The body is, according to Grosz, widely considered a "signifying

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[49] Ibid., 6.

medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of rendering public and communicable what is essentially private (ideas, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, affects)."[50] The nature of the human body as fundamentally a tool for communication and "vehicle for the expression of an otherwise sealed and self-contained, incommunicable psyche," according to Grosz, constructs a covalent belief in its transparency and malleability.[51] Examples of the trope of body as matter reflecting a specific interior can be seen across a variety of cultural phenomena, including somatyping, phrenology and eugenics, developed from pseudoscientific theorization and physical anthropology. These concepts, along with contemporary discourse about health and fitness, assume that personality characteristics and identity are determined by and evinced in the body.[52]

The centrality of the body in thinspiration is obvious, but the underlying messages about transformation of the inner-self and rationality seem to be contradictory. If the inner-self is really the main concern, why is there this obsession with the control of the flesh? In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler addresses this paradox by looking at "masculine reason as disembodied body… whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other bodies." For this "disembodied body" of reason to function it needs to "operat[e] through the dematerialization of other bodies."[53] This problem in which the idealization of a bodiless rationality can coexist with a fixation on bodies parallels the concern that the disembodied self has with the body exemplified in thinspiration.

Re-Embodiment through Self-Representation Online

In addition to the technical particularities of thinspiration as digital image, the very concept of embodiment is shaped by discourses about new media. There is a growing body of

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[50] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 9.
[51] Ibid., 9.
[52] Serlin, *Replaceable You: Engineering the Body in Postwar America*, 14.
[53] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* 49.

work by new media and internet scholars that examines these changing assumptions about the digital self and physical body. The potential for recalibration of the mind/body hierarchy has been a pervasive theme in several discourses about new media and technology. Many have argued that the ability to communicate from afar allows for a useful and expanded form of identity to be performed without a fixed body or materiality. Jessica Johnston summarizes the idealization of technology as the belief that "by losing the concreteness of the physical body and its connection to supposed naturalness and the taken for granted givenness of real life bodies, the assumptions guiding Western conceptualizations of mind/body dualism …the discipline of the body is no longer significant when the mind can be unencumbered by physical reality."[54] However, some research indicates that this is not actually occurring within online communication. While a fixed body is not technically necessary and does not signify as it would offline, it is still invoked frequently. The centrality of images of the self in digital communication and the desire to socialize in social media with people one knows or might eventually get to know "IRL" undermine the potential for bodilessness.[55]

Cyberutopian conceptions of the body as an uncomplicated inert machine or vessel for the human mind parallel new media theorists' fantasies of the "posthuman" frontier. In *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, Lisa Nakamura discusses the issues of embodiment that are raised by newer technologies, describing the posthuman and cyberutopian concepts as the belief that "the mind, termed 'wetware,' operates like the software in a computer; it is housed by an apparatus but is transferrable in nature."[56] This idealist discourse about new media has occasionally been used to propose its liberatory potential for individuals. The seeming absence of

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[54] Johnston, *The American Body in Context: An Anthology*, 9.
[55] Johnston, *The American Body in Context: An Anthology*, 10.
[56] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) 159.

the body in online interactions, it has been proposed, might allow users to transcend or reject

limiting identities like race and gender. However, implementation of non-binarized identities on

the internet is not so easily realized. Nakamura observed that identities conforming to hegemonic

norms are still most common online, and they are explicitly performed by users. Online,

Nakamura writes, "users *do* as well as *are* their race; this networked racial positioning broadcasts

this doing in ways that explicitly un-'cover' race."[57] Ultimately, Nakamura finds that "online

practices of visualizing bodies have, far from defining users as "posthuman," come to constitute

part of the everyday material activity of information seeking and communicating."[58]

Similarly, Sarah Neely suggests that the utopian disembodiment promised by advanced

technological cultures is unrealized, and that in fact the body "in some ways becomes more

sacred."[59] Neely's article "Making Bodies Visible: Post-Feminism and the Pornographication of

Online Identities" asserts that in online spaces women are more frequently represented and self-

represented than they are in mass-media, but notes that troubling issues in terms of the quality of

representation emerge. In fact, when women are present online they are often more likely to be

marked by their body or appearance than what they say or do.[60] Neely examines the self-

objectification that occurs in specific online spaces (like social networking and "sex blogs") and

identifies this as rooted in the language of popular discourse that "distances women from their

bodies. Instead of being something to identify with, unruly bodies are put forth for scrutiny and

discussion among a general discourse that encourages the objectification of women's bodies."[61]

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[57] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet,* 218.

[58] Ibid., 13.

[59] Sarah Neely, "Making Bodies Visible: Post-Feminism and the Pornographication of Online Identities," *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*, eds. Ted Gournelos and David J. Gunkel (New York, NY: Continuum, 2012) 106.

[60] Neely, "Making Bodies Visible: Post-Feminism and the Pornographication of Online Identities," *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*, 101.

[61] Ibid., 105.

Dorothy Smith anticipated this objectification of the female body in "Femininity as Discourse,"

in which she discusses the emergence of popular discourses that suggest that now women are

able to transcend their bodies—which often actually means that women are free to objectify their

bodies.[62] The examination of thinspiration also addresses these issues about embodiment and

self-objectification in new media, while adding to the discussion of the internet as a medium for

visual communication.

Critique of Approaches to Disordered Eating: Biases and Absences

Since disordered eating has often been considered synonymous with "anorexia," and

primarily the affliction of upper to middle-class white teenage girls, the experiences of those who

do not fit this profile have often been omitted or overlooked. Despite evidence that bulimia and

binge eating disorders are significantly more common than anorexia, the vast majority of cultural

studies approaches to eating disorders primarily investigate anorexia, perpetuating an absence in

literature specifically geared toward these types of disordered eating. Though there is still a bias

toward this profile in medical literature and popular culture narratives about eating disorders,

there have been a number of critical studies that have investigated the shortfalls of these studies

and that center further investigations on groups that do not match this profile. According to

Mervat Nasser and Helen Malson, recent studies show that outside "white western mainstream

culture," rates of eating disorders have exploded, and that the "spread of thinness as a master

signifier of feminine beauty, promulgated by the mass-media and post-colonial operations…

have been devastatingly effective in the 'globalisation' of 'eating disordered' subjectivities and

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[62] Dorothy Smith, "Femininity as Discourse," *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, eds. Leslie G. Roman, Linda K. Christian-Smith and Elizabeth Ellsworth (London; Philadelphia: Falmer Press) 1988.

practices."[63] Though various scholars have been turning attention to non-white and non-western populations there is still much work to be done in this field.[64]

The deep effect that heteronormativity and sexual orientation likely play in eating disorders and weight management practices is still markedly under-researched.[65] Although there have been various attempts to tackle issues of race, socioeconomic status and different abilities in relation to disordered eating, there is still a relative dearth in the literature. Though I do address some of these issues, rather than attempting to pattern the examination of thinspiration to address these problems in the field of body studies, I have allowed the material that is readily available and most visible online shape my project. In the Conclusion I have identified and discuss the accounts of users who identify as bulimic, feature people of color, and curate thinspirational images of men and boys. The analysis of thinspiration has great potential in the development of further research regarding embodiment and disordered eating in communities underrepresented in medical literature.

Many studies that examine internet communities in relation to disordered eating have focused explicitly on "pro-anorexia" sites. However, a more diverse ecology exists online where anorexia, bulimia, fasting, dieting, and struggles with body image or weight management are linked and concretized through the sharing of thinspiration. Oftentimes, thinspiration images blur the boundaries of medically sanctioned diagnoses, serving a range of communities and users who might include any of the aforementioned struggles with eating, weight, and body. Interestingly, a quantitative study of the search terms used to reach unhealthy pro-eating disorder content found

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[63] Mervat Nasser and Helen Malson, "Beyond Western Dis/Orders: Thinness and Self-Starvation of Other-Ed Women," *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 82.

[64] Becker, A. E., et al., "Social Network Media Exposure and Adolescent Eating Pathology in Fiji." *The British Journal of Psychiatry: The Journal of Mental Science* 198, no. 1 (Jan, 2011): 43-50; Susan Bordo, "Not Just 'a White Girl's Thing': The Changing Face of Food and Body Image Problems," *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 46; Nasser and Malson, "Beyond Western Dis/Orders: Thinness and Self-Starvation of Other-Ed Women." *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 74.

[65] Malson and Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 3.

that "thinspiration" searches had significantly higher "mean harm scores" (based on coding of

the harmfulness of content reached by search terms), than "anorexia" or "pro-ana" searches.[66]

This also points to the importance of studying the expression and understandings of the body

based on thinspiration. Rather than critically examine mass media based studies, or

psychological or ethnographic approaches to eating disorders, my analysis addresses visual

content produced and circulated by and for users who struggle with body and weight issues or

disordered eating. The genre conventions and visual motifs that mark images as thinspirational

may highlight important cultural constructions of mind and body not overtly expressed in mass

culture. Similarly, interviews conducted by therapists and scholars, and/or archives of user-to-

user interfacing may not adequately reflect the intuitive, and potentially difficult to articulate,

values and narratives expressed in thinspiration.[67]

Conclusion

This chapter provides some of the historical background and theoretical frameworks that

contextualize and motivate my investigation of thinspiration. In order to accurately and

compassionately discuss the expression and management of disordered eating through

thinspiration, cultural discourses regarding embodiment, subjectivity and pathology must also be

examined. The analysis that follows in Chapter II will examine the tropes used in thinspiration

that reveal mind/body dualism while expressing values associated with embodiment and

selfhood. Analysis of the stylistic and thematic conventions used for the expression of

thinspiration is an essential foundation for understanding both pro-eating disorder cultures on the

internet and body/weight management practices outside of these communities. The following

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[66] S. P. Lewis and A. E. Arbuthnott "Searching for Thinspiration: The Nature of Internet Searches for Pro-Eating Disorder Websites," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking* 15, no. 4 (Apr, 2012) 203.
[67] Some of these approaches are addressed in Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* and Helen Malson and Maree Burns, eds. *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*.

textual and visual analysis reveals the ways in which disordered eating and body management

practices are filtered through contemporary understandings of mind/body dualism, and then

represented and reproduced digitally through thinspiration.

CHAPTER II. READING THE BODY: VISUAL AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF
THINSPIRATION

Introduction

The depository of images available publically on Tumblr provides an important means for the examination of popular constructions of the body, contemporary body management processes, and online identity formation. This chapter contains in-depth descriptions and observations of mind/body dualism in thinspiration and situates the analysis of self-expression that follows in Chapter III. Thinspiration uploaded onto freely accessible personal pages and blogs is the primary source material for this discussion and each of the images and sites chosen for in-depth analysis is representative of typical content or collections of images meant to reinforce weight loss or "trigger" eating disorder ideation.[1] The content is often very disturbing in its portrayal of real people in deep distress. Despite the upsetting nature of these images, their presence calls for close examination.

The Circulation of Thinspiration on Tumblr

The collection, arrangement, and display of found images in service of self-expression is a logical response to the apparent excess of images in circulation online. While this expression through images is apparent in other virtual forms, like personal blogs and social networking sites, domains like Tumblr, Pinterest, and Instagram make the curation of images central to the function of the site. Tumblr, like many microblogging and image aggregation sites, uses quoting functions to encourage the citation of content, facilitates and traces the reblogging of content, and enables tagging to help sort content. All of these aspects help users manage and access content and make Tumblr a practical site for the examination of thinspiration.

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[1] The term 'trigger' is used to warn others that the content posted (picture or text) is graphic or disturbing, and also may induce behavior or thoughts associated with eating disorders in susceptible viewers.

The conventions regarding the citation of material aggregated and presented by Tumblr users are partially a function of the interface used for uploading. Unlike other sites that provide platforms for personal logs, Tumblr seems to encourage the sharing of non-textual material—both produced by the user and found in external sources.[2] The process for uploading material onto Tumblr forces users to choose what medium they will be sharing before the form for submission of content is provided. This differs from other popular blogging sites like Blogspot, LiveJournal, and Wordpress, which direct users to a blank text box for uploading content, providing a small icon on the tool bar that allows the addition of various media content (like video and image) to be uploaded within the text. This format seems to favor text content, as it is the default setting. Tumblr, on the other hand, allows for media content sharing first, and then provides a text box for captioning and titling the content. Figure 2.1 includes screenshots of the Tumblr uploading form alongside that of Google's blogging platform. The ease with which image sharing can take place on Tumblr undoubtedly contributes to its use as an image aggregator and increases the number of picture-only posts. This creates an image-centric community and attracts a good number of users who focus primarily on the image—be it through fashion, art, or thinspiration.

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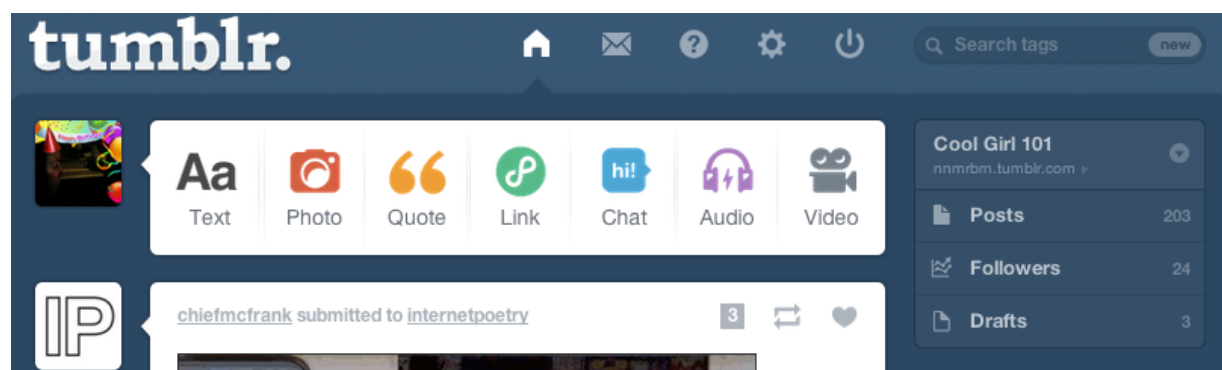
[2] By user-produced, I mean an image that is either altered or made by the user and uploaded onto Tumblr. Found material includes images that are either linked to within the site, or uploaded, but appear to be unaltered by the user.
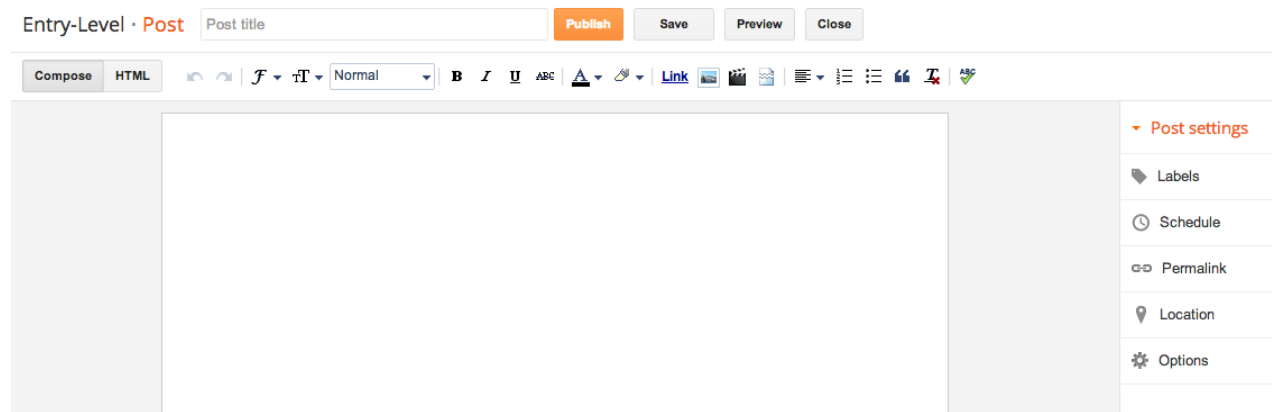
Figure 2.1
Top: Tumblr dashboard with large buttons at the top for sharing content
    (http://tumblr.com/dashboard, 12/3/12, screenshot)
Bottom: Blogger dashboard with small icons on top of large text box (http://www.blogger.com/,
    12/3/12, screenshot).

Another important characteristic of Tumblr as a media platform is its treatment of

authorship. Unlike many text-centric blog sites, the first step in posting content on Tumblr (as

well as other content aggregating sites like Pinterest) accounts for the potential that the user is

sharing information and facilitates this through quoting functions. A list of the number of users

who have "liked" or re-blogged a Tumblr post is frequently included beneath the content.

However, this list is necessarily limited as many users who do not use the reblog feature share

content uploaded by someone else on Tumblr. Users may save images online or on their

computers and then upload the found content again, or eliminate the reblog list through their

template choice. While this list is limited, it is still a potentially useful window into the

circulation, popularity, and use of an image.

The subject tags applied by users to posts also have a limited, but important function in

the analysis of thinspiration. The addition of subject tags allows the content to be catalogued and

accessed via Tumblr's in-site search tool.[3] According to Nancy Thumim's *Self-Representation in*

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[3] Some of the most common tags include terms like thinspiration/thinspo, pro-anorexia/pro-ana, pro-eating
disorder/pro-ed, starve, skinny, etc.

a Digital Age, the "common sense that results in the establishment of a genre" is important for identifying the underlying function of a particular form.[4] Tagging is a concrete representation of a common sense identification system employed by users, and as such may transmit important information.

An example of the common use of tagging with regard to thinspiration may be seen in the account "skinny-love777." This user displays image tags beneath the content, often including repeated words like: perfect, starve, worthless, flatstomach, miaa, abs, beautiful, thynspo, ed, ribs, bonethin, hipbones, blithe (an ironic code word used to evade censure for self-harm content), thinstagram, cuself, anaa, skinny, anagirl, skinnygirl, mydream, iwant, myperfection, thighgap, thin, thinlegs, tinyfeather, diet, dontcheat, dontbinge, fakesmile, notme (Figure 2.2).[5] Some of these tags (thynspo, anaa, blithe, miaa, and thighgapp) are purposely employed by users to avoid detection and censorship by Tumblr. Subject tags, frequently included with thinspiration, can provide insight into the user's interpretation of the content or its intended use. An image of a thin woman might not automatically be read as thinspiration without tags directing its interpretation or other presentational cues. However, there is a certain amount of meta-commentary that can occur with the use of tags—some users include intentionally unrelated or ironic tags, or tags that are exceedingly self-referential.[6] Additionally, some users do not use tags at all. Still, both the tags and re-blogging records, when used, make Tumblr a fairly transparent and practical site for research, and provide additional material for investigation.

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[4] Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 15.
[5] http://skinny-love777.tumblr.com
[6] For instance, there are pro-eating disorder users that may tag images of themselves 'fat' or 'gross,' or may upload pictures of overweight people and tag them as 'thinspiration.'

3 MONTHS AGO   Wow this is absolutely perfect to me #worthless #ed #ribs #thynspo
1 NOTES   #thinstagram #perfect #iwant #abs #anaa #anagirl #skinny #starve #skinnygirl
#MYDREAM   #dream #flatstomach #goal #hipbones #cuself #blithe #bonethin #miaa
#ED   #mydream #myperfection #collarbones #thighgapp #thin #thinlegs
#IWANT
#MYPERFECTION
#THIGHGAPP
#SKINNYGIRL
#PERFECT

Figure 2.2 Common tags for thinspiration (http://skinny-love777.tumblr.com, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Personal Tumblr Accounts

Before analyzing the themes and structural characteristics of particular images, I will describe two specific accounts that host thinspiration. "Stop-eating-to-be-skinny," an account that has been active on Tumblr since early 2012, is an example of the typical presentation of pro-eating disorder thinspiration (top image, Figure 2.3). This particular personal Tumblr page has amassed a huge number of posts since its inception, indicating a high level of user-activity. Interestingly, examination of its archives shows that early on, "stop-eating-to-be-skinny" was less exclusively dedicated to the propagation of thinspiration or posts indicating disordered eating in the past. Instead, "stop-eating-to-be-skinny" posted images relating to various types of traditionally "emo" content (including images with dark themes regarding sex, drugs, music, self-harm, tattoos and piercings),[7] but by December 2012 began sharing exclusively pro-anorexia and self-harm content.

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[7] Liz Eckermann briefly touches on the intertwining of the 'emo' aesthetic and anorexia in "Theorising Self-Starvation: Beyond Risk, Governmentality and the Normalizing Gaze," *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, eds. Helen Malson and Maree Burns (New York: Routledge, 2009) 18.
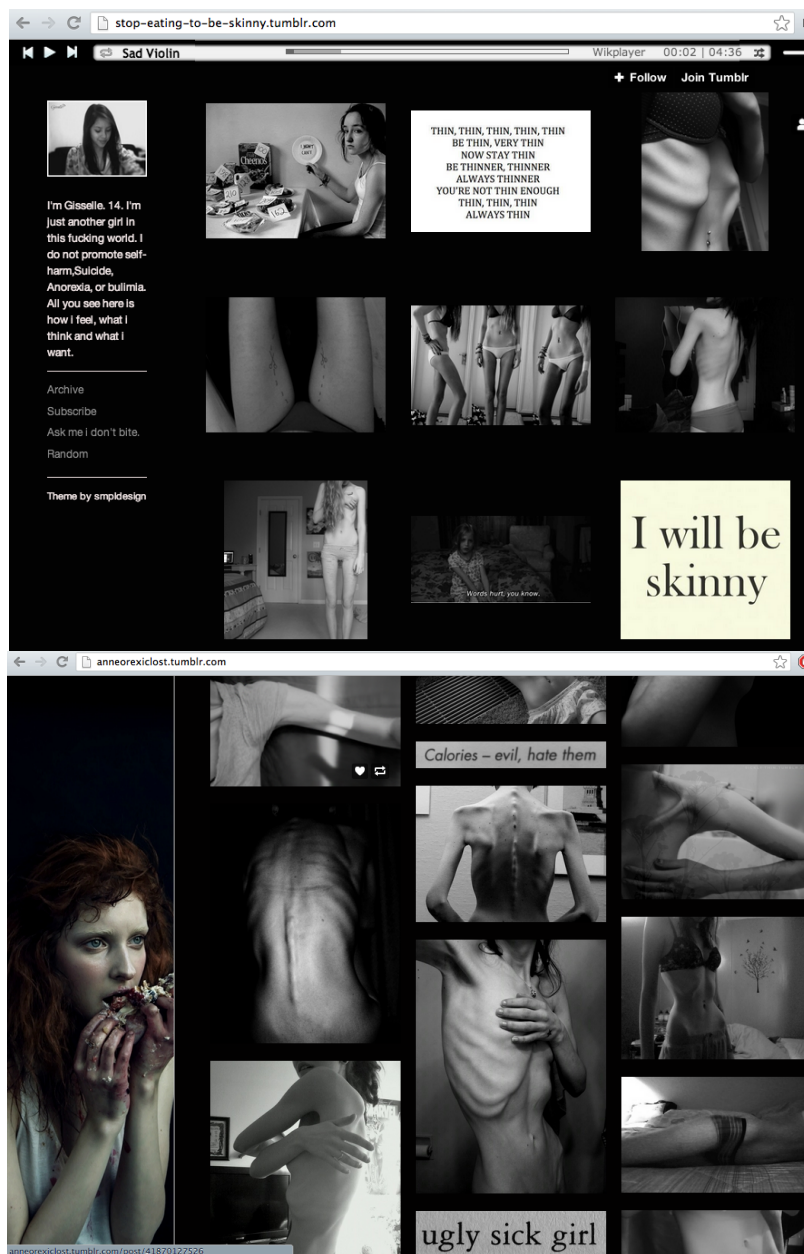
Figure 2.3

Top: Typical use and display of thinspiration ("Stop-eating-to-be-skinny," stop-eating-to be-skinny.tumblr.com, 2/27/13, screenshot)

Bottom: More Extreme thinspiration, without personal narrative or transparent social functions ("Anneorexiclost," anneorexiclost.tumblr.com, 2/27/13, screenshot).

The layout is black and white, and very minimalist (the theme was created by

"smpledesign"). The site has a music player embedded at the top of the page with a slow,

melancholy instrumental song titled "sadness," playing on loop. The bio section on the sidebar

consists of a typical self-portrait photo (or "selfie") above a description of the user: "I'm [first

name]. 14. I'm just another girl in this fucking world. I do not promote self-harm, Suicide, Anorexia, or bulimia. All you see here is how I feel, what I think and what I want."[8] Below this bio are links that allow visitors to interact with "stop-eating-to-be-skinny" by subscribing to her account or asking her a question that she answers publically on her page. "Stop-eating-to-be-skinny" also includes a visitor counter, which during the course of observation, 1/23-2/15/13, went from 356 visitors to 863. During this time, there was also a template change, from a black and white image of night sky and stars to a plain black background with white text. The user description, bio section, templates, and image content of "stop-eating-to-be-skinny" reveal many of the conventions found in the thinspiration accounts on Tumblr.

However, there are also some accounts that seem to be more expressly centered on the propagation of pro-eating disorder content without reference to their personal information or sensibilities. One such site that stood out in my analysis because of its extremely distressing content and presentation was "anneorexiclost." This account collects and displays some of the most extreme pro-anorexia imagery circulated on Tumblr. Images depicting the bodies of severely underweight people, often uploaded by users who are explicitly suffering from acute eating disorders, appear to be less popular overall on Tumblr and turn up less frequently in searches.[9] However, "anneorexiclost" and others that deal primarily in this type of imagery are often very active, posting over long periods of time and at regular intervals.

"Anneorexiclost" does not include a bio or self-portrait. The template, depicting a slender woman with bloodstained fingers gnawing on a piece of meat, provides a deeply unsettling juxtaposition for the stream of bodies archived inside it (bottom image, Figure 2.3). Despite the lack of biographical information, the user posts answers to questions that visitors ask her.

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[8] http://stop-eating-to-be-skinny.tumblr.com
[9] This may in part be caused by purposeful forgoing of tags for images that would be censored by Tumblr.

According to her answers in these posts, "anneorexiclost" is an 18-year-old woman who has been suffering from anorexia for 3 years.[10] Although many images collected by the previously mentioned account, "stop-eating-to-be-skinny," are equally graphic and feature bodies as morbidly thin as those collected by "anneorexiclost," there is undoubtedly a greater emphasis on the visual effect of emaciation. The images curated by 'anneorexiclost' seem to be dark in emotional tone, almost never include people in public or with others, and generally do not include text or other content in the frame that would direct attention away from the body. "Anneorexiclost" is also different from "stop-eating-to-be-skinny" (and unusual overall) in the lack of accompanying content; source information and tags are not made visible, and there is not much in the way of personal commentary or emotional accounts (she does not post any content unrelated to eating disorders or emaciated bodies). Despite these differences, her activity level is prolific: in the month of January in 2013, for instance, she had 342 posts. Because of the characteristics of "anneorexiclost" and similar accounts, the thinspiration they circulate seems to be distinct from more mainstream thinspiration, despite some similarities like the stark presentation of images and focus on the emaciated female body.

While the first account, "stop-eating-to-be-thin" is more typical in terms of content, the presence of more extreme images on "anneorexiclost" should not be neglected. There is a range of Tumblr accounts with thinspo content that fits somewhere along a continuum. At one end of this continuum are the most common sites, which occasionally include thinspo images amidst mostly non-thinspo fashion or pro-fitness images. In the middle are accounts that more frequently feature explicit pro-ED thinspo, but include other types of content or appear to serve additional purposes (like stop-eating-to-be-skinny). Finally, there are accounts that seem to be exclusively centered on pro-ED content or accounts portraying shocking images of skeletal

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[10] "Anneorexiclost," http://anneorexiclost.tumblr.com/archive, 2/17/13.

bodies. These users, when they include biographical information, are often very underweight themselves and struggling with severe eating disorders.

Analysis of Images

Out of the hundreds of images I have collected throughout this investigation, I chose several images and screenshots of internet pages for deep visual and textual analysis. Each of the chosen examples displays a formation of mind and body and has been designated by users as "pro-eating disorder" and/or "thinspiration."[11] This assessment is based on the image tags provided by the user, or in some cases information gleaned from accompanying text. There are many thinspo images that employ different, but related content with tags like "fitspiration" (or fitspo) and "self-harm" images. However, these images are often dramatically different from other types of thinspiration and pro-eating disorder content in terms of aesthetic qualities, depictions of the body, and textual motifs. Together, these indicate a distinct function for users and a potentially divergent ideological view of the body. In order to identify the generic and conceptual attributes of pro-eating disorder thinspiration, I focused my analysis on images that both used thinspiration tags and excluded tags relating to fitspo or self-harm.

The images chosen represent three major genre subtypes that I have identified, which are commonly found on various image-centric internet platforms: fashion and model thinspiration, "real girl" thinspiration, and thinspirational text-images (Figures 2.4, 2.5, and 2.6).[12] Fashion and model thinspiration is perhaps what first comes to mind to those who are unfamiliar with thinspiration; these are professionally produced images of models or fashion icons with

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[11] There is a variety of explicit terms used to indicate that content is either pro-eating disorder or thinspiration. Some of the terms I encountered include: pro-ana, ana, pro-mia, mia, pro-ed, ednos (in reference to the medical term 'eating disorder not otherwise specified'). While thinspiration, thinspo, thynspo, and thinsp, are not explicitly recorded as pro-eating disorder, they may contain similar messages.

[12] The concept of genre on the internet may be understood both in terms of its form (such as words, organizational structure, and visual elements) and context (or the social usage). See Janet Giltrow and Dieter Stein, *Genres in the Internet* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2009) 33.

extremely thin bodies. "Real Girl" thinspiration describes photographic images that appear to be amateur, or user-produced. Thinspirational text-images do not include a photo of a person or body part, but instead are digital or photographic images of text that encourages or describes body-management practices. "Fitspiration" (see Figure 2.7), a related but separate genre, occasionally is circulated as thinspiration. However, fitspo generally has distinct stylistic features and consists of images designed to encourage weight-loss or body management through exercise or fitness techniques (as opposed to restrictive dieting). These variations of thinspiration images are interrelated in form, content, and function, and are frequently present alongside each other in pro-disordered eating content and weight-loss accounts. Comparative examination of these categories sheds light on the stylistic conventions and thematic tropes that are used to produce meaning. Together, the images I examine constitute a minute sample of the thinspiration produced and consumed online; however they each may be used as case studies that reveal messages embedded in contemporary body rhetoric.
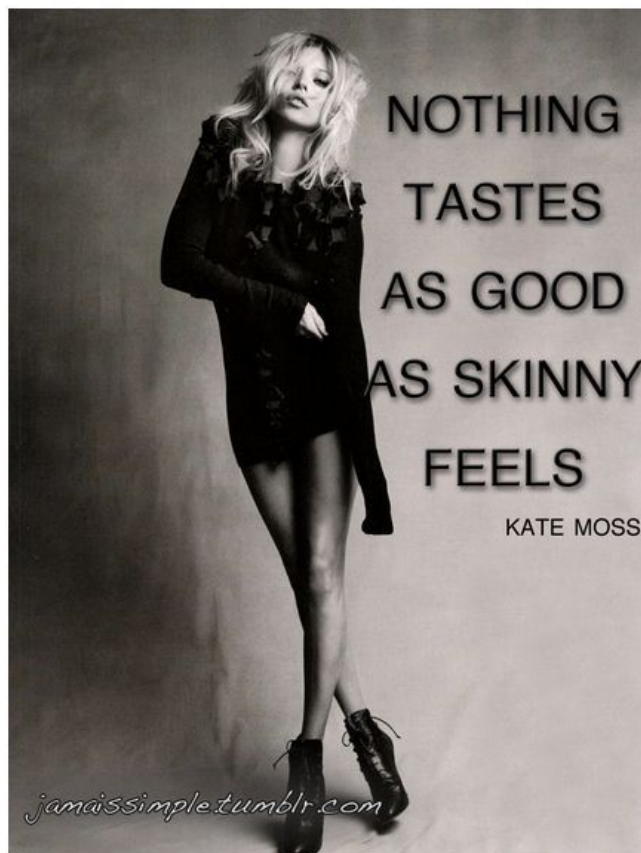
Figure 2.4 Fashion/model thinspiration, which appears to appropriate images from fashion photography or professional photos featuring models ("Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels," http://lewerkshop.tumblr.com/post/4754627333, 2/25/13, screenshot).

Figure 2.5 **"**Real Girl" thinspiration, which purportedly features an amateur model and often reads as a self-portrait ("I don't care if it hurts, I want to have control," forthesakeoflosingweight.tumblr.com/post/287334903283, 4/13/13, screenshot).

Figure 2.6 Text-image thinspiration consisting solely of an image of text ("I already ate."
http://push-till-your-thighs-dont-touch.tumblr.com/, 12/3/13,
http://24.media.tumblr.com/tumblr_mczk5z1aNU1rk9hnzo1_500.gif).

Figure 2.7 Fitspiration, emphasizing exercise and fitness over weight-loss through diet alone
("Don't throw away all of yesterday's progress today,"
http://fittestofthefitblrs.tumblr.com/post/47529390482, 4/12/13, screenshot) and ("To be able
to push through the burn," http://reasonstobefit.tumblr.com/post/20086416687/submitted-by-
email, 4/13/13).

Text and Image

A small proportion of the posts tagged thinspiration are text only and a slightly larger

portion includes both text and image within the post. The precise ratio of text posts to image

posts is difficult to ascertain as search results vary in an extreme manner according to time of

day and users posting. Text that is used to accompany thinspiration imagery or promote extreme

weight-loss and pro-disordered eating ideologies is undoubtedly important to analyze. There

have been various studies of pro-eating disorder communities that rely on the analysis of text

posted online. Some of these studies approaching pro-anorexia websites and forums focus on

discursive practices in communities,[13] or therapeutic support functions,[14] while others focus on analysis of the thematic content and performance of self in the text of the posts.[15] However, there is not a significant amount of discussion regarding online discursive practices that are not textually based, or about the content circulated that is not explicitly part of a pro-eating disorder community.

The text-only thinspo posts tagged as thinspiration on Tumblr include personal expression, diet tips and body management strategies, advice for disguising and mediating symptoms of anorexia, and motivational quotes or sayings (both attributed and not). This type of communication found in pro-disordered eating text on Tumblr parallels previous work on the textual content of pro-anorexia web-forums. For instance, an extensive content analysis study by Dina Borzekowski et al. found that common content found on pro-anorexia sites includes thinspiration and advice on weight/body management, and discussion involving themes like control, isolation, and recovery.[16] In my observations of text on Tumblr, personal expressions in the text of thinspiration text-only posts often feature distressing and emotional accounts of struggles with weight-loss, anorexia, and body image (Figure 2.8). Diet tips included specific dietary regimes and nutritional information about specific foods that are either high in fat or caloric content or "safe." These tips were often linked with other unhealthy body management strategies and offer advice on coping with hunger or how to purge and use laxatives. There were also posts about how to hide anorexia from others (by tricking friends and family about eating

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[13] Katy Day and Tammy Keys, "Anorexia and Bulimia as Resistance and Conformity in Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia Virtual Conversations." *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, eds. Helen Malson and Maree Burns (New York: Routledge, 2009) 74.

[14] Wyke Stommel, *Entering an Online Support Group on Eating Disorders: A Discourse Analysis* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009).

[15] Day and Keys, "Anorexia and Bulimia as Resistance and Conformity in Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia Virtual Conversations." *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 74.

[16] Dina Borzekowski et al., "E-Ana and e-Mia: A Content Analysis of Pro-Eating Disorder Web Sites." American Journal of Public Health 100, no. 8 (Aug, 2010): 1528-1529.

habits, for instance) or how to deal with the physical effects of disordered eating (such as hair loss or faintness). The motivational quotes and sayings in text posts often were the same quotes and sayings that appear in the thinspiration picture-quotes described below.

So here's the deal on my part! I am going to start updating this blog again for several reasons ;

1. I have a lot of free time on my hands and feel I can now finally update it frequently.
2. I have gained at least three kilos since I stopped blogging and it makes me feel like complete shit and I simply cannot handle it anymore.
3. I miss having someone to talk to about my feelings and thoughts.
4. I have the most perfect boyfriend that I just want to be perfect for aswell.
5. I am now living in the states..... need I mention how the food is here?

Do you think ABC diet is better or skinny girl diet?

Anonymous

Start out with the skinny girl diet... because its higher in calories and makes it easier to follow and not break it, then later on if you've manage to stick to that then move onto the ABC

absolutely love your blog!! it explains my life soo well! very motivational :)
xoxo

Figure 2.8: Text content features a personal account of struggles with weight-loss, anorexia, and body image, as well as tips for weight-loss and other users' expressions of support (http://stay-skinny.tumblr.com/, 4/11/13, screenshot).

While most of the images that are tagged as thinspiration or pro-disordered eating do not include text within the picture, there are many that do. For example, the content posted by a now defunct, self-described pro-ana user, "f-o-r-e-v-e-r-w-a-n-t-i-n-g," reveals that out of 279 posts, none were text-only, though many of the images featured text (Figure 2.9). Of the 279 posts examined, 104 posts were photos of a body without text, 69 consisted of digital words superimposed on a photographic image of a body (which I refer to as "picture-quotes"), 8 featured an image of words written on the body, and 54 of the posts were images of words alone (which I refer to as text-images). The remaining 44 posts included digital graphic images, photos of objects or scenery without a Figure, or illustrated images.[17]

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[17] "Help me ana," http://f-o-r-e-v-e-r-w-a-n-t-i-n-g.tumblr.com/archive, accessed 2/27/13.

Figure 2.9 Tumblr archive displaying some of the variation in thinspiration imagery (http://f-o-r-e-v-e-r-w-a-n-t-i-n-g.tumblr.com/archive, 2/27/13, screenshot).

The picture-quote, a term occasionally used to tag images of digital text superimposed onto a photo, is a significant form of thinspiration with much symbolic potential. Picture-quotes include a visual element that is formally combined with text. In those identified as thinspiration the pictorial element commonly features the female body, though male bodies and photos

without figures of any sort are also circulated. The unique formal qualities of these images, in

conjunction with the expressive text included in them, create an opportunity for extensive

reading and analysis. While it is certainly possible to describe images in relation to their

captions, or accompanying text and tags, the picture-quote and text-image provide more stable

objects for analysis because the text is frozen in a specific form and location.

Visual and Textual Analysis

The visual characteristics of thinspo imagery produced online for self-expression and

communication are central in its signification and complicate the discussion of body

management practices and contemporary views of eating disorders. My approach to thinspiration

is informed by formal analysis, based on the work of art historians like Roger Fry and Clement

Greenberg, and psychologists studying visual perception like Gyorgy Kepes and Rudolf

Arnheim. Formal analysis often addresses the treatment of the visual form through color,

composition, line, size, and shapes in the image. Some of these formal visual conventions that

will be discussed in terms of thinspiration include the desaturated, or black and white, palette,

static composition, and shallow depth of field. These formal characteristics are sometimes

overlooked in everyday consumption of imagery, but are important to analyze as they are used to

convey meaning and influence perception.

Additional components useful for visual analysis of new media images include

iconographical readings of subject matter in images, ideological analyses of the politics of seeing

and consuming these images, and semiotic models used to decode images.[18] These tactics

address other critical dimensions of visual signification in order to draw out the narrative or

political content embedded in images. Conventions in thinspiration that may be read through this

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[18] Each of these methods is explained in detail in Richard Howells and Joaquim Negreiros, *Visual Culture* (Cambridge: Polity) 2012.

type of analysis include the consumption of images of the body, performances of gender in the image, and fragmented representations of the body. Each of these approaches to reading images is valuable for understanding thinspiration imagery and will be used in this analysis.

Overall Themes and Image Content

In terms of overall themes or content of the images, the depiction of the thin (often-female) body is frequently a central characteristic. However, within the umbrella term "thinspiration," there are significant variations in content and visual motifs that should be addressed. The range of thinspiration genres discussed at the beginning of this chapter ("real girl" thinspiration, fashion and model thinspiration, thinspirational text images, and fitspiration), does not include all of the iterations of images circulated but instead constitute some recognizable—though by no means static—categories. The images that I have chosen to analyze are linked by their use of text in a self-contained visual field and user-applied categorization as thinspiration. The picture-quotes in this analysis are most frequently "real girl" thinspiration, featuring a digital photo of a girl or woman that *appears* to be amateur—that is, not produced professionally or for use in a commercial context. A study of the search terms used on Google to reach unhealthy pro-eating disorder content found that three of the top ten search terms analyzed included the word "real," showing that the sense of realness is a characteristic valued by viewers.[19] 'Real thinspo,' had the second highest "mean harm score" out of all of the terms analyzed, above phrases like "pro-ana" and "tips on anorexia."[20] Though this is not directly addressed in the study, the "realness" of thinspiration is apparently of great import to those seeking pro-eating disorder content.

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[19] S. P. Lewis and A. E. Arbuthnott "Searching for Thinspiration: The Nature of Internet Searches for Pro-Eating Disorder Websites," Cyberpsychology, Behavior and Social Networking 15, no. 4 (Apr, 2012) 203.
[20] Ibid., 203.

Despite a slew of visual cues that might indicate that a 'real girl' image is of amateur origin, it is difficult to verify the origin of the material because fashion and model images (produced professionally) are occasionally appropriated and altered to achieve this effect. Additionally, this appropriation of professional imagery is oftentimes accompanied by specific techniques such as cropping or digital alteration of colors to match the "real girl" thinspiration aesthetic (for instance, Figure 2.14 seems to be a professional image but is cropped to help it conform to the amateur look). This genre, whether of amateur or professional origin, is sometimes tagged as "real girl" (or with other tags like "selfie" or "me" that indicate that the image is a real self-portrait), but even in the absence of these labels the "real girl" genre is signified thematically and stylistically.

Formal Qualities of Thinspiration

Though it is difficult to adequately describe all of the formal qualities associated with thinspiration imagery, a brief overview of visual conventions can help ground the analysis. Again, rather than attempting to fully address all the variations in thinspiration content, I have focused my discussion on the thinspiration that features both text and photographic representation of the body. Overall, these images tend to be of medium size—that is, they are rarely larger than screen dimensions, but are generally significantly larger than icons or typical avatar images. The size indicates a particular level of viewer interaction with the image that is more profound than a simple glance, as it allows some examination of detail, but is not so large as to indicate that the images are meant for downloading or viewing at a magnified level.

Like most photographic images on Tumblr, thinspiration images are generally square or rectangular, with typical aspect ratios for photos (4:3, 3:2, etc.). The composition of thinspiration is often static, as the focus is generally on the centered subject. The shallow space in the image

contributes partly to this static composition, as does the employment of few accompanying props or shapes that would encourage eye movement within the image.[21] This static composition may be a function of typical production techniques; generally a girl producing self-portraits at home would not easily be able to compose images that include deep landscapes or complex scenery. However, it also invokes an intimacy and spontaneity that other techniques would not. The intimacy in the positioning of the body in front of the camera, as well as the composition itself, point toward the function of thinspiration as a communicative and expressive tool.

Color usage in thinspiration varies, but many users who identify themselves as suffering from eating disorders or are pro-eating disorder display images that are either black and white, or muted and pastel. The color scheme of thinspiration with pro-ana or pro-mia tags (or others alluding to disordered eating) is markedly different from that of fitspo thinspiration images (for comparison, see Figure 2.7 of fitspiration and Figure 2.9 with thinspiration images). The muted pale or achromatic color scheme of thinspiration helps the image evoke a darker or more melancholic mood, which points to one of its functions. The thinspiration images that are also tagged as "self-harm" (alluding to self-mutilation) tend to be black and white with high-contrast and a grainier image quality, in contrast with the more muted colors and soft focus of thinspiration that does not include this tag (compare Figure 2.10 with Figure 2.11). High-contrast images are often associated with dramatic, macabre themes and gritty realism, while gray-scale or pale images with low contrast evoke a more sad or distant feeling.[22]

Words added to picture-quote thinspiration can be analyzed both visually and textually. The formal qualities of text can include the font choice, the alignment and arrangement of words and letters, the color and opacity of the text, and the positioning of text within the image.

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[21] Gyorgy Kepkes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: P. Theobold, 1951) 20.

[22] Paul Martin Lester, *Visual Communication: Images with Messages* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2011) 274.

Positioning of the text in thinspo varies, but it is common to see images that either superimpose the text onto the body, or draw attention to the body shape by filling in only the negative space (see Figures 2.10 and 2.14). The text is often displayed in a light, minimalist-style font, such as Helvetica or Futura, categorized in typography as geometric sans serifs because of their lack of trailing edges and their flourishless, monolinear construction. These fonts are popular in contemporary typography, but also visually suggest thinness. This slender font (as opposed to the bolder and blockier fonts sometimes employed in fitspiration) is frequently white, black, or gray in color, often offering only subtle contrast to the rest of the pictorial field. Underscoring this subtle feel that the font evokes are the variations of the opacity of the text. In many instances, either the font or space directly behind the font is semi-transparent, which embeds the text further in the pictorial field (Figure 2.10). It also forces the viewer to view the body *through* the text, creating a subtle tension with metaphorical significance.

Depictions of Mind and Body

After briefly surveying the formal qualities of thinspiration and describing some of the stylistic characteristics, the thematic and symbolic depictions in thinspiration can be examined in a more thorough way. Several emergent conventions in the depiction of the subject in thinspiration illuminate particular views of mind and body. The alienation, fragmentation, degradation and erasure of the flesh in thinspiration will be examined, as well as the passivity and privacy that accompany it. These themes are often consistent with critiques of mind/body dualism and examinations of the symbolic potential of eating disorders provided by previous studies; however, thinspiration images also present unique sensibilities that beg for close reading.

One of the foundational tropes of thinspiration and classic mind/body dualism is the assertion that there is an innate separation between the mental and physical realms. This includes

notions of the body as alien to the "self," and of the control and discipline of the mind over the flesh. In total accordance with historical and contemporary dualistic discourse, in thinspiration the flesh is considered an ungainly appendage.[23] The true self, often referred to as "you" in thinspiration, is frequently portrayed as being in a struggle to escape from "it"—the confines of the flesh (Figure 2.10). Interview-based studies of eating disorders have consistently documented that, as thinspiration might suggest, the body of the anorexic is experienced as disconnected from the true self.[24] This disconnection is elucidated through Judith Butler's description of the formation of the boundaries of bodies. In "Subversive Bodily Acts," Butler argues that the boundaries are made distinct through expulsion, paralleling the theme of weightloss in thinspiration: the expulsion of alien flesh.[25] Thinspiration that depicts the flesh as disposable and separate from the self is common in both the typical thinspiration images and fitspiration, indicating that this assumption is accepted by a wide range of Tumblr users (Figure 2.11).

Figure 2.10 Body, "it," as separate from the self, "you," and passive/blank ("Your body is a blank canvas," http://diethoroscopes.tumblr.com/post/6154055483, 11/22/12, screenshot).

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[23] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 144.

[24] Mervat Nasser and Helen Malson, "Beyond Western Dis/Orders: Thinness and Self-Starvation of Other-Ed Women," *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 80.

[25] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 2011; 1993) 375.
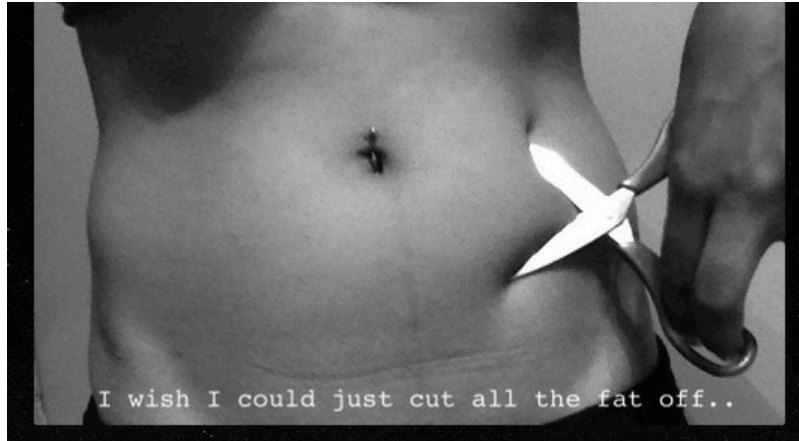
Figure 2.11 "Self-harm" thinspiration in which the body is described as an undesirable appendage ("I wish I could just cut all the fat off," http://f-o-r-e-v-e-r-w-a-n-t-i-n-g.tumblr.com/archive, 2/17/13, screenshot).

Fragmentation of the Body

The fragmentation of the body in thinspiration is communicated visually through the use of particular angles or image cropping that isolate parts of the body and the frequent obfuscation or lack of depictions of the face and head of the subject. In most images, the body is dismembered through these aesthetic choices. For instance, in the archives of f-o-r-e-v-e-r-w-a-n-t-i-n-g, out of 173 images that featured the body, only 13 included faces (see Figure 2.9). This visual strategy is akin to Laura Mulvey's theorization of the way that the use of close-ups of the body in film leads to the fragmentation and dehumanization of the subject. Mulvey writes, "One part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen." [26] The reduction of women to body parts in thinspiration images is not unique, as many other culturally sanctioned mediums also employ this fragmentation. In thinspiration, this visual

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[26] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2003) 48.

tactic amplifies the language of the alienation of mind from body while reinforcing normative depictions of the female body.

Fragmentation of the body, or images of the body, has been theorized extensively in psychoanalytic discourse. According to Elizabeth Grosz, Jaques Lacan's understanding of the body image resides in the tensions between the sensory experiences of self and the visually learned mirror image of self. This sensory aspect includes a fragmentation of the image of the body. Grosz describes this as "the image of the body-in-bits-and-pieces, the child's reconstruction of the body fragmented and divided by its diverse and scattered experiences, and by the body's compartmentalized sensations in the earliest stages of life […]"[27]This is in contrast to the phenomenon of "autoscopy" in which the body is viewed from outside oneself as the result of depersonalization, and which, as Grosz explains, "according to Lacan, can be traced back to memories of the mirror-state, in which the 'subject's ego is no longer centered in its own body, and the body feels as if it has been taken over by others or is controlled by outside forces.'"[28] The teenage girl body (so often the body displayed in thinspiration) is frequently portrayed as being under the control of outside forces. In contemporary society, the teenage female body it is the domain of parents, educators, and peers.

The "objective" fragmentation exhibited in thinspiration imagery is strikingly analogous to Grosz's description of the autoscopic view of the self (Figure 2.12). A common motif in thinspiration posing is the measuring of the body and the viewing of the body through a mirror. However, there are also many photos that elicit or reference the fragmented sensory experience described by Lacan such as those that feature the grabbing, pinching, and mutilation of flesh that often accompanies more "self-harm" oriented thinspiration (Figure 2.11). This creates an

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[27] Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994) 43.

[28] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 43.

interesting tension between the "objective" views of the body central to modern body

management discourse and the very much-embodied sensations of dieting, anorexia, and bulimia.
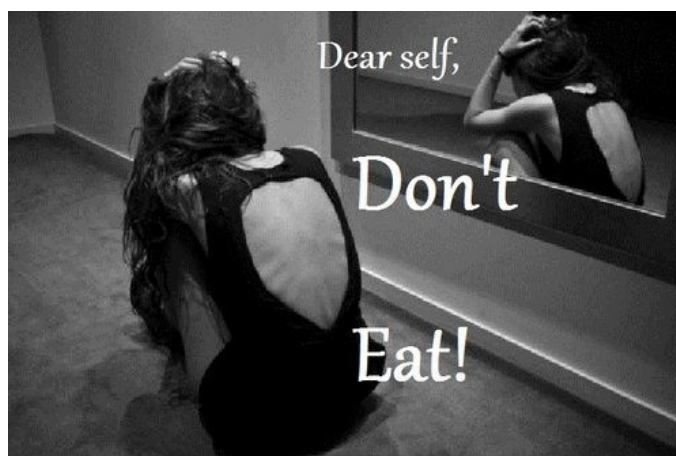

Figure 2.12 Autoscopic view of the body ("Dear self, Don't Eat!" http://pretty-fromwithin.tumblr.com/post/38398929941, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Degradation of the Body

Not only is the body portrayed as foreign to the immaterial mind/spirit, it is also conceived as

overtly antagonistic to it. In Megan Warin's study of anorexia, *Abject Relations: Everyday*

Worlds of Anorexia, "Disgust was a central element of participants' experiences of anorexia.

Disgust points to the abject relations that participants had with food, their own bodies, and other

people. In coming too close for comfort, disgust points to the dangers of relatedness." [29] Disgust

for the body, for its material presence and its needs, is also expressed openly in thinspiration. In

many images, a contempt for the limitations of the flesh is expressed textually and visually.

Visual cues that express and evoke a deeply troubling narrative about the disciplining of the flesh

through performative acts like the squeezing or cutting of it are exceedingly common (Figure

2.11). Aside from blatant allusions to the body as deserving of punishment, there are also visual

cues in the positioning of the body in particular settings (on the floor or in bathrooms) and

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[29] Megan Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia* (Rutgers University Press, 2009) 150.

contorted poses that communicate despondency and purposeful degradation of the flesh (see

Figures 2.3, 2.11, 2.12).

Passivity of the Body, Dominance of the Mind

Interestingly, though many images essentially call for discipline of the body, the models'

poses in pro-ana thinspiration are almost always passive. The vast majority of the images portray

the female body in a state of repose. Though this is easily read as another means of reinscribing

femininity by presenting the woman's body as available for visual consumption, it also serves an

additional function. The passivity shown in thinspiration of this type visually evinces a restrictive

technique for weight management, impressing a sense of the dominance of the mind as the sole

agent for attainment of this ideal body (Figures 2.13 and 2.14). The body, in thinspiration and in

the accounts of those struggling with eating disorders,[30] is most notably a hindrance in the path

to complete control. The passiveness of the body, as an object in need of discipline

(encapsulated by the Figure 2.10) echoes the Platonic conception of body and materiality as

formless and feminine.[31] Cressida Heyes explains that this conceptualization of the body

> …[r]elies on a metaphysics in which there is an underlying truth (a "hidden potential")
> within each individual. Disciplinary practices that take the somatic individual as their
> object, then, often have as their overt aim to make visible on the flesh some inner reality,
> thus obscuring the content relativism of the norms that define that alleged reality.[32]

The ability and desire to transform the flesh therefore become both the motivation for body

management and the *de facto* prize, allowing the ideologies motivating this to remain

unexamined.

[30] Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, 94.
[31] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 53.
[32] Cressida Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 34.

Figure 2.13 "Mind over matter" ("Mind over matter and I won't get fatter," http://itsjustkierra.tumblr.com/post/43567413873, 4/13/13).
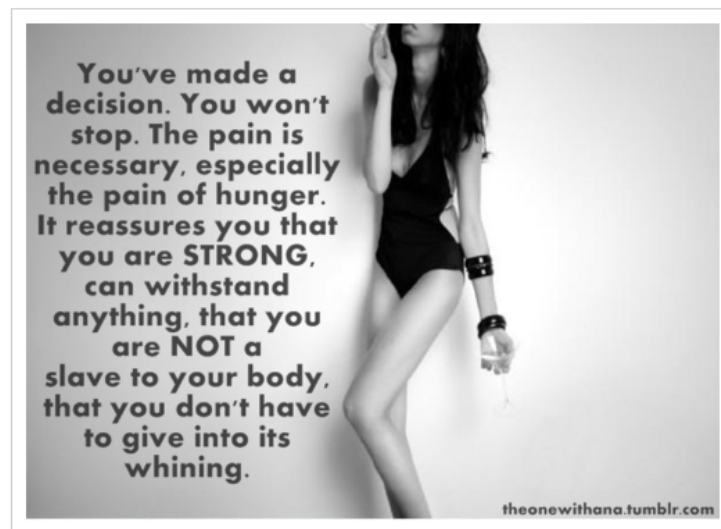
Figure 2.14 The mind as sovereign, ruling over the body ("You are not a slave to your body," http://lm1210.tumblr.com/post/34275677169, 2/25/13, screenshot).

Erasure of the Body

According to some feminist conceptualizations of eating disorders, the erasure of deeply entrenched negative cultural associations inscribed on the body (particularly the female body) can only be fully attained through the absolute dissolution of it through weight loss or anorexia.[33] For instance, in her critique of representations of the feminine body in mass culture, Susan Bordo cites Ellen West's personal account of her struggle with anorexia as the "ideal of being too thin, of being without body."[34] This journey toward material inexistence is thus the practice of those with eating disorders, and the common usage of words like "disappear" may even be read as references to the ultimate goal of "dis-appearing"(Figure 2.15). Furthermore, the preoccupation with the beauty of the "thigh gap" in thinspiration (Figure 2.16) indicates a focus on the negative space rather than the thickness of the body. In "Beyond Western Dis/orders" Mervat Nasser and Helen Malson describe this as the "'invisibility' of the emaciated body which at the same time as physically dematerialising 'screams out' its invisibility… a body that appears to disappear."[35] Visual conventions again may be seen to uphold this ideology: the focus on figuring the negative space and the desaturated pale images with minimalist fonts imposed on top of the body give the images a ghostly, supernatural appearance contributing to the aura of absence.

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[33] See Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body;* Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*; and Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture.*

[34] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 147.

[35] Mervat Nasser and Helen Malson, "Beyond Western Dis/Orders: Thinness and Self-Starvation of Other-Ed Women," *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 80.

Figure 2.15 Disappearing through thinspiration ("I'll starve myself until I fade away," http://eexhibita.tumblr.com/post/45395023079, 2/27/13, screenshot).
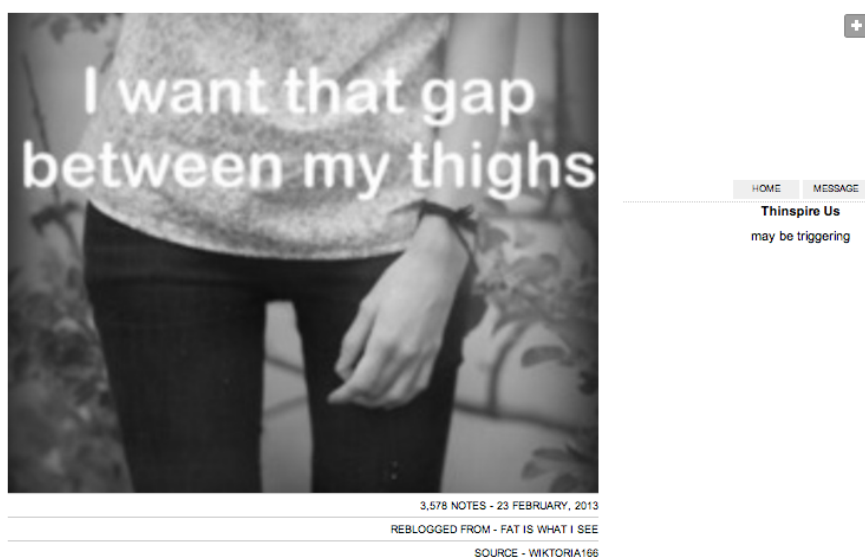
Figure 2.16 "Thigh gap" in thinspiration ("I want that gap between my thighs," http://thinspiring.tumblr.com/post/43857105301, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Interiority and Private Spaces

Thinspiration most frequently portrays the body in domestic, private spaces. This is in marked contrast with the public spaces often depicted in fitspiration (compare Figure 2.16 to Figure 2.7). This depiction of private space is accompanied by shallow depths of field in the

images, lending an aura of intimacy and allusion to self-portraiture (fabricated or not). While this convention also preserves traditional gender roles in which women are relegated to operating in the private sphere,[36] the solitude and interiority symbolically assert the individuality and transcendence of the self. Rather than portraying this ideal, disciplined body as a social, natural, or active one, thinspiration tends to show it as one that is individual and alone, distanced from external pursuits. Elizabeth Grosz postulates that the separation of mind and body is logically accompanied by social isolation. Grosz asserts that Cartesian dualism not only positions consciousness outside of the natural world and body, but it also removes it from "direct contact with other minds and a sociocultural community… The existence of other minds must be inferred from the apparent existence of other bodies. If minds are private, subjective, invisible, amenable only to first-person knowledge, we can have no guarantee that our inferences about other minds are in fact justified."[37] This distrust of others and belief that the surface can mask the interior self is also found in the clichés of thinspiration (see title in Figure 2.14). Through static compositions, in which the figure is the lone actor within the frame (though there is a visual interaction with the text), the individual subject is reified.

Textual Content

A picture-quote's text relies on linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical characteristics to convey meaning. Examining the deployment of these tactics in thinspiration text reveals the thematic and narrative content of the text. Although the words in the image may be read as captions, they should not be assumed to be simply denotative. The ideology articulated in the text may be very different, either in tone, style, or substance, from that of the pictorial content,

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[36] Gillian Perry, *Gender and Art.* (New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Open University, 1999) 14.
[37] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism,* 7.

and in this juxtaposition additional meanings can be made. While the words and pictures may be potentially contradictory, they are dynamic in their signifying potential. For this reason, the textual and visual elements of the thinspiration picture quote ought to be considered as distinct, but integral pieces in the communicative potential of thinspiration. Neither one may be completely reduced to the other, as they rely on each other to produce a legible message for those seeking thinspiration or body management encouragement.

Language itself must also be considered as a discursive framework through which and in which thinspiration does its work. In *Bodies That Matter*, Judith Butler finds that the body, considered to be at once preempting and an effect of signification, calls into question the representational status of language. According to Butler, language should be considered "productive, constitutive, one might even argue *performative*, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification."[38] Butler stresses that this does not reduce the body/materiality to a set of linguistic signifiers, but rather that the bonds between language and materiality are indissoluble.[39] This indissolubility of the body and language plagues the attempts of scholars to understand eating disorders, and complicates any assertions about causality and the significance of thinspiration.[40] However, the words inscribed into thinspiration images represent a nexus between various cultural discourses and the individual.

Control of the Body through Text

The intersection of the text-content of thinspiration and the paradigmatic moralization of the body in Greco-Christian dualism is illustrated textually through the invocation of control in

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[38] Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex,"* 30.
[39] Ibid., 30.
[40] For a great discussion of this issue see Maree Burns, "Bodies as (Im)Material? Bulimia and Body Image Discourse" in *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 124.

thinspiration. While anorexia in itself "signifies success and achievement, that one is sufficiently skinny or slim, that one is in control," the text in thinspiration insures that this connotation will not be lost on the viewer.[41] Phrases like "You control your body, your body doesn't control you" and "I don't care if it hurts, I want to have control" (Figure 1.5 and 2.14) invoke control in terms of surface references, but also seems to assert control in the phrasing itself. The heavy use of a strong, authoritative and sometimes imperative voice signifies in a way that a more passive or polite phrasing does not (Figure 2.12). This emphasizes the agency of the subject through the control of the body. In the text, it is clear that the interests of the pure and true inner self are separate from, and must always be asserted over, the flesh. A clear example of this is in the text of Figure 2.14, which reads: "You've made a decision. You won't stop. The pain is necessary, especially the pain of hunger. It reassures you that you are STRONG, can withstand anything, that you are not a slave to your body, that you don't have to give into its whining." The ability to deprive the body of something "it" desires, even to the point of pain, is idealized as it allows the captive will to exert its power. The sovereign mind that can enact its will on and through the inert flesh is continually expressed in thinspiration quotes and phrases.

Use of Cliché and Anonymity

In thinspiration the text used is often quotational, either through the use of cliché or direct quotes. Gary Morson examines the cultural value of quotes in his book, *The Words of Others*. Morson's stance is that the actual category of quotation has extremely fluid—if not totally meaningless—boundaries; language's ability to assimilate "foreign words and phrases, its development of clichés and idioms, and its deployment of a host of other quotational phenomena

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[41] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, 146.

often make it hard to say where one speaker's words end and another's begin."[42] This blurring of non-quotational language use and "quotational phenomena" is clearly evident in thinspiration text—most picture-quotes and text-images evoke external references or authored quotes through stylistic attributes, like rhyming or idiom use, without actually citing anything. Figure 2.5 is an example of the quotational text in thinspiration, which uses lines from Radiohead's song "Creep" without referencing the song or using quote marks. Morson sees this as a breakdown of quotation, as the presence or absence of quotation marks or attribution is "too crude an instrument to register degrees, and complex kinds, of quotationality."[43] In an interesting turn of phrase, Morson suggests that within language "the undigested is quoted, the assimilated is not."[44] More complicated quotes that use complex phrasing, include unusual words, or suggest formality are more likely to be marked as quotes. In thinspiration quotes marked as quotes—that is, words explicitly attributed to someone else—seem to be used only if the words are associated with a beautiful woman or model (see Figure 2.4 featuring a quote by model Kate Moss vs. Figure 2.5, with a quote from Radiohead). This indicates that external references to glamorous, thin, and beautiful women are also sometimes a means of signifying within thinspiration.

While Morson primarily describes variations and differences in quotational content not as errors but as illustrations of "the life of quotations," he also considers briefly the ideological effects of different types of quoting. In his view, the construction of cliché is not found in the words themselves or the frequency of use, but in the "intent of the user… [P]eople use clichés to shut down diversity of judgment."[45] The use of phrases that have the oblique quality of a quotation, whether or not they appear to have an actual author, is one of the ways in which

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[42] Gary Morson, *The Words of Others: From Quotations to Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011) 38.
[43] Morson, *The Words of Others: From Quotations to Culture*, 41
[44] Ibid., 50.
[45] Ibid., 63.

thinspiration can function as a means of normalization of particular assumptions about the mind and body. Figure 2.6 isolates a somewhat non-descript phrase and puts it in quotation marks, lending particularity and voice to the words. The use of quotation marks in this image also seems to highlight the deception in the statement as scare-quotes might, glorifying the lies that accompany disordered eating. According to Cressida Heyes, "normalization—this process of simultaneously defining the particular case and homogenizing the population—describes something important about the emergence of the somatic individual."[46] The quotational text present in thinspiration normalizes individualism and mind/body dualism ideologies by way of the homogenizing effect of quotationality. By repeating expressions and wordings, the self is continually presented as a sovereign of the body, reinforcing the assumption that a somatic identity is a means of attaining selfhood, as exhibited in thinspiration and user bios.

Text-Image and Bodilessness

The text-image is an interesting supplement to the picture-quote as it too breaks down the binary between text and image in a unique way. Images of text can easily be employed for expressive purposes and may actually be easier to circulate online in some instances. The content that is circulated in this form is ostensibly primarily textual; however, the choice to display and aggregate text demonstrates significant interest in the aesthetic quality of words and typography. Thinspiration text-images are able to draw upon or conjure a different history and discourse that can elide the problematic female body—that of literature and institutional forms of knowledge. In *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, Lisa Heywood describes the "anorexic" impulse of the modernist poets, evinced in the explicit obsession with eliminating the "fat" in their work, as dependent partly on the stripping of all indications of body:

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[46] Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, 36.

> The true poet is henceforth only words. He is the corpus or body of his work, having stripped his body of feminine characteristics or 'effusions.' This emphasis on hardness, paring down, and reducing the poetic body can be read as a corollary for the paradoxical reduction or elimination of the female body within imagist poetics.[47]

Visually, text-images often adhere to other thinspiration and pro-eating disorder stylistic conventions in their use of black and white imagery and the linear and slender qualities of letters in common fonts. The negative space of printed or digital text is often made to signify (see Figure 2.17) as it evokes a melancholic loneliness or disappearance. Similarly, the nonexistence of capital letters in this image make the words themselves take up less space and seem to be diminishing the significance of the subject.
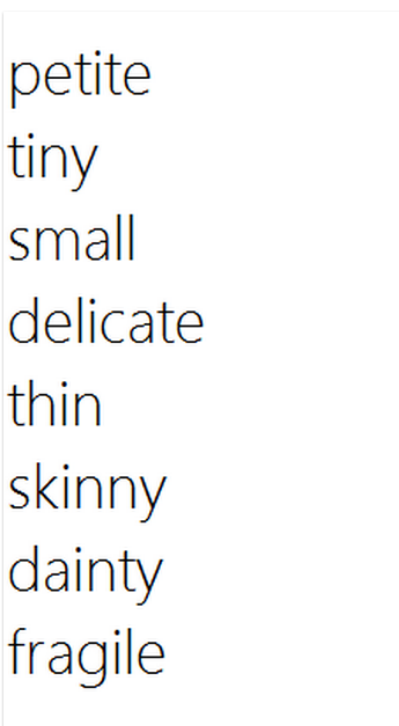
petite
tiny
small
delicate
thin
skinny
dainty
fragile

Figure 2.17 Text-image thinspiration ("Petite, tiny, small, delicate, thin, skinny, dainty, fragile," http://bitter-bulimicbitch.tumblr.com/post/46302023081, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Text-images are able to achieve the bodilessness that is only alluded to in photographic figurations of the body. The inner subjectivity is brought to the front, and associations with

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[47] Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, 101.

rationality, purity, enlightenment, and all of the other qualities that are ascribed to the interior self are reinforced. The thinspiration text-image is often in conversation with the photographic images of the body, tiled on pro-eating disorder accounts. Through its specific aesthetic characteristics, the text-image highlights the mind and brings to the forefront the rhetorical features and symbolic visual conventions that are central to thinspiration.

Conclusion

The visual and textual analysis of thinspiration reveals several important themes including the centrality of visual content, importance of authenticity, and mind/body dualism. In this chapter, I explored the conventions in the display of thinspiration, as well as a few of the sub-genres of thinspiration that have developed on Tumblr. Through the analysis of formal characteristics and narrative strategies employed in thinspiration images, mind/body dualism is figured again and again in various ways, stressing the importance of this ideology in disordered eating and body management. In the consistent depiction of the body in pro-eating disorder imagery as a fragmented, degenerate, and passive object of the mind, the notion that one must control and shape one's body is reinforced. The text used, both in conjunction with photographs and as text-image, reveals themes of control and discipline but also highlights the symbolic visual conventions. In various significant ways, from the formal characteristics of imagery, to the phrases and use of cliché, contemporary understandings of mind/body dualism are signified throughout thinspiration. All of the images examined also point to the importance of expression and the process of self-making that takes place in the creation of thinspiration, which will be explored further in Chapter III.

CHAPTER III. SELF-FULFILLMENT THROUGH SELF-DESTRUCTION

Introduction

In the examination of thinspiration at the micro-level within the image, as well as the

conventions apparent at a macro-level, various thematic consistencies emerge. It is clear that the

images circulated as thinspiration treat the body in a way that is consistent with many of the

dualistic ideological discourses described in Chapter I. However, the analysis of thinspiration as

a visual culture should not stop at the examination of visual qualities of the image. Instead,

according to visual culture studies scholar Nicholas Mirzoeff, analysis of images should take into

account "the importance of image making, the formal components of a given image, and the

crucial completion of that work by its cultural reception."[1] In this chapter, I examine the process

of making thinspiration images as an expressive practice, as well as the performances that take

place within the thinspiration photographs. Thinspiration images are at once aesthetic objects

that are used for self-representation, and documents of the performance of self. The

interpretation of both of these aspects as acts of creation further highlights thinspiration's

function as a form of self-making that operates through the tropes of mind/body dualism.

The Self in Thinspiration

Although thinspiration circulated online sometimes includes content clearly distributed

by mass-media outlets, it should not be reduced to a mere repetition of institutionalized

hegemonic media content. The emergence of thinspiration is also partly dependent on the

technical characteristics of its production and distribution as digital objects online. According to

Liz Eckerman's chapter in *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, the "cult of

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[1] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "What is Visual Culture?" in *The Visual Culture Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998) 3.

thinness" critique regarding the dissemination of images of thin women through mass media as described in the work of Helen Malson and Maree Burns and by Susan Bordo, does not apply in the contemporary mediascape.[2] Eckerman sees the emergence of "emo" (in reference to the self-styled dramatic "emotional" youth subculture) niche internet sites as providing new scripts for the body that are not exactly aligned with mainstream beauty ideals. Eckerman asserts, "the significance of the thinness of 'emo gaunt' young women is totally divorced from the 'body as coat hanger' symbolism of runway models."[3] While it is difficult (and problematic) to understand thinspiration as "totally divorced" and independent from mainstream culture, there is certainly a unique aesthetic in the "emo" thinspiration texts on Tumblr that should be considered.

The reproduction of this alternative aesthetic is enabled through the evolution of communication and expression made possible by new media advancements. Without the infinite reproducibility of digital technology, fast and efficient transfers of information, and the formation of niche groups consisting of geographically distant users, the images of thinspiration would likely look considerably different, and might even reflect different values. Undoubtedly, the subject portrayed in thinspiration is often somber or pained, with a figuration of the body that is markedly different from the idealized body depicted by the fashion industry and in dominant configurations of the body in the "cult of thinness" of mainstream media. More extensive observation of differences and similarities between user-generated, or amateur, images in thinspiration and the ideal body presented in film or commercial enterprises might elucidate the function of thinspiration. It seems that in user-generated thinspiration there is something else at

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[2] Eckerman, "Theorising Self-Starvation: Beyond Risk, Governmentality and the Normalizing Gaze" In *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders* (New York: Routledge, 2009). Helen Malson and Maree Burns, *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders*, 1.; Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 47.
[3] Eckerman, "Theorising Self-Starvation: Beyond Risk, Governmentality and the Normalizing Gaze" In *Critical Feminist Approaches to Eating Dis/Orders,*10.

stake that cannot be reduced to the need to adhere to mainstream beauty or fashion standards. The examination of thinspiration should thus be conscious of the particularities of its form and medium, as digital imagery transmitted through the internet, and of how this shapes its use and content.

The particularities of thinspiration (including its visual characteristics, creation processes, and exhibition) are carefully constructed instances of self-representation that hinge on the expression of vernacular beliefs regarding mind and body. While these beliefs are deeply entrenched in popular body management discourse, and for the most part rely on traditional dualist ideologies, thinspiration also is a space in which people struggling with disordered eating and body image issues may create themselves as active agents. The polysemic nature of thinspiration images allows those who create and display them to articulate their personal concerns and understandings of the culture around them and cast themselves as subjects in these discourses.

The politics of self-representation that takes place in thinspiration and within pro-eating disorder accounts is important to consider. Self-representation is ubiquitous throughout any society and can serve important social, political, and personal goals. As a genre, self-representation is always mediated and always political in the sense that it deploys "strategies of which aspects of the self should be represented and how."[4] Thinspiration images, especially those with clear user intervention (via the application of text, cropping, or arrangement), display the producer's intention of directing the reading of the image, and highlight the expressive nature of the medium and its potential use as a means for identity formation. This type of creative expression of identity is commonplace in everyday use of the internet. As Simon Bronner explains in his discussion of jokes online in *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in*

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[4] Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 8.

a Digital World, "being disembodied allows for role playing, speech play, visual representation, bricolage, and sometimes anonymity, each of which supports elaboration of the self—and connection to a group—through expressive material."[5] While the users who collect and display thinspiration appear to be anything but disembodied (despite their own efforts and assertions to the contrary), the elaboration of the social self through bricolage, visual representation, and anonymity is certainly present in their work.

Expressive Possibilities in Tumblr Interface

In addition to the complicated interaction within the thinspiration image, there is important information to be gleaned from the situation of these images in the visual and narrative space of the Tumblr page. One of the reasons that I chose to investigate the circulation of thinspiration on Tumblr is its particularly customizable layout, which presents users with an opportunity for expression and creativity. Unlike sites such as Pinterest and Instagram, which do not allow for even the most basic customization of font or background, or most blogging platforms, which are fairly limited in terms of their layout or potential for customization, Tumblr pages are open to a wide variety of user intervention (see Figure 3.1, with the top and bottom images for comparison). The layout, including the positioning and presentation of content in the screen space, the "theme" or visual style, and the links and applications embedded in the page are all easily manipulated.

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[5] Simon J. Bronner, "Digitizing and Virtualizing Folklore," *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, ed. Trevor J. Blank (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2009.)
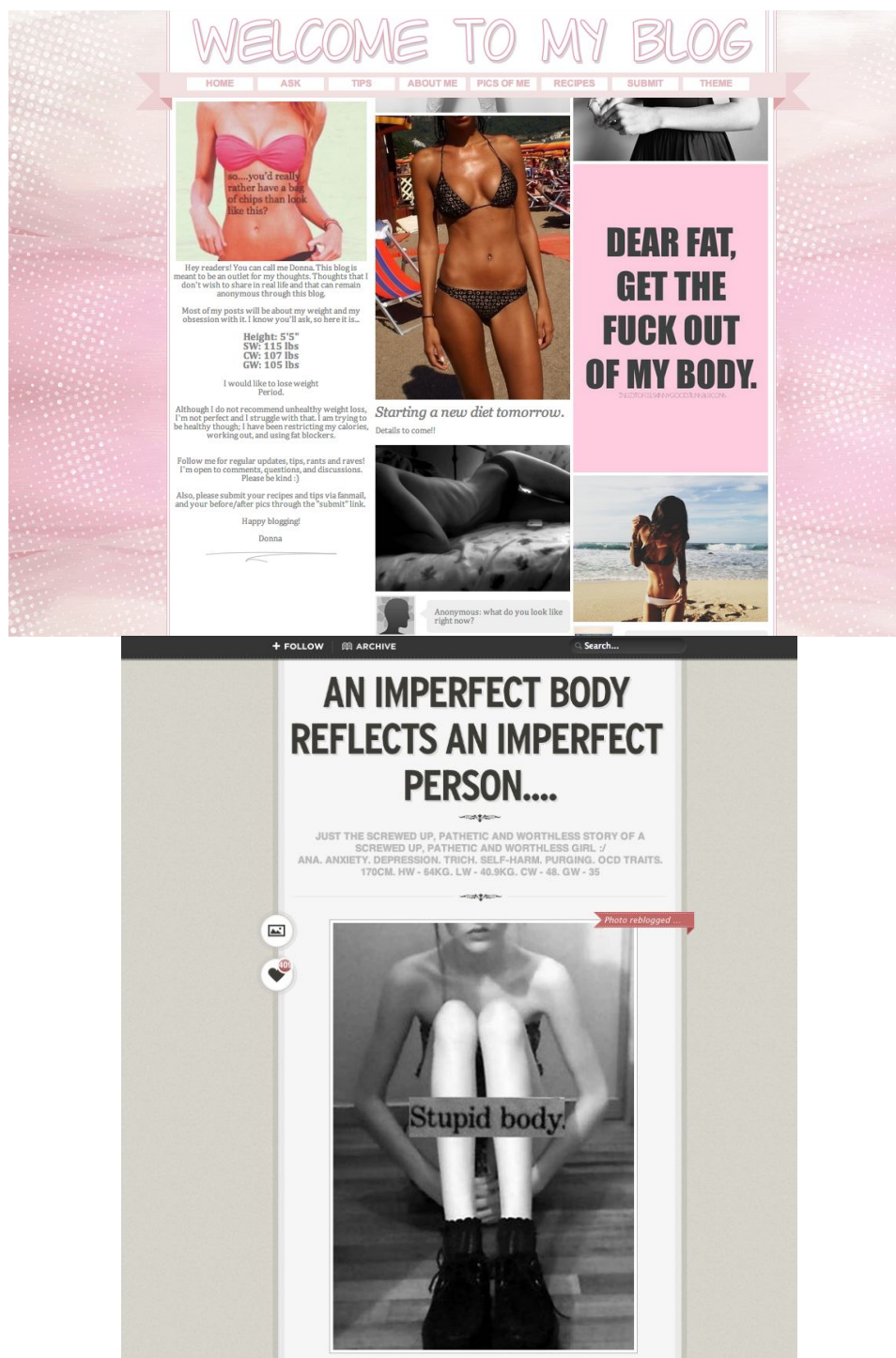
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Figure 3.1

Top: Example of account layout featuring thinspiration and fitspiration ("Skinny4eva," http://skinny4eva.tumblr.com/, 4/13/13, screenshot).

Bottom: Example of an account layout featuring thinspiration with traditional chronological layout and less modified template ("An imperfect body reflects an imperfect person," http://to-be-butterful.tumblr.com/post/45468250479, 4/13/13, screenshot).

The examination of Tumblr pages as a personal archive parallels that of other established practices of informal personal expression. The mode of production on Tumblr shares many similarities with activities like quilting, scrapbooking, and diary keeping. The presentation of material on Tumblr accounts, like the images examined by Lisa Nakamura in *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, can resemble quilting "in the sense that like pinboards they are accreted out of scraps that are differently sourced and may not match, yet all have meaning."[6] Each image or text entry is laid out on the page and juxtaposed in order to create an overarching narrative. Much like scrapbooking, the presentation of images online may "work through a logic of selection of existing modules or scraps and the subsequent accumulation and arrangement of these pieces into something new."[7] The careful arrangement of parts that goes into the production and presentation of the Tumblr page is similar to that of scrapbooks, though they are less about the collection of unique memories, and more about the keeping and ordering of aesthetically appealing, personally expressive, or potentially useful content.

This alterability creates a significant layer in which users may represent themselves. Some of the most obvious instances of expression in this realm include the Tumblr domain name, the page title, the background and color themes, and the presentation of biographical information. However, the Tumblr interface itself inevitably limits expression to a certain degree through its modulation of user interaction. Lev Manovich explains that this modulation of interface is not without consequence:

> The computer interface acts as a code which carries cultural messages in a variety of media…. In cultural communication, a code is rarely simply a neutral transport mechanism; usually it affects the messages transmitted with its help…. A code may also

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[6] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001) 164.
[7] Ibid., 164.

provide its own model of the world, its own logical system, or ideology; subsequent cultural messages or whole languages created using this code will be limited by this model, system or ideology.[8]

The default interface forced upon the Tumblr user is not neutral. It encourages the presentation of media over long blocks of text, discourages direct conversations between users (through the omission of comment fields), and most readily allows for the presentation of material in a linear and chronological fashion. All of these aspects point to Tumblr's ideological orientation, which reifies individual expression and rational ordered approaches to the space, and reinforces its use as an image aggregator and micro-blogging platform.[9] However, the Tumblr users have a certain measure of agency within this framework: they retain control over presentation and linking, and there is further latitude available to those dedicated enough to find ways around limitations. The aesthetic choices represented by the Tumblr template can reflect the nature of the user's engagement with particular taste cultures and act as a means through which a user may express his or her identity and alignment with them. Thus, expression in this realm should inform the analysis of image and text content.

The aesthetics of the Tumblr site, as well as the images hosted within it, may be a means of expression through their alignment of the user with specific social groups or taste cultures. In *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture*, Leslie Heywood suggests that a great deal of the psychology and culture surrounding anorexia is influenced by modernist aesthetics. Heywood asserts that it is essential to "re-read modernism when we are trying to understand anorexia, because it is in modernism we find the kind of truth claim that may be even more influential than the dominant media images and beauty ideals for women that are so often

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[8] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 76.
[9] Tumblr is unlike forums, for instance, which are reliant on community interaction, or sites that do not enforce the presentation of material chronologically.

said to 'cause' the disease."[10] This "truth claim" of modernism involves the abjection of excess, body, and femininity in favor of an invented notion of purity, transcendence, and masculinity. This results in an emphasis on minimalism and "pure" design elements in modernism.

The modernist aesthetic is also notable in the trends regarding layout in pro-eating disorder accounts. While more casual thinspiration aggregators have a variety of types of layouts and themes, the more explicitly pro-ED users often choose achromatic layouts with minimal adornment. Heywood asserts that "anorexics and modernist writing pursue the same goal, which is characterized by a symbology of the body structured by a shared cultural logic: that which defines the female as extraneous, dependent and chaotic, in need of control by deduction."[11] Lisa Nakamura notes that within contemporary aesthetic principles, "the emphasis on functionality, 'cleanness,' and simplicity has long been employed as a way to critique and gender women's aesthetic decisions as 'frilly femininity.'"[12] Distinct visual trends in thinspiration and the sites that house it show a clear rejection of the cluttered, decorative aesthetic associated with femininity and low culture. In thinspiration, the modernist aesthetics of purity and functionality are demonstrated through gestures toward austerity and minimalism in images and page layouts or themes, and an overall suppression of the ornamental. The ubiquitous use of black and white in Tumblr layouts and imagery not only alludes to a morose or ominous emotional state, but also shows a conscious rejection of decorative color. Similarly, the generally spare or empty-feeling layouts and themes used in pro-eating disorder accounts underscore the aesthetic rejection of all that is associated with "low" feminine sensibilities: frivolity, ornamental embellishment, lack of structure, and non-intellectualism.

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[10] Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996) 61.

[11] Ibid., 69.

[12] Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, 139.

Expressive Tactics in the Production of Picture-Quotes

        The picture-quote form of thinspiration is unlike some other forms of thinspiration because of the clarity of user intervention—it is clear that *someone* decided to add text to the image. Though there are many instances in which thinspiration might include the introduction of new, or user-generated, material (as in the case of the "real girl" self-portrait style exemplified by Figures 2.5 and the images in Figure 3.3), frequently there is a manipulation or arrangement of pre-existing elements (as in Figure 3.2). This is an important means of authorship and can be very expressive. According to Lev Manovich, in *The Language of New Media*, the conceptualization of production and authorship in new media contexts must move away from older models that include the romantic idealization of the author as creator. Instead of creating "unique" images or text from scratch, as a traditional novelist or painter might, in the construction of new media objects like thinspiration the "creative energy of the author goes into selection and sequencing of elements rather than original design."[13] Images that display a picture (regardless of whether its contents may be characterized as found or user-generated) in combination with text show this authorial intent, and the desire to direct the reading of the picture.

        The addition of text to a thinspiration image may be produced through very basic user interaction or extensive image editing processes. The editing can be executed through the importing of the image to a program that allows the addition of text to an image (which can range from basic mobile apps to professional grade programs like Adobe Photoshop) or the use of a web-based image editor with a function that allows for the addition of text. While this act of intervention could be as simple as the user typing (or copying and pasting) words that would

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[13] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 130.

otherwise be used as a caption outside of the frame, positioning of the text within the image as part of editing processes, creates additional symbolic potential and can represent significant intention. While a user may be relying on the default settings for font choice, size, and color, the text in the picture quote often displays a more involved process of aesthetic production. This aesthetic construction could include the choice of font, the spacing of characters, the coordination of text color with the colors of the image, applying effects on the text such as transparency, outline, or shadows, and the arrangement of the words in a way that enhances the image's legibility or in some way alters the emphasis of the image compositionally. All of these aesthetic choices encode particular meanings and may be decoded by viewers.

The profound effects that the placement of text can have, as well as the intentionality of the image, are evident in the bottom image in Figure 3.2. While the photo of the girl on the beach has been circulated as thinspiration without text superimposed (for example, see the top and bottom images in Figure 3.2, which is also appropriated and altered through cropping), at some point during its circulation a user decided to appropriate the image and add text. The textual effects in this case are minimal. The words are equally spaced and centered in the image, each word above the next. The top of the word "I" is lined up with the top of the model's head, and covers much of her face, and the other words loosely follow the shape of her body. The text is not carefully placed around the body as it is in some other picture-quotes. However, the letters are not overly distracting as they closely match the tones of the rest of the image—rather than obstructing the body, the superimposition effectively draws the eye to its shape. The font is not an uncommon one (though its minimalist aesthetic is likely an important factor as thinspiration rarely includes blocky, thick, or ornate fonts), and it is also typical in its use of transparency effects that allow the parts of the image behind the text to appear through it. Because of this

semi-translucent effect, rather than simply occluding parts of the girl's body, the text allows her body to be consumed *through* it. All of these factors work together to represent the producer's sensibilities regarding aesthetic taste and enhance the function of the image. Potential readings of the unaltered image, as for instance a depiction of a happy girl (with an unambiguous identity) on the beach during vacation, are suppressed with the addition of an outside voice within the frame. The image's ideological work is exposed and potentially dramatically changed through the addition of words. Unlike pictures with captions, in which the text may be altered or removed by any user posting or re-blogging the image, picture-quotes preserve and display this act of producer intention.

The creative rights asserted in watermarks or on Tumblr accounts point to the users' regard for thinspiration as original, expressive work. Digital images are often said to complicate claims to originality, as they are infinitely reproduced and alterable.[14] Perhaps it is for this reason that "watermarks" or signatures are often included in thinspiration, as are images that confirm the identity of the poster (through the use of time stamps and the repetition of scenery or props). Though the identifying information on thinspiration is never (to my knowledge) the full name of the producer, images commonly include the URL or Tumblr domain that wishes to be credited.[15] Occasionally there are disclaimer remarks that explain that the content displayed on the account is *not* the creative property of the user, or offer to give credit to other users if they see their work on the site. For instance, "thinspo-love" writes in her bio, "Any of the pictures that I post (not reblog) are just random pictures I found on random sites on the internet (such as google) that are saved to my computer. I don't claim any credit for these, none of them belong to me. If by some

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[14] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet,* 168.
[15] This is not unusual as extensive personal information that is linked to "IRL" identity is not commonly displayed in pro-eating disorder content.

chance I end up posting a picture that is of you, and you want me to delete it, just send me an ask and I absolutely will."[16] There are also some users who complain about the use of their images without proper sourcing or credit. A user-altered photo is more likely to include a watermark than photos without text or text-images, suggesting the importance of the act of alteration to the users' claim of ownership. The frequent use of signatures in images circulated online and proclamations of creative rights also indicate the producers' desire for recognition and sense of originality.
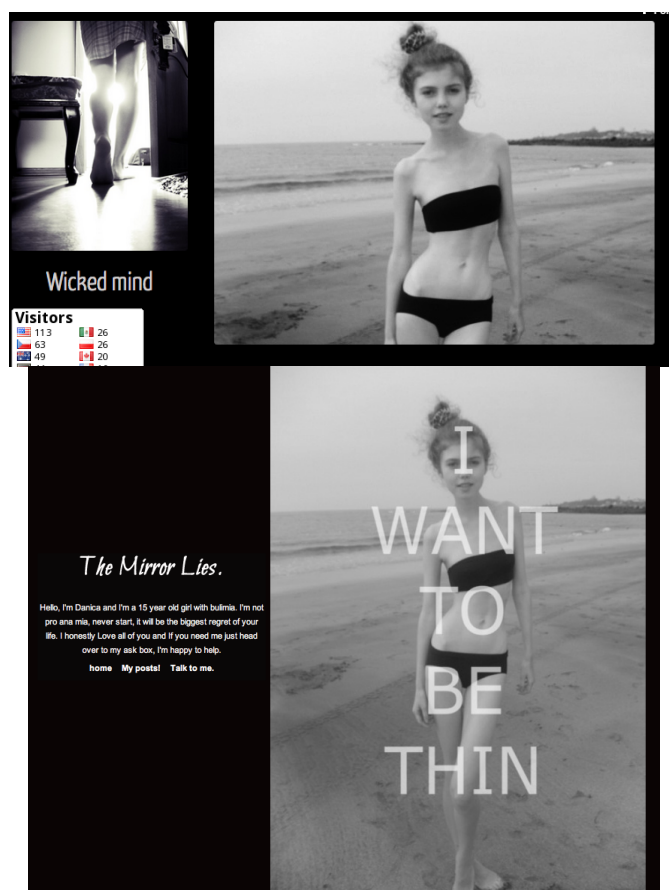

Figure 3.2
Top: Cropped found image used as thinspiration (Girl on beach, http://my-wicked-mind.tumblr.com/post/1617855136, 2/27/13, screenshot).
Bottom: User-produced picture-quote with found image ("I want to be thin," http://trying-to-be-skin-and-bones.tumblr.com/post/31100026609, 2/27/13, screenshot).

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[16] Bio of http://thinspo-love.tumblr.com, 4/14/13.

Performances in Thinspiration Images

While many images used as thinspiration are appropriated from commercial media and

feature professional models, there is a great deal of amateur personal digital photography that

also must take place. The photos used in thinspiration are not snapshots, but are generally

carefully orchestrated and performative self-portraits. In an analysis of the performative self-

portrait in fine art, Amelia Jones describes the complexity of photographic self-representation:

> In the self-portrait, this subject [of the portrait] is the artist herself or himself, and the
> promise of the artwork to deliver the artist in some capacity to the viewer, a promise
> central to our attraction to images, is seemingly fulfilled. In the photograph, an indexical
> image of the "real" is supposedly presented through the technological means of
> mechanical reproduction, tempting the viewer to return to it as a document of the
> truth….[17]

The truth claims of the photographic self-portrait are harnessed in thinspiration and seem to be

part of the meaning embedded in its form. In *Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political*

Violence, Susie Linfield notes that the dedication to self-documentation by those experiencing

tragedy or pain proves that, "far from being 'supremely uninterested,' those who have suffered

through violent upheavals have much to tell us, and they have gone to extraordinary lengths to

do so."[18] The subjects of self-portrait-style thinspiration are indeed going to great lengths to

share their bodies and experiences online and assert their realities. As digital self-portraits,

thinspiration can be analyzed as a visual object, and of the process of its composure.

The photographs in thinspiration are not naïve and unselfconscious, as some analyses of

amateur photography have suggested, and although they are certainly part of a social practice,

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[17] Amelia Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," *Signs* 27, no. 4
(Summer 2002), 951.
[18] Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence* (Chicago: The University of Chicago
Press, 2010) 99.

they are still personally expressive and creative in many senses.[19] Images that portray the subject in an informally decorated or untidy bedroom are very common, as are occasional visual attributes such as the appearance of a flash in a mirror and low-definition graininess or blurriness indicating the use of a webcam or camera of amateur quality. These aesthetic qualities not only indicate the technological processes used to construct them, but also conjure particular moods through their washed-out color palettes and blurry lack of particularity. The visual attributes also indicate the privacy of the picture-taking process. Frequently taken in private spaces of the home, such as bathrooms and bedrooms, the self-portraits evoke the privacy of the performance and invite a voyeuristic gaze.

Beyond the visual cues, thinspiration self-portraits can be considered performative. When conceiving of the contents of the self-portrait photograph, according to Amelia Jones, "we move into the performative arena as the apparently static object (the person depicted, frozen, fetishized in the photograph) becomes a subject […] where the object is, indeed, the subject of making."[20] Self-portraiture by its nature allows the body depicted in the photo to truly gain subjectivity. The authorship and desire to recreate the aesthetic in faked self-portraits is an important part of the meaning of thinspiration. The self-portrait is a genre of image making which has been ascribed with additional significance, and which can also be harnessed in thinspiration. Jones explains the reliance of selfhood on the self-portrait image: "While the photographic portrait in general has historically been mobilized as a way of solidifying the making and viewing subject (the centered, Cartesian, Western "individual") […] it can only do this, as more recent practices have seemed

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[19] Patricia Zimmerman describes two unproductive approaches to amateur photography as either the assumption that they are either pure and ahistoric, or primarily a social rite stripped of artistic intent. Patricia Zimmerman, *Reel Families: A Social History of Amateur Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995) 6-7.
[20] Jones, "The 'Eternal Return': Self-Portrait Photography as a Technology of Embodiment," 960.

to stress, by *passing through the object.*"[21] Like other forms of portraiture, the object (or

photographic documentation), alongside the performance within the image, are important in

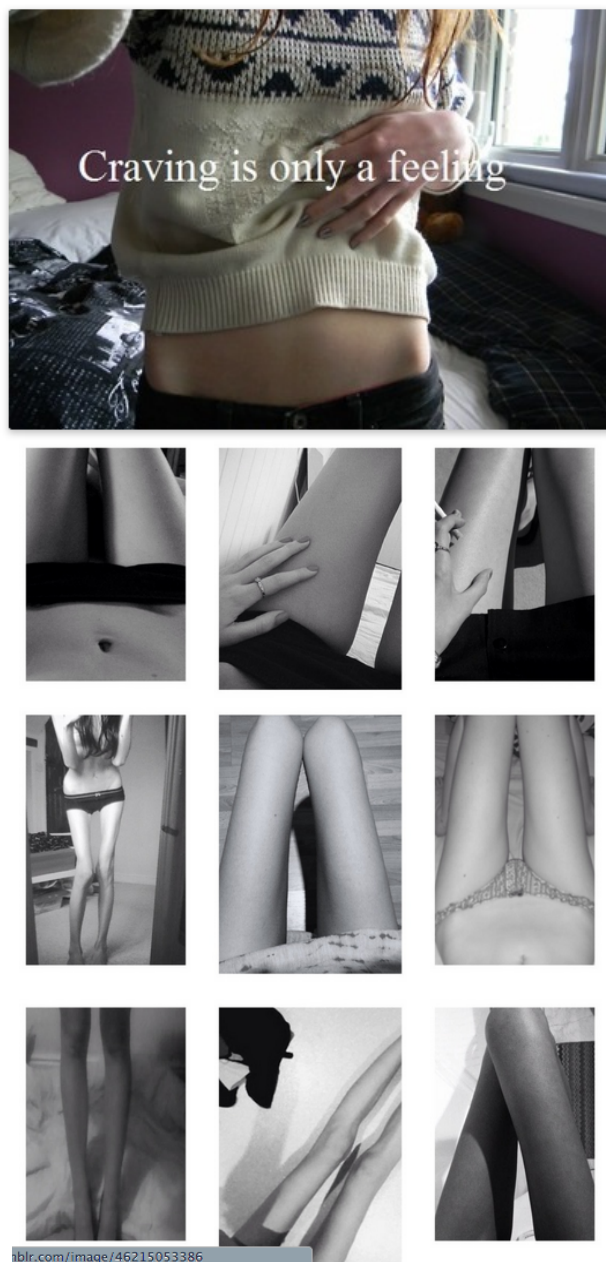constructing a narrative of subjectivity in thinspiration.

Figure 3.3 Self-portrait style thinspiration
Top: ("Craving is only a feeling," http://skinnnnnny.tumblr.com/post/31634821685/, 4/14/13,
    screenshot).
Bottom: (Leg images, http://thinspirin-g.tumblr.com/post/46215053386, 4/14/13, screenshot).

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[21] Ibid., 960.

There are various performative processes of composure in thinspiration self-portraiture. The production of the images often involves the positioning of the body in close range of the camera, sometimes even including an arm extended toward the edge of the frame (ostensibly toward a computer with a webcam or holding a camera or phone as in the top image in Figure 3.3). The shallow depth in the images of thinspiration is useful for its ability to frame particular body parts, but also as a means to emphasize the subjectivity of the artist/subject. Frequently there are "point of view" images circulated that convey the subject's sense of embodiment (bottom image in Figure 3.3). Pro-eating disorder self-portraits often conceal the identity of the subject, in contrast with professional photos that generally include the model's face, pointing to the underlying objectification of the body and shame of embodiment. Each of these attributes displays a certain amount of visual literacy and intentionality in terms of the ability to produce images in a particular formal vocabulary. Throughout all of the performances within images and the aesthetic choices in their display, thinspiration is part of the discursive struggle to manage the conflicted meanings of disorder, thinness, and subjectivity.

Gender Performance and Eroticism

Traditional gender binaries are rarely transgressed in thinspiration. Though Susan Bordo and others have found evidence that there are ways in which anorexia may be seen as an attempt to become masculine and desexualize the body,[22] thinspiration performances seem to primarily illustrate the ways in which girls and women have internalized their feminine roles through their replication of the cultural objectification of the female body. Despite the fact that women are often the primary participants in the exchange and display of thinspo images, there is a definite erotic, and occasionally outright pornographic, charge to them. In many images, the model is

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[22] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 156.

passively posed and almost nude (see bottom image of Figure 3.3). Thinspiration, for the most part, supports the argument that weight-loss, dieting, and anorexia are actually extreme and problematic performances of femininity that allow women to access a feeling of agency through the control and discipline of their own bodies.[23]

In most of the mainstream thinspiration images the erotically and passively posed girls are either fashionably dressed in composed outfits, or are semi-undressed with tight and frilly feminine undergarments exposed. The consistent portrayals of the thin body as frail and the hyperfeminine posing in thinspiration support Susan Bordo's connection of prescriptive gender roles that expect women to dedicate their bodies to the service of others with the development of eating disorders. This connection, according to Bordo, is manifested in the contemporary valuation of restraint from the expression of desire in all arenas—especially those relating to food, public presence, power, and sexual gratification.[24] From this perspective, the performance of frailty and self-abnegation is closely linked to femininity. Thinspiration posing that emphasizes submissiveness and fragility, as well as the intense focus on visual consumption of the female body, may be read as part of the performance of femininity.

Representations of the Body in Pain

The performative representations of the individual nature of suffering and pain in thinspiration are used to highlight the agency of the subject. Representation of the body in pain has been theorized widely by visual culture scholars and seems to be an important part of the signification in thinspiration. James Elkins, in *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, explains that "the crucial issue in studying pictures of the body must be the expressive value of each individual choice: what *kind* of pain is being evoked, exactly *where* the sensation is

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[23] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa,* 146.
[24] Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body,* 117.

strongest, precisely *how* the analogies operate."[25] The pain that is expressed in thinspiration is that of both an "inner" psychical nature and the starving, contorted and disciplined body. The images in Figure 3.4 show the centrality of pain expressed in two distinct ways. The top image represents an interior pain in the text and posing, while the bottom image shows the material traces of pain and self-injury. Pain is performed in photos of thinspiration and highlighted through text and Tumblr account layout and can be a marker of individual subjectivity, as well as a somatic identity. Susie Linfield writes, "The photograph of suffering presents us, too, with the specific, *individual* experience of suffering."[26] While discourse about eating disorders in general can draw attention to societal problems, the self-portraiture of thinspiration "singles out the individual from the mass and confronts us with the particularity, and the terrible loneliness, of suffering."[27] It is in the singularity of the thinspiration self-portrait that the subject can construct herself as an agent rather than patient or victim.

The ability to feel pain is often a marker of subjectivity and humanity. According to Samantha Holland in "Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body, and Gender in Contemporary Cyborg Cinema," the "concept of pain—a common theme in the philosophy of the 'mind'—is invoked as a sure signifier of humanness."[28] Thinspiration also invokes pain as a signifier of humanness, and through its portrayal creates an aura of authenticity and individual identity within the image. Lisa Nakamura explains that digital images portraying embodied pain can carry an assumed authenticity "because these bodily images invoke the 'semimagical act' of remembering types of suffering that are inarticulate, private, hidden within domestic… spaces

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[25] James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999) 276.

[26] Linfield, *The Cruel Radiance: Photography and Political Violence,* 39.

[27] Ibid., 38.

[28] Samantha Holland, "Descartes Goes to Hollywood: Mind, Body, and Gender in Contemporary Cyborg Cinema," *The American Body in Context: An Anthology* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001) 17.

that exclude the public gaze."[29] The "remembering" of inarticulate and private suffering through

its depiction and enactment in thinspiration is deeply affecting and relies on expressive

performances as well as image-making techniques.

Figure 3.4 Depiction of interior and corporeal pain in thinspiration
Top: ("I'll be fine, just not today," http://stop-eating-to-be-skinny.tumblr,cin/post/44996503925,
    4/14/13, screenshot).
Bottom: ("Fat," http://thinspirin-g.tumblr.com/post/44936267703, 4/14/13, screenshot).

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[29] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet,* 168.

Identity and Agency through Control of the Flesh

The embodiment that occurs in virtual spaces through symbolic representation is often incredibly important for those who are not often self-represented in other media.[30] The desire to represent the misrepresented body is one of the central functions of thinspiration. The bodies of young women and those suffering from eating disorders are highly visible, often as objects of medical and moral discourse, and are highly regulated in private family structures and public institutions. It is likely important, therefore, that thinspiration images create an alternative narrative that evokes embodied pain and sadness, as well as a sacred interiority that is far removed from the control of parents, schools, doctors, and even other teenagers.

Articulation of the Individual and Self

Cressida Heyes considers body management and modification practices as a means for the achievement of selfhood as they can "promise far more than a transformation of the flesh; they guarantee a new relationship to oneself in which one will be more self-confident, have more capacities, live a better life, and even be more 'natural.'"[31] It is this promise that underlies thinspiration and provides a positive incentive to its users. The invocation of the inner authentic self, or soul, in thinspiration is part of the functioning of this narrative. In Judith Butler's reading of Foucault, the "soul" is conceived of as a "normative and normalizing ideal according to which the body is trained, shaped, cultivated, and invested; it is an historically specific imaginary ideal… under which the body is effectively materialized."[32] This "soul" is a central concern in thinspiration and is reified through body management discourse. The control over the body that

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[30] Ibid., 159.

[31] Cressida Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).35.

[32] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge Classics. Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2011; 1993) 33.

is promised and reinforced by thinspiration is destructive in terms of its physical and psychological effects, but productive of a particular, socially valued, type of identity. Malson suggests that "the 'control' achieved through 'anorexia' also functions to produce identity." By constructing this identity, based on the rhetoric of control and individualism, the person suffering from disordered eating is "the subject as well as the object of control."[33] In this sense, the narrative can position the subject outside of the influence of society, in rebellion, and ultimately in a more powerful position than as a patient in a medical context.

In the analysis of interviews conducted with anorexics, Malson found that "whilst there is a diversity in these oppositional constructions, the accounts also converge on the issue of identity."[34] According to Malson, the discourse of individualism "interpellates the subject as a sovereign and unitary individual… based on a liberal ideology, setting up as its ideal 'the autonomous, self-directed, self-governing individual who stands separate from society and social influences.'"[35] The importance of individualism is articulated amply by interviewees struggling with anorexia in Malson's study, but individualism is also a common trope in the word content of thinspiration.

Similarly, countering reductive accounts of some theorists that seem to suggest that those suffering from eating disorders are passive consumers of popular media that produces the desire to be thin, Heywood suggests that the mythologies of the "individualism of the modernist artist…[set] a paradigm for the anorexic who wants, beyond all things, to stand out as superior."[36] According to thinspiration, it is not the desire to adhere to beauty norms that produces disordered eating. Instead, it is an achievement of a self through the denial and shaping

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[33] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, 146.
[34] Ibid., 147.
[35] Ibid., 151.
[36] Leslie Heywood, *Dedication to Hunger: The Anorexic Aesthetic in Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California, 1996) 61.

of the body, which both creates the disorder and constitutes an identity. In many thinspiration

quotes, there is an express desire to deny social influence on their development of disordered

eating or their desire to be thin. Figure 3.5 exemplifies some of these images in thinspiration by

asserting that the desire to be thin and/or disordered eating is entirely self-directed. The emphasis

on self apart from society indicates the centrality of individualism in the discourse of

thinspiration. According to Malson, by denouncing the possibility that social pressures may

influence the adoption of anorexic practices or the desire to be thin, the anorexic secures his or

her identity as "a sovereign and unitary individual."[37] This is inevitably limiting, as

the"imperative to construe oneself as governed by an *internal* self rather than by *external* society

curtails a more political construction of the self as socially pressured to be thin." Thinspiration

sometimes directly confronts popular interpretations of eating disorders as either the direct

expression of the need to conform to societal expectations or medicalization of the user as a

passive patient (both of which construct people with eating disorders as essentially devoid of

autonomy and individualism), and sometimes obliquely addresses them in the performance of

non-conformity.

Thinspiration's call to individualism operates both through the positioning of self against

society and through the emphasis on the "inner" self (see previous chapter Figures 2.10, 2.13,

2.14). In the testimony of her interviewees, Malson notes that there is the assumption that "'the

self' is 'underneath' the appearance" and that because it is internal it is "implicitly dichotomized

from (external) society."[38] This discourse of internal self vs. external society is also reinforced by

individualism, which "produces the idealized subject position of self-governing individual and

constitutes identity in terms of topographical metaphors such as body boundaries, internality,

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[37] Ibid., 152.

[38] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, 155.

externality, superficiality and depth."[39] Thus, the common mind/body metaphors that spatialize

identity and locate the self inside and apart from the body, which are omnipresent in

thinspiration, also support individualism. Quotes in thinspiration that reinscribe the notions of

interiority vs. exteriority and individualism are matched by the visual cues discussed in Chapter

II and are based on a concept of mind/body dualism.

Figure 3.5: Assertions of independence in thinspiration ("It's not society's idea of beauty, it's
my idea of my own idea happiness,"
http://tryingforperfection.tumblr.com/post/40305343899, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Problematic Subjectivities: Self-Making Through Thinspiration

Another important part of self-making that takes place through thinspiration is the

development of somatic identity. As Nikolas Rose points out, the language used to describe the

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[39] Ibid., 157.

self as an individual in everyday personal narratives is innately formative. Rose explains that the "rules of this 'grammar' of individuals—'language games'—produce or induce a moral repertoire of relatively enduring features of personhood […]. Talk about the self actually makes up types of self-awareness and self-understanding that human beings acquire and display in their lives *and* makes up social practices themselves…."[40] In contemporary society, according to Rose, "psychological language is thus one of the key components of the modern soul."[41] The frequent use of medical diagnoses in user bios and tags for thinspiration content and personal narratives points to the formation of somatic identities described by Cressida Heyes as the "democratization of biopolitics." To Heyes, the somatic individual is problematic, as the democratization is "less a matter of liberation through creating and disseminating new forms of knowledge (although it may be that) and more a matter of creating increasingly minute forms of deviance, defining every somatic individual as having failed to fully embody some norm or other, and freighting somatic expression with moral meanings."[42] The identification with particular psychological or medical diagnoses is thus a process of normalization. Heyes suggests that the "subjects emerging from this disciplinary regime eventually have no political choice but to organize around their identities."[43] Ethically, however, Heyes suggests that the somatic identity is bad and limiting in many senses. In this process, identities of the self as "disordered" are formed, which are then addressed through self-help techniques that tend to reinforce this identity.

Though individualism and associated liberal and humanistic ideologies have been important politically in helping individuals secure rights, their inscription in the understandings

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[40] Nikolas Rose, "Assembling the Modern Self," *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*, (London: Routledge, 1996) 237-238.
[41] Rose, "Assembling the Modern Self," *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Middle Ages to the Present*, 238.
[42] Heyes, *Self Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies*, 35.
[43] Ibid., 32.

of self expressed by thinspiration and mind/body dualism indicate some problematic aspects. Helen Malson suggests that alternative constructions of self as constructed multiply through discourses might be more effective in treatment, while not undermining the subjectivity of those with eating disorders or reifying a disordered identity.[44]

Conclusion

The thinspiration image is expressive in its production and, through its use of the self-portrait form and depiction of pain, effectively casts the people who use or produce thinspiration as subjects. The tropes of mind/body dualism support this expression and its construction. The visions of the mind as the immaterial seat of personhood and of the body as abject and passive material are intimately tied to contemporary assumptions about creativity, subjectivity, and to understandings of pain.

Though the internet can be an outlet for narratives that were previously suppressed, it does not automatically facilitate the re-working of ideologies or hegemonic constructions of the body and self. Mind/body dualism continues to reign in self-expression through thinspiration images. The examination of counter-hegemonic potential still plays a significant role in the theorization of disordered eating, especially in arguments against the censorship of thinspiration imagery. Andrea Alden Lewis, for example, argues that pro-ana web forums are actually resistant to dominant cultural narratives by presenting information about the occasional positive messages of support on these sites.[45] While messages of support or information about health are sometimes present amongst thinspiration on Tumblr, this does not counteract the harmful effects, or make thinspiration itself a source of counter-hegemonic resistance. Thinspiration, however, may be

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[44] Malson, *The Thin Woman: Feminism, Post-Structuralism, and the Social Psychology of Anorexia Nervosa*, 157.
[45] Andrea Alden Lewis, "Redefining 'Ana': The Discourse of Resistance on a Pro-Ana Website," *Girls, Cultural Productions, and Resistance*, eds. Michelle S. Bae, Olga Ivashkevich (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2012).

more adequately understood as a means of self-surveillance and reification of individualism through a framework of mind/body dualism. While thinspiration does not imply adherence to the norm by emphasizing slenderness or reiterating standard assumptions about beauty, it also does not truly represent a rejection of these norms. Instead, thinspiration often reifies individualism and self-surveillance by evoking pain and sadness, and by employing truisms about transcendence of flesh and rebellion. The processes of monitoring and shaping the body symbolize the active self and harness feelings of agency within societal norms. In this light, the creative aspect of thinspiration and its expression of individuality also operate as a form of self-regulation and normalization.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of thinspiration images throughout this thesis supports the assertion that contemporary mind/body dualism plays a formative role in understandings of disordered eating, body management, and selfhood. In the previous chapters, I explained the cultural situation of eating disorders, performed an extensive analysis of the depictions of the mind and body in thinspiration, and examined the ways in which thinspiration images are used to express and construct the self. Each of these chapters elucidated the centrality of mind/body dualism in body management discourse, eating disorders, and contemporary society as a whole. Instead of presuming that there is a direct causal relationship between content that reproduces dualistic discourses and the adoption of harmful body management processes, I would like to suggest that the creation of images produces alternative (though not necessarily counter-hegemonic) discourses that allow users to experience an empowering sense of self-construction and creative expression. The self-construction in thinspiration reiterates many of the negative cultural understandings of the body, and thus provides a means for understanding the experience of eating disorders and depression through their alignment with established social values.

Future Directions: Pro-Bulimia, Thin Men, and Users of Color

Examinations of class, race, sexual orientation, nationality, and masculinity have been notoriously absent from the study of eating disorders. Thinspiration circulated online undoubtedly offers new opportunity for the analysis of disordered eating with regard to these issues. The thinspiration images I have analyzed in this thesis are representative of the most common images circulated as thinspiration. However, by limiting my examination to images most frequently propagated has, to some extent, resulted in another project that is indifferent to

eating disorders outside of the realm of white femininity and anorexia. My examinations of the images that are frequently and widely propagated adhere to and represent hegemonic norms to a great extent. There are a number of subsets or categories of thinspiration, such as pro-eating disorder accounts that exclusively cater to women of color, men, or bulimics, which deserve extensive critical analysis. Each of these subcategories is marked linguistically through tagging conventions as variations from the typical thinspiration. Additional issues of embodiment are articulated through thinspiration of these types, and while these issues lie slightly outside of the scope of this project, they offer substantial ground for further analysis. I also believe these images have the potential to complicate and strengthen the conclusions I drew from the unmarked norm of thinspiration. In an attempt to briefly address some of the alternative categories of thinspiration and map out potential divergences, I will present some preliminary findings related to women of color, men, and bulimia.

While the vast majority of thinspiration content found online confirms the cultural misconception of "eating disorder" as synonymous with "anorexia," there are also clear examples of pro-bulimic content circulated. Some users even clarify their identity as 'bulimic' in their bios. The account "bulimicbunny," for instance addresses this in her bio that reads "[First name]. twentyone. english. Currently in hospital trying to recover from Bulimia. This is m'blog. I like anything illegal, immoral, fattening, addictive, expensive, or impossible."[1] This bio is markedly different from those of anorexic users, who tend to emphasize weight, depression, and "perfection" (see, for instance, the bio of "stop-eating-to-be-skinny"). Interestingly, it is also aligned with the distinctions described by anorexic informants in Megan Warin's *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*. Warin describes the view that there was a "purity" or "truth" to eating disorders that were based on "total control through almost total abstinence from

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[1] http://bulimicbunny.tumblr.com

food and drink…. [T]hose who binged and vomited fell into the bulimic category and were

disparaged for their messiness and weakness."[2] Bulimicbunny's content includes a great deal of

personal posts about her treatment and general interests, and also includes thinspiration

considered pro-anorexia. A picture uploaded and "signed" via watermark by bulimicbunny

critiques pro-bulimia content, while reinforcing the established dichotomy between anorexia and

bulimia. The pro-bulimia image that she has found and altered is posted with an image

description that denounces the glamorization of eating disorders when the reality of bulimia is

"fucking disgusting and nothing to be particularly proud of" (Figure 4.1). While "bulimicbunny"

cannot be considered representative of all bulimic users, her account seems to present a

significantly different discourse about eating disorders and the body.

Sites that explicitly feature thinspiration images for or of women of color and specific

ethnicities present an additional site for discourses about embodiment by calling attention to

issues that affect racially marked bodies. Users like "blackgirlthinspiration," "asian-

thinspiration" and "beautifulblackthinspo2" signify their focus in their domains, while others

include information about their background implicitly in their bios, or in the content shared.

Accounts that specify that their content is for a particular race or ethnicity, like

"Blackgirlthinspiration," often directly address race in terms of embodiment. In Figure 4.2's title

area, there is a subheading that reads "There is no excuse for being Black and fat," and the

content posted is a picture-quote specifically about embracing dark skin. This indicates that the

user has a significant investment and complex understanding of the cultural implications of

Black embodiment and thinness. Other sites, like "thin—perfection," include information about

the user's ethnicity more implicitly by including demographic information about race or ethnicity

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[2] Warin, *Abject Relations: Everyday Worlds of Anorexia*, 94.

in the bio section.[3] In contrast to both of these users, the account "Asian-thinspiration" seems to be created for the express purpose of the objectification of 'Asian' bodies via the collection of thinspiration images. The bio for "asian-thinspiration" states: "i like Asians. i like models./i'm not Asian, i'm not a model" to clarify that the content on the site merely *features* Asian models collected by a non-Asian user.[4] These three different sites of thinspiration with explicit references to racial identity show the variation that is present among Tumblr users, and could exemplify the ways in which "digital racial formation"[5] takes place through the circulation of images.

Thinspiration for and of men and boys is another axis of identity that breaks down pervasive assumptions about disordered eating. Images of thin boys and men are included occasionally alongside the images of women and girls. However, there are also a host of accounts that target a male audience or are run by men struggling with disordered eating. It seems as though "male thinspo" more often includes professional-looking content, rather than amateur "real guy" self-portraits. Images of male fashion models are commonly circulated, and amateur pictures of "real" boys differ from "real girl" thinspiration in that the heads or faces of men are more commonly included (see Figure 4.3). While my observations are preliminary, comparisons between images of men in thinspiration and those of women seem to indicate that even in cases of men struggling with eating disorders, gendered norms about depictions of the body are not totally disassembled.

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[3] http://thin--perfection.tumblr.com/
[4] http://asian-thinspiration.tumblr.com
[5] Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet,* 14.
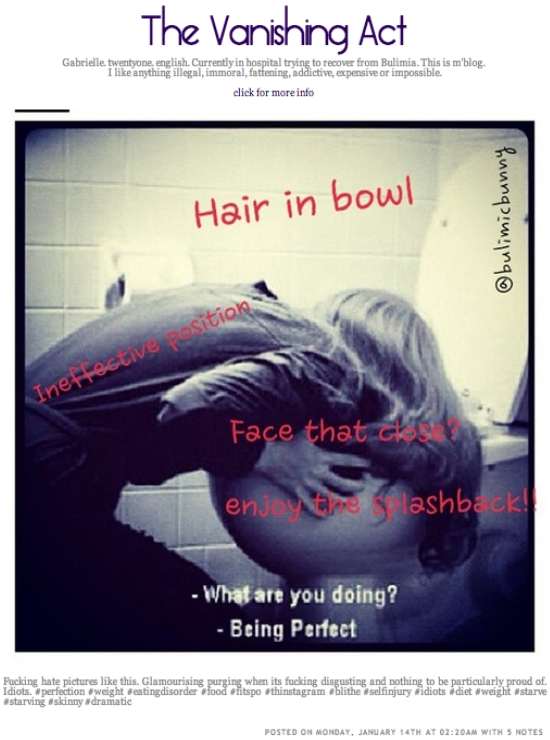
Figure 4.1 Pro-mia user critiquing thinspiration ("Hair in bowl," http://blimicbunny.tumblr.com/archive, 2/25/13, screenshot).
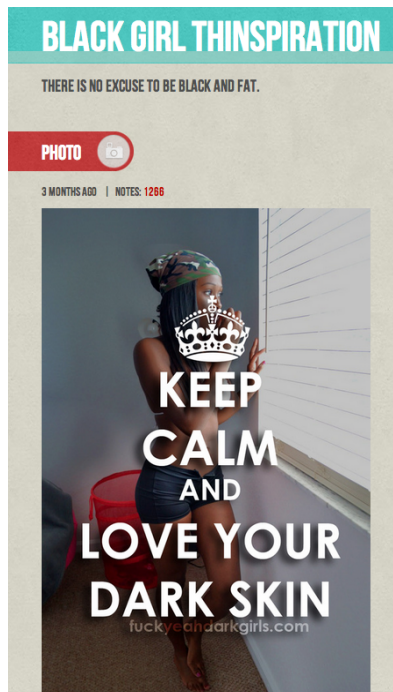

Figure 4.2 "Black Girl Thinspiration" ("Keep calm and love your dark skin," http://blackgirlthinspiration.tumblr.com/, 2/25/13, screenshot).

Figure 4.3 "Male Thinspiration" (http://male-thinspiration.tumblr.com/archive, 4/11/13, screenshot).

Duality of Thinspiration

The signification in thinspiration reflects mind/body duality in form, function, and processes of expression. Within thinspiration there is at once a rejection of and acquiescence to hegemonic beauty ideals. There is a pronounced desire to both rebel against and to conform to societal norms, and a reification of subjecthood and individuality through somatic identity. All of these indicate obsession with the body, but are displayed through exaltation of the bodiless. There is an implicit tension between the public expression online of private suffering and the display of domestic spaces that make personal issues part of a public identity. There is additional duality in the formal qualities of thinspiration, as an image and/or text that relies on both creativity and reproduction. In order to escape from dualistic categorization, the thinspiration that is circulated online should not be read as *either* expression of resistance *or* capitulation, but as multivocal crystallizations of a range of complex cultural ideologies and embodied experiences.

Indisputably, thinspiration upholds traditional ideals of beauty and gender and reinforces harmful eating practices and rigid constructions of the body. At the same time, it is an arena in which people may reflect on and narrativize the reality of depression, obsession, and disordered eating, confirming the presence of distress that was previously hidden.

Since eating disorders have such devastating effects on the physical and emotional health of people worldwide, it may seem petty or inadequate to merely analyze the formal qualities of online images without addressing the real impact on those who encounter it. Even if they are transient, trendy, amateurish, and limited in terms of the population they represent, thinspiration images crystallize vernacular conceptions of mind and body. These expressions are not without political consequence. As Nancy Thumim argues in *Self-Representation in a Digital Age*, "if we take the idea that texts do political work seriously… then we must encounter and make sense of texts that lie very far outside any kind of canon— like the self-representations of ordinary people."[6] Mary Douglas' structural analysis of the body and its cultural significance also reinforces the importance of examining the link between representations and bodily reality. Her argument for the examination of the body in cultural contexts in *Natural Symbols* relies on two premises: "First, the drive to achieve consonance in all levels of experience produces concordance among the means of expression, so that the use of the body is coordinated with other media. Second, controls exerted from the social system place limits on the use of the body as medium."[7] This first aspect, in which a culture's media is coordinated with its views of the body, provides substantial impetus for the study of its depictions, while the second suggests that these social views affect bodies.

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[6] Nancy Thumim, *Self-Representation and Digital Culture* (Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012) 15.

[7] Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982) 71.

Rather than simply lamenting the existence of thinspiration or pushing it aside to look at the disordered individual, this examination strives to treat thinspiration as a point of entry into everyday understandings of embodiment and processes of self-making. It is also an attempt to acknowledge the makers of thinspiration images as agents producing texts with symbolic and expressive potential. There is harm in assuming that those who struggle with eating disorders are passively molded by the culture around them, or in maligning producers of thinspiration as purveyors of destruction. These analyses would only repeat the myth that those struggling with disordered eating are victims who over-internalize cultural messages, or are innately disturbed, both of which indicate individual culpability. While many sites (including Tumblr) have sought to shut down the exchange of thinspiration, this investigation suggests that the ideologies within the images are not unique or even unusual. Instead, they are harsh manifestations of pre-existent assumptions and broader societal views of the body and self.

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