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Information Sources Survey

INFO 200 - Stephens

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### Introduction

The National Institute of Mental Health (2016) defines eating disorders as “serious and often fatal illnesses that cause severe disturbances to a person’s eating behaviors.” Despite the prevalence of eating disorders among adults and teens, only a small percentage of people with eating disorders seek professional help, especially when compared to other mental health problems such as depression (Hart, Granillo, Jorm & Paxton, 2011). This may explain, in part, why many struggling with disorder eating behaviors turn to eating disorder online groups and social media sites. My research focuses on communities of individuals with eating disorders seeking information online.

Eating disorder online communities fit Fisher & Durrance (2003)’s description of information communities as groups typified by collaboration among different groups of people who can access and use useful information, and take advantage of the information sharing capabilities of online technologies. Indeed, both Ransom, D. C., La Guardia, J. G., Woody, E. Z., & Boyd, J. L. (2010) and Rouleau & von Ranson (2011), found users of online eating disorder communities sought online groups both as a source for information as well as socialization. Individuals perceived finding social support they could not find elsewhere, even in online communities that seemingly promote pro-eating disorder, non-recovery behaviors (Ransom, et al. 2010). The relative anonymity of such spaces and shared experiences among its members helps overcome barriers of distrust, which also fits with Fisher & Durrance’s definition of information communities (Fisher & Durrance, 2003).

### Research-based Resource

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*International Journal of Eating Disorders*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Retrieved October 10, 2016 from [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/journal/10.1002/\(ISSN\)1098-108X](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.libaccess.sjlibrary.org/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)1098-108X)

The *International Journal of Eating Disorders (IJED)* is an eminent, peer-reviewed, academic journal spanning the fields of psychology, psychiatry, nutrition and dietetics. Published online and in-print eight times a year by John Wiley & Sons, Inc., IJED seeks to “advance the scientific knowledge needed for understanding, treating, and preventing eating disorders” (IJED, 2016), and reaches an international audience of clinicians, researchers, and other health professionals. A Web of Science search for “eating disorder” lists three IJED articles among the top ten most cited articles since 1975 and two IJED articles among the top ten most cited articles since 2013 (Web of Science, 2016). IJED’s Journal Impact Factor (JIF) for 2015 is 4.068, placing it in the top quartile in the categories of psychology, psychiatry, clinical psychology, and nutrition and dietetics (InCites Journal Citation Reports, 2015).

Within the information cycle, IJED falls into the Months after the Event position as a frequently published secondary academic reference resource. IJED also boasts a quick turnaround cycle for author submissions, as well as publishing an early view of articles online to ensure information is as timely as possible. As the official publication of the Academy for Eating Disorders (AED), IJED gets additional global exposure to AED members who receive free access to this publication (IJED, 2016). The full-text of IJED is available in numerous database subscription services as well as abstract and indexing databases (Ulrichsweb Global Serials Directory, 2016). IJED authors have the option to publish their research as open access articles immediately available to all, however, authors must pay a fee to do so, which is a limiting factor in the amount of freely available content.

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IJED covers a wide scope of articles that address, “state-of-the-art scientific research on theory, methodology, etiology, clinical practice, and policy related to eating disorders, as well as contributions that facilitate scholarly critique and discussion of science and practice in the field” (IJED, 2016). Articles are accepted from around the world and span multiple scientific disciplines and approaches, including clinical trials and implementation research. Because it is academic in nature, published only in English, and most content is behind a paywall, IJED does reflect an English-speaking academic bias and is unlikely to be widely read and disseminated beyond academic and professional circles, although occasionally articles receive attention from mainstream media. However, while the intended audience is primarily academics and healthcare professionals and not those with eating disorders per se, the journal covers many contemporary issues directly applicable to this information community when it comes to both online and offline approaches to support and care. A look at recent articles from 2016 shows topics like pro-eating disorder usage across multiple countries; Facebook usage, peer comparison and eating disorder pathology; online eating disorder prevention program feedback, and perceived barriers and facilitators to treatment. This suggests that IJED is aware and concerned with addressing many of the information needs of the online eating disorder information community.

### Community-based Resource

MyProAna (MPA) [website] (n.d.) Retrieved October 14, 2016 from <http://www.myproana.com/>

MyProAna (MPA) is a community-based resource as an online community for individuals with eating disorders. Although the name “Pro Ana” is a term used to describe sites that promote anorexic or eating disorder behavior in general (Rouleau & von Ranson, 2011), MPA describes itself as “a site dedicated to the support or recovery of those suffering from eating

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disorders or body dysmorphic disorders” (MPA, 2016). The MPA site has over 200,000 registered members and over 11 million community postings dating from 2013 to present, with 100+ daily postings.

MPA falls into the Day/Weeks after the Event position in the information cycle as an online community with user-generated content such as forum and blog posts, files, and photos. The MPA site primarily consists of community forums, but also contains sections where members may create blogs, view or post photos, chat with other members, view member lists, download shared files, or view a calendar of member birthdays. In addition, there is a section about purchasing ad space on the site (although no paid advertisers currently appear on the site) and raffles (not currently in use). Another section consists of a body mass index (BMI) and basal metabolic rate (BMR) calculator with an accompanying caloric intake calculator for projecting weight loss. Most of the content is publicly available to browse, however, only registered and approved members may post to forums or access restricted parts of the site, including chat, private forums, and membership lists (MPA, 2016).

Like most online communities, MPA adheres to a set of community rules governing member behavior. The rules emphasize community support without judgment and restrict members from abusive behavior or posting hate speech, spam, or personal or identifying behavior about themselves or other community members. A team of volunteer moderators (currently numbering eight) supports members and enforces the rules. For safety purposes and to avoid spammers, members must post a number of times over the course of several days to receive full access to all areas of the website. To comply with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA), MPA requires that users enter a birthdate before registering. MPA is

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currently only in English, but aside from this potential language restriction and registration requirements, the site is otherwise almost entirely open and accessible to anyone online.

Forum topics range from community introductions and general discussion to disease-specific discussions (i.e. anorexia, bulimia, binge eating, etc.). While there are forums, photo galleries, and shared files specifically aimed at offering “thinspiration” and diet and exercise tips, there are also spaces for non-eating disorder related discussions, games, sharing artwork, and arranging in-person gatherings. This aligns with Ransom, et al (2010)’s analysis of pro-eating disorder websites, which found while such sites had a potentially harmful influence on the eating disorder behavior of users, they also provide a social outlet where users discussed non-eating disorder topics.

### Comparison and Conclusion

On the surface, IJED and MPA appear to be vastly different information sources. IJED is an academic professional journal, mainly accessible only through professional groups or journal subscription services, where contributions must follow a specific framework and are peer-reviewed before publication. Conversely, MPA is an online community aimed at individuals who struggle with eating disorder behaviors, is almost entirely available to read online, and places only minimal restrictions on membership and rules for user-generated contributions. While IJED seeks to help inform the treatment and prevention of eating disorders, MPA is merely intended to be a supportive community for those who struggle and does not proscribe, nor officially endorse recovery or pro-eating disorder behaviors.

Yet both services serve a purpose for eating disorder information communities. MPA illustrates the complexity of online community interactions, demonstrating a clear need for 24/7

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social support for individuals with varied types and severity of disorder eating behavior and levels of motivation for recovery or non-recovery. IJED illustrates the awareness of researchers to address both the positive aspects and potential dangers that online eating disorder communities present in order to develop effective treatment and prevention interventions. Rather than dismiss or condemn pro-eating disorder sites outright, IJED's continued research can provide opportunities to educate about the complex nature of such communities, and how to best work with eating disorder sufferers within the reality of our technologically connected landscape. Online communities like MPA may provide a necessary stepping-stone for individuals to receive support before seeking offline sources of treatment or other care.

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