Article

Researching Transgression: Ana as a Youth Subculture in the Age of Digital Ethnography

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Abstract: In this paper, we explore the contribution of material and digital ethnography to providing a deeper understanding of youth subcultures. We provide the context by reviewing some of the research carried out by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to provide a historical overview of cultural studies and critically appraise how they have drawn on ethnography as a way of deepening our understanding of young people's subculture. We then draw on digital ethnographic data to explore the lived experiences of Ana girls, that is, young women who advocate anorexic and bulimic behaviours as legitimate lifestyle choices, as they explore and negotiate their identity through online social media platforms with like-minded people. The aim is to demonstrate the potential of longitudinal digital ethnography to provide insights into these girls' transgressive voices played out through online spaces. In narrating the Ana girls through digital storytelling, we argue that digital ethnography is the only way to access and understand their experiences and as such, has a unique role to play in advancing sociological understanding of their complex lived experiences. Thus, we suggest that digital ethnography provides a unique way of capturing longitudinal data and that this knowledge is important to bring about greater understanding of the challenges facing these girls as they grapple with complex problems. This greater understanding could inform changes to practice needed to better support Ana girls in online spaces.

Keywords: youth subculture; transgression; ethnography; digital ethnography; Ana girls

1. Introduction

> Social life is ongoing, developing, fluctuating, becoming. It never arrives or ends. Some forms of behaviour may be fairly stable, others variable, others emergent. (. . .) Processes for example of cultural induction, labelling, identity formation, differentiation and polarisation, curriculum modification, friendship formation—all require lengthy involvement in the research field, otherwise only part of the process will be sampled, leading to misleading analyses. [1]

In this paper, we address the special issue aim to 'reflect on the study of youth cultures and subcultures in today's society' by focusing on the 'methodological approaches adopted in this study' [2]. As such, we have chosen in this paper to focus on the contribution of ethnography and digital ethnography to the study of youth subcultures. We begin this paper by providing a brief historical overview of cultural studies in England and critically appraise how they have drawn on ethnography and latterly digital ethnography as a way of deepening our understanding of complex social phenomena. We then support the case for online digital ethnography as a transformative research methodology that can provide access to transgressive voices in digital spaces, and draw on detailed, longitudinal ethnographic data capturing the experiences of the Ana girls to support our argument. Our intention here is not to present our data per se, but rather to use extracts from our study to illustrate the value of

ethnographic work in deconstructing and making sense of troubling, problematic and often hidden identities and behaviours. We conclude by emphasising the value of digital and material ethnographic research as a way of understanding young people on their own terms and that such understanding of young people's engagement in the digital world could inform changes to practice.

In this paper, we have conceptualised transgressive behaviour as paper as a violation of moral or social boundaries. In digital spaces, we use the term transgressive to refer to resistive behaviours, but also deliberate mischief making in these online spaces. These behaviours would typically include pushing the boundaries of social norms and acceptability (e.g., trolling, subversive blog postings), but not illegal activities (e.g., hacking).

In England, like much of the global north, young people's transgressive behaviour, conceptualised in this, is not a new phenomenon. In 1977 [3], the work of Willis was published in *Learning to Labour*, an ethnography that provides a unique window into the lives of 'the lads', a group of 12 working-class British male students attending a modern, boys-only school in a town in the British Midlands. In 1972, Willis observed the boys for about six months, focusing on their social behaviour with each other and their school and interviewed them periodically throughout the study. The text, whilst critiqued by feminists, provided insights into the lived realities of working-class males' lives, and revealed the powerful processes of social reproduction that shaped and steered their lives; they followed their fathers and grandfathers into unskilled manual labour. The use of ethnography provided a window into the unique and universal features of their transgressive youth subculture, for example, fighting and being overtly racist, by giving voice to their experiences.

In her book *Goliath: Britain's Dangerous Spaces*, Campbell [4] highlights the material spaces and activities that provide an outlet for 'deviant' behaviours. In conversations with joyriders, rioters and offenders, Campbell's ethnographically informed research uncovered a spectacular degree of appropriation of public space by young men denied access to the more conventional public arena of work. She also found young women participating in criminal behaviour but to a far lesser extent [4]. Her work provided a unique insight into the motivations influencing deviant behaviour and revealed the failure of the police and local councils in addressing the issues.

More recently still in England and again much of the global north and south, the advent of mainstream youth subcultural digital spaces such as Instagram, Pinterest, ask.com, Facebook, myproana.com and schoolroom.com have provided spaces for transgressive behaviour. For example, they have formed a key part of the backdrop to high-profile cases of young people taking their own lives whilst encouraged to do so by anonymous online users. The most recent of these cases in England occurred in November 2016 and involved Molly Russell, a 14-year-old girl who took her own life following her retreat into a terrifying online world algorithmically tailored to encourage her darkest thoughts, as a way of managing depression that was likened to 'a storm bearing down on her' [5]. From her tragic death, it has become increasingly apparent that companies such as Instagram and Facebook have inadequate understanding of the transgressive voices that coalesce in these accessible digital spaces and this lack of understanding has contributed to an online context with few or no controls. Responses to date, initiated by the UK government and private companies, have focused on closing these sites down but users simply move elsewhere on the web and continue their activities [6].

This movement from one digital space to another is apparent in our data as the Ana girls moved from social networks to online game worlds and eventually to protected, yet accessible, websites that are extremely difficult to close down. Our research demonstrates that young people are particularly susceptible to these spaces as they grapple with the multiple challenges of growing up in contemporary society, whilst navigating and constructing/reconstructing their own identities.

In this paper, we want to argue that to continue to build our understanding of these evolving and ever-changing spaces would be through the funding of longitudinal digital/material ethnographies, which have the potential to get inside these spaces and hear the transgressive voices to understand the experiences afforded by these sites [7]. Indeed, McArthur [8] argued a decade ago that:

Recent scholarship in critical/cultural studies and ethnography has suggested studies of youth subculture can no longer be solely centered around musical preference and that the Internet may be a new resource for the affiliation and expression of subcultural identity.

A decade later, engagement in online spaces represents an important dimension of young people's experiences of being in the world. According to Ofcom, the UK's communications regulator, 6% of children aged 12–15 devote the majority of their waking time at the weekend to online activities and a further 11% are spending between five and eight hours a day online at the weekend, equivalent to about 300,000 children [9]. The digital world is increasingly important to understand as it is under researched phenomena, yet an important space for young people.

2. Ethnography as a Distinctive Research Methodology in the Study of Youth Subculture

In this section, we outline some of the distinctive features of ethnography and digital ethnography in social science research and trace the emergence of ethnography in youth cultural studies. We argue that the application of ethnography, and more recently, digital ethnography, to the study of youth subculture can provide powerful insights into transgressive spaces that are otherwise largely obscured in social research.

Cultural studies emerged as a field for study out of the discipline of English as a result of the growing feeling that there was a need to challenge the canonical culture present in English both in schools and higher education where the material that was selected focused on 'traditional' middle-class textual forms (including poems, novels, etc.) and discarded the rest (oral traditions, newspapers, magazines, etc). This challenge to the elitist nature of the discipline of English allowed cultural studies to explore beyond well-established boundaries [10]. Indeed, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), still influenced by English's concern with making sense out of a 'text', transferred the 'text' in question to be a cultural artefact, for example, a motorbike jacket [11]. To investigate the meanings of these 'texts', the centre turned to the method of empirical enquiry developed within social anthropology, that of ethnography.

Ethnography, a qualitative research methodology [12], involves the researcher 'living and working in the society or social setting being researched, seeking to immerse himself or herself as fully as possible in the activities under observation, but at the same time keeping careful records of those activities' [13]. The method is distinctive and significant because it allows researchers to get at the 'sense of what meaning social actors give to their own lives. It supposedly avoids fixing them in social categories' [13]. Indeed, ethnographic research has been viewed as participants actively coproducing fieldwork in relation to the researcher [14]. This coconstruction of knowledge is important to address the 'crisis of representation' identified by postmodernists who challenge the significance of ethnography over and above other forms of data collection [15]. The problem, according to Bennett et al. [14], arises when ethnographers do not critically examine their 'insider knowledge' in relation to their participants. Whilst ethnographers attempt to tell a story using their respondents' 'own words', concerns have been raised about how the data is interpreted and the meaning that is attributed to such interpretations. Consequently, CCCS writers, for example, Hebdige, were charged with 'appropriating their subject matter' [14]. To address and overcome these limitations, Bennett et al. recommend that researchers 'manage his/her identity in the field, being open about his/her intentions in order that respondents are not deceived into providing information about themselves' [14]. When this reflexivity is applied to the data, in conjunction with participants taking a more active 'interpretative role', ethnography, as a way of uncovering people's lived experiences, is invaluable.

This need for reflexivity has arguably become more necessary through the development of digital ethnography. Of key significance in this change are the ethical dilemmas raised by research into young people's online spaces [16]. One method deployed by digital ethnographers is to lurk and scrape data, where lurking requires the researcher to hang around, often unnoticed, in an online forum, observing the interactions, and scraping involves lifting text from these forums without permission and using it

in publications [17]. In Phillips' [18] work exploring trolls, the data included not only lurking and scraping but also feeding the discussion she observed:

> A cliché of online life is 'Don't feed the troll'. Yet to study the troll through ethnography requires feeding, and stocking the refrigerator for future meals. Although this book offers an evocative presentation of the diversity of trolls and troll behaviour, the ethical implications of Phillips' research should be a key point of discussion for digital ethnographers [19].

The tension here centres on the ethics of the researcher in these digital ethnographic spaces. In their comprehensive review of digital ethics, Whiting and Prichard [20] conclude by calling for an 'approach that moves away from reliance on fixed rules to one that highlights the need for continuing and reflexive practice'. We follow their approach and suggest that rigorous ethical procedures should inform digital ethnography as with all research, but the ethical challenges of this type of research cannot become the reason to shy away from this form of methodology.

In the next section, we outline the origins of youth subcultural research in England, drawing on research that has been and remains influential since the time of publication.

3. The Evolution of Youth Subcultural Studies

In this section, we aim to reveal the unique empirical insights into youth subcultures provided by ethnography and digital ethnography to highlight the importance of this longitudinal, multimethod research.

In England, the CCCS was established in Birmingham and researched youth subculture for 40 years, from 1964 until it closed in 2002. The unit was established during a volatile decade that witnessed extensive postwar economic and social change across not the United Kingdom (UK). Whilst, since its inception, cultural studies were primarily concerned with issues of 'class', this analysis had historically centred almost exclusively on male working-class youth experiences [3,11]. By the mid-1970s, academic feminism was gathering momentum and feminist arguments set out to challenge the ethnographic research that the CCCS was involved in at that time. Key feminist protagonists included Christine Griffin and Angela McRobbie, who both worked at the CCCS and are socialist feminists, referring to a yoking of ideas around Marxism and Socialism. McRobbie and Garber [21] noted the frequent absence and marginalisation of girls in subcultural ethnographic studies. When girls were discussed, it was 'either in ways which uncritically reinforce the stereotypical image of women with which we are now so familiar—for example, Fyvel's [22] reference, in his study of Teddy Boys, to 'dumb, passive teenage girls, crudely painted". This claim suggests the need to critically examine girls' subcultures in their own right, which could only be achieved by carrying out ethnographies with girls, something which feminists such as McRobbie [23], Hey [24], Griffin [25] and, latterly, Campbell [4] did engage with.

The cultural studies ethnography used by feminist researchers at the CCCS can be seen to 'produce knowledge with a particular purpose in mind', which is 'to provide a rhetorical space where the experiences and knowledge of the marginalised can be given epistemic authority, be legitimated and taken seriously' [26]. The crucial influence of feminism on ethnography has been the legitimation of female experiences as worthy of study, and this has paved the way for the data that forms the basis of this article [27]. We follow CCCS feminists and argue that understanding of the lived experiences of females can be used to inform and initiate social change, and this perspective guided our ethnographic research with the Ana girls.

More recently, the emergence of digital ethnography has further consolidated the importance of the ethnographic turn. Research exploring online trolls [18] 'considers the subcultural origins of trolling (2003–07), its golden years (2008–11) as well as a transitional period (2012–15)' [19]. Phillips' [18] work 'shows the value and power of disruption and transgression and the plurality of trolling behaviours'. The research prompts the question of how to 'create a space for researching social patterns that cause harm to others' [18]. Whilst ethically challenging and comprising both to the researcher and

the researched, we want to argue here that this form of research is valuable in opening up societal understanding of transgression in digital spaces that continues to exist, whether acknowledged or ignored in mainstream discourses of youth subculture.

McArthur [8] draws on digital ethnography to explore the online experience of geeks, through an examination of internet sites, and argues that 'geeks who affiliate in self-assigned Web-based chat rooms demonstrate the characteristics, community, and style common to the expanding conceptualizations of Internet-based subculture' [8]. The research also makes a powerful case for the importance of digital ethnographic research because 'the use of online environments as a meeting space can aid researchers in considering subcultures of many types and in considering how the Internet may serve as a medium for subcultural development' [8]. We take this argument one step further by suggesting that digital ethnographic research can enable understanding of transgressive behaviours in youth subcultures through immersion over time in young people's digital spaces.

Murthy [28] contends that 'a balanced combination of physical and digital ethnography not only gives researchers a larger and more exciting array of methods, but also enables them to demarginalize the voice of respondents'. We agree with this view and now present illustrative data drawn from a longitudinal nine-year ethnographic study exploring young people's (often transgressive) digital behaviours. The participants we cite here are all girls, aged between 14 and 21, and the material has been gathered from their blogs, websites and forum postings as well as from direct interviews and interactions within digital space (for example, via peer-to-peer platforms).

4. Exploring Pro-Ana

The immediate context of this youth subcultural study entails research of digital spaces—both overt and covert—that appear to deliberate upon, foster or celebrate anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, particularly in young women. As in all matters of the 'web', discussion and debate cross all international lines—there can be no national jurisdiction to such issues. The underground internet movement of the 'Ana Girls' [29] and so called 'Pro-Ana' (Pro-Anorexia) online forums are seen as controversial cross-border spaces that endorse eating 'disorders' as a legitimate lifestyle choice [30,31]. 'Pro-Ana' is a term used to promote the eating disorder anorexia nervosa. It is commonly referred to by anorexics simply as 'Ana' and more recently as 'MiAna' (a call that seeks to encompass both pro-anorexic and pro-bulimic behaviours). As a self-declared community [32], Pro-Ana websites maintain a discourse that actively resists the dominant cultural norms regarding 'healthy' eating in favour of alternate (arguably resistive) expressions of the body—a position for which they are often vilified and denied a digital voice [33].

Of course, working in the insubstantiality of virtual space brings with it its own peculiar set of challenges, but surveying the Pro-Ana movement also requires careful negotiation of a highly secretive community, as one of our participants, Jazz, explains:

> Ana is like our special secret you know. No one understands us in RL (Real life) but online I have so many sisters to share my life with. Only they get Ana, only a sister can comprehend the daily struggle that Ana asks of us.

Jazz opens up one of the interesting dilemmas within Pro-Ana research. Although there is a physical dimension to the MiAnic identity (the body), Pro-Ana and Pro-Mia 'practice' (the act of advocating MiAnic behaviours) is almost exclusively of the digital world. We can see how Jazz keeps the two separate: whilst she hides in the shadows of her everyday (material) life, it is only within the 'liberated' world of digital space that she finds affinity with her 'sisters'—who she feels are the only ones who can identify with the challenges that MiAnic practice brings. This is perhaps not surprising. In the medically defined arena of eating disorders, any behaviour that is seen to promote unhealthy practices is labelled as problematic, transgressive, even deviant. The girls' websites and other digital meeting places are often removed by hosting companies so it is a continued game of cat and mouse to stay one step of authority both in the material and digital domains. The girls have become adept at navigating

this restrictive surveillance: we first discovered them by accident on an online game world (Runescape) where they were meeting because their forum had just been taken down. Within Pro-Ana, there is clearly, then, a tension between one's (repressed) material existence and the liberation offered by digital space. This is often articulated by a tension between dark and light, or truth and deception. Hunger Hurts and (jo)Ana detail this more explicitly:

> It's like we live in the darkness. You can't let anybody know. Only we get what she demands of us. Follow the tips and tricks on the website and no one will find out . . . . thank fuck some of the sisters know what to do, try to keep us safe. You will always be safe if you stay in this light (jo)Ana.

> (laughs) yeah, you get good at lying. Take food up to your room cos you gotta 'do you homework' leave plates in the sink so they think you have eaten. Real life is for lying, only online can I be truthful (Runic Heart).

As these girls remind us, secrecy is an important theme in Pro-Ana. Perhaps this is not that very different to other transgressive spaces. Digital space has begun to replace (or extend) some young people's traditional public arenas—the parks, malls and street corners—that have become increasingly risky and regulated places in which to hang out [34]. Importantly for an underground movement such as MiAna, the perceived 'safety' of digital space—or space that has been claimed 'for' Ana—mitigates against the risks of 'going public' in the material realm [35]. Crucially for those of us interested in transgressive behaviour(s), the girls remind us that they are often not visible in the material world (the darkness that (jo)Ana speaks of) and it is only by entering the 'light' that such practices can be explored. As Runic Heart tells us, *'to be Ana you cant look Ana'* but *'it is only for the initiated, not everyone can find us . . . and that's the point Nic'*.

The term anorexia originates from the Greek *'an orexis'*, literally to negate appetite, thus signifying a resistance to eating [36] and highlighting the dieting practices that characterise the 'condition' [37]. As the girls explain:

> I don't want to be remembered as the 'Fat girl', I want to be thought of as an Artist, as someone who made her body beautiful, perfect. Art takes time, perfection takes effort. Fat Girls let themselves go and have no control (Jazz Simply).

> If you can face the struggle, you will show your strength, your dedication and prove your worth to Ana. You cant eat, you cant tell anyone. It takes strength and discipline, but your body will be like an athlete—a sign of your daily training, your dedication to our practice, to Ana. This is not ED (Eating Disordered) this is order, control perfection (Anas Angel).

We can see here the complexity of investigating MiAnic behaviour. For example, Angel ascribes a near religious dimension to her 'practice'—only through the daily ritual of fasting and secrecy can a girl 'prove' her worth to Ana (and presumably the communion of her sisters). Whilst she acknowledges the struggle and discipline demanded by Ana, she also recognizes that this will be rewarded by the 'salvation' of perfection—she is special, an 'athlete' who hones her body—an outward expression of (or reward for) the self-control and dedication she has shown. Similarly, Jazz likens her practice to that of an artist—her pursuit of beauty requires something that (in her opinion) most girls are not able to exert—'control'. Both girls subvert a dialogue of 'health' (Angel's description of herself as an 'athlete', Jazz's use of art as a signifier of perfection) and see themselves as separate from (arguably superior to) domestic expressions of the body (the domain of ED or the Fat Girl). To be MiAna requires a reconfiguration of what it means to be 'suffering' from anorexia: a rational and informed representation of the healthy body rather than a condition that requires 'recovery'.

For us, such comments are interesting because they sit at the heart of the tensions that underpin much of the research in this area. First, there is a prevailing impression that young anorexic or bulimic women are

taken by a physical illness [38]. This perspective is in sharp contrast with claims instead— as illustrated earlier—that anorexia is an informed and desirable 'thinspirational' lifestyle choice that should be respected. Although anorexia and bulimia are both acknowledged to be the result of multidimensional factors, these two opposing camps are deeply divided. Those who insist on the essentialist, material, biological, often pathologising discourses of (male) medicine are countered by others who look to wrest interpretations of anorexia and bulimia towards the cultural and social importance of gender. For some (e.g.,) [39], this is a separation of biological reality from socially discursive language. There is considerable conflict in the debate so that 'fat can become a feminist issue' is a discourse that focuses on the discursive construction of fat bodies rather than the materiality or agency of obesity—a discourse that looks to distance itself from essentialism. In contrast, constructions of anorexia and bulimia are commonly sustained by a moral panic pathologised by medical science and which, for Kirkland [40], can be a 'deeply punitive medico-moral discourse' (p.187).

Second, anorexia is often described as a mental disorder (for example,) [38] that 'distorts (young women's) thinking and ability to judge' (p. 4). Our own experience in the field [30] has indicated otherwise: that the proponents of 'Pro-Ana' websites, for example, are well informed on medical and health issues, and they design the websites for those who most need the reassurance of talking to others who have been in similar situations, who can provide emotional and social support. The absurdity and irony of this reversal—of claiming and celebrating fat while castigating and marginalizing thin—is not lost on the young people at the heart of these debates (Ibid):

> It makes me so angry when they close down the 4evaAna blogs. All we want to do is help our sisters, tell them that thin—that Ana—is beautiful. But they say we are a problem; we are sick and diseased. But then there are loads of websites—even adverts on TV—selling plus sized clothes, even size 28 ffs, for "Real Women" . . . How does that work? Like its ok to be that fat? Ugh gross!' Nothing 'real' about that (BoneMaiden).

> Yeah. So, they invent these phrases like 'curvy' and 'full' to disguise the fact that they are fat and that's called 'real' bodies—fucking empowerment. How come we are the devil? Ana is power. Be3ing in control is empowerment and Ana lets me take control of my body, my life.— Amanda98

What is interesting here is that the girls can clearly place themselves within wider debates of body narratives. Amanda equates the 'control' offered by Ana with a sense of empowerment, which she sees as being in direct competition with that provided by other (distasteful) expressions of body. Similarly, BoneMaiden articulates a popular contradictory dichotomy—that somehow a 'fat' body is a 'real' body whilst Ana is a 'problem'—questioning the societal ideals of what constitutes legitimate expressions of both beauty and health. Again, the distinction between Pro-Ana and the behaviour of other girls is highlighted. We see in these examples that whilst the Ana community embraces those who have the strength to engage in its practices, it simultaneously excludes those who fall short—*'only an Ana girl understands another Ana girl . . . .we are not ED, or recovering, this is not for you'* (Runic Heart). Ana makes demands on her followers that transcend the lack of control and discipline exhibited by the 'fat girl'.

5. Ethnography of Ana

So, how do we study a contradictory position such as MiAna? Our research has been based upon online data gathered through participative ethnographic observation since 2010, termed 'netnographic' by Kozinets [41] and del Fresno [42]. According to del Fresno and López-Pelaez [43], netnography is (i) naturalistic, (ii) immersive, (iii) descriptive, (iv) multimethod and (v) adaptable. We see these features being at the fore of our own work and it is from within this context that we discuss the Ana websites. Mills and Morton [44] view ethnography as a way of 'being, seeing, thinking and writing' which, in our case, implies that educational ethnography is essentially a way of being, thinking educationally: developing insights of education for use in education, by educators. They make the point that

ethnography is an 'uncomfortable science', which in turn implies that educational ethnography should explore those unconventional, exposed, difficult corners of the educational field.

When exploring digital space such as MiAna, one enters a complex social world, a subculture that brings together many of the problems and possibilities, and sometimes more, of the relationships operating in the nonvirtual world. Understanding these innovations requires examining users' online behaviours, specifically the types of textual (for example, forum 'chats') and nonverbal (in this case, photographs/video from their websites) actions [45]. One of the main issues to be 'resolved' is that whilst MiAna concerns the material expressions of the body 'in the flesh', it takes places within the 'insubstantiality' of digital space. It might help from the outset if we can begin to see—in research terms, at least—online space as sharing many of the characteristics of material space.

Since social research aims to help us understand the world in which we live and why things are the way they are, it asks questions about the different (often conflicting) 'meanings' people bring to aspects of their everyday lives or situations. For those of us interested in understanding young people, their narrative is expressed not only in terms of their lived experience, but also through the dimensions of 'agency' (the capacity of individuals to act independently) and 'identity' (how they consider aspects of 'self' in relation to their surroundings and others). For the Ana girls, these represent crucial aspects of young people's understanding of 'being in the world' but as Massey [46] argues, these can only be understood relationally as both *spatialised* and *placed* (p. 184). Digital space offers its citizens ' . . . geography, physics, a nature and a rule of human law' [47] and, like material space, the virtual acts as a 'repository for cultural meaning—it is popular culture, its narratives created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts' [48]. Thus online spaces are not abstracted or isolated arenas Storey [49]. MiAnic space is not 'placeless' [50] but, like all places, it is constituted by its own specific social practices. Boyd [51], Calvert [52], Goffman [53], De Certeau [54] and Asgari and Kaufman [55] all hark back to classical stances [56–58], to understand identity through relationships between internal experiences and the external world. From this direction, identity can refer to at least two different aspects of the individual: an internalised notion of the self and the projected version of one's internalised self, where the external representation is not necessarily the same as the internal. Gee [59] uses the term 'socially situated identity' to illustrate the multiple identities people adopt in different practices and contexts, and argues that identity can be viewed in at least three different ways:

(i)   Nature-identity, which refers to a state developed from forces in nature
(ii)   Institution-identity, a position authorised by authorities within institutions
(iii) Discourse-identity, an individual trait recognised in the discourse/dialogue of/with 'rational' individuals.

Even within its ranks, MiAna has struggled with its own sense of identity and validation mechanisms. Although it presents itself as homogeneous and stable, the 'movement' encompasses a range of different positions often jostling for a sense of authenticity. A 'disclaimer' on the home page of the Thin Intentions Forum illustrates this tension:

> *This is a Pro Ana Blog*
> *Some Images, Texts and Thinspiration may be considered triggering in nature*
> *Leave now if you are ED*
> *If you consider yourself to be 'Recovering', leave now*
> *If you are wanting to be Anorexic just to lose a little weight, leave now.*
> *If you are just trying to be cool, leave now*
> *If you think than Ana is about being 'broken', leave now*

This is not a new problem, and a decade ago, Turkle's [60] classical writing highlighted the complexities generated by multiple selves in 'cyberculture'. As Guimaraes [61] notes, social sciences are not necessarily concerned with persons as individuals, but as representatives of situated social relationships. Therefore, according to the topic under investigation and the empirical approach

adopted, the informants of an online ethnography can be the personas that create the social environment in cyberspace. It is not possible to equate online and offline personas in so far as the same individual can participate in many overlapping groups playing different roles in each—essentially the point that the girls have been making throughout this article:

> The aim to find the 'truth' behind the social masks, therefore, must be abandoned because the intrinsic richness of the sociability created at the level of these masks could be lost in this quest (p. 153) [61].

6. Conclusions

The aim of this article has been to engage with the special issue theme by focusing on the methodological value of ethnography and digital ethnography as a productive and critical way to research youth subcultures, particularly subversive and transgressive subcultures. By reviewing the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), we aimed to draw attention to the rich data that comprised some of the influential educational research studies from the past 50 years. Ethnographies carried out by Willis and Campbell highlighted the extent to which there is not one working-class experience and show that it is important to engage with the ways in which gender complicates class in young people's lived experiences [62,63]. Such ethnographies have formed the basis of social practice, as a result of their 'mapping of the field' of young people's class and gender identities.

The rich data from the digital ethnographic case study with the Ana and MiAnic girls that we have presented here aimed to show the trust built up with the research team over extended periods of time. The longitudinal nature of the digital ethnography with MiAnic and Ana girls is a significant aspect of understanding this youth subculture. In relation to the Pro-Ana websites touched on here, the number of participants in threads demonstrates just how huge the following is. Thus, we argue that we need funding to understand (year on year) the growth in this area and wide-scale research is needed for educational institutions to understand and support MiAnic and Ana girls.

To conclude, we want to argue that digital ethnography can provide a holistic view of youth subcultures, in the case of this paper, the Ana and MiAnic girls, including some insight into who the girls are, what motivates them, how they engage with the space, how many there are and the pleasure and pain evident in the narratives of Ana girls [64]. We suggest that to continue the rich tradition of youth subcultural research, funding of longitudinal and ethically 'risky' digital and material ethnographies is important as it is one of the few ways to understand young people on their own terms, in their own spaces. We argue that only by gaining understanding and insight into young people's perspectives of their use of online spaces can we begin to address the impact of wider societal shifts that have taken place in recent decades, particularly in relation to new technology. This understanding, we suggest, could form the starting point for any new interventions that aim to address young people's transgressive behaviour in digital spaces.

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