

**Performing Anorexia on YouTube: The Aesthetics, Narratives, and Functions
of Video Testimonials**

by

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Abstract

This thesis examines anorexia video testimonials uploaded to YouTube by women. By focusing on three major sub-genres – confessionals, food videos, and life stories – this research brings new awareness to the ways women can use the platform to make themselves, and thus their anorexia, visible. The aesthetic and narrative parameters of each sub-genre create various types and levels of functionality. Confessional videos may enable YouTubers to repair their self-narratives, become active witnesses, and use their bodies to communicate their stories. Food videos, on the other hand, are uniquely suited to help those with anorexia work through the paradoxical emotions of fascination and fear around food. Finally, life story videos may increase feelings of empowerment, embodiment, and selfhood. Moreover, the comment cultures that surround these videos can generate strong affective ties and help affirm these YouTubers' decisions to share their anorexia stories and increase the visibility of the illness.

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Introduction

In news media, anorexia is often described as a ‘silent’ and ‘invisible’ illness. The perception that anorexia is hidden emerges out of, and is perpetuated by, the self-stigma carried by many who are affected by it. However, social media platforms such as YouTube are giving those with anorexia the opportunity to make their illness – and themselves – both seen and heard. YouTube creates a space where anorexia is no longer hidden, but instead broadcast to a global audience. In this thesis I will explore the intricacies of videos created and uploaded to YouTube by women with anorexia, the functions of these videos, and the communities they create. As someone with lived experience with the illness, I resonate deeply with these videos and the stories they tell.

Anorexia, also known as anorexia nervosa, has a variable and inconsistent definition. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, it is “a serious disorder in eating behavior primarily of young women in their teens and early twenties that is characterized especially by a pathological fear of weight gain leading to faulty eating patterns, malnutrition, and usually excessive weight loss” (“Anorexia Nervosa”). This definition perpetuates the idea that the fear of weight gain is the genesis of anorexic behaviour, which, although common, is not always the case. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) provides a slightly different definition. According to it, there are three specific diagnostic criteria for anorexia: (1) the restriction of food to the point of being underweight, (2) anxiety about weight gain and/or engaging in behaviours that stall weight gain, and (3) body image issues and/or a lack of awareness of the dangers of malnourishment (American Psychiatric Association). While this definition is more flexible, it emphasizes the characteristics that make anorexia clinically diagnosable, and therefore fails to encompass sub-clinical experiences of the illness. In my

thesis, I move away from these fairly limited definitions and instead use a more inclusive one. The videos discussed in this thesis meet two criteria: they are created by individuals who self-identify as having anorexia and they do not include any behaviours or descriptions that could be better attributed to another eating disorder, such as bulimia nervosa. It is my hope that this conceptualization will allow for a multiplicity of perspectives on the lived experience of anorexia.

Although this thesis is not grounded in theories of feminism or gender, the issue of gender is nevertheless present. According to the DSM-5, for every male diagnosed with anorexia, there are about ten females (American Psychiatric Association). Eating disorders of all types occur in men as well as women, but when it comes to anorexia, the ratio leans heavily towards women. Anorexia videos on YouTube are likewise dominated by women. Indeed, in 2016 health researcher Lila M. Pereira and her colleagues undertook a quantitative study in which they analyzed and coded the first 50 videos on YouTube under the title “My struggle with an eating disorder” (940). Six videos were taken down before they could be coded, and out of the 44 remaining videos, 41 were uploaded by women, one was uploaded by a man, and in two the gender of the uploader could not be deduced (941). Thus, although anorexia videos created by men do exist, they are relatively few and far between. Due to the limited number of videos uploaded by men, and the fact that it would be difficult to provide both a genre and a gender analysis in the scope of this thesis, this research will solely rely on videos created by women.

YouTube, with its focus on user-generated content, enables women with anorexia to share their experiences with a wide audience. Although the debate still remains if social media reinforces or opposes gender inequalities (Szostak 48; Webb and Temple 638; Wotanis and McMillian 913), it is widely thought that social media platforms “can provide forums for voices

that are often overlooked or silenced in society,” such as those of women (Webb and Temple 640). YouTube is not unique in its user-generated approach. As communication scholar Michael Strangelove points out, the internet itself is founded upon the notion of users generating content, such as in blogs (8). Moreover, as digital media scholars Jean Burgess and Joshua Green point out, audiovisual vernacular forms such as the vlog (also known as video blogs or video diaries) “pre-existed YouTube and even the web” as demonstrated through the “camgirl” phenomenon (38; 39). Audiovisual vernacular forms already existed; YouTube simply removed the technological barriers in order to allow more people to create and access them. Once the vlog format reached YouTube, it began to be codified. In June 2006, a year after the platform became active, the YouTuber known as lonelygirl15 began uploading videos. She was among the first well-known YouTubers, and her fame quickly drew the attention of the press (Burgess and Green 43). It was not long, however, until viewers and the press alike became suspicious of the unusually high quality of her videos, and the lonelygirl15 vlog was revealed to be a fictional filmmaking experiment (Burgess and Green 43). Despite being uncovered as a sham, the popularity of the lonelygirl15 vlog “legitimised vlogging as a genre of cultural production” (Burgess and Green 44). Vlogs have since become a popular and celebrated YouTube genre and, according to research council officer Heather Molyneaux and her colleagues, has allowed “women … [to] be in control of their own representations” (3).

There is much debate about what to call user-created videos. As mentioned above, the terms ‘vlog,’ ‘video blog,’ and ‘video diary’ are all synonymous. Regardless of how one chooses to refer to this type of video, its characteristics remain the same: confessional in tone, formatted in the ‘talking head’ style, and discussing everyday – and often quite relatable – topics. These characteristics only encompass a small (although vibrant) sub-section of user-created videos. As

only some of the videos discussed in this thesis fit the characteristics of a vlog, another term will be used to broadly refer to all videos discussed herein: video testimonial. I have chosen this particular term because the word ‘testimonial’ is closely linked to the idea of witness, and these videos all entail an individual with anorexia presenting their own struggle with the illness and inviting others to become witnesses of that experience.

There is a similar debate about what to call those who upload videos on YouTube, especially those who become famous on the platform. Some social media and YouTube scholars, including Alice Marwick and Tobias Raun, are partial to the term “micro-celebrity” (Marwick 353; Raun 100). Unlike big-name celebrities, like Tom Cruise, who are known to almost everyone, micro-celebrities are only celebrities in the eyes of their followers. Other scholars, including Burgess and Green, and the news media often refer to these individuals as “content creators” (94). This term emphasizes the role these individuals play in generating popular content for the YouTube platform. As it does not appear that any of the individuals discussed in this thesis make a full living off of creating YouTube videos (although the three prolific vloggers discussed in Chapter One – Laura Grace, Jessie Paege, and Hannah – might be close), this term will not be used. Instead, for the scope of this thesis, the simple ‘YouTuber’ will be used to describe all individuals who upload videos.

Literature Review and Methodology

Inquiry into anorexia video testimonials, and the YouTubers who make them, is already underway. Although quite small, there is a distinct body of work dedicated to this topic. Quantitative research, such as that done by Pereira et al., has provided a strong overview of the types of eating disorder videos, and comments, that appear on YouTube. Health informatics

researcher Shabbir Syed-Abdul and his colleagues have undertaken similar quantitative research in relation to the prevalence of health misinformation in anorexia-related YouTube videos. They found pro-anorexia videos that spread misinformation about the illness to be “highly favored and rated by users” (Syed-Abdul et al.). A comparable study has been put forth by psychology researcher Atte Oksanen and his colleagues into the reception of pro-recovery and pro-anorexia videos. However, unlike Syed Abdul et al., they found pro-recovery videos to be more popular among viewers (Oksanen et al.). In regards to more qualitative approaches to this topic, Ekant Veer, a marketing professor with an interest in social media, found that vlogging technology encourages individuals with anorexia to share their stories because it gives them “acceptance through self-validation [and a sense of] community and control” (257). English scholar Jenny Platz takes a more reserved standpoint, arguing that “[t]he YouTube brand of disordered eating is characterized by secrecy, shame, disgust, and confession” and this “could lead to more people hiding disordered eating” (71). This thesis differentiates itself from past research into this topic by promoting qualitative methods and, instead of engaging in the controversial discussion about their possible harmful consequences, emphasizing the aesthetic, narrative, and functional aspects of these videos.

Film and television scholar Su Holmes’ foundational article about life story anorexia video testimonials creates a framework for how to examine these videos from the film studies perspective. Working solely with the life story sub-genre, Holmes watched 35 videos and noted their stylistic and narrative characteristics. Resisting the dominant medical discourse that describes anorexia as a physical illness, she takes a feminist perspective and highlights the gendered, social, and cultural nature of anorexia. Arguing that these videos “offer complex discursive constructions of female self-starvation which twist and turn on (an always slippery)

continuum of containment and/or resistance,” Holmes focuses on the ways in which girls use this sub-genre to create self-representations that emphasize the visibility of the (anorexic) body (19). My work seeks to expand upon Holmes’ foundation, especially in regards to exploring more than one sub-genre of anorexia video testimonials.

In order to choose the videos analysed in this thesis, I began by watching numerous anorexia video testimonials. As I watched, various sub-genres began to emerge. Videos belonging to three specific sub-genres, which I gave names to, were especially prevalent. The first of these is the ‘confessional.’ This sub-genre is defined by YouTubers, many of whom already have a well-established YouTube vlog, uploading a video in which they confess publicly to having, or having had, anorexia. The second sub-genre, ‘food videos,’ are videos in which a YouTuber uses a camera to log what they do and don’t eat within a given day. Finally, ‘life story’ videos are those in which a YouTuber uses the slide show format to tell the story of their childhood, the onset of anorexia, their struggle with the illness, and finally their recovery. After distinguishing between these three sub-genres, I chose between three and four videos that were representative of each. Besides choosing typical examples, the selection process was random. However, YouTube is an unstable archive and videos can be both uploaded and taken down at any point. As of March 2021, a video in Chapter One, Laura Grace’s “The Truth. My Eating Disorder;” two videos in Chapter Two, clodyeats’ “what i eat in a day | restriction | tw ed” and Ava Grace’s “extreme hunger: what I ate | eating disorder recovery;” and a video from Chapter Three, Jessica Eddy’s “Anorexia Story // Jessica Eddy” have been taken down by their uploaders.

It is important to note that, although this thesis focuses on three prevalent sub-genres of anorexia testimonials, other less common sub-genres can also be found on YouTube. These other

sub-genres include videos in which a YouTuber challenges food rules, records an average day with their anorexia, provides either pro-recovery or pro-anorexia ‘how to’ advice, or records their recovery journey. Moreover, it is not uncommon for a YouTuber to engage with more than one sub-genre, either within a single video or across the various videos on their channel. As this is an exploratory study into this underrepresented field of research, these less popular sub-genres will not be discussed; instead, this thesis will bring new awareness to the construction of, and communities generated by, the more popular sub-genres. That being said, these less popular sub-genres share several characteristics with the videos discussed in this thesis, and therefore my research results may be generalizable to a wider range of videos than those discussed herein.

In this thesis, I employ two key methodological strategies. The first is close textual analysis of the selected videos. While analyzing the selected videos, I paid special attention to formal techniques such as framing, mise-en-scène, sound, and extra-diegetic elements such as title cards and on-screen text. In Chapter Three, which focuses on life story videos, I also examine the narrative techniques used. The second technique, which is utilized in Chapter Four, is reception analysis. In this chapter, I use the comments below the videos as my main research material, in order to discover how viewers react to, and what sorts of communities form around, the videos discussed in the three previous chapters. By using research methods that focus on the videos themselves and viewers’ responses to them, the research hopes to demonstrate how anorexia video testimonials are not only a mode of self-representation but are actually part of a wider online (and possibly even offline) social community centred upon the illness.

Conceptual Framework

Several key concepts and theories give this research its structure. Above all, this thesis is centred upon the idea of *performance*. There is no singular definition to performance; indeed, according to communication scholar Mary S. Strine and her colleagues, performance is “*an essentially contested concept*, meaning that its very existence is bound up in disagreement about what it is, and that the disagreement over its essence is itself part of that essence” (183, emphasis in original). Although involved mainly in discourses of theatrical performances and performance art, the concept has been discussed as everything from a specific reciprocal relationship between humans and technology (Leeker 22) to a broad “‘continuum’ of human actions ranging from ritual, play, sports, popular entertainments, the performing arts and everyday life performances to the enactment of social, professional, gender, race and class roles, and on to healing, the media and the internet” (Schechner 2). As social media platforms such as YouTube are largely based upon the ‘everydayness’ of those who use the platform, this thesis will focus on ideas of everyday social performance. Following from Strine et al., this thesis does not promote a singular definition of performance but instead explores a variety of definitions, including those of sociologist Erving Goffman and literary scholar Christopher Grobe, and the ways each can be applied to anorexia video testimonials.

Closely connected to the idea of performance is the concept of *authenticity*. Burgess and Green contend that authenticity is a core value of YouTube, and that it helps create the “YouTubeness of YouTube” (44). Strangelove agrees with the value of authenticity on YouTube, and for him video diaries are the main site of authenticity (64). He argues that their authenticity, or realness, comes from the video diarists’ use of amateur aesthetics (Strangelove 65). Although it is undeniable that aesthetics and the appearance of authenticity are intrinsically connected, this

thesis resists the argument that authenticity is an intrinsic characteristic of the platform, a video, or a YouTuber. Instead, this research positions authenticity as a function of a specific performance that is found across the spectrum of anorexia testimonials.

In order to give the appearance of authenticity, YouTubers frequently utilize *confession*. As famously defined by Michel Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality*, confession is a discourse that occurs between two (or more) people of differing authority, and which has the power to fundamentally change the confessant (61-62). Within the context of YouTube, the faceless viewers, who gain a semblance of authority through the power of anonymity, become the YouTuber's confessors. In this way, confession on YouTube takes on a similar arrangement to that of a confessional booth, where the priest is obscured from the view of the confessant. As will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One, there is a "confessional culture" that permeates our contemporary society, and video testimonials are among the newest examples of this culture (Burgess and Green 80). Strangelove concurs with this and goes so far as to say that video diaries, by definition, have a confessional aspect (69). The appeal of confessing 'into the void' is interesting, as it suggests that disclosing personal details to a person (or people) whom the confessant does not know is different and easier than disclosing to a friend or a loved one. Because of this, YouTube is an ideal place for individuals – with or without anorexia – to engage in confessional discourse.

What, exactly, do individuals with anorexia confess? It is obvious that they confess to having anorexia, but what does 'having anorexia' really mean? Although anorexia is not always initiated by concerns regarding weight, the illness is still fundamentally related to the relationship a person has with their *body*. Throughout history, bodies have always mattered. Ideal body shapes and sizes have been immortalized in the statuary of the Greeks, the paintings of the

Renaissance, and the social media platforms that are currently defining the 21st century. Bodies and gender are intertwined, with Jessica Rose, a communications professional, and her colleagues suggesting that “[i]n contemporary media and culture, women’s and men’s social desirability and gender have often been defined in terms of their bodies” (589). Over the past several years, much research has been conducted that suggests that the development of anorexia, especially among women, is influenced by the unattainably thin images of individuals that pervade media culture (see, for example, Derenne and Beresin; Perloff; Thompson and Heinberg). This thesis seeks neither to support nor to undermine this claim, but rather to demonstrate how media culture can be *used* by those with anorexia. In this thesis I provide numerous examples of individuals harnessing a possible anorexia risk factor and coopting it for their own purposes. This research is guided by the question of how women with anorexia represent their bodies on screen, and the relationship between their actual body and the digital body they create through the filmic mediation process.

Finally, *food and eating* are closely connected both to one’s body and to the development of an anorexia identity. Although only discussed in-depth in Chapter Two, YouTubers’ fears, desires, and ambitions around food and eating are omnipresent characteristics of the videos discussed herein. The creators of the video testimonials discussed in each of the following chapters thus do not merely confess to having anorexia; they confess and describe their fraught relationship to their bodies, to food, and to eating.

Thesis Outline

Chapter One explores the confessional sub-genre. This chapter begins by highlighting the role of our confessional society in the creation of this type of video, before moving on and using

Goffman's theory of performance to explore how confessional YouTubers perform the attribute of authenticity. Through the analysis of three confessional videos – Laura Grace's "The Truth. My Eating Disorder," Hannah's "i have an eating disorder," and Jessie Paege's "i'm anorexic" – this chapter suggests three possible functions of confessional anorexia video testimonials. First, borrowing medical sociologist Arthur Frank's idea of "narrative wreckage" (*Wounded* 55), confessing publicly to having anorexia may be a way for those affected by the illness to regain control over their illness narrative. Second, relying upon media scholar John Durham Peters' conceptualization of witnessing, these videos may enable the YouTubers to move from being passive to active witnesses in regard to their own illness. Finally, returning to Frank, these videos may allow the YouTubers to approach the "an ethical ideal for bodies": the "communicative body" (*Wounded* 48).

Chapter Two moves away from the talking-head, direct-address format of the confessional sub-genre and instead explores the characteristics of food videos. Using Grobe's definition of performance – "all the stylized *doings* in our lives" (viii, emphasis in original) – this chapter demonstrates how two restriction-focused YouTubers (cloudyeats and Craving Skin) and two recovery-focused YouTubers (Emily Sara and Ava Grace) stylize their videos to create the mixed feeling of fascination and fear around the acts of preparing and eating food. As anorexia is an illness that is characterized by reviling food yet being unusually preoccupied by it, the paradoxical mix of emotions embodied in these videos is discussed as a way for these YouTubers to potentially 'work through' the paradoxical nature of the illness itself.

Chapter Three, by focusing on the life story sub-genre, emphasises a more longitudinal approach to the illness. Relying on Holmes' discussion about life story anorexia video testimonials, and English scholar G. Thomas Couser and Frank's discussions around the types of

stories autobiographers with illnesses and disabilities tell, this chapter seeks to understand the various aesthetic and narrative techniques employed within three videos: Elle Tayla's "My Eating Disorder Story," Carolyn Radnor's "My Anorexia Story," and Jessica Eddy's "Anorexia Story // Jessica Eddy." As these videos are fundamentally *stories*, they must contain some amount of entertainment value in order to be well-received by YouTube viewers. Thus, this chapter follows performance scholar Richard Schechner's argument that telling stories and entertaining people are two vital aspects of performance (28; 46). This chapter concludes with a discussion of the functions of life story videos, and points out how these videos promote female empowerment, a sense of embodiment, and a strengthening of selfhood.

Finally, Chapter Four takes a different approach from the first three chapters and, instead of analysing videos, analyses the comments below them. Beginning with a discussion of political scientist Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' and the ways in which the term does – and does not – reflect the types of communities found on YouTube, this chapter then touches upon the unique specificity of communities that emerge on YouTube. After situating anorexia video testimonials within the larger context of YouTube, I discuss the main categories and sub-categories of comments found below these videos and provide examples from the videos discussed in the previous three chapters. The chapter concludes with the proposition that, like the YouTubers who create these videos, commenting on a video can function as a form of active witnessing.

The conclusion will tie these four chapters together by engaging in an analysis of the differences and similarities that exists between these three sub-genres, their comment cultures, and their respective communities. The thesis will end by addressing the limitations of this

research and highlighting the possible future directions that can be taken when exploring the unique intersection of online video, testimony, and anorexia.

Chapter One

“I Have an Eating Disorder”: YouTube as a Confessional

[Confession is] a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession ... and finally, [confession is] a ritual in which the expression alone ... produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him; it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises him salvation.

- Michel Foucault, 61-62

Our Confession Society and Culture

A young woman looks into a camera. Tears slide down her face, making her makeup run. Taking a deep breath, she calms herself. “Nobody knows this,” she says, “but... I... I have an eating disorder.” Uploaded to YouTube by Laura Grace in 2016, “The Truth. My Eating Disorder” has (before it disappeared) over 500,000 views and has garnered more than 3,000 comments. Laura is one of many who use YouTube videos as a medium of disclosure. Within this ‘confessional’ sub-genre, YouTubers of all types confess intimate details about their lives, often to the acclaim of their viewership. This chapter applies Goffman’s definition of performance to confessional videos and engages in three case studies to illustrate the specific functions of anorexia confessional discourse.

Confession has deep roots in our society. According to Michael Renov, a film scholar, confession’s “triple legacy” lies in theology, criminology, and psychoanalysis (91). Within this legacy, an individual can confess a sin to a priest, a crime to a police investigator, or a repressed sexual fantasy to a psychoanalyst. Confessing within one of these situations always presupposes a certain outcome, such as confessing a sin leading to the hope of salvation. As Strangelove points out, not only are these scenarios based in major societal institutions, they also involve a power relationship whereby an individual confesses to a person with more authority than they (72). Thus, in accordance with the elements that Foucault outlines in the epigraph, confession

will be defined as any act that includes the divulging of personal emotions, thoughts, or actions to an authoritative ‘other’ in hope of a certain outcome.

Foucault famously explored the concept of confession in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. For him, the West is “a singularly confessing society” and those who live in it “confessing animal[s]” (59). He expands, saying that:

one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, *one’s illnesses and troubles*; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves. (59, emphasis added)

If Foucault were to re-write this today, he might add: one confesses to the camera, either on a reality TV soundstage or in one’s bedroom. In recent years, reality TV, talk shows, and social media have become key locales for confession. Popular culture, arguably one of the most visible indicators of a society’s mores and folkways, has both changed and been changed by society’s confessional discourse.

Reality TV helped popularize confession within American culture. In 1973, PBS released what is considered to be the first American reality TV show: *An American Family*. This 12-episode observational documentary, set in California, monitored the daily lives of the Loud family as the parents headed towards divorce. Grobe argues that, although the show predated the use of direct-address monologues in reality TV, its ability to capture un-scripted and spontaneous actions made it feel confessional (198). Nineteen years later, *The Real World* (1992–2017, 2019–present) moved away from *feeling* confessional to *being* confessional. The first season consisted of seven young adults learning to live together in a luxurious New York City loft, all while being observed by an ever-present camera crew. The second season added “a small, soundproof room”

in which the participants could go and give private direct-address monologues to a camera (Bunim and Murray 5). According to media scholars Minna Aslama and Mervi Pantti, this popularized “staged confession[s]” within reality TV (175-176). Cultural scholars Anita Biressi and Heather Nunn argue that reality show participants may even enjoy engaging in staged confessions because “our sense of self is guaranteed by the fantasy of an ‘other’ who observes us and whose gaze confirms the solidity and worth of our existence. Therefore, rather than fearing the omnipresent surveying gaze we embrace it” (101). These types of confessions, which may have become popular among audiences because of their ability to elicit personal and highly emotional responses from participants, are now present in the majority of reality TV shows, including the ‘diary room’ in *Big Brother* (1999-present) and the ‘confessionals’ in *Survivor* (2000-present).

The widespread desire to confess publicly, and the desire to experience strangers confess something, is reflected in ‘confessional’ YouTube videos. Unlike reality TV, these videos involve the YouTuber having the freedom to confess what, how, and when they want; the absence of a production crew; and the YouTuber’s complete control over the confessional apparatus. However, like reality TV, YouTubers are still confessing to confessants who gain a sense of authority through their anonymity. YouTubers of all types and popularity levels often upload at least one video titled with some variation of ‘the truth,’ ‘confessions,’ or ‘I’ve been lying to you.’ Despite the similarity of the titles, this genre is defined by its heterogeneity. A random sample of ten confessional videos reveal that they vary dramatically in length, aesthetic choices, and seriousness of confession. In relation to the lattermost point, two YouTubers used the confessional genre as parody (with one YouTuber tearfully confessing that she creates fake

thumbnails for her videos) while at the other end of the spectrum another YouTuber used the genre to admit (notably) to suffer from a binge eating disorder.

Within this virtual confession booth, there is a distinctive sub-genre of anorexia confessions. Anorexia confessions are closely linked to other sub-genres, including bulimia, binge eating disorder, and general eating disorder confessions. Similar to its sister sub-genres, anorexia confessions have a variable relationship with the disorder, with some promoting recovery and others indicating hesitancy about it. Regardless of the relationship that YouTubers have with their illness, they all demonstrate an acute desire to appear authentic in the eyes of their viewership. In the following sections, three case studies illustrate the various functions of anorexia confessions.

Repairing Damage

In 2014, Laura Grace uploaded a video titled “GETTING A SHOT ||VLOG||,” officially marking the beginning of her successful career as a YouTuber. Her first foray into vlogging indicates a keen understanding of the purpose and importance of the vlog-medium: to record the everyday experiences of everyday people. Currently with 244 thousand subscribers, Laura’s channel has evolved from the fun ramblings of a middle school student to a destination for beauty and fashion advice. In the summer of 2016, she uploaded the video discussed at the start of this section: “The Truth. My Eating Disorder.” Confessing publicly to having anorexia, this video moves away from her previous content and instead engages with a deeper, and more personal, mode of YouTubing.

Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis, which he uses to explain the performativity of social existence, provides a framework by which Laura’s confession can be understood. For Goffman, a

performance is when an individual engages in an action that effects another (*Presentation of Self* 8). He goes on to explain:

While in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts that might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. For if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express *during the interaction* what he wishes to convey. (*Presentation of Self* 19-20, emphasis in original)

Goffman's definition thus presumes an individual who acts, subconsciously or otherwise, in a way that demonstrates desired traits. In Laura's case, her performativity can be understood as demonstrating the desired trait of authenticity.

Laura's video is both emotional and revelatory from the start. A straight-on, medium-close up shot of her combined with even lighting and a deep depth of field (revealing the interior of Laura's neat bedroom) create an open and direct visual atmosphere. Her voice is loud, almost to the point of being tinny, and increases this feeling of immediacy. Even before she reveals what is bothering her, the audiovisual qualities of the video create a well-set stage for her confession. Her confession has several false starts, with her trying to speak but becoming overwhelmed with sobs. While Holmes points out that, in life story videos, written text foreground "affective experiences of embodiment," in confessional videos such as Laura's it is visible emotion that creates affective experiences within viewers (16). Tears are an indication of vulnerability, demonstrating that a person's defenses have come down and that they are feeling 'true' emotional distress. Communication scholars Rachel Berryman and Misha Kavka argue that what they term "crying vlogs" work because "however uncomfortable they may be to make and distressing to watch ... the producers claim to be showing an authentic side of themselves" (87;

90). Laura's display thus encourages viewers to engage with her on an emotional level, and subsequently to accept the validity of her performance.

After almost a minute, she calms down enough to speak about what is on her mind. As she speaks, she exhibits hesitancy – even worry – about what she is doing. She states:

I'm sorry if you can't understand me, because I'm just crying, but this, this needs to be said. I'm just... it's... I'm done. That's what it is. I'm just *done*. And I'm done lying, and I'm done pretending, and I'm just over it. Honestly... Okay, okay. I don't know if I'm ready to do this, but I hope, I really, really hope I'm doing the right thing. And I know I'm gonna be judged for this video, and people are going to think less of me, but... I just, I just really... I just need to do, I know I need to do this. It's not fair that I've been keeping this for so long.

Laura displays two conflicting feelings in this monologue: a desire to reveal what has been troubling her, and a fear that she will be judged because of this confession. While the former demonstrates her participation in confessional culture, Goffman would explain the latter as Laura's fear of having her identity spoiled. Following from Goffman's *Stigma: Notes of the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Laura already carries stigma because of her anorexia, but she has 'passed' successfully thus far. By confessing – by being *too* revealing – she faces the risk of social discreditation.

Laura's potential discreditation emerges from the fact that her vlogging identity is characterized by her engagement with, and promotion of, the fashion and beauty industries. These industries happen to be two cultural forces that potentially impact the development of eating disorders. Thus, it is not merely her identity as a 'sane' person that is at risk of being spoiled; her identity as a beauty YouTuber who is unaffected by the culture she reinforces is also

in danger. With this at stake, it becomes questionable why she would be willing to spoil her identity in such a public way. A tentative answer to this question is paradoxical, yet highly intriguing: she *damages* her public identity in order to *repair* both it and her private self-narrative.

Goffman describes various ways a stigmatized individual might cope with a spoiled identity. These strategies include presenting “the signs of their stigmatized failings as signs of another attribute, one that is less significantly a stigma” and “voluntarily disclos[ing]” the stigma (“Information Control” 94; 100). Laura uses these exact strategies by self-disclosing her anorexia and changing the stigmatizing attribute of anorexia into the much-valued trait of authenticity. This shift occurs a few minutes into her video, when she says:

Nobody knows this, but... I... I have an eating disorder. And when I say ‘nobody knows this,’ I mean actually *nobody* knows this. And my family doesn’t know, my best friend doesn’t know, I have lied to everyone including you guys, and I’m just done. I’m really done with it. And it’s not fair to you guys because I set an example – I get emails daily from you guys talking about how I give you such confidence with yourself and how I’ve changed your lives and made you feel beautiful, when I don’t even feel beautiful, and I lie about it.

Interestingly, she does not reveal her private self to her family first; instead, she chooses to discuss her illness with her YouTube audience. As Berryman and Kavka suggest, discussing an emotional topic in a face-to-face interaction is often viewed by YouTubers as less desirable than discussing it with a diffuse, online audience (91). In this way, Laura changes or even damages her online identity and opens herself up to stigma only to immediately perform the attribute of

authenticity. By doing this, she takes control over the stigma associated with anorexia and uses it to proactively repair the damage it could cause.

While Goffman argues for a social conception of stigma whereby it (mainly) works to destroy an individual's identity from the outside in, Frank suggests that ill individuals experience identity damage from the inside out. Informed by his dual interest in autobiography and illness, Frank writes that “[a]llmost every illness story I have read carries some sense of being shipwrecked by the storm of disease” (*Wounded* 54). This metaphorical ship refers to an individual's sense of self and coherent self-narrative, the ruination of which causes “narrative wreckage” – the fragmentation of the person's self-narrative (55). For individuals with anorexia, this feeling of being shipwrecked can occur either after a sudden onset of an eating disorder, or after hitting a low point after a slow downward spiral into the disease. Laura experiences the latter in her video. She describes struggling with eating disorder thoughts for most of her life, with the recording of her video marking the point in her narrative when she has had enough. In her own words, “this weight needs to be lifted from my shoulders.” Although she fears being stigmatized and experiencing damage to her online identity, she already feels shipwrecked by her anorexia.

Laura's self-narration of her illness is not only a confession; it is also a form of autobiography. Autobiography's relationship to confession is summarized by Grobe: “Understood as the art of breaking though, confessionalism is an ongoing experiment in the *use* of autobiography, whatever medium it may happen to inhabit at the moment” (35, emphasis in original). This autobiographical tendency is present in Laura's description of her history with anorexia and the story she tells to explain her decision to reveal her anorexia publicly. She also delves into the damage that her illness has caused, describing an increasing duality between who

her subscribers see her as (a self-confident beauty guru) and her how she sees herself (a person who struggles with body image issues). For Frank, this kind of autobiographical storytelling allows the illness autobiographer to reclaim their narrative wreckage and repair their ship (*Wounded* 54). Laura's performative storytelling allows her to take the fragmented pieces of her life and re-assemble them back into a coherent self-narrative (a beauty guru who is recovering from anorexia). Her story thus reaffirms her relationship with herself while also reaffirming her connection to her audience (Frank, *Wounded* 56). At the end of her video, Laura begins to cry again, but this time it is hopeful tears. She says, "this is probably the hardest video – this is the hardest video I've ever filmed ... [but] this video is going to change my life, and I hope it's for the better." As Frank states in relation to a female illness autobiographer, by the end of Laura's story, "[Laura's] narrative wreckage is rebuilt; her map redrawn" (*Wounded* 73).

Through her utilization of confessional and autobiographical formats, Laura engages in both public identity and self-narrative repair work. In regards to her public identity, her performative video ensures the stigma she possesses – her anorexia – does not spoil her identity but instead becomes transformed into the attribute of authenticity. Simultaneously, the process of telling her story helps her find a way out of her narrative wreckage and back to a coherent self-narrative. This function of confession is not unique to Laura's video; instead, it is found in the majority of anorexia confessions, including the others discussed in this chapter.

From Passive to Active Witness

On Hannah's channel, "A Clockwork Reader," she buys, rates, and reviews books. From her bright smile to her long curly hair, she exudes bookish enthusiasm and a desire for viewers to join her in the wonders of a good novel. After almost four years of book-vlogs that mostly elided

personal information, it came as a surprise to her subscribers when she publicly confessed in the fall of 2018 to struggling with anorexia. In “i have an eating disorder” Hannah sits in front of the camera for just over twenty-six minutes and opens up about the profound impact her eating disorder has had on her personal life. The rawness caused by the video’s generic irregularity is exacerbated by its subdued mise-en-scène, minimal jump cuts, and Hannah’s uncharacteristically desolate countenance and mannerisms. This dramatic change in atmosphere corresponds with the fact that Hannah is performing a different ‘self’ within the video. Specifically, the Hannah that appears in “i have an eating disorder” is a behind-the-scenes version of the self she normally presents to YouTube.

Goffman complexifies his dramaturgical approach through the addition of the “front” and “back” regions, or stages, of performance (*Presentation of Self* 13; 69). These terms are the sociological equivalents to the front and backstage regions in a theatre; however, unlike a theatre, individuals’ front stage performance changes depending on the situation. Hannah, in her book-vlogs, spends most of the time displaying her YouTube-specific front stage self. Just like Goffman’s definition of the front stage, Hannah’s performance “functions in a *general and fixed* fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (*Presentation of Self* 13, emphasis added). Although the content of Hannah’s videos varies, her relatively consistent performance ensures widespread consensus about the situation. Within “i have an eating disorder,” however, this relationship becomes tenuous. Although Hannah is still performing, it is a *specific* confessional performance that has become *unfixed* from how she usually defines the situation. This indicates that the video does not operate solely within the front stage region.

Her video is defined by its unique behind-the-scenes glimpse into her life. As she admits, “I don’t really talk too much about my personal life on my channel.” Although she prefers to

keep her private life private, she goes on to explain that her eating disorder has made it so “I feel like I can’t be me when I’m on [YouTube] anymore. Every time I turn on the camera, I feel like I’m lying to thousands of people.” In order to unify the disconnect between her private and public selves, she gives viewers the opportunity to see into the backstage region of her identity, a place “where the impression fostered by the [front stage] performance is knowingly contradicted” (Goffman, *Presentation of Self* 69). Although Hannah allows these backstage glimpses throughout her entire video, the most salient example occurs near the beginning when she acknowledges the performativity of her front stage self:

[Last year] was technically, on the outside, a fantastic year. And I know that from my social media, from everything my friends have told me, from other people’s perception of me and what I was doing, I seemed really happy and I seemed like I was living my life, like the best life, and all of that was not true.

Just like Laura Grace, Hannah created a front stage version of herself that contradicts her anorexia. However, as sociologist David Shulman argues, “front and backstages are fluid and variable in social life” (22). By deciding to no longer hide her anorexia in the backstage region, Hannah enters a liminal space where her front and back stage selves become merged. This liminal space has been termed by communications scholar Joshua Meyrowitz as a “middle region” where viewers see the performer from a “sidestage” angle (47).

Within this middle region Hannah can move beyond confession and become a *witness* to her own illness. In the essay “Witnessing” media scholar John Durham Peters discusses the origins of the concept and provides an intriguing re-conceptualization of how the act of witnessing can, and should be, used in contemporary society. He describes how there are two types of witnesses: a person who passively observes an event, and a person who has witnessed

that event and then gone on to actively share their story (709). For Peters, every witness has the ethical responsibility to move from being passive to active (713). When applied to anorexia, every individual is a passive witness of their own illness; it is only when they turn their self-knowledge into public-knowledge that they become an active witness. Active witnessing in regards to anorexia involves the internal and subjective experience of the illness, as witnessed by the individual, to be shared publicly. In other words, the curtain has to be pulled back in order to reveal the person's backstage self, a self that is often contradictory to the self portrayed on the front stage. As Hannah candidly speaks about her mental health struggles, she reveals the backstage person behind her upbeat and confident book-YouTuber persona. She goes as far as describing the part of her psyche that triggered the illness:

I am unfortunately the type of person who does not handle things going my way very well. I don't really know how to explain that other than when everything's going perfectly, I just assume that something terrible is going to happen, and because I always have this assumption in the back of my head and this anxiety around that, I in turn have to create chaos for myself. And that is how I think this kind of spiralled out of control for me and how I got here.

Hannah engages in a deeply personal, yet very public, introspection of her illness. By figuring out how to verbalize her self-knowledge, she moves from being a passive to an active witness.

The YouTube platform, with its dual emphasis on public viewing and intimate authenticity, is an ideal place to explore the intricacies of one's front and backstage selves. Hannah, by pulling back the curtain on her book-YouTuber persona, was able to share her personal experiences with anorexia in a public forum. In doing so, she became an active witness and utilized another possible function of anorexia confession.

Becoming a Communicative Body

In 2018, Jessie Paege uploaded “Coming Out,” a video in which she revealed her bisexuality to her YouTube community. The video was overwhelmingly well-received, with her fanbase reaching out to her via the YouTube comments to share their love and support. Jessie therefore already had experience with the confessional genre when, a year later, she created an analogous video. In “i’m anorexic,” Jessie confesses to hiding her eating disorder from her subscribers. The equivalency of these videos lies not only in their genre, but also in Jessie’s physical and emotional presence: in both videos, she runs her hands through her hair, finds it difficult to verbalize the thing that she has been hiding, and does her best not to cry on-screen. The key difference between these two videos is her attitude to the thing she is confessing, an attitude that is mirrored in the capitalization of the video titles. While in “Coming Out” she confesses to possessing an identity that she is proud of and wishes to explore, in “i’m anorexic” her identity revelation instigates shame and embarrassment. Like both Laura and Hannah, however, she actively engages in impression management by pulling back the curtain, revealing select parts of her backstage self, and, in doing so, becoming an active witness.

Frank adds another dimension to Peters’ concept of passive and active witnessing. For him, active witnessing and the body are intrinsically connected because “[t]he stories that ill people tell come out of their bodies” (*Wounded 2*). Jessie’s video supports this statement, as she is framed in a medium close-up and a shallow depth of field privileges her body over the background. (As an aside, her filming background is distinctive. At the beginning of the video she changes the camera’s focus for a moment to reveal a bed with four vinyl record sleeves on it and a table holding a rainbow, a pride flag, and a Bulbasaur. This momentary deep depth of field indicates her love of music, pride, and Pokémon.) Jessie is also distinctive with her shoulder-

length wavy red hair, made-up face, and dark t-shirt. Unlike Hannah who is mostly static during filming, Jessie is quite dynamic and is constantly running her hands through her hair, talking with her hands, hiding her face, and shifting in her chair. Her continuous movement, facial expressivity, verbal articulations of her experience, and use of full-body photos of when she was the most ill, all reinforce the notion that she is not merely testifying *about* her body, but *through* her body.

By actively employing her body as part of her testimony, Jessie approaches what Frank calls “an ethical ideal for bodies” (48). This ethical ideal is encompassed in the “communicative body,” an ideal type of body that “itself *is* the message … [because it] *communes* its story with others” (Frank, *Wounded* 48; 50, emphasis in original). Midway through her video, Jessie shares photos of when she was near her lowest weight. As each picture appears on screen, she narrates the physical repercussions of anorexia: “No period. Yup. Always, always, *always* cold. Always cold. That is when my chest pain developed.” This present-body narration of her past-body photos creates a moment of pure storytelling through the communicative body. In this moment her body *becomes* the message she wants to share with her viewers: “I don’t wish this on anyone. *Anyone*. No humans deserve this.”

According to Frank, there are three ethics of a communicative body. The first is the “ethic of recollection” (*Wounded* 132). This ethic involves an ill person sharing their past experiences in order to right past wrongs (*Wounded* 132). Throughout her video Jessie recollects various actions she took when she was unwell, such as restricting and over-exercising. Through these recollections, Jessie is able to take ownership over her past and begin to heal from the harm her eating disorder caused. Jessie also demonstrates the “ethic of solidarity and commitment” (*Wounded* 132). She does this by positioning herself with the eating disorder community, acting

as a spokesperson for that community, and providing fellow sufferers a forum (the YouTube comments) to share their own stories. Finally, when Jessie states at the beginning of her video that “this, my people... it’s a positive video, because I told myself, when I was a lot better, I would make this video so that I could help other people so they don’t have to go through what I went through,” she is demonstrating the “ethic of inspiration” (Frank, *Wounded* 133). This final ethic is central to illness testimonies, because “[h]umans need exemplars who inspire [us]” (Frank, *Wounded* 133). Throughout her video, Jessie is an exemplar who inspires. Just like her ability to inspire closeted individuals through her “Coming Out” video, she is able to promote anorexia recovery in “I’m anorexic.” By using her body as testament and inspiration, Jessie becomes a communicative body.

According to Foucault, confession “produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it” (62). Anorexia confessions on YouTube are no exception. Throughout their videos, Laura, Hannah, and Jessie repair the damage their illnesses caused, move from being passive to active witnesses, and become communicative bodies. These functions overlap, and occur with different intensities with each YouTuber. United by their anorexia, each of these YouTubers has the potential to be deeply changed by their act of confession. However, these videos are filmed at a single point in time and do not reveal what daily life with anorexia actually looks like. The next chapter will explore the lived experience of the illness as seen through food videos.

Chapter Two

“What I (Don’t) Eat in a Day”: Fascination and Fear in Food Videos

Dis-moi ce que tu manges, je te dirai ce que tu es.
[Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are.]

- Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Food and identity became firmly conjoined when, almost 200 years ago, gastronome Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin made the above claim. This aphorism quickly transformed into the popular saying ‘you are what you eat.’ Culture, society, family, and personal preference all impact the food choices individuals make. For certain demographics, such as those with anorexia, food is not merely part of their identity; it *is* their identity. Experiencing food, of course, is not limited to the physical ingestion of it. The proliferation of cookbooks with glossy pictures, the trend of photographing food before eating it, and the amount of cooking and baking shows that are available to watch are some current examples of the interconnectedness of food, identity, and popular culture. YouTube has likewise become a hub for food media. In addition to confessional videos, food videos are a popular sub-genre of anorexia video testimonials. This chapter will discuss how women with anorexia create both restriction-focused and recovery-focused food videos, and how creating these types of videos may function to help these YouTubers work through the paradoxical nature of anorexia.

Food videos abound on YouTube. A simple search for ‘food’ reveals a wide array of videos, ranging from channels as popular as Tasty, Buzzfeed, and Gordon Ramsay, to more esoteric and amateur content. The sheer number of these videos is matched by their demand. Back in 2014 a study put forth by YouTube’s parent company, Google, revealed that around fifty percent of adult YouTube users watched food videos, and millennials watched the most food videos out of all demographics (Delgado et al.). Watching food videos has become a part of

many people's – especially youth's – daily lives. Among the various genres of food videos, including recipes, challenges, and informational videos, there is the 'what I eat in a day' video. In these self-descriptive videos, YouTubers reveal a portion of their identity by audio-visually logging what they eat in a given day. Scholars have discussed the reasons for creating these types of videos, with media scholar Yasmin Ibrahim suggesting that digitally recording one's food is a form of self-representation and sociologist Erin Metz McDonnell maintaining that "[d]isplaying food choices to others is an expression ... of one's aspirations" (2; 241). YouTubers in various stages of anorexia routinely upload examples of their daily food intake. Although these videos usually share some characteristics of other 'what I eat in a day' videos, such as showing the preparation of food, providing either audio or written commentary on it, and displaying the food in a pleasing manner, they also differ in one respect: there is an overarching affective cadence of fascination and fear that permeate them. This cadence appears to mirror the same emotions that those with anorexia may feel when experiencing food.

Although Goffman's theory of performance, as discussed in the previous chapter, could be applied to food (for example, individuals may show their restriction diets in order to demonstrate the desired traits of self-control and being a 'good anorexic'), another definition may be better suited for this particular analysis. Following from Ibrahim, "[f]ood, when dislodged from the kitchen and devoid of its nutritive or taste qualities enters a realm of the performative" (4). Despite the compelling nature of this claim, Ibrahim does not expand on what she considers performance to be. This is where Grobe's definition becomes vital. For him, performance is "all the stylized *doings* in our lives" (viii, emphasis in original). Unlike popular conceptions of performance, anorexia food YouTubers often do not perform with a body or a voice. Instead, they perform with food. To combine Ibrahim and Grobe's ideas, food that,

through technological mediation, has been dislocated from its temporal and spatial existence becomes uniquely amenable to stylistic intervention. Thus, for this chapter, performance will be discussed in terms of the stylization of food-related imagery.

Through recording (and thus performing) these intimate confrontations with food, YouTubers who produce anorexia ‘what I eat in a day’ videos simultaneously signal their authenticity and make an aspect of anorexia that is often hidden from the public eye visible to a mass audience. In order to understand the conflicting emotions these videos embody, the following sections will examine the specific aesthetic strategies used within both restriction and recovery videos.

What I Eat in a Day of Restriction

Craving Skin’s “⚠️ TW ⚠️ What i eat in a day with an ED - low restriction,” uploaded in February 2020, and clodyeats’ “what i eat in a day | restriction | tw ed,” uploaded in June 2020, are two of countless videos that feature the daily diet of an individual in the midst of their anorexia. Unlike the average dieting ‘what I eat in a day’ video, these restriction videos do not promote the consumption of a healthy and sustainable amount of food. Instead, these videos encourage a rephrasing of the saying pioneered by Brillat-Savarin: ‘You are what you *don’t* eat.’ Both videos are short, with clodyeats’ being a minute and forty seconds long and Craving Skin’s being only slightly longer at three minutes and forty-nine seconds. While Craving Skin has four videos on her channel, all of which are of the same sub-genre, clodyeats’ video is her sole upload. As Craving Skin has more videos, her fanbase is larger and her video has garnered over 22,000 views (as of March 2021); clodyeats’ video, on the other hand, has been viewed just over 2,000 times (before it disappeared). Despite the discrepancy in viewership, the videos

are equal in their performance of the fearful daily *doing* of anorexia and the sense of ‘working through’ the YouTubers’ uncertain relationship to food.

Anxiety and vulnerability work hand-in-hand. Although anorexia is often romanticised in popular culture (for example, in Marti Noxon’s 2017 film *To the Bone*), it is nevertheless a mental illness that carries with it a certain stigma. By displaying the foods that they eat, Craving Skin and clodyeats expose their anorexic identities to the wider world. However, these YouTubers work hard to ensure that their food choices are the *only* indication of their identities. One way in which they control their identities is through the use of pseudonyms. According to media and communication scholar Emily van der Nagel, “pseudonymity [is] a conscious engagement with platforms that seeks to compartmentalise aspects of the self” (313). Craving Skin and clodyeats further compartmentalize their identities through the almost sole use of point-of-view (POV) shots. In the rare instance when a POV shot is not used, the YouTubers’ face is never in the shot. In this way, the audience *sees with* the YouTubers instead of *seeing* the YouTubers. This is in direct contrast to the medium close-ups of the YouTubers discussed in the previous chapter. POV shots, through aligning the viewer with the YouTuber, may create a sense of embodiment or *feeling-with* the individual. However, the lack of an on-screen body may also be viewed as a tactic to efface the bodily presence of the narrator. This is most vividly seen in clodyeats’ video, with her hands only occasionally entering the frame. In this way, these YouTubers’ choice of using POV shots can be understood as a reflection of the body-mind split within those with anorexia. According to philosopher Susan Bordo, known for her interest in body politics, those with anorexia experience their bodies as separate, and antagonistic, entities (Bordo 144-145). In one respect, being able to see (figuratively) through the eyes of Craving Skin and clodyeats deepens the connection between viewers and these YouTubers. In another

respect, however, the erasure of the YouTubers' bodies makes it difficult to recognize them as separate beings *to* have a connection with. Either way, this choice of shot serves the dual function of giving the audience a glimpse into how Craving Skin and clodyeats see the world, while at the same time decreasing the YouTubers' vulnerability by making them anonymous.

Although these YouTubers mostly erase themselves from their videos, the remaining visuals suggest an aesthetic of fear. On the most basic level, this aesthetic is materialized through both YouTubers' use of intertitles to provide trigger warnings at the start of their videos. Craving Skin's intertitle reads " TW  I DONT (sic) ENCOURAGE THIS TO ANYONE BUT MYSELF SO IF YOU ARE ON RECOVERY OR GET EASILY TRIGGERED PLEASE DONT (sic) WATCH." The anxiety inspired by the warning signs, the caps-lock letters, and the slow enlargement of the text is somewhat lessened by an incongruously cutesy lilac background sprinkled with white stars. The fear-dampening effect of the background may encourage viewers – even those who are “on recovery” or “easily triggered” – to disregard the warning. clodyeats’ trigger warning functions in a similar manner. Hers reads: “DISCLAIMER TW: EATING DISORDER. i (sic) am not trying to promote eating disorders with my videos. i (sic) do not encourage them at all. i (sic) make these videos to keep myself on track and hold myself accountable. please (sic) don’t watch if you think this will trigger you.” The intertitle’s background is tan with white dots and stars (some of them moving), and is surrounded by a light pink border. Although the text is not animated and only a portion of it is in caps-lock, it connotes the same mix of anxiety and reassurance as Craving Skin’s. Interestingly, the titles of both videos also provide trigger warnings. Therefore, viewers have already been warned and have decided to click on the videos well before the intertitles appear on screen. The trigger warnings in the intertitles, then, are a formality and an expected part of this sub-genre’s aesthetic of fear.

Another expected part of this aesthetic is calorie-counting. Calorie-counting is not unique to restriction videos; however, in other food videos it often has positive connotations. For example, the calorie counter in Epic Meal Time's extravagant food creation videos functions, according to sociologist Deborah Lupton, as "a way of quantifying, demonstrating and celebrating excess" (44). For restriction videos, the opposite is true. As evidenced by psychiatrist Zoë Ellison and her colleagues, the caloric value of food creates anxiety for those with anorexia. They found that young women with anorexia displayed higher activation in the amygdala region of the brain – associated with the fear response – than control subjects when shown pictures of high-calorie foods (Ellison et al. 1192). Unlike the positive connotations of Epic Meal Time's calorie counter, counting calories in restriction videos highlights the YouTuber's desire for self-control while at the same time associating each food item with its anxiety-inducing caloric value.

Conversely, like the trigger warnings, Craving Skin and clodyeats' use of on-screen calories can be viewed as a reassurance tactic. Both YouTubers use on-screen text and/or intertitles to display the caloric information for each food item, the total of each meal, and the total for the day. For clodyeats, the minutiae of calorie-counting is especially important. When she prepares pancakes for dinner, she uses on-screen text to break down the exact calories for each part of the meal:

2 pancakes – 160 cals
 1 tbl spoon maple syrup – 52 cals
 a lil over 1 serving vegan butter - 100 cals
 1 serving nondairy whipped cream – 25 cals
 total – 337 calories

clodyeats' attention to caloric details suggests that she has a strong desire to control the amount of energy that enters her body. She demonstrates her desire for control again at the end of the video, when an intertitle proclaims "total calories- about 380:)." The emoticon smiley face at the

end of the sentence indicates her satisfaction about successfully restricting her daily food intake. There is a similar intertitle at the end of Craving Skin's video. With a triumphant "DAY TOTAL: 240 KCALS" Craving Skin establishes her own sense of pride about her accomplishment. Both YouTubers seem to associate the success of their anorexic identities with the number of calories eaten in a given day. Despite any caloric value being associated with fear, both cloudeats and Craving Skin exert control over this anxiety by precisely calculating calories and choosing low-calorie food items.

The profilmic images of food in Craving Skin and cloudeats' videos expand upon the fear and reassurance created by the non-diegetic visuals. They both use POV shots and/or visual effects showcase their perception of reality. As cloudeats prepares her pancake supper, she holds up the nutrition information for the pancakes and the non-dairy whipped cream to the camera. The camera stands in for her eyes as she examines the various numbers on the package. While the on-screen text of her video only lists the calories, the nutritional information on the pancake package lists the amount of other commonly-feared items, such as fat (1.5g), carbohydrates (32g), and sugar (5g). The close-up shot of the pancake box lingers for seven seconds, with the large and bolded calories (160) drawing the eye. Moments later, this set-up is reproduced with the whipped cream container. Framed in an extreme close-up, the calories (25) and fat (1g) are visible. It is interesting to note that although cloudeats prepares a meal that is associated with relatively high amounts of carbohydrates, sugar, and fat, the components of the meal are surprisingly low in both calories and other nutritional components. This suggests that these items were specially chosen based on their (lack of) nutritional value. The careful examination of nutritional information is a common aspect of life with anorexia, and cloudeats' video stylizes this ordinary activity and transforms it into a performance.

Craving Skin takes a different approach in capturing her subjective reality. Except for one key moment which will be discussed below, all profilmic visuals in her video are in black and white. Periodic use of slow, slightly melancholic music accentuates the dreariness of the black and white visuals. Along with taste and smell, seeing food is an important aspect of ingestion. Psychologist Charles Spence and his colleagues draw upon past research to explain how human's trichromatic colour vision may have evolved in response to our need to find nutrient-dense foods during hunter-gather times (53). Craving Skin, by removing the colours from the food she prepares, also removes the visual cues that suggest that it is nutritionally and gustatorily desirable. For instance, when she slices up an apple at the start of her video, the presumably ruby-red tone of the fruit has been transformed to dull shades of grey. This reduces the pleasure of gazing upon the fruit, and presumably indicates that Craving Skin perceives food to be both frightening and undesirable.

While Craving Skin reduces the visual pleasure of looking at food, both she and clodyeats elide the actual consumption of it. Both show the preparation of food (an apple and crushed-ice coffee "ice cream" for Craving Skin and pancakes for clodyeats), but then utilize some combination of before-and-after shots of the plated food, selecting a piece of food and eating it offscreen, and starting to record after they have already eaten the food. Although it can be argued that watching someone eat is not particularly enjoyable, the popularity of cooking shows that feature chefs, bakers, and judges tasting various culinary creations disprove that argument. For Craving Skin and clodyeats, these elisions connote discomfort around being seen actually consuming the food they prepare – and possibly just being seen at all. These are both traits commonly associated with individuals with anorexia, and, like the trigger warnings and calorie counting, are seen almost ubiquitously across restriction videos. Filming food and then

not eating it on-screen illustrates the daily struggle within these women between needing food to survive and being ashamed to be seen eating. In this way, *not* being seen (eating) is a performance in and of itself.

However, clodyeats and Craving Skin's apparent anxiety around food can be understood another way. As mentioned above in regards to intertitles and on-screen text, the fear embedded in these videos is often changed into reassurance. This reassurance may be a way for these YouTubers to 'work through' their paradoxical relationship to food. Specifically, although anorexia is defined by a lack of interest in eating – its definition is literally "loss of appetite" ("Anorexia") – both YouTubers display a keen interest in, even a fascination with, food. clodyeats provides a salient illustration of this when she, throughout her video, watches mukbangs. Mukbangs are a specific genre of food video that involves a YouTuber eating a large amount of food. They are related to other YouTube genres, including autonomous sensory meridian response ('ASMR') and binge videos. Mukbangs can be viewed in opposition to restriction videos in regards to their display of uncontrolled eating and gustatory pleasure. The overabundance of food consumed in these videos is not socially sanctioned, and has recently been discussed in relation to its mental and physical health consequences (Kang et al.; Kircaburun et al; Strand and Gustafsson). Interestingly, although clodyeats watches mukbangs according to on-screen text "in hopes of curving the cravings" of foods that she wants, she ends up watching a pancake mukbang and then making pancakes for dinner. The importance of this is twofold. First, she admits to having "cravings," thus directly contradicting the definition of anorexia. Secondly, instead of the pancake mukbang curing her craving, it seems to have exacerbated it. Her desire becomes manifest when she prepares her pancake supper. She provides a lengthy shot of a pancake sizzling in a pan, and shortly afterwards uses a close-up to display

the plated pancakes. In the next shot, cloudyeats zooms in as her fork selects a piece of pancake and slowly sops up some maple syrup and whipped topping. These shots are all paired with upbeat café-style music. As McDonnell points out, “[t]hose who photograph their food often belie their own obsession with looking at the food” (255). Just as it did with the nutritional information, the camera becomes a surrogate for cloudyeats’ gaze. This time, however, it powerfully demonstrates her obsession (possibly even compulsion) with looking at food.

Craving Skin’s fascination with food is slightly more subtle, though no less intriguing. The first indication of her desire for gustatory enjoyment occurs when she puts five spoonfuls of 0-calorie sweetener into her morning coffee. As she puts spoonful after spoonful into her cup, she exposes her fondness for sweet-tasting food. This fondness is repeated later in her video, when she makes herself crushed-ice coffee “ice cream” with a large amount of the same 0-calorie sweetener. For the only time in the video, she uses full-colour to film the finished “ice cream.” As she stirs her creation, on-screen text describes it as being “super yummy.” Craving Skin’s judicious use of colour and on-screen descriptions highlight the fact that she finds this food item enjoyable to both look at and eat. The fact that both her morning coffee and the “ice cream” contain no calories, combined with her use of visual cues to enhance the food and her liberal use of sweetener, demonstrates her contradictory feelings of distaste and pleasure in regards to food.

When it comes to ‘what I eat in a day of restriction’ videos, having an anorexic identity is not as one-dimensional as it might at first seem. Both cloudyeats and Craving Skin demonstrate not only a fear and distaste of food, but also an obsession – maybe even an enjoyment – with gazing upon it. They may even look upon food as a substitute for eating, as ingesting food through their eyes would be safer for them than physically ingesting it. While food in these

videos work to reveal the paradoxical nature of having anorexia, the videos in the next section demonstrate the similarly paradoxical identity of being in anorexia recovery.

What I Eat in a Day of Recovery

Recovery and restriction videos are two sides of the same phenomenon. While recovery videos have many distinguishing traits, they also cannot be fully understood without reference to their restrictive counterparts. Emily Sara's "WHAT I EAT IN A DAY - anorexia recovery" and Ava Grace's "extreme hunger: what I ate | eating disorder recovery," both uploaded in February 2019, demonstrate typical days of anorexia recovery. In both videos Ava and Emily's presences are very different from those found in restriction videos. Emily only uses the occasional POV shot, and instead relies mainly on direct address. Ava films the first part of her video using POV shots, and then switches to direct address at the end. In this way, Emily and Ava do not present their bodies as being separate and antagonistic (like the restriction YouTubers do); instead, their corporeal forms are shown to be unified and necessary parts of themselves. While both Emily and Ava's first YouTube videos focused solely on their anorexia recoveries, they have now both branched out into general lifestyle vlogging. Unlike clodyeats and Craving Skin's videos, both Emily and Ava foreground the necessary – and often positive – aspects of food consumption. Interestingly, both videos have received significantly more views than the restriction videos. While Ava's video has almost 95,000 views (before it disappeared), Emily's is approaching 438,000 (as of March 2021). Similar to the restriction videos, Emily and Ava make evident that identifying as an anorexia recoveree involves walking the line between being fascinated by, and being fearful of, food.

Emily's video is just over six and a half minutes long, and has garnered over 10,000 likes (in comparison to about 140 dislikes), and almost 600 comments. Emily uses peppy music, sarcastic dialogue, witty on-screen text, and unexpected camera and editing work to lightheartedly represent anorexia recovery. This favourable take on recovery is accentuated by a successful eat-out challenge and her consumption of nutrient-rich at-home meals. In contrast to the restriction videos, which often make the YouTubers' socioeconomic statuses opaque through food scarcity and close framings that hide physical living spaces, Emily's video highlights luxury food items and the affluence of her house. This brings awareness to the possibility that recovering from anorexia – and being able to make a 'what I eat in a day of recovery' video – may be influenced by an individual's socioeconomic circumstances.

Emily's lighthearted representation of anorexia recovery encourages curiosity among her viewers. Emily rewards this curiosity by directly addressing her audience and giving them insight into her thoughts and emotions before and/or after she completes her meals and snacks. Moreover, unlike both restriction videos, Emily shows herself eating on-screen. As discussed above in relation to the restriction videos, eliding the consumption of food may connote shame around the act of eating. Similarly, erasing one's body from the video may reduce the anxiety associated with vulnerability. Emily disrupts these connections *not* eliding the majority of her food consumption and by *not* effacing the source of narration. Although she does not film her afternoon or evening snacks, she uses time-lapses to film herself eating breakfast, morning snack, lunch, and part of dinner. In her own words, she shows herself eating in order to demonstrate "how much you have to eat to restore weight – it's a lot more than I originally thought." She is aware of her audience's interest in her recovery diet, and at the end of the video states "whether you are watching this out of sheer curiosity, or you are going through the same

thing, I really hope you got something out of it and that I could give you a little glimpse into the life of what recovery is like.” Her purpose for making the video seems to be to illustrate what an anorexia recoveree identity looks like. Holmes points out that life story videos are often couched “in altruistic terms,” meaning that YouTubers claim to be making the video for viewers who are currently struggling with anorexia (8). Although not working in the life story genre, Emily emphasizes her desire to help viewers and, in doing so, allows her audience – whether they have anorexia or not – to vicariously live with her and experience what it would be like to be in recovery.

Emily’s portrayal of her recoveree identity is influenced by the fact that she is performing what she believes authentic recovery looks like. To return to Grobe’s definition of performance, Emily stylizes her video in a way that emphasizes the positive aspects of daily life in recovery. While daily life for both anorexia sufferers and recoverees revolves around food, recovery allows for food intake to be balanced with other aspects of an individual’s regular routine. Although Emily’s life is still partially defined by her food intake, her decision to film her eat-out challenge – a challenge in which she gets frozen yogurt and afterwards describes as “the first time in a very, very long time that I’ve ever ate – either, like, gone out for morning tea and be eating alone in a café or restaurant situation, so, crushed it!” – powerfully performs a return to normality. What she elides from the video further suggests a return to an ordinary lifestyle outside of her anorexia. There are elisions between her morning snack and lunch, and between lunch and dinner. In both of these instances she explains to her viewers afterwards that she was “very, very busy” and that “things got really hectic, schedule-wise.” Despite the fact that part of her hectic afternoon schedule included a doctor’s appointment, which could have been anorexia-related, her busyness appears to indicate that outside responsibilities have returned to the

forefront of her daily life. Consequently, her performance of anorexia recovery is in stark contrast to cloudyeats and Craving Skin's performances of anorexia restriction. While the latter videos are fascinated with looking at, preparing, and counting the exact calories of, food, Emily's video performs the joy of reclaiming a life that involves food, but is no longer completely defined by it.

Although Emily accentuates the positive aspects of recovery, her performance also brings to light the challenges associated with this identity. She uses various audiovisual techniques throughout her video, including rapid zoom-ins, image rotation, and sound effects. Emily's use of mediated performativity peaks in the middle of her video when she inserts a representation how her mind reacts when confronted with a challenging meal. After she sits down for a lunch of quiche and quinoa salad, she stares at her plate for a moment before turning to the camera and saying:

Do you ever kind of like sit down for a meal, and you're feeling fine, like everything is going fine, like right up to all of a sudden all you want to do is run away? All my brain wants to do is leave. I'm going to put a little simulation of what's going on inside my head right now.

With a snap of her fingers and the ring of a gong, the camera zooms in on her eye. For the following twenty seconds, exaggerated sounds accompany images of her picking up her keys, going down the stairs, entering her car, driving to a forest, and striding angrily into the wilderness. She eventually stops, looks at the camera, flails her arms and shouts "mother f--." A quick cut brings the viewer back to Emily sitting at the table in front of her lunch. Looking at the camera, she says "but you can't do that. So – I'm very motivated at the moment, I'm the most motivated I've ever been to get better, to recover, to be healthy. So, I'm going to crack on with

this.” This performative simulation colourfully demonstrates that even during recovery, certain foods and meals can still be frightening. Nevertheless, the humorous nature of the insert, combined with Emily’s ability to eventually eat the meal, puts a positive spin on this common struggle.

While Emily’s video allows the audience to vicariously *live with* her, Ava’s video allows the audience to vicariously *eat with* her. Ava’s video is almost eight minutes long, and has garnered 1,800 likes, 40 dislikes, and 271 comments (before it disappeared). In it, she uses mainly POV shots to film most of the food she ate in a day of “extreme hunger.” This popular-psychology term refers to a biological weight-gain process, often experienced during anorexia recovery, whereby an individual’s increased hunger cues drive them to eat more than usual (Troscianko). Ava eats constantly throughout the day, with her meals and snacks running into each other. Although close framings hide much of the view of Ava’s house, the sheer amount and variety of foods that Ava consumes reinforces the connection between recovery and relative affluence demonstrated in Emily’s video. The way in which Ava films her extreme hunger differentiates her video from Craving Skin and clodyeats’ videos. While the restriction videos displayed a fraught ‘love-hate’ relationship with food, Ava’s video seems to exhibit an untainted (and untamed) desire for it. Similarly, while Emily’s recovery identity is defined by her positivity and pragmatism around recovery, Ava’s recovery identity is defined by the sheer amount of food that she eats.

Watching Ava’s video is hungry work. Her aural and visual stylization of the video creates a landscape of longing. Throughout her video, she uses the track “Urban Lullaby” by Doug Maxwell and Jimmy Fontanez. This track has no lyrics, and is instead comprised of sensual, mouth-related sounds like “mmmm’s” and “oooo’s.” Ava’s use of this music in her

video thus transforms food items into sensual objects of desire. In relation to the visual characteristics of her video, Ava holds a significant portion of the food she eats (chocolate, crackers, nuts, granola bars, bread with peanut butter, a banana, etc.) up to the light coming from a window. She turns the food in various directions, often framing it in close-ups or medium close-ups, in order to show off its tactile characteristics. Her physical movements when she makes food, like when she slowly spreads peanut butter over a slice of bread, further demonstrate her own food-related fascination. These pauses for admiration, combined with close framings, bright lighting, and her physical movements, invites viewers to join Ava with gazing yearningly at food.

Ava's profuse consumption of food can be both liberating and uncomfortable to watch. As Bordo suggests, "our culture is ... obsessed with keeping our bodies slim, tight, and young" (140). Anorexia takes this obsession to the extreme, with individuals who suffer from the disorder desiring absolute control over their bodies. As Bordo explains:

The frustrations of starvation, the rigors of the constant exercise and physical activity in which anorexics engage, and the pain of the numerous physical complications of anorexia do not trouble the anorexic; indeed, her ability to ignore them is further proof of her mastery of her body. (149)

Ava's seeming overindulgence goes against societal norms and, through the very act of gaining control over her recovery, renounces the type of mastery that individuals with anorexia seek to gain over their bodies. Interestingly, like the restriction videos, she leaves eating out of the video. The absence of on-screen consumption makes Ava's food intake ambiguous (is she eating all that she shows? Is she eating none of it? Is she – as she claims at the end of the video – eating everything she shows *and more?*). Assuming she eats all that she says she does, these elisions

suggest anxiety or embarrassment on her part around the act of eating. This, in turn, reinforces the idea that eating more than average is shameful. While watching Ava take control over her recovery could be liberating for some, it may trigger in others the fear of losing self-control.

Unlike the restriction videos, Ava makes herself known – and thus vulnerable – at the end of her video when she switches from POV shots of food to a close-up direct address monologue. This switch is sudden and startling, and shatters all perception of anonymity. Like Emily, Ava uses a real-sounding user name. It is unclear if these are their real names or pseudonyms. Nevertheless, by using a real-sounding name to refer to herself, she, like Emily, becomes more personable to her audience. While Emily's video is defined by her direct-address style, Ava had the opportunity to remain relatively anonymous (at least in this video – her vlogging career makes it so she cannot be anonymous), yet she chooses to reveal herself. She invites the viewer into her life by filming her direct-address monologue while lying on her bed in her room. She intimately addresses the viewer when she says “so, let's talk about extreme hunger. I know I talk about it a lot, and I might make it sound like it's not that hard for me, but the truth is a lot of times its really hard on me.” Her confession is reminiscent of the videos discussed in the previous chapter, with her disproving an assumption that her audience might have about her. This confession is poignant, as it also reveals that extreme hunger is not as easy for her as she made it out to be in the video. Although her video embodies a positive viewpoint of recovery, this monologue retrospectively shades her video with anxiety. Just like Emily's video, Ava demonstrates that being in recovery means that the positiveness of regaining normality is underlaid with a continuing fear of food.

Food Porn: Connecting Anorexia Food Videos to A Modern Media Practice

The videos discussed in this chapter are connected to the wide-ranging phenomenon often called ‘food porn.’ Food writer Anne E. McBride argues that this term, which encompasses aestheticized food imagery across various media, “is contentious” (38). In her article she leads a roundtable discussion with academics and chefs. For chef Will Goldfarb, food porn is “a meaningless, artificial term” (McBride 38). Sociologist Krishnendu Ray is also “skeptical” of the term, partially because “[o]nce you call something pornographic, you bring down moral opprobrium on it” (McBride 40). Conversely, other scholars have no qualms about the validity of the term. McDonnell, for example, makes the connection between sex and food explicit in her definition of the phenomenon: “food porn is a set of visual aesthetics that emphasizes the pleasurable, sensual dimensions of food, derived from (but not actually employed in) human sexuality” (239). Artists Nathan Taylor and Megan Keating also find value in the connection between food and sex, defining food porn as images that “are styled to elicit hidden desires of intimacy and sensuality while prioritizing aspects of fantasy and unattainability” (311). Despite the controversy around this term, it is a useful heuristic to understand the importance and impact of anorexia food videos.

According to Taylor and Keating, food porn is characterized by its unattainability; however, for those with anorexia, its *intangibility* might be its most important quality. Specifically, food porn gives individuals with anorexia a way to experience food at a distance, and allows them to eat with their eyes and ears instead of their mouths. Signe Rousseau, who specializes in both food and communication, suggests that food porn is appealing to those with eating disorders because it is “safer than consuming real foods” (748). Medical sociologist Anna Lavis even suggests that looking at food porn may induce “a sense of satiety – of *having eaten*,”

or what Spence et al. terms “digital satiation” (201, emphasis in original; 53). If what Rousseau, Lavis, and Spence et al. suggest is accurate, then food porn may enable anorexic behaviour. On the other hand, as seen with cloudyeats’ habit of watching mukbangs, food porn may give the illusion of providing satiety while actually exacerbating food cravings – and thus encouraging eating. This debate remains unresolved, but it shows how varied and ambiguous our attitudes to food are, and how it often is associated with shame as well as pleasure.

The four videos discussed in this chapter do not posit a single view of anorexia. Instead, they each ‘work through’ the paradoxical nature of the illness and often contradict their own portrayals of it. Although it may not be appropriate to describe these videos *as* food porn, they are definitely part of the wider culture of those with anorexia viewing and creating food imagery that is both aestheticized and intangible. While each of their videos are unique, Craving Skin, cloudyeats, Emily Sara, and Ava Grace all seem to share an anorexic/recoveree identity impacted by the fear of being fascinated by, and the fascination with the fear of, food.

The vlogs and food videos in the past two chapters have focused on snapshots of an individual’s life either in the midst of the illness or during their recovery. This raises the question: how do those with anorexia *move* from illness to recovery? The next chapter will examine this question in relation to life story narratives.

Chapter Three

“My Anorexia Story”: Creating Narratives, Creating Selves

The writing of autobiography is properly understood as an integral part of a lifelong process
of identity formation in which acts of self-narration play a major part.

- Paul John Eakin, 101

YouTube’s premise, and promise, as a high-traffic platform is captured by its famous ‘Broadcast Yourself’ slogan. Although this slogan is no longer active, it lives on in the vernacular of those who use the platform. However, what does it mean to broadcast *yourself*? And how are the ‘selves’ that people broadcast connected to the stories they tell? In order to explore these questions, this chapter examines the aesthetic and narrative strategies individuals use to tell their anorexia stories and theorizes the connection between anorexia narratives, performance, and selfhood.

The videos discussed in this chapter all centre on an individual’s anorexia story, or narrative. In her book exploring the characteristics of fictional narratives, English scholar Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines “narrative fiction” as “the narration of a succession of fictional events” (2). In order to apply this to non-fictional narratives, one need only rewrite the definition: *the narration of a succession of real-life or subjective events*. According to Rimmon-Kenan, narratives can be further defined by their three fundamental aspects: “the events, their verbal representation, and the act of telling or writing,” or the “story,” the “text,” and the “narration” (3). In relation to anorexia video testimonials, the story is what actually occurs, the text is the completed video, and the narration is the process by which the individual organizes the video and tells their story. This analysis does not discuss the events themselves, as they are inaccessible. Instead, the first part of the chapter focuses on the text of the videos and ends with a discussion of the possible functions of the narration process.

Anorexia ‘life story’ videos are those in which an individual’s experiences with anorexia are transformed into a single, encapsulating narrative. Unlike the moderately diverse aesthetic and narrative strategies found in anorexia vlogs and food videos, anorexia life story videos are fairly uniform in their approach. Aesthetically, the vast majority employ a slide-show format, with only a few outliers that use the vlog format. Narratively, most of these videos use a formal narrative structure with a clearly defined beginning, middle, and end. The videos chosen for this chapter are all uploaded by women; however, it is important to note that there are many videos of this kind that are uploaded by men. In general, male anorexia life story videos are comparable to those discussed in this chapter, with perhaps slightly more use of vlog-style setups and slightly less emphasis on full recovery at the end of the narratives.

Like the videos discussed in the first two chapters, life story videos are performative. While previous chapters discussed performance in relation to Goffman and Grobe’s sociopsychological and stylistic definitions of performance, respectively, this chapter will instead focus on the word’s commonly-known definition. According to Schechner, not only do “performances mark identities, bend time, reshape and adorn the body, and *tell stories*,” but a key function of performance is to entertain an audience (28, emphasis added; 46). This connection between performance and entertainment is crucial. In order for their videos to gain likes and subscribers, and maybe even help monetize their channels, life story YouTubers must not only open up about their anorexia (like the confessional vlogs) and provide details about their habits and thoughts (like the food videos), they also must *tell a good story*.

The Aesthetics of Anorexia Storytelling

Elle Tayla's "My Eating Disorder Story" (uploaded May 2015), Carolyn Radnor's "My Anorexia Story" (uploaded March 2016), and Jessica Eddy's "Anorexia Story // Jessica Eddy" (uploaded November 2019), are three of countless examples of YouTube videos in which an individual has audio-visually narrativized their journey through anorexia. Each of these YouTubers has a different level of experience with the platform, with Elle having thirty-two videos on her channel, Carolyn having two (both being life story videos, with the one analyzed here being the updated one), and Jessica just having one. The popularity of their channels varies accordingly, with Elle having the most subscribers (130,000), Carolyn in the middle (36,000), and Jessica the least (164). In relation to the popularity of their life story videos, Elle's has almost 14,000,000 views, Carolyn's 2,500,000 (although the original one has 14,600,000), and Jessica's 72,000 (note that while the view count on Elle's and Carolyn's videos was updated in March 2021, the view count on Jessica's reflects the number of views in September 2020). These impressive numbers indicate the importance of performative storytelling within these videos. Despite the discrepancies in experience, subscribership, and views, these three videos are quite similar and can be viewed as representative of the entire anorexia life story sub-genre.

On the aesthetic level, these videos are virtually indistinguishable. Both Holmes and Platz have also noted the similarities between the videos in this sub-genre (8; 58). The most distinguishing similarity is the use of the slide-show format consisting mainly of selfie photographs. These photographs are rarely still but instead use pans and zooms that highlight specific aspects of the young women's bodies, such as legs and stomachs. These photos first focus on the YouTubers' shrinking bodies and then, towards the end of each video, chart the progress of weight gain. Holmes, writing from a feminist perspective, argues that these selfies

are produced through “the act of self-scrutiny and self-surveillance” and therefore “draw attention to the ways in which normative femininity is (required to be) *produced and performed*” (15; 20, emphasis in original). Holmes uses the Goffmanian idea of performance as being the display of desired traits (in this case, the display of tightly-controlled femininity). What she does not note is that selfies often chart the recovery of these YouTubers, and thus also perform the desired traits of health, determination, and pro-recovery. Holmes briefly touches upon another conception of performance when she argues that selfies documenting spectacular bodily transformations are the main draw of anorexia life story videos (11). The popularity of anorexia life videos, as seen through the number of views on Jessica, Elle, and Carolyn’s videos, gives credence to this argument. Specifically, one key allure of these videos may very well be the spectacular – the *performative* – high-stakes narratives of anorexia and anorexia recovery.

There are also other ways of understanding the presence of selfies within these videos. Tamar Tembeck, an art historian who researches illness and medical photography, suggests that illness selfies may be used “to convey both the centrality of medical experiences in the subjects’ lives and their specific desire to be publicly identified as persons living with illness” (9). Viewed in this light, the use of these self-starvation selfies enables each of these anorexia life story YouTubers to publicly identify as someone who has significant experience with the medical system and who is (working towards being) recovered from anorexia.

Text cards and/or on-screen text are interspersed among the selfies. Along with providing narrative information and sharing the YouTuber’s inner thoughts, the text also gives a justification for the existence of the video. As was discussed in the previous chapter in relation to Emily’s food video, life story YouTubers often highlight the altruistic reasons behind their videos (Holmes 8). Jessica, for example, provides a text card at the end of her video that states

“Your worth is not defined by a number on the scale. The fight wasn’t easy but I’m here to let you know that every day that I fought was worth the freedom I have found today. You are more than enough exactly the way that you are.” Similarly, Carolyn writes:

To anyone that is struggling with some kind of eating disorder, just know recovery is possible. It’s not easy but it is so worth it in the end. You will have your ups and downs. There is a life after an eating disorder. Weight is just a number. It doesn’t define who you are as a person. You are strong, beautiful, and mean so much in this world. You can recover. Have a support system and be dedicated. You can do this.

These YouTubers act as role models for those still struggling with anorexia, showing that because they survived the illness, others can too. Although this is potentially helpful for those who watch the videos, the YouTubers inadvertently downplay the personal reasons for audio-visually narrativizing their illness story. The potential personal functions of anorexia self-narrativization will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter.

With narrative information and description being conveyed via on-screen text, the videos have no need for voice-over narration. Moreover, recording one’s voice and editing that recording to match a series of images is difficult, and demands editing skills and software. However, this lack of voice-over creates an interesting distancing effect. By not having an auditory voice to weave the past and the present together (unlike Jessie’s confessional video in Chapter One), the individual that is the centre of the narrative becomes removed from the individual that is telling the narrative. This may enable these YouTubers to tell their narratives while firmly distancing their current, recovered selves from their past, anorexic selves. The lack of a voice-over also raises an interesting question about these young women’s voices being ‘silenced.’ It could be argued that because we cannot hear these young women’s voices, the

aesthetic parameters of this sub-genre render them, quite literally, speechless. This argument has some merit, although it assumes that a person's voice is limited to their verbal articulations and the sound of a physical voice. Holmes discusses this question and argues that these young women's voices are instead situated within the photographs and selfies of their bodies (10). According to Holmes, their bodies are "the representational signifier[s]" in these videos (10). It may even be empowering for these young women to allow photos and selfies of their bodies – the very things that their narratives revolve around – to do most of the talking in these videos.

However, by emphasizing the representational power of bodies, Holmes simultaneously understates the role of formal techniques in the conveyance of these women's voices. It may be more appropriate to suggest that although we never *hear* these young women, their *voices* are perceived through their carefully curated selections of photos, on-screen text, and music. Following from documentary film theorist Bill Nichols, "'voice' [in documentary] is not restricted to any one code or feature such as dialogue or spoken commentary. Voice is ... formed by the unique *interaction* of all a film's codes" (18, emphasis added). For example, in Elle's video, the combination of a photo of Elle (eyes wide and face drawn, huddled next to a couch wearing a sweater and a scarf), on-screen text ("Always cold, lips blue, disconnected from reality..."), and melancholic instrumental music (which will be discussed below), carries with it the same connotation of being lost and afraid that would (presumably) be found in her voice if she was narrating. In other words, the other audiovisual techniques these young women use compensate for the impression that their actual voices are being silenced.

Background music accompanies these images, with both Jessica and Carolyn using pop music with inspirational lyrics. While Jessica uses "Warrior" and "Skyscraper" by Demi Lovato, Carolyn also uses "Skyscraper" and combines it with "Keep Holding On" by Avril Lavigne and

“The Fighter” by Gym Class Heroes (ft. Ryan Tedder). These YouTubers’ use of Demi Lovato’s music is interesting as the pop star has been open about her own history with mental illness, including struggling with an eating disorder (Birch). Although Demi Lovato has not discussed the meaning of “Warrior,” the lyrics suggest that it was at least partially inspired by her own history with mental illness (Muller). However, she has explicitly connected “Skyscraper” with her own mental health struggles (Vena). By using her music, these YouTubers appear to be situating their narratives within the broader cultural landscape of mental illness and eating disorders.

Jessica only uses Demi Lovato’s music in her video, and the songs’ lyrics complement her narrative. Jessica begins her video with “Warrior.” As a picture of young Jessica overlaid with the title “OVERCOMER: MY ANOREXIA STORY” appears on screen, Demi Lovato sings: “This is a story that I have never told / I gotta get this off my chest to let it go / I need to take back the light inside you stole.” These lyrics function as a form of voice-over narration, creating the sensation that Jessica is speaking directly to her viewers. After “Warrior,” Jessica plays “Skyscraper.” The first instance of the song’s chorus, “You can take everything I have / You can break everything I am / Like I’m made of glass / Like I’m made of paper / Go on and try to tear me down / I will be rising from the ground / Like a skyscraper, like a skyscraper,” corresponds to the part in her narrative when she decides to fully commit to treatment. In this context, the “you” in these lyrics seems to refer directly to Jessica’s anorexia. Despite the lyrics in this second song being more metaphorical than the lyrics from the first, it still provides important narrative information. It gives the viewer a glimpse into Jessica’s determination to rise above the struggles of her eating disorder.

Music functions slightly differently in Carolyn's video. "Skyscraper" plays for the first three minutes and forty seconds of her narrative. It accompanies her narrative through a gradual period of weight loss, becoming weight restored, and finally falling fully into anorexia. Out of that time, only a minute is dedicated to her weight restoration while the rest is taken up by documenting weight loss. Whereas in Jessica's video "Skyscraper" accompanied images of recovery, here it accompanies mainly images of weight loss and thus has a different connotation. The second song that Carolyn plays, "Keep Holding On," also accompanies images of weight loss. These pairings create the sensation that she is using her anorexia to rise "like a skyscraper" and is telling herself to "keep holding on" to the eating disorder. Although her intention cannot be known, these song/image pairings imply ambivalence about the idea of recovery. Towards the end of the video Carolyn charts her recovery, and the music that accompanies the images of weight gain reduces this feeling of ambivalence. As pictures of Carolyn, smiling and weight-restored, appear on screen, the lyrics of "The Fighter" state: "Give me scars, give me pain / Then just say to me / ... / Here comes a fighter / That's what they'll say to me, say to me / Say to me, this one's a fighter." This ensures that Carolyn's video ends on a triumphant and hopeful note.

Unlike Carolyn and Jessica, Elle opts to use computer-generated music characterized by melodic, piano-like notes. Her video starts with a slow, melancholic arrangement. This music accompanies her narrative through her childhood, her first encounter with anorexia, and her first time becoming weight-restored. At this point in her narrative a new arrangement with a slow tempo and a hopeful tone begins to play as she describes her returning desire to lose weight. Her choice to switch from melancholic to hopeful music at the advent of her relapse is curious. Like some of the music in Carolyn's video, this music seems to suggest an uncertainty on Elle's behalf around the idea of recovery. As a quick montage of weight-loss photos and selfies appear

on screen, the music changes into an up-beat crescendo, seeming to emphasize her relief about her weight loss. However, this same musical composition accompanies the rest of her video, including the section about her recovery. Because of this, Elle's choice of music creates both dissonance and resonance within her video.

In this brief overview and analysis of the aesthetic strategies these life story YouTubers employ, there has been a reoccurring emphasis on the relationship between formal techniques and narrative. The next section will move away from aesthetics and instead engage in a deeper exploration of how these YouTubers structure their illness narratives.

Creating an Anorexia Narrative

Jessica, Carolyn, and Elle all use the same basic narrative pattern to structure their videos. This narrative pattern has four distinct parts. First, the YouTubers describe their “pre-anorexia period” (Holmes 8), which consists of a happy childhood without a fear of food (“I loved food and burned calories as quickly as I ate them”; “I ate whatever I wanted and did not have a care in the world”; “I was healthy, happy, always with friends”). Next, an “agent” (Holmes 9), such as sports or bullying, marks the turning point from their happy childhood to being concerned about their weight (“Things started to change when I went en pointe and really took dance seriously”; “I was terrified I wouldn’t fit in my [cheerleading] uniform from the previous year”; “The restriction started. All because i (sic) had a fear of gaining weight from the times i (sic) was called a ‘fat Whale’ in primary school”). In relation to the last quote, Elle’s use of a lowercase “i” to refer to herself in the on-screen text may suggest that her desire to make her body smaller made her sense of self smaller as well. Third, weight loss is rapid and leads to health complications, in-patient treatment, and/or hospitalization (“I was just 80lbs. … [I was on]

IV fluids and nutrition because my stomach couldn't hold enough real food"; "I was 25 pounds underweight. I was put in the inpatient unit for 9 days"; "losing over 40kg in 6 months My body was shutting down on me as i (sic) began to have seizures"). Finally, the YouTubers make the decision to recover and they are happy again ("I decided I was done with anorexia... I am now 17 years old, a Junior at Cornerstone University pursuing a triple major and double minor... My favorite food(s) are pizza, sushi, and dark chocolate!"; "I was released from [inpatient treatment] and was on the road to recovery... I now have a healthy relationship with food and exercise"; "i (sic) had come to the realisation that the only person who could save me was myself... I no longer restrict calories. I smile again. I go out with friends. I once again have the energy to exercise. But most importantly i (sic) am finally HAPPY!"). This four-part narrative structure is not exclusive to these three videos, but is instead found across the majority of anorexia life story videos.

These anorexia life story videos are part of larger tradition of individuals transforming their experiences with illness or disability into a narrative. There is some debate about what to call these narratives. Both Couser and Tembeck use the term "autopathography" to refer to "autobiographical narrative[s] of illness or disability" (Couser, "Introduction" 5) whereby "the life narrative pivots around an experience of illness, an accident, or trauma, hence the replacement of the root word *bios* with *pathos*" (Tembeck 1, emphasis in original). Throughout her book *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* humanities scholar Anne Hawkins prefers to use the simpler "pathography." Although both of these terms apply to the videos discussed in this chapter, they have a tendency to reduce these narratives – and thus the young women who tell them – to just the illness. It is true that these videos do 'pivot' around anorexia, with the young women's worlds narrowing until it seems that their anorexia *is* their world.

However, terms such as ‘autopathography’ and ‘pathography’ reinforce this and provide the normative judgement that these autobiographies are inherently different from all other autobiographies simply because they revolve around an illness instead of any of the other topics that permeate the autobiographic genre (such as one’s family, a career, a hobby, etc.). In order to resist this unnecessary distinction, the generic and inclusive term ‘autobiography’ will be used to refer to anorexia narratives.

Scholars specializing in illness and disability autobiography have discussed the various ways in which an autobiographer can structure their narrative. Frank argues that there are three main narrative strategies that are indicative of both the narratives individuals tell others (in the form of autobiography) and the narratives individuals tell themselves (in the form of their mindset about their illness). These strategies intertwine throughout the course of the illness and throughout the course of narrativizing the illness. First is the “restitution” narrative, which involves the author describing how they were healthy in the past, are now sick, and expect to be healthy again soon (*Wounded* 77). Jessica, Carolyn, and Elle clearly demonstrate the first two parts of this narrative strategy by discussing the transition from their happy childhoods to their eating disorders. However, there is no indication that they are looking towards a future where they are recovered. As the three YouTubers all create their narratives after they have reached recovery, it makes sense that their narratives do not provide an emphasis on expecting health to return – because health has *already* returned. Next, the “chaos” narrative involves the autobiographer assuming that their life will never get better, and that their illness/disability will define and limit them for the rest of their life (*Wounded* 97). Elle demonstrates this mindset when, in the midst of her eating disorder, she states, “I had lost all control of my thoughts and actions but i (sic) didn’t know a way out.” Although she did eventually find a way out, her

anorexia narrative was impacted by the chaos narrative. Finally, there is the “quest” narrative in which the individual accepts their illness and desires to utilize their experience (*Wounded* 115). Carolyn’s narrative takes on the quest aspect when, near the end of her video, she writes, “I still struggle everyday. I have my days where I’m gaining and days that I am losing. That’s life and I have learned to embrace my eating disorder.” Afterwards she provides peer support to those who are still in the midst of their eating disorders, and encourages them to get better. In this way, she has accepted the presence of her eating disorder and is seeking to use her lived experience to help others. Although the restitution narrative dominates these videos, both the chaos and the quest narratives influence the types of narratives these young women tell.

Couser, on the other hand, argues that there are four main ‘rhetorics’ that autobiographers with disabilities use. First there is the “triumph over adversity” rhetoric which is characterized by great feats of strength and perseverance where the limits of the disability are fully overcome (“Rhetoric and Self-Representation” 33). In relation to a disability, this type of rhetoric would refer to narratives like that of Terry Fox. When applied to anorexia, it takes on a different meaning. Jessica provides a key example of this rhetoric when she, during her recovery phase, writes “Over my 17th birthday my family and I went to London and I had an absolute blast trying new foods, discovering bakeries and restaurants, and enjoying London!” This simple situation – enjoying the sights, sounds, and *foods* of a new city – is the very definition of a feat of strength that overcomes the limits of anorexia. Next there is the horror and gothic rhetoric, in which “disability is characterized as a literally dreadful condition, to be shunned or avoided” (“Rhetoric and Self-Representation” 34). This rhetoric is present in certain types of illness selfies and treatment photographs. Both Jessica and Elle include photos of their stays in-hospital, including IVs in their arms. In these moments, anorexia takes on a horrific tinge. Third is the rhetoric of

spiritual compensation, in which the autobiographer views their disability as a mission from a higher authority (“Rhetoric and Self-Representation” 36). Although this rhetoric is not found in Jessica, Carolyn, or Elle’s narratives, it could very well be present in other anorexia life story videos. Finally, there is the rhetoric of nostalgia, characterized by the autobiographer looking back and reminiscing about when they were not yet disabled (“Rhetoric and Self-Representation” 38). Once again, as these anorexia narratives were created during recovery, this rhetoric is not found in these three videos.

Neither Frank’s narrative strategies nor Couser’s rhetorics are one-size-fits-all formulas in which narratives fit neatly. Instead, they can be viewed as ‘ideal types.’ Max Weber defines ideal types as the “*accentuation* of one or more points of view … [and the] synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent *concrete individual* phenomena … [i]n its conceptual purity, this mental construct cannot be found anywhere in reality” (90, emphasis in original). Frank and Couser invented these narrative types through the ‘synthesis of a great many’ individual illness and disability narratives. Therefore, these concepts are useful for understanding the *types* of narratives told, even if no individual narrative fits perfectly into a single type. As seen from the above examples, although anorexia narratives have distinctive traits, they are also part of the larger legacy of illness- and disability-focused autobiographical writing. Frank and Couser’s narrative strategies and rhetorics, respectively, intertwine in all illness and disability narratives – including anorexia ones – and are useful heuristics for unravelling the varying affects, impulses, and viewpoints expressed in these narratives.

The Functions of Anorexia Self-Narrativization

So far, this chapter has focused on the audiovisual and narrative techniques of what Rimmon-Kenan would refer to as the “text” of the anorexia life story videos (3). Interestingly, Holmes notes the risks of reducing anorexia to a “text … which neglects the experiences of real girls or women” and raises the question “about the relationship between the material ‘lived’ body and the digital body” (6). There are no easy answers to these concerns; however, this chapter follows from Rimmon-Kenan’s argument that the “story” – the actual, lived, succession of events that make up the text – is inaccessible to reader (3-4). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the ‘text’ does not reflect real experiences. As Frank notes:

The stories we tell about our lives are not necessarily those lives as they were lived, but these stories become our experience of those lives. A published narrative of an illness is not the illness itself, but it can become the experience of the illness. The social scientific notion of reliability – getting the same answer to the same question at different times – does not fit here. Life moves on, stories change with that movement, and experience changes. Stories are true to the flux of experience, and the story affects the direction of that flux. (*Wounded* 22)

With this in mind, this section moves beyond the text and instead explores the functionality of “narration,” the process of producing the text (Rimmon-Kenan 3). When it comes to the functions of anorexia life story videos, there are three main considerations: gender, embodiment, and selfhood.

Unlike Holmes’ use of feminist scholarship in her analysis of anorexia life story videos, this chapter has so far mainly overlooked gender considerations in favour of aesthetic and narrative ones. However, it is important to acknowledge the ways in which the videos discussed

in this chapter go against preconceived gender norms. In their article about selfie culture, media scholars Theresa Senft and Nancy Baym engage with art critic John Berger's argument that "in the history of Western art, women have had little control over the representation of their bodies and subjectivities" (1594). Of course, in recent years devices such as cellphones with integrated cameras and platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram have allowed for an increasing amount of the population, including women and minorities, to engage in audiovisual self-representational practices. However, the self-representational practices of some demographics continue to be perceived as more valuable and genuine than others. Specifically, Couser argues that autobiography is a "male-dominated genre" ("Introduction" 4), while sociologist Paula Saukko points out that the perceptions of women with anorexia are often thought to be unreliable (6). Anorexia life story videos uploaded by women push back against each one of these realities. In this way, telling an autobiographic, self-representative narrative through digital technology – especially one that is as popular as Jessica, Carolyn, and Elle's videos – may be quite empowering for women with anorexia.

As mentioned above, the cornerstone of these narratives is photos and selfies of the YouTuber's body. As anorexia is often associated with the desire to hide one's body, it is counter-intuitive, and surprisingly powerful, for these YouTubers to share numerous full-body images of themselves. In the current media environment, with selfies proliferating on social media platforms, "the concept of the anorexic body as hidden is no longer workable" (Holmes 2). As also discussed above, Holmes views photos of the YouTubers' bodies as "the representational signifier[s]" that constitute their voice (10). Although these photographs are *one* of many formal elements that combine to create these YouTubers' voices, they also serve another function. Couser points out that it is our bodies that allow us to experience and interact

with the world around us (“Introduction” 4-5). English scholar Paul John Eakin agrees, arguing that “subjectivity and selfhood are deeply rooted in the body” (20). By using photographs and selfies, these YouTubers are locating their sense of self *within* their bodies. This is especially significant for those with anorexia, who often have a dissociative and antagonistic relationship to their bodies. Over the course of these videos, these YouTubers first publicly demonstrate how they viewed their bodies as ‘other’ and something that they could control, and then, during the recovery parts of the narratives, begin to publicly identify with their bodies and reforge the intrinsic connection between their bodies and their selves.

This focus on corporeal existence, including feelings of disassociation and re-connection with one’s body, is often seen in autobiographical narratives revolving around an illness. According to Frank, “[p]eople telling illness stories do not simply describe their sick bodies; their bodies give their stories their particular shape and direction” (*Wounded* 27). This relates back to, and builds upon, Frank’s idea of the “communicative body” discussed in Chapter One (*Wounded* 48). In many ways, these life story YouTubers’ relationship to their bodies is the main aspect of their narratives. Indeed, “[t]he body, whether still diseased or recovered, is simultaneously cause, topic, and instrument of whatever new stories are told” (Frank, *Wounded* 2). In relation to all anorexia video testimonials, but especially in regards to life story videos, the individual’s antagonistic relationship to their body is one of the *causes* of the narrative, overcoming that antagonistic relationship is the *topic* of the narrative, and the recovered body is the *instrument* that constructs the narrative. Instead of actively fighting *against* their bodies (and thus themselves) as they have in the past, the process of narration showcases how these young women actively work *with* their bodies (and thus themselves) to operate their computers and editing software to create the text of their narratives. This unification of body with self in service

of creating the text that celebrates the unification process is among the most powerful functions of the videos discussed in this chapter.

One's body and one's self are intrinsically connected; therefore, as one's body changes throughout time, one's sense of self will change alongside it. As Eakin points out:

we are all becoming different persons all the time, we are not what we were; self and memory are emergent, in process, constantly evolving, and both are grounded in the body and the body image. Responding to the flux of self-experience, we instinctively gravitate to identity-supporting structures: the notion of identity as continuous over time, and the use of autobiographical discourse to record its history. (20)

In other words, we are drawn to the autobiographic genre because it allows us to unify all our different selves, and all the different aspects of those different selves, into a discrete, encompassing narrative. Eakin continues, describing how idea that the present "I" is continuous with the "I" in the past is "autobiography's most distinctive – if problematic – generic marker" (Eakin 93). Anorexia narratives fall into this 'I' trap, with the YouTuber often using on-screen text to refer to the person before, during, and after the illness, as 'I.' This suggests that they, like the majority of autobiographers (and humans in general), see themselves as a unified individual throughout time.

One of the key components of autobiographies that revolve around an illness, however, is a narrative of self-change. According to Frank, illness narratives frequently use the metaphor of the phoenix to describe the deep personal transformation that the illness caused ("Rhetoric of Self-Change" 40). This suggests that those with severe illnesses often *do* perceive themselves as being different from who they were in the past. Viewed in this light, these videos could be read as a way for these YouTubers to say "I got through that, but I was transformed in the process. *I*

am not quite the same ‘I’ as back then.” In other words, anorexia autobiography may be a way for individuals to *both* unify their shifting sense of self *and* acknowledge deep personal transformation.

Narratives are omnipresent in human society. Although “[w]e know perfectly well that life certainly isn’t a story, at least not in some simple, literary sense,” we rely on narratives because they “do not simply describe the self; they are the self’s medium of being” (Eakin 99; Frank, *Wounded* 53). As this chapter has demonstrated, humans are narrative beings, relying on narratives to understand our *selves* and our place in the world. By uploading body-focused narratives to YouTube, the young women discussed in this chapter engage in the purest form of *self*-broadcasting. However, as also demonstrated in this chapter, the popularity of life story videos may lie partially in their entertaining, or performative, nature. Having anorexia (or having recovered from anorexia) does not automatically lead to self-narrativization; instead, “autobiographers … must have some cultural authorization, some sense that their story is valid and valuable” (Couser, “Introduction” 12). The next chapter will examine the cultures and communities of YouTube in order to understand the “cultural authorization” of anorexia videos and the ways in which they are valued by those who use the platform.

Chapter Four

The YouTube Platform: Community, Confirmation, Comments

[YouTube's] virtual community reflects the cultural politics of the present times and thus is rife with both cooperation *and* conflict.

- Michael Strangelove, 4

Defining YouTube's Community

Since its inception in 2005, many scholars have referred to YouTube as an ‘imagined community.’ This term, coined by Benedict Anderson in his 1983 book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, refers to the ways in which individual citizens conceptualize themselves as being part of a larger nation. Yet in what ways does this term – in its original definition – actually reflect the types of communities that form on social media platforms such as YouTube? What alternative theorizations can we use to understand how the affordances of the YouTube platform create digital communities? And what is the unique specificity of communities that emerge around anorexia video testimonials? This chapter will first discuss the idea of imagined communities and then move on to explore the functions of anorexia communities on YouTube and the comment cultures that surround them.

Anderson’s idea of imagined communities developed out of his desire to define the characteristics of nationalistic identity. In doing so, he examined the idea of a ‘nation’ in its historical context and discovered four characteristics that define it. First, a nation is “imagined” because individual citizens cannot be aware of all the members of the nation (Anderson 6). Second, a nation is “imagined as *limited*” because of its finite borders (Anderson 7, emphasis in original). Third, a nation is “imagined as *sovereign*” because citizens believe themselves to be free within its boundaries (Anderson 7, emphasis in original). Lastly, a nation is “imagined as a *community*” because of the deep bonds that connect those with the same national identity (Anderson 7, emphasis in original). YouTube scholars, including Strangelove and anthropologist

Patricia G. Lange, have described YouTube in these terms (104; “What Defines a Community?” 153). Yet these scholars seem to be relying on the words of Anderson’s concept – ‘imagined’ and ‘community’ – rather than the way he intended the term to be used. As Anderson used the term to describe nations, and nationalistic pride, using the term to describe YouTube makes the implicit assumption that YouTube communities have (some of) the same characteristics of a nation.

Although Anderson points out that “all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined” (6), this does not mean that other social formations have the characteristics of a nation: imagined as limited, sovereign, and – most importantly – as a community. To begin with the last, there is a stark difference between the nationalistic pride that creates the “deep attachments” and “a deep, horizontal comradeship” found in a national community (Anderson 4; 6) and the type of communities that form on YouTube. Many YouTube communities would appear shallow and ephemeral compared to Anderson’s definition, and thus are quite different from the way that Anderson uses the word. In this way, Anderson’s definition of ‘community’ should not be conflated with other uses of the word. Continuing to work backwards, YouTube communities are not sovereign – at least, not in the same way that Anderson uses the term. The YouTube platform allows for both top-down and bottom-up policing of content and comments. In a YouTube community, it would be unlikely that members would imagine themselves and their community (or ‘communities’ plural, as a YouTube user can be a part of countless different communities) as having the same level of freedom and sovereignty that members of nations believe themselves to have. Finally, YouTube communities, including those around anorexia videos, are neither finite nor limited. YouTube communities are forever in flux, with community participation being forever temporally

dislocated. While citizens of a nation imagine themselves as part of a community both constantly and simultaneously, those who engage with YouTube videos become part of the community for an asynchronous, variable length of time. Although YouTube communities may be imagined because, like citizens of a nation, YouTube users cannot be aware of all other visitors to the platform, these communities do not necessarily fit with the characteristics of Anderson's idea of 'imagined communities.'

Some scholars have questioned whether or not community even exists on YouTube. Media scholars Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau point out that, "according to the so-called '90-9-1 rule,' ... 90 percent of online audiences never interact, nine percent interact only occasionally, and one percent do most interacting," meaning that "ordinary YouTube users hardly see themselves as part of a larger community" (12). Despite the fact that the majority of YouTube users neither upload nor comment on videos, Burgess and Green, along with Strangelove, nevertheless argue that "[c]ommunity is a constitutive cultural logic of the platform" and amateur videos "can provide the basis for community formation" (Burgess and Green 95; Strangelove 185). Lange takes a more balanced approach to the idea of YouTube community. Lange, who interviewed YouTubers at a YouTube convention in 2007, states that "[m]ost interviewees believed that *under the right circumstances*, YouTube could facilitate community" ("What Defines a Community" 182, emphasis added). From this point of view, YouTube communities are neither an integral part of the platform, nor completely absent. Instead, YouTube has the potential to be both an individual-focused and a community-focused platform, depending on the circumstances and the desires of any particular YouTube user.

Anorexia video testimonials are among the types of videos that, under the right circumstances, can foster community. Online anorexia communities have a long history,

including chat rooms and ‘thinspiration’ websites. Thinspiration refers to both the desire to get thinner and the objects that cater to that desire. The communities that form around anorexia, both in real-world situations and in online platforms such as YouTube, are not unified. Instead of a singular outlook on the illness, communities are often structured upon their dissonance, with some members promoting the illness and others promoting recovery (and some promoting both simultaneously). According to Strangelove, “where there is disagreement and debate, there we find community. If we want to know what types of community YouTube has enabled, one of our best sources will be the internal debates and controversies that are found among YouTube’s members” (105). As will be discussed in more depth below, conflict and contestation are prevalent among the comments on anorexia video testimonials. In contrast to Anderson’s term, anorexia communities on YouTube can be described as asynchronous, expansive, and policed communities that are imagined on the basis of their inter- and intra-member conflict.

Functions of YouTube’s Anorexia Community

Within the expansive YouTube community, there are two key types of members: YouTubers who upload videos, and commentors who engage with videos and other viewers. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive, and this categorization does not represent ‘lurkers’ who watch videos (and maybe read some comments) but who do not comment themselves. For the scope of this chapter, however, community engagement will focus on visible signs of participation, such as through videos, comments, and ‘likes.’ This section will explore the possible functions of community on the YouTuber themselves, with the subsequent section examining the comment culture that surrounds these videos.

First, the previous chapter touched upon Couser's claim that "autobiographers ... must have some cultural authorization, some sense that their story is valid and valuable" ("Introduction" 12). When applied to anorexia testimonials, this suggests that these YouTubers must believe that there is an audience (a *community*) who will value their story. In other words, for a community to form around a video, or for a video to be seen as part of a wider YouTube community, that video – that *story* – must be valued. Uploading videos about one's experiences with anorexia can be viewed as a process of validation. These YouTubers have the potential to receive validation not only in regards to their illness, but also in regards to their own worth as a member of a YouTube community.

The philosophy of Martin Buber offers a secondary potential function. In his work *I and Thou*, Buber argues that there are two methods of engaging with the world: It and You. When people view the world through the method of It, they may "experience something" but do not gain any deeper insight into the object or person of their contemplation (55). However, if an individual is able to see the "exclusiveness" of an object or a person, they may be able to "encounter" that object or person as a "You" and enter into a relationship based on "reciprocity" (58-59). This latter method can only occur infrequently, as "[t]he individual You *must* become an It when the event of relation has run its course" (84, emphasis in original). Buber's philosophy is more nuanced than what is discussed here, and it does not concern mediated cultures like YouTube, but his foundational concept of It and You resonates with anorexia testimonials. These videos may be able to encourage viewers – even for a brief moment – to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the YouTuber (i.e., through liking or commenting) and see the YouTuber specifically, and anorexia generally, as less of an It and more of a You. Moreover, Buber argues that "[p]ersons appear by entering into relation to other persons" (112). The presence of anorexia

video testimonials on YouTube suggest that these young women want to be seen yet are afraid to be seen. Although Buber maintains that “[t]he relation to the You is unmediated” (62), creating a *mediated* digital body through their testimonials is a way for these YouTubers to be vulnerable – to be *seen* as a person – yet maintain a distance from that representation. It can be seen as a therapeutic way to receive confirmation of their existence.

For Buber, encountering the You in others is a prerequisite of community formation.

According to him:

True community does not come into being because people have feelings for each other (though that is required, too), but rather on two accounts: all of them have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to a single living center, and they have to stand in a living, reciprocal relationship to one another. (94)

When applied to anorexia video testimonials, the ‘single living center’ refers to the video itself, and viewers engage in a reciprocal relationship to that centre, and to one another, by liking and commenting on the video and each other’s posts. Although Buber maintains that community is formed on reciprocity and Strangelove argues that it is founded upon disagreement, these two scholars’ ideas are not mutually exclusive. Viewers who disagree with the video or with one another are nevertheless engaging in a type of reciprocal relationship. For the YouTuber, who is at the centre of these multiple levels of reciprocity, having a community form around their story – around *them* – could very well be one of the main incentives to upload a testimonial.

Lange’s term ‘Videos of Affinity’ provides a third and final example how community may function for YouTubers. She defines this term as videos that “attempt to maintain feelings of connection with potential others who identify or interpellate themselves as intended viewers of the videos” (“Videos of Affinity” 71). Although anorexia video testimonials, as seen through

the comments, are watched by a wide range of people, the majority of viewers seem to have some experience of the illness. As, to use Lange's words, anorexia testimonials contain "numerous in-jokes and references," such as discussion of calories, weight, and anorexia-specific thought patterns, they may "interpellate" viewers with experience of anorexia and thus strengthen feelings of an anorexia community ("Videos of Affinity" 73; 71). The sub-genres present within anorexia testimonials deepen feelings of community. According to Lange, "[f]eelings of affinity are normally promoted by communal eating and drinking, sharing an experience in a common space, conducting an informal conversation" ("Videos of Affinity" 78). The sub-genres discussed in the previous chapters – the vlog format ("conducting an informal conversation"), the food video format ("communal eating and drinking"), and the life story format ("sharing an experience") – reflect situations that heighten feelings of affinity. In this way, anorexia testimonials are not only valued by YouTube viewers (Couser) and allow for 'You'-centred reciprocal communities (Buber), but they also have the potential to create affective ties among those with lived experience with the illness (Lange).

YouTube's Comment Culture

Besides being a repository for online videos, YouTube's affordances, such as being able to 'like' a video or comment on it, promote virtual social interactions. YouTube's comment system is based upon the idea that anyone who has an account can comment on a video. According to communication scholars Janet Wasko and Mary Erickson, this has helped create the popular belief that YouTube is a fundamentally democratic platform (372). Strangelove argues against this belief. For him, "YouTube is many things, but it is not a democracy. It is a privately owned capitalist fiefdom. The minute we lose sight of that reality, we give ourselves

over to YouTube's own propaganda" (191). In other words, YouTube's *appearance* as a democracy is just another one of the platform's affordances. Strangelove argues that YouTube functions as a "village cop": "a regulator, patron, and landlord of this *virtual village*" (106, emphasis added). By saying this, he acknowledges that YouTube has the potential to act as a community – or, more accurately, countless smaller communities – while also pointing out the fact that these communities are regulated and non-autonomous.

Those who upload videos, viewers, and YouTube itself have a significant amount of control over what comments – if any – remain below any given video. YouTube allows creators to remove and report individual comments on their videos, along with being able to hide users from their channel. YouTubers also have the option to disable comments on a particular video, have YouTube flag potentially inappropriate content, or have YouTube hold all comments for the YouTuber to review before allowing them to be posted publicly. This allows individual YouTubers to monitor and police their own channels and ensure that the comments attached to their videos are tailored how they see fit. In other words, it allows YouTubers to curate a 'community' around their videos, instead of just allowing for a 'following' to develop organically. Comments and social interactions on YouTube are also monitored by the platform itself (through algorithms that catch inappropriate content), and by individual YouTube users (through 'reporting' comments to YouTube). Any discussion of YouTube's comment culture must acknowledge how these regulatory systems invalidate the perception of YouTube as a full democracy.

The comment culture, and subsequently community, that forms around a video depends on the type of YouTuber that created the video. Well-known YouTubers such as Laura Grace, Jessie Paege, and Hannah often receive a higher number of likes and personable comments on

their videos. Several scholars have noted how this type of positive and personal engagement on social media content can increase the self-esteem and happiness of the person who created the content (Burrow and Rainone 235; Marengo et al. 6; Zell and Moeller 31). For YouTubers such as Laura, Jessie, and Hannah, some of their followers would have watched their content for quite a few years and seen them grow and develop over time. For example, on Jessie's video Lizard posted that "Jessie... honey, we love you so much and care about you... We don't want you to suffer. You're a beautiful, wonderful human being." Lizard's declaration of love and support seems to emerged from a deep familiarity of Jessie's vlogs. Returning to Buber, it may be easier for viewers to see well-known YouTubers as a 'you' – as a *person* – because of their deeper level of attachment with the YouTuber. When it comes to YouTubers who have uploaded a small number of videos, there is not the same level of attachment. On Jessica's life story video, which is the only video on her channel, derina hooks wrote "You are truly inspiring. In not just recovery but pursuing your dreams. I may not know you but am so proud if you." This comment demonstrates the fact that, although viewers can be deeply moved by a YouTuber who has uploaded a single video, viewers do not feel the same level of attachment and familiarity to them as they do for a semi-famous YouTuber. Following from this, it is possible that YouTubers such as Jessica may not receive the same intensity of affirmation as YouTubers like Jessie.

Past researchers have analyzed the types of comments found on YouTube generally, and eating disorder testimonials specifically. Lange created a taxonomy of the common types of comments found on YouTube videos. Her taxonomy contains three main categories: comments "that interacted with: (1) the video's content; (2) the video maker; and (3) other commenters" ("What Defines a Community?" 159). Although this taxonomy is fairly self-explanatory, it is limited in focus. It emphasises the direction of the comment, while eliding a discussion about the

comment's tone. Pereira et al., in their discussion of comments found beneath eating disorder video testimonials, take the opposite approach and focus mainly on the tone of the comment. According to them, there are four types of comments: "Supportive," "Unsupportive," "Posted by Creator," and "Spam" (940). Interestingly, based on their quantitative sample of 1,580 comments, almost 75% fell into the "Supportive" category (940). While Lange categorizes comments on YouTube videos based on what or who they interact with, and Pereira et al. suggest that anorexia comments should be categorized based on their supportiveness, this chapter will instead advocate for a taxonomy that encompasses both direction and tone. Furthermore, although it would be interesting to discover the proportion of comments that fall into each category (as Pereira et al. do), that form of analysis falls outside the purview of this research. Moreover, the comments that are visible to a researcher may not be indicative of all the comments that viewers have posted. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the types of comments discussed in the current taxonomy appear across most anorexia video testimonials, with their prevalence depending both on the sub-genre of testimonial and the YouTuber's relationship to their own illness.

Taxonomy of Anorexia Testimonial Comments	
Categories	Sub-Categories
Affirmation	YouTuber-focused
	Self-focused
	Other commentator-focused
Hate	YouTuber-focused
	Other commentator-focused
Thinspiration	Appreciating weight-loss techniques demonstrated in the video
	Offering weight-loss advice
	Comparing body/food intake to that of the YouTuber
	Explicitly stating that they are watching for thinspiration
Other	Asking the YouTuber questions
	Asking for help
	Non-thinspirational comparisons between commentator and YouTuber
	Discussing aspects of the video that are not anorexia related
	Addressing other commentators/viewers (non-hate)
	Other

Table 1

There are three main types of comments commonly found beneath anorexia testimonials: affirmation, hate, and thinspiration (Table 1). The first of these, affirmation, are comments that promote anorexia recovery. These comments can be YouTuber-focused, self-focused, or other commentor-focused. On Hannah's confession video, Gwendolyn Kensinger posted: "i (sic) love you hannah (sic)!! sending (sic) you all the positive thoughts <3 <3 <3." This comment actively supports Hannah and affirms her decision to publicly confess to having anorexia. This comment has received 631 likes, further reinforcing the affirmation emanating from Hannah's viewers. A similar feeling of affirmation comes from Delphi, who posted the following self-focused comment on Jessie's confession video: "she is my hero...for a girl who cant (sic) actually talk to anyone about body image and eating disorders, i (sic) love you jessie (sic) for making me feel less lonely." Not only does Delphi's comment acknowledge how Jessie's video positively impacted her, it also supports performance scholars Lynn C. Miller and Jacqueline Taylor's argument that "[t]estimony calls forth testimony" (177). Although Miller and Taylor write from the perspective of autobiographical performance art, their claim resonates with the tendency for commentors to use the forum beneath anorexia video testimonials to testify to their own experience with the illness. Finally, other commentor-focused comments are those in which a viewer replies to another's comment in a supportive manner. On Jessica's video, Bella Elles posted a long comment outlining her own struggle with anorexia. A fellow viewer, Sloane Price, replied to her post, saying:

Oh, no honey! You are gorgeous. Food is not fat; it is energy that we need to live. I know it's hard, but try to remember that you don't need to be bone thin to be pretty. You are so stunning and I know you will recover. I'm praying for you. It's just not worth it. eating (sic) healthy is good, and losing weight is too, but it can be dangerous.

Sloane Price's comment, although suggesting that weight loss is 'good,' nevertheless affirms Bella Elles' desire to recover from her eating disorder. The types of social interactions and communities that form around affirmative comments are built upon a communal recovery or anti-anorexia mindset. YouTuber-focused, self-focused, and other commentator-focused affirmation comments appear on all types of anorexia video testimonials; however, the amount of this type of comment is often dependant on the type of video (for example, they are more present on stories of recovery and less on restriction food videos).

The next category of comments, hate, are comments that direct dislike either towards the YouTuber or to other viewers/commentors. Unlike affirmation comments, these comments seek to divide, not unify. Maaahitn Cartahh, who commented on Laura Grace's confession video, provides a salient example of a hate comment directed towards a YouTuber. They wrote: "How you cryin (sic) but there is NO. TEARS. Lmfao. Fake a f." This comment undermines Laura by suggesting that she is faking her emotions and, consequently, faking her confession. On the other hand, hate comments directed towards other viewers/commentors often occur in *defense* of the YouTuber. Ayee It's Joanna, who also posted on Laura's video, wrote that "Each and every person that disliked this video is disgusting and sick." This comment seems to be in direct opposition to commentors such as Maaahitn Cartahh, who did not believe in the veracity of the video. Ayee It's Joanna's comment has received 320 likes (as compared to Maaahitn Cartahh's comment, which did not receive any). In this specific example, it appears that although hate can (and often is) directed towards YouTubers with anorexia, it is more socially sanctioned to protect the YouTuber (through hate comments directed to other viewers) than to question the validity of the YouTuber's subjective reality.

Thinspiration comments are those which promote anorexic behaviour. There are four sub-categories of this type of comment. The first involves a commentor appreciating weight-loss techniques demonstrated in a video, and is especially prevalent on restriction food videos. In Craving Skin's restriction video, she provides a description of how to make 0-calorie "ice cream." One of her viewers, Sweet pastry's, wrote, "Thanks for the 'Ice cream' trick! I had already eaten 400cals and really wanted something sweet, thx agian (sic)." Sweet pastry's comment is not solitary; instead, a large portion of the comments on Craving Skin's video thank her for providing the recipe. This sub-category of comment belies the viewer's reasons for watching the video: to discover 'tips and tricks' on how to be a better anorexic. A similar type of comment involves the commentor providing their own tips. Jazzi Juice, who also commented on Craving Skin's video, wrote "I drink black coffee, monster, or just caffeine in general, because it gets my heart rate up to make me want to exercise more." This explicit sharing of anorexia tips, either in the video or in the comments, helps create a community based not on affirmation or hate, but instead based on a communal desire to lose weight.

There are two other sub-categories of thinspiration comments. The first involves the commentor comparing their body and/or food intake to that of the YouTuber. For example, on Elle's life story video, Micha UwU commented "Meanwhile I'm just an obese walrus." This comment has received 1000 likes and 32 replies. 26 of these replies are from viewers who agree with Micha UwU's sentiment, including replies such as "lmao #relatable," "sameee (sic)" and "I relate to this comment on a spiritual level." Micha UWU's comment has thus created a mini-community of like-minded people who struggle with body image concerns. The last sub-category involves comments that explicitly state that the commentor is watching the video for thinspiration. To continue with comments associated with Elle's video, BIC MAC bitch! wrote

that “Some people are here to watch and support … Some are here to get some inspiration … But some are also here for some ‘thinspiration.’” This comment has received an astounding 1,800 likes and 180 replies. All but one of the replies agree with BIG MAC bitch!’s original comment, including replies such as “So true. I’m glad someone said it!,” “Definitely thinspiration I know I can drop extreme amounts more if I cut way down on intake,” and “I know I am. As a girl who went from 270+ lbs to 130+ lbs and stuck here for more than a month now, I really need to see that it can be done.” Like Micha UwU’s comment, BIG MAC bitch!’s comment creates a community of viewers who, individually, may have felt alone in their semi-oppositional reading of Elle’s video. Although thinspiration comments are often disturbing to read, they are as omnipresent on anorexia video testimonials as both affirmation and hate comments. To quote the epigraph by Strangelove at the top of this chapter, “[YouTube’s] virtual community reflects the cultural politics of the present times and thus is rife with both cooperation *and* conflict” (4, emphasis in original). These three main categories of comments – affirmation, hate, and thinspiration – reflect the current cultural politics around women’s bodies and therefore embody the conflicting tendencies of cooperation and conflict present on the YouTube platform.

There are also comments that do not fall into any of these main three categories, and are therefore classified here as ‘other.’ The comments in this fourth category are often relatively neutral in tone. The first sub-category involves a commentor asking a YouTuber a question. For example, Kasey M posted on Emily’s recovery food video, “How old were you when you first got diagnosed with your anorexia I’m a new subscriber I’m glad that you are doing ok.” Questions such as these seem to emerge out of curiosity. The second sub-category involves commentors asking for help in their own recovery. On Jessica’s video, Z s1920 6B Yuen Ying Chun Jujube 6B29 wrote “im (sic) having the same experience as you any tips on recovery:(

gaining weight sounds super scary but i (sic) know it is a must:(.” This type of comment can be seen as directly oppositional to thinspiration comments, as the commentor appears to be recovery-focused instead of illness-focused. However, as this sub-category does not radiate affirmation, it is not classified among other recovery-focused comments. The third sub-category involves the commentor making non-thinspirational comparisons between themselves and the YouTuber. Kath, who posted on Jessica’s video, commented that “At a very young age you’re already in college. Just wow. And oh, you even got a job and bought your own car at age 16 or 17. You’re so amazing! And here I am, turning 17 yet Im (sic) still useless.” Although Kath’s comment is self-deprecating, she makes a comparison based on a non-anorexia attribute. This leads into the fourth sub-category, comments about the video that are not anorexia related. In Emily’s video, her dog, Lulu, makes an appearance. A viewer, asdfg hjkl, excitedly wrote that “WE NEED MORE LULU ON THIS CHANNEL PLEASE.” Like Kath’s comment, this comment is not related to the anorexia content of the video. The fifth sub-category involves general replies on other’s comments, such as replies on a post that is not explicitly affirmative, hateful, or thinspirational. Finally, the six sub-category is comments that do not fall into any of the previous five sub-categories, such as spam. To summarize, the comments that fall into the broad category of ‘other’ are those which do not actively engage in affirmation, hate, or thinspiration but are instead more neutral in tone and more variable in content.

Comments and Witnessing

All these categories of comments – affirmative, hate, thinspiration, and other – work together to create a sense of community around both specific anorexia testimonials and around the genre as a whole. However, the ability for viewers to comment on others’ videos may serve a

function beyond simply their ability to create a sense of community. Chapter One discussed John Durham Peters' suggestion that people who witness an event have the ethical responsibility to move from being a passive to an active witness (713). That chapter suggests that those with anorexia can become active witnesses by creating video testimonials and publicly sharing their experiences of the illness. YouTube's comment culture enables a similar form of active witnessing among viewers. A viewer who watches a video without engaging with it becomes a passive witness to that YouTuber's story. A viewer who watches a video *and then* comments on it becomes active. Arguably, any kind of engagement with a video, including hate comments, is a form of active witnessing as the commentor is still expressing their subjective truth to what they have just witnessed. Returning to Buber, certain comments (such as hateful ones) see the YouTuber as an 'it,' or a thing. Other comments, such as affirmative ones, do the exact opposite by *seeing* and affirming the uploader. While it is important that the YouTuber be able to actively witness their own anorexia story, it is as – if not even more – important for secondary witnesses to actively engage with that story. In relation to the three aforementioned functions of anorexia communities on YouTube, viewers who actively witness an anorexia testimonial have the ability to give value to the video, allow the YouTuber to be *seen* as a person, and create affinity-based communities.

In the end, despite the fact that YouTube's regulatory system limits its democratic potential, the platform has the powerful potential to create communities imagined on the basis of their asynchrony, expansiveness, and conflict, and move community members (both YouTubers and viewers) from passivity to activity in regards to the high-stakes issues of anorexia and mental health.

Conclusion

When exploring the unique intersection of online video, testimony, and anorexia, it is difficult to discuss the full breadth and depth of the phenomenon. This thesis has attempted to do justice to this large and complex topic by engaging in rich analyses of the three major sub-genres of anorexia video testimonials on YouTube: confessional, food videos, and life stories. While this approach comes with the benefit of providing an understanding of each of these sub-genres, it is also limited by its inability to fully accentuate the connections between them.

These three sub-genres are unified by their use of performative actions, aesthetics, and/or narratives. By using a different conceptualization of performance in each chapter, I do not mean to suggest that each sub-genre can only be viewed through that singular definition. Indeed, all conceptualizations of performance can be seen across the spectrum of sub-genres. In Chapter One, confessional videos were aligned with Goffman's theory of performance, a theory that permeates into the other sub-genres. For example, the food videos in Chapter Two highlight the desired traits of control (in restriction videos) and health (in recovery videos), while the life story videos in Chapter Three exemplify the desired traits of control and health concurrently. Grobe's definition of performance, as "all the stylized *doings* in our lives," can similarly be applied to Chapters One and Three, with vlogging literally being a stylized everyday action and life stories being a stylization of someone's entire life (viii, emphasis in original). Finally, Chapter Three's definition of performance – as storytelling and entertainment – must, on some level, apply to all anorexia video testimonials, as they all contain some aspect of storytelling and are formatted in ways that catch the attention of viewers. The decision to view each sub-genre through a single definition of performance was therefore made in order to focus each chapter on the definition that best suited the sub-genre, and not to suggest that each sub-genre can only be read through that singular definition.

The desired trait of authenticity also permeates all the sub-genres. In confessional videos, one way that authenticity is engendered is through seeing the YouTuber crying, doing their best not to cry, or displaying some form of emotional distress. Along with being an act of vulnerability, crying on-screen is also a visual rhetoric that convinces viewers that the YouTuber is a real, everyday person who is feeling ‘true’ emotions. Tears are one example of the close connection between authenticity, everydayness, and performance that is present across the spectrum of anorexia video testimonials. Authenticity, and the performance of the everyday, is expressed in different ways in the other sub-genres. Unlike confessionals, no tears are seen in food videos, as the YouTuber is often not seen on-screen. Instead, authenticity is demonstrated through the intimate display of anorexia restriction and/or recovery behaviours. In the restriction food videos, where the YouTuber’s face is never seen, authenticity does not come from being *seen*, but instead from the subjective stylization of the struggles – and pleasures – of daily food consumption. Recovery videos, similarly, give the appearance of providing an authentic depiction of the pleasures – and struggles – of being in recovery. Life story videos, on the other hand, are not filmed in real-time like confessionals and food videos. Instead, their authenticity lies in the feeling of indexicality provided by the on-screen photographs. These photos function as candid – and sometimes, in regards to illness selfies, spectacular and dramatic – windows into various key moments of the YouTuber’s story. In each of these sub-genres, ‘true’ authenticity is impossible to determine. However, the *appearance* of authenticity infuses the vast majority of anorexia video testimonials.

Returning to food videos for a moment, the majority of anorexia video testimonials either explicitly or implicitly involve food and eating. As food and (not) eating are key components to any eating disorder, it is no wonder that this theme permeates self-representations of the illness.

While not discussed in the first chapter, Laura, Hannah, and Jessie's confession videos all discuss topics such as their unhealthy relationship to food, their 'fear foods,' skipping meals, and struggling to eat out with friends or family. These discussions all take the form of a confession; for example, Jessie confesses that "I have not had pizza in, like, five years, and I'm going to actually do that. I'm working my way there." These sorts of comments match the confessional discourse of this sub-genre and focus the viewer's attention on the ubiquitous presence of food, and the fear of it, in the daily life of someone with, or recovering from, anorexia. This ubiquitous presence is also found in life story videos, but is framed as part of a narrative, not as a confession. As mentioned briefly in the third chapter, life story videos often begin with a happy childhood and a good relationship with food. For example, Jessica writes that "I loved food and burned calories as quickly as I ate them." The first turning point in the narrative occurs when the YouTuber tries dieting, 'eating healthy,' or restricting for the first time, such as when Carolyn states that "I finally got sick of my weight and started to eat healthier." Food is then often positioned as a vector of recovery at the end of the video, such as when Elle describes how she "looked into alternative ways of eating ... [and] discovered the High carb low fat vegan lifestyle" that allowed her to recover. Therefore, while food videos are solely focused on the acts of preparing and eating food, both confessionals and life stories are structured through the YouTuber's relationship with food.

Connections can also be made in relation to the functions associated with each sub-genre. For example, I suggest in Chapter One that confessing publicly to having anorexia allows the YouTuber to move from being a passive to an active witness. This function of the confessional sub-genre is present in both food videos and life stories. Although YouTubers are not necessarily *confessing* in food videos, the videos still engage in a form of self-revelation. Using a camera to

mediate interactions with food allows for these YouTubers to actively capture, edit, and share their subjective realities, and thus become active witnesses to their anorexia. In life story videos, YouTubers retrospectively look at their life and create narrative out of it. In doing so, they move away from passive experience of, to active engagement with, their history with the illness. Similarly, I argue in Chapter Three that life story videos may function to provide YouTubers a sense of embodiment, or even a feeling of amicability towards their body, as their body is the “cause, topic, and instrument” of their story (Frank, *Wounded* 2). The same could be said for confessionals and food videos. In confessionals, the YouTuber’s body – at least from the chest up – is on display, and much of the confessional discourse in these videos centre upon the YouTuber’s relationship to food and, subsequently, their body. While in food videos it is food that seems to be the topic, the food (or lack thereof) these YouTubers eat is framed as a method of control and body modification. In all three sub-genres, the YouTubers’ bodies are instrumental in the storytelling process. Their bodies not only frame the narrative content of the videos; they also help viewers relate to the YouTubers. As seen through these two examples, the functions discussed in any given chapter can often apply to the types of videos discussed in the other chapters, albeit in slightly different ways.

In relation to bodies, the Introduction stated that although gender theory is not central to this thesis, the issue of gender is nevertheless present. The videos discussed in this thesis were all uploaded by women, as anorexia video testimonials created by women are far more common than those created by men. While not a focus in each of the chapters, each sub-genre is gendered. As discussed above, crying and displays of emotion are common in confessional videos uploaded by women. Among confessionals uploaded by men, however, intense displays of emotion are significantly less common. Instead of discussing how the illness makes them feel and its personal

impact, men are more likely to describe the physical impact of the illness. This is inline with past research that has found that women, in both vlogs and blogs, are more emotional and release more personal content than men (Molyneaux et al. 5; Pedersen and Macafee 1484; van Doorn et al. 150). When it comes to food videos, there are relatively few uploaded by men. While recovery videos created by men do exist – if few and far between – at the time of writing I could not find any restriction videos uploaded by men. There are many possible explanations for this, such as the expectation that men are supposed to already have control and thus restriction should not be necessary for them, or the possibility that it is less socially acceptable for men to display restriction behaviours. Gender concerns are also present in life story videos, with two of the three videos discussed in Chapter Three involving a stereotypically ‘feminine’ sport (cheerleading for Carolyn and ballet for Jessica) being a deciding factor in the development of the illness. Out of all the anorexia testimonials uploaded by men, life story videos are by far the most common. However, as mentioned briefly in Chapter Three, the vast majority of life story videos uploaded by men utilize the vlog format, with the YouTuber talking directly to the camera and pictures appearing periodically on the screen, instead of the slide-show format that is prevalent among life story videos uploaded by women. There are questions about visibility – and vulnerability – at play here. While men seem to feel more comfortable narrating their story from the present, women seem to prefer relying on images from the past – possibly because of a lingering fear of being seen. Although, regardless of gender, all anorexia life story videos discuss bodies, the fact that women mainly use past photographs to tell their stories may relate to wider discussions around women, our current society, and shame about one’s body. Reversely, as discussed in Chapter Three, the use of photographs to create an illness narrative may also function as a form of embodiment. The significant aesthetic differences between male- and female-created life story

videos are indicative of a wider discussion about gender, and would be an ideal topic for future research.

Moving now away from the content of the videos to the comments under them, the comment cultures and communities associated with each sub-genre fluctuate wildly. While the comments attached to Laura, Hannah, and Jessie's confessionals are fairly affirmative in nature, hate and thinspiration comments still speckle them. This is especially noticeable on Laura's video, with various hate comments criticizing her for a lack of authentic crying. These hate comments suggest that certain viewers are not convinced by Laura's performance. When it comes to food videos, there is a clear divide between the types of comments found on restriction videos and those found on recovery videos. Viewers seem to seek out restriction videos *for thinspiration*, and often expressly say so in the comments. Because of this, restriction videos are dominated by thinspirational comments and seem to foster pro-anorexia communities. Interspersed among these comments are posts by concerned viewers, inquiring if the YouTuber is alright and if they have received help yet, but these comments are few and far between. On the other hand, recovery food videos seem to mainly foster communities based on pro-recovery sentiments. The majority of comments on these videos declare support for the YouTuber and wish them well in their recovery. However, there are still comments, such as some that judged Ava's food intake during her day of extreme hunger, that direct hate towards the YouTuber. This type of comment is often policed by fellow viewers, who educate the original commentor on the proper etiquette of speaking to, or about, someone who is recovering from anorexia. Finally, the comment cultures and communities that arise around life story videos seem to depend on the YouTuber's relationship to their anorexia. Elle's life story video, which demonstrates some uncertainty about recovery, has garnered quite a few thinspirational comments. On the other

hand, if the YouTuber showcases a strong desire to recover, then the comments are often overwhelmingly affirmative. Jessica's video, for example, has, as far as I can tell, only received affirmative comments. Across these three sub-genres, audiences seem to more or less mirror what they see in the video. The more uncertain the YouTuber is about the idea of recovery, the more thinspirational comments there are. And while videos that are clearly pro-recovery receive the most amount of affirmation, they also sometimes receive hate, presumably from those who are worried by the idea of recovery.

Anorexia Video Testimonials and Digital Bodies

What does this all mean – both for the study of anorexia video testimonials on YouTube and in the larger landscape of our media-savvy society? How does the concepts and ideas of performance, authenticity, food and eating, the various functions of these videos, and the communities they create, interact to provide insight into the complexities of online social interaction? Each of these concepts is closely connected to the idea of bodies, gender, and performance – of being a *person* in the world. Indeed, Rose et al., while discussing Judith Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, suggest that “[g]ender is best seen as a way of doing the body in performance” (605). As mentioned in the Introduction, our bodies (and, subsequently, our gender performances) have always mattered. They are our sole method of sensing, experiencing, and interacting with the world around us. Simultaneously, they are deeply intertwined with our identity and sense of self. Although bodies have played a vital role in our self-conceptualizations throughout history, the way that we experience our bodies – and thus ourselves – has undergone a shift with the advent of media culture. As Rose and her colleagues explain, “[d]igital formats ... represent exciting possibilities for individuals who can explore the freedom of presenting a

physical self that might differ from the one they present or perform in everyday life or from socially-defined expectations” (590). Instead of one body, individuals can now have two – a physical one and a digital one.

Digital bodies are created through the careful curation of content that an individual uploads to the internet. These bodies are not always representations of the individual’s physical body but are instead the various aspects and traces of oneself that an individual releases into cyberspace. These bodies are ephemeral and fragmented, transitory and distanced. It is not merely YouTube’s ease of access or the potential for internet anonymity that encourages women to create anorexia video testimonials. Instead, the ability to create digital bodies on social media platforms provides a surface on which their story and emotions can be projected, yet from which they are somewhat removed. In doing so, women can reduce feelings of vulnerability; a feeling, as mentioned above, that may be more associated with women than men when it comes to the relationship with one’s body.

In many ways, the young women discussed in this thesis are appropriating audiovisual media (media that often promotes, through the advertisement and entertainment industries, an unattainably thin ideal which women are encouraged to replicate) and are repurposing it as a site for ‘working through’ their illness and, for many, recovering from it. These digital bodies ‘embody’ the YouTuber’s performance of anorexia, their desire to appear authentic, and their unceasing fear and obsession with food, while simultaneously being the site of community formation and the conduit of any and all functions provided by the creation of a testimonial. Although bodies have always mattered, the advent of social media has made it so that digital bodies are increasingly commonplace. Whether or not an individual has anorexia, their digital body is a vital part of their identity, selfhood, and sense of *being* in the world.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This research has provided the groundwork for understanding some of the ways in which women with anorexia create digital bodies and use YouTube videos as a form of illness testimony. However, there are some limitations to this research. As I mentioned in the Introduction, YouTube is an unstable archive, and four of the videos I worked with in this thesis – Laura’s, Ava’s, clodyeats’, and Jessica’s – have been removed by their uploaders. This, unfortunately, makes it so that I could not review these videos during the last revision stage of this thesis. Similarly, because YouTubers have the ability to monitor and remove comments, the discussion provided about the comment culture and communities surrounding these videos is inherently limited. The analysis of the comments can merely explore the comments that are visible; not all the comments that have been posted on a particular video. This research also opens the door for future research into anorexia video testimonials. By focusing solely on videos uploaded by women onto YouTube, this research has mostly elided discussions about videos uploaded by men and videos uploaded to other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram. On YouTube, there are some prolific male anorexia YouTubers such as Chris Henrie and Tommy Kelly whose videos would be a fascinating topic for future research. Similarly, although there has been much written about anorexia content on other social media platforms (see, for example, Arseniev-Koehler et al.; Ging and Garvey; LaMarre and Rice; Teufel et al.), this past research focuses mainly on written text and photographs. Future research could highlight the unique specificity of online video in these larger social media discourses around anorexia. With these limitations and directions for future research in mind, it is my hope that this current research brings new visibility to anorexia self-representational practices.

In the opening of my Introduction, I pointed out that anorexia is widely perceived to be both a silent and invisible illness. On YouTube, this could not be farther from the truth. Anorexia video testimonials reveal what has long been hidden and give those who suffer from the illness – especially women whose voices have historically been silenced in society – a (digital) body and a voice with which they can share their stories with all who will watch and listen.

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