Chapter 4

Fat Talk: Constructing the Body through Eating Disorders Online among Swedish Girls

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to study how young women in a Swedish context construct their body by writing about eating disorders in blogs. Connected to the body and eating disorders a construction of girlhood can be seen. The blogs studied are all part of the online community ungdomar.se. The chapter begins with a background to eating disorders, blogs and girlhood and youth in a cultural context. The main focus is on examples from thirteen blogs. The content and typographical emphasis in the blogs are analysed and discussed. The study shows that the process of becoming or constructing a certain body and blogging is both social and collective because of the interaction between the blogger, the community and blog commentators. The body is not only constructed by teenaged girls by striving to a certain type of a female body, but also by mastering the talk about one’s own body, dissatisfaction with it and by typographical emphasises in the blogs.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter the focus is on the body, eating disorders and blogs. Since the material consist of blogs written by girls, the chapter is connected to the construction of girlhood among the girls studied. How is the body staged in these textual performances online? What typographical emphasises are used? How do the blogger discuss eating, food and feelings? How do the bloggers write about normality and abnormality?

I will begin with a brief background to eating disorders in a cultural context and a short conceptual and theoretical background to girlhood and youth as identity constructions. This is followed by a general introduction to blogs, the online community, the blogs analyzed and methodological concerns. The main focus in the chapter is on examples from blogs and the examination of how the body and girlhood is constructed through writ-
Fat Talk

Eating disorders have been studied in psychology, medicine, health studies, cultural studies and social sciences. Eating disorders are not a new phenomenon, but have been dated back to the middle ages (Bell 1985) and the Victorian era (Brumberg 1988 and Schwartz 1985). The American general public knew virtually nothing about them until the 1970s, when the popular press began to feature stories about young women who refused to eat despite available and plentiful food (Brumberg 1988, 8). Much of the research conducted in the 1980s had a medical or psychological perspective. Bordo’s (1993) work on eating disorders was seen as groundbreaking because of the feminist perspective that most of the earlier research was lacking. In the 1990s researchers became aware of how widespread women’s problems with food, eating and body images were (Bordo 1993, 64). During the 2000s several studies appeared about eating disorders focusing on pro-anorexia, in connection to web pages, web forums and blogs. Pro-anorexia, also called pro-ana, is an internet based movement where eating disorders are seen as a choice of life style instead of an illness (Gavin, Rodham & Poyer 2008). In July 2001 an American eating disorder advocacy group, ANAD (Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders), made pleas to servers such as Yahoo to take down sites about pro-anorexia. Four days later 115 sites were shut down (Reaves 2001).

In a Swedish context the first treatment in institutional care was developed during the 1970s and during 1993 the Swedish Association for Anorexia and Bulimia (Svenska-Anorexi-Bulimi sällskapet) was founded, an association for people who worked with or studied eating disorders (Clinton & Norring, 2002). During the 1990s and 2000s several fictional and autobiographical books about eating disorders, written by young Swedish women, were published. Young women wrote in youth magazines about the fixation with appearance and hysteria with thinness. Feminist literature by young women was published and the advertisement for women’s underwear by the company H&M was sabotaged (Ambjörnsson 2004, 176). Scholars argued that the phenomena that earlier had been described as young women’s superficial engagement with the body and the appearance, should not been seen as an individual problem or as a sign of vanity, but as a phenomena that reflected the social system as a whole (Solheim 2001, 112). From the middle of the 1990s one could talk about a public discourse about young women, the appearance and the societies influence (Ambjörnsson 2004, 177).

The blogs I study in this chapter deal with eating disorders to some extent. I am interested in how they write about eating disorders and how eating disorders and dissatisfaction with the body are expressed in an online environment. My aim is not to study reasons for eating disorders and I will therefore not speculate about possible causes. There is little consensus on what causes eating disorders. Explanations generally fit within one of three models: the medical, the psychological or the cultural.

GIRLHOOD AND YOUTH AS A SOCIAL AND CULTURAL CATEGORY

This chapter is written from a constructivist perspective, which means that I see girlhood and youth as socially and culturally constructed. They are created by being performed: they are not a cause of, but rather an effect of different sorts of actions (Butler 1990, 140). According to Butler (1990, 151) the constructed divide between men and women has been developed from what she