

Measuring Moral Panic Propagation on the Interpersonal Level: Case of Pro-ana Women Bloggers

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Despite the large number of papers devoted to the analysis of moral panic, research is lacking on methods to measure moral panic propagation on the interpersonal level. This article addresses that gap, suggesting a methodological approach that could be applied to studies of moral panic propagation by interpersonal interactions. Based on the pairing of ego-network analysis and biographical interviews, this method measures the influence of personal social contacts on an individual's participation in a moral panic. To demonstrate the capabilities of this methodology, I examine the obesity moral panic propagation. I conceptualize pro-ana women as moral panickers who diffuse moral panic on obesity and analyze 50 biographical interviews with Russian-speaking pro-ana women bloggers along with their public online diaries. The study findings are discussed in relation to obesity moral panic research. The potential and limitations of the approach are shown in the moral panic propagation analysis.

Keywords: moral panic; moral panic propagation; obesity; pro-ana; ego-network; biographical method

Recently, the vast majority of socio-psychological studies have recorded an increase in fear and anxiety levels among people worldwide due to varied socioeconomic stressors [Salari et al., 2020]. Moral panic (MP) is a phenomenon that arises from anxieties experienced by a society at the group level, and many researchers are currently concerned with the operationalization of this concept, its evaluative character, and the necessity to limit the scope of the empirical phenomena to which it is applied [Altheide, 2009; Cohen, 2011; David et al., 2011; Monod, 2017]. To address these ontological and epistemological concerns, multiple definitions of MP have been proposed [Critcher, 2008; Dandoy, 2015; Goode, Ben-Yehuda, 1994; Rohloff, Wright, 2010; Ungar, 2001]. However, these definitions do not explain how information on moral deviants (folk devils) is diffused in interpersonal interactions between members of the public (ordinary people), who function as spectators, and with moral entrepreneurs, who do not actively and consciously make attempts to propagate MP. Furthermore, in the MP research, media are typically considered a proxy variable for public opinion measurement [Pearce, Charman, 2011]; nonetheless, individual factors, such as the emotional appeal of folk devils, could also influence MP propagation [Critcher, Pearce, 2013]. For instance, children lie at the core of many contemporary legends, not only because they are easy to portray as innocent at the ideological level, but also because child exploitation provokes strong emotional reactions. Moreover, environmental factors could affect MP diffusion, such as socio-geographical variables [Elsass et al., 2021]. Though concerns about the need to measure public receptivity to MP discourses have been raised [Critcher, Pearce, 2013], few papers have been produced on this topic [Critcher, Pearce, 2013; Elsass et al., 2021; Pearce, Charman, 2011; Schildkraut, Elsass, Stafford, 2015]. Furthermore, these investigations did not consider the role of individuals' social networks in MP propagation. In turn, these networks, as well as media sources and moral entrepreneurs, could influence an individual's adoption and further dissemination of contemporary legends.

To summarize, current studies of MP propagation display two interrelated problematic aspects: 1) they do not enable measurement of the phenomenon at the interpersonal level and instead estimate the process of propagation through media data analysis, and 2) they do not consider the influence of individual social contacts on an individual's participation in the moral panic and its diffusion. Therefore, this article suggests a new methodological approach to MP propagation analysis that in comparison with the previous research [Critcher, Pearce, 2013; Elsass et al., 2021; Pearce, Charman, 2011; Schildkraut, Elsass, Stafford, 2015] takes into account personal social relationships.

Measurement of MP on the interpersonal level should be informed by theoretical assumptions about the role of interpersonal communication in MP propagation. In this paper, I use my own definition of MP, which includes interpersonal interaction as an element of the MP propagation. This definition draws on the concept of contemporary legends, which are rumor stories disseminated through oral communication and by mass media during MP [Victor, 1993]. Specifically, I define MP as a collective reaction that stems from the belief in the existence of people with behavior that contradicts current moral norms and threatens social safety (i.e.,



belief in contemporary legend) [Mikhaylova, 2021a; 2021b]. Not all contemporary legends underlie MP — only those that are diffused during MP that negatively feature folk devils and blame them for a certain state of affairs. Sometimes these legends also describe measures that should be taken to eradicate the folk devils' actions. Using this definition, I demonstrate how biographical interviews paired with ego-network analysis could be used to study MP propagation.

Obesity-related MP can be characterized as an exaggeration of the risks connected with being overweight. Fatness is considered analogous to disaster, so the social anxieties that underpin this MP are projected onto fatness [Campos et al., 2006: 58]. Since the first application of the term “MP” to obesity by [Campos et al., 2006], many papers have been produced on the topic [Friedman, 2015; Monaghan, Hollands, Prtichard, 2010; Monaghan, Rich, Bombak, 2019; Patterson, Johnston, 2012]. However, these studies focused on the construction of such panic by the media; entrepreneurs and ordinary people (the public), who believe in the contemporary legend, have not been taken into consideration. Members of the online pro-anorexia (pro-ana) community can be defined as those who perpetuate the contemporary legend of obesity [Mikhaylova, 2021a]. The online pro-ana community is a group of people who do not consider anorexia a disorder; rather, they treat it as a lifestyle choice [Boero, Pascoe, 2012: 29]. Such communities offer weight-loss tips, provide support for holding this view, and spread non-negative images of anorexia. The pro-ana community regards being fat as the root of all one's problems. Although the medical and psychological model of self-starvation neglects the morality behind anorexic practices, studies of people with anorexia have shown that these practices are understood within the community as being the moral duty of a good citizen [Giordano, 2005; Orsini, 2017]. People with anorexia may believe they are enforcing social health [Boero, Pascoe, 2012]. Additional moral meanings are attributed to being thin, such as purity, moral strength, and superiority [Banles, 1992; Garrett, 1996; Giordano, 2003; Gooldin, 2008; Orsini, 2017].

To illustrate an application of the proposed methodology, I examine a community of people who believe that obesity is an acute social problem (i.e., MP on obesity). Individuals' social networks are operationalized as ego-networks. Each ego-network consists of the social actor (ego) and the other actors related to the ego (alters) [Crossley et al., 2015: 1]. Relationships between alters were constructed based on body-, fat- and food-related (FBF) talk.

Further, choosing the obesity MP for the methodology application is motivated by the existence of social media data, specifically public diaries/blogs, which I utilize in my study. These diaries are used to verify information from biographical interviews. The pro-ana women who participated in my study permitted me to use the material from their unsolicited online diaries on the social network VKontakte. These diaries are in the format of online communities with subscribers. Pro-ana women regularly post their thoughts about life-related matters on the walls of such communities.

While researching MP propagation, I concentrate on the personal connections within ego-networks because these connections could, in addition to media, explain

individuals' adoption of contemporary legends. However, how these connections are formed is unclear — network science literature provides contradicting justifications for the link between personal attitudes and social connections [Lazer et al., 2010]. Network scientists argue that the formation of communities of people with common values, behaviors, or attitudes could be attributed to processes of social influence, homophily, or coevolution. In regard to MP propagation, this means that participation in the community of moral panickers could be a result of relationships with other moral panickers (social influence), or due to the predisposition to believe in the legend that stems from an established personal value system, psychological traits, and life experiences (homophily). Finally, both processes (interaction with moral panickers and personal characteristics) could lead to a change in an individual's belief in the contemporary legend (coevolution).

These three theoretical assumptions could be tested quantitatively, most simply through counting and categorizing contacts in a personal network and determining who influenced an individual's personal attitudes towards obesity at various timepoints: in the past, in the present, both in the past and the present, and who did not affect them at all. Or, these hypotheses could be evaluated qualitatively based on individuals' reports about personal network changes. In this article, I use the latter as an exploratory approach. However, quantitative measurement of MP propagation on the interpersonal level is possible in future studies.

To sum up, in this paper I research how the personal relationships of moral panickers on obesity are connected to their degree of belief in a specific contemporary legend. This approach to MP measurement is important since knowledge about the ways in which MP is propagated interpersonally could be used to effectively manage and deradicalize an emerging MP. The next section describes the methodology used to measure MP propagation on the interpersonal level. Next, the data gathered using this methodology is characterized. Finally, study results are reported and discussed in relation to the methodology and the tasks tackled in this article.

Methodology¹

Biographical interviews and ego-network data

To measure the connection between personal social networks and the adoption of contemporary legends, I conducted biographical interviews. Included were 1) questions regarding belief in the contemporary legend of obesity; 2) use of the concentric circles method [van Waes, van den Bossche, 2020] to construct representations of personal social networks; and 3) questions regarding how people in the social surroundings of moral panickers related to their views on food, body and fatness (FBF talk) [O'Dougherty et al., 2011; Roach et al., 2017; Shannon, Mills, 2015].

¹ The methodology and additional informational about the study participants could be found in the following articles: [Mikhaylova, 2021b; Mikhaylova, Dokuka, 2022].



Belief in the contemporary legend of obesity was measured using questions from the obesity moralization scale [Ringel, Ditto, 2019]. I asked participants about the meanings they ascribe to thinness and fatness and their attitudes towards obese people.

Personal social networks of pro-ana women were measured using the concentric circles method. Informants divided their social contacts into three groups — the most significant people, less significant, and least significant — and explained the reasons for the classifications [Mikhaylova, 2021b; Mikhaylova, Dokuka, 2022].

The people and social groups who talked with the ego about FBF were identified from participants' biographical narratives without asking explicit questions. After the biographical interview, I asked participants to enumerate and characterize others who, in their opinion, talked to them about the mentioned topic. Usually, each type of talk is studied separately [O'Dougherty et al., 2011; Roach et al., 2017; Shannon, Mills, 2015]; however, I decided to examine the three types of talk together because they encompass the spectrum of the talk related to the contemporary legend of obesity. Talk about fat contains predominantly negative content, such as bullying and teasing, so only considering fat talk could have excluded talk of neutral and positive character, which are body and food talk respectively.

Social media data

Participants' social media data, namely their public diaries, was examined. Triangulating the social media data with interviews was necessary to verify the information from the interviews and therefore increase the validity and reliability of the research. This was possible because, in their diaries, pro-ana women characterize their relationships with family members, friends, classmates and others in their social surroundings. Thus, I could compare the representations of personal contacts in the diaries with the descriptions of the same contacts in the interviews. The opportunity to work with unsolicited diary data is especially valuable [Jones, 2000] because it reduces the interviewer effect created during interviews.

The narratives from interviews and diaries were examined using thematic qualitative analysis [Vaismoradi et al., 2013] and the network data was researched using mixed-method ego-network analysis [Bellotti, 2016]. I identified propagation types used in the FBF talk networks and described them using characteristics such as network size, structure, and composition. Propagation types were defined based on the participants' descriptions, as mentioned at the beginning of this article.

Empirical base

This study's empirical base was gathered in August-September 2020. I conducted interviews with 50 Russian-speaking women (14–25 years old) who were members of online pro-ana communities and had public diaries on the social network VKontakte. I downloaded materials from these online diaries. Participants were recruited using purposive sampling to maximize the variety of voices. All

participants signed informed consent forms, provided consent for the use of their diaries' information, and were provided with transcripts of their interview. Data was anonymized during the analysis to guarantee their safety. Participants varied in age, phase (pro-ana or in remission),¹ diary length, and city of origin (See Table 1). They were from more than 30 different Russian, Ukrainian, Kazakhstani, and Belarussian cities.

Diary length ranged from 1 to 41 months. The frequency of posts in these diaries varied from several times per day to one time per week. Most of the participants experienced bullying, had abusive romantic relationships, and consulted mental health specialists; 90% had comorbidities to anorexia. The most prevalent comorbidities were self-harm and depression. Other comorbidities included compulsive overeating, bulimia, suicidal attempts, gastric problems, borderline personality disorder, bipolar disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, heart problems, schizotypal disorder, panic attacks, dysthymia, and pneumonia. Almost half of the participants engaged in activities such as drawing, singing and sports. Other hobbies included intellectual clubs, volunteering, political party activity, dancing, modeling, culinary interests, and learning foreign languages.

The mean social network size² was 7.7 and most of participants' alters were in the first and second circles of subjective importance. Alters tended to be older than the women and more than half of them were female. A statistically significant difference was found between alters' ages and circles of subjective importance, with older alters being more important.

Women predominated in all circles of subjective importance and did not differ significantly in proportion from case to case. On average, slightly less than half of network members were friends, and nearly half of network members were relatives. Additionally, about half of the women named current romantic partners as significant others (CI 95% [0.32; 0.6]). A significantly lower percentage of relatives was found in the third circle of subjective importance compared to the first and second circles. Only eight of the 50 women had animal companions. Pets were usually described as a replacement for close attachment figures; therefore I include them in the description of the legend propagation types. Participants typically talked with 5 people about FBF. Network sizes were similar or lower in comparable studies of pro-ana individuals [Pallotti et al., 2018; Tubaro, Mounier, 2014]. Regarding network density, the proportion of females was similar to those found in previous studies. By contrast, the percentage of friends was lower, and the percentage of family members and romantic partners was higher. These minor differences between women's pro-ana women networks in the current study and previous ones could be interpreted as culturally specific or attributed to measurement error. If the differences between my participants and previous studies are not due to measurement errors, then these women are in a greater state of alienation from society in comparison to the British and French pro-ana women in previous studies.

¹ Although they did not consider anorexia as a mental health problem, they used this medical terminology.

² Network size is the number of people who belong to the individual's personal social network (alters).



Table 1

Network size and composition of the sample (N = 50, CI 95%)¹

Variable		Mean / proportion	Min	Max	SD
Age		18 [17.3; 18.7]	14	25	2.6
Subscribers (number of people)		1179.9 [689.0; 1670.8]	56	8275	1771
Diary length (months)		10.6 [8.1; 13.2]	1	41	9.2
FBF talk (number of people)		5.0 [3.9; 6.1]	1	27	3.9
Network size	Whole	7.7 [6.3; 9.2]	3	33	5.2
	1	3.8 [3.0; 4.6]	0	15	2.8
	2	3.1 [2.1; 4.2]	0	24	3.8
	3	1.0 [0.6; 1.4]	0	6	1.5
Age	Whole	30.2 [28.2; 32.2]	15.8	49	7.2
	1	31.9 [28.4; 35.4]	13.3	81.5	12.6
	2	24.6 [20.8; 28.4]	15	68	13.6
	3	14.6 [9.5; 19.6]	16	80	18.3
Female%	Whole	0.6 [0.5; 0.7]	0.1	1	0.2
	1	0.6 [0.4; 0.7]	0	1	0.3
	2	0.5 [0.4; 0.6]	0	1	0.3
	3	0.3 [0.2; 0.4]	0	1	0.4
Friends%	Whole	0.3 [0.2; 0.4]	0	0.7	0.2
Relatives%	Whole	0.5 [0.4; 0.6]	0	3.1	0.4
	1	0.5 [0.3; 0.6]	0	1	0.4
	2	0.4 [0.2; 0.5]	0	1	0.5
	3	0.1 [0.0; 0.2]	0	1	0.4

Results

In this section, I describe pro-ana women’s beliefs regarding the contemporary legend of obesity based on an analysis of the interviews. Additionally, I report how this legend was transmitted interpersonally. Because the focus of the article is on the ways the legend is propagated, the description of the legend’s content is brief.

Legend content

The thematic analysis revealed twelve meanings that pro-ana women attributed to being thin. Women claimed that for them being thin meant 1) beauty;

¹ Whole refers to characteristics of the entire network, and 1, 2, and 3 refer the circles of subjective levels of importance.

2) controlling the situation around them and feeling strong; 3) being better than others physically and mentally; 4) getting attention and love from other people; 5) comfort; 6) being addicted, gaining a sense of euphoria; 7) lightness, tenderness and defenseless; 8) self-love; 9) invisibleness, smallness; 10) healthiness; 11) genderlessness and 12) cleanness. (Table 2). While these findings cannot be generalized to all pro-ana women, in my study pro-ana women primarily characterized being thin as being beautiful, perfect, and strong.

Table 2

Meanings pro-ana women ascribe to thinness

Meaning	Example
Beauty	<i>"First of all, thinness is aesthetically pleasing. I did modeling in the past and I saw beautiful women around. Also, I enjoyed making photographs and worked as a photographer. When I saw photos of the fat people and the thin ones, I concluded that thinness looks more beautiful compared to fatness" (Mara, 24 y.o., Minsk).</i>
Control and strength	<i>"I just wanted to eat somehow in a controllable way. I was feeling that I am becoming stronger and starting to love myself more when I eat less and can control appetite" (Aselya, 19 y.o., Izhevsk).</i>
Perfection (moral and physical)	<i>"I was trying to get revenge through slimming down in school. I thought that I needed to become the best student and the thinnest one. I suppose that, when I get lighter, I become better than the others in all spheres of my life" (Diana, 17 y.o., Rostov-na-dony).</i>
Popularity and lovability	<i>"For me, other peoples' opinions are very important. I need to know that if I am slim, I am lovable. When I lost almost 20 kilos, people started to communicate with me more. Therefore, I understood that only when you are thin and beautiful will you be loved by other people. When I was fat nobody talked with me and boys did not notice me" (Lilya, 17 y.o., Arhangelsk).</i>
Comfort	<i>"I feel very uncomfortable at a heavy weight. I do not like when my body becomes rounded. I mean, when my figure becomes feminine, softer. I feel more comfortable when I have a space between my legs and visible abs. For instance, I feel uncomfortable when I see a thinner person than me. Especially when he eats three times more than me. Because I cannot allow myself many types of food. Psychologically I feel discomfort in the company of such a person" (Rose, 23 y.o., Moscow).</i>
Addiction	<i>"When I lose weight, I feel like I want to lose more and more, and it becomes addictive. I mean I got rid of 1 kilo, then 5 kilos, and after that it feels like I need to do more. Finally, you do not even notice that you start to disappear" (Arina, 15 y.o., Gubkin).</i>
Lightness and tenderness	<i>"For me it is tenderness, defenselessness and lightness" (Maryana, pro-ana, 15 y.o., Vladivostok).</i>
Self-love	<i>"Usually, I think that other people are better than me and because of that I hate my body. I always thought that everybody is thinner than me and better because they are thinner" (Nadya, 16 y.o., St. Petersburg).</i>



End of Table 2

Meaning	Example
Invisiblensess	<i>"I want to be small, tiny. Maybe it is connected with me being always bigger than the other people. I even invented the idea of the big person complex. When I lost weight, I was still thinking that I am taking up too much space and wanted to be invisible"</i> (Bonni, 20 y.o., Murmansk).
Healthiness	<i>"I think that being thin is being healthy. I suppose that being in a healthy body means being healthy in general. Beauty is important for me only after health"</i> (Kristina, 15 y.o., Tolyatti).
Genderlessness	<i>"For me being thin is being androgynous. I do not feel like a woman or a man. I feel like I do not have gender. Being androgynous for me is not having minimally distinguished sexual characteristics. For me, sharp physical traits are beautiful and androgynous"</i> (Sam, 17 y.o., Barnaul).
Cleanness	<i>"For example, when I eat two apples, I think that I overate and feel dirty. Therefore, I think that I have to quit overeating, purge, and feel lightness. When I am clean from food that I ate, slim, I feel like I can do anything"</i> (Mary, 19 y.o., Voronezh).

Apart from thinness, women argued that they evaluated their own value and compared themselves with others' bodies including the "fat" ones. I was able to distinguish between five sorts of beliefs participants expressed about fat people (Table 3). Most of the participants argued that they felt compassion towards such people and thought that these people were probably ill and want to lose weight. Many women argued that fat people were disgusting to them and they felt superior to such people. Some women said that being fat was good for some people but not for them. Furthermore, some claimed that fat people were weak and lazy and argued that fat people were killing themselves. Finally, several women stated that they do not pay attention to fat people.

Pro-ana women performed several practices to ensure that they will one day reach their ideal weight. They did not eat, restricted calorie intake, used medications (antidepressants, laxatives and diuretics), exercised excessively, created rituals, self-harmed, and purged. They received their advice on techniques for slimming down from pro-ana communities. These communities also motivated them and provided support.

Table 3

Attitudes towards fat people among pro-ana women

Attitude	Example
Compassion	<i>"I explained to myself that fat people's weight issues is their bad health condition. I felt compassion for them because I thought that they probably have diabetes or problems with hormones. I am trying to not judge fat people"</i> (Tameraz, 20 y.o., Almaty).
Disgust and superiority	<i>"I relate positively to fat and fit people, but if the person is extremely fat, I feel like I am better than that person, but I know that it is bad to feel like that"</i> (Vika, 17 y.o., Ufa).

Attitude	Example
Being fat is ok for others but not for me	<i>"If a girl wants to look fat it is her right to do that. There are even women who look beautiful while being fat. At the same time, it is my right to be thin. I do not look pretty being fat. I suppose that only those who want to be treated for EDs [eating disorders] should be treated because if you do not disturb other people it is your personal choice"</i> (Sam, 17 y.o., Barnaul).
Condemnation (they are lazy)	<i>"I always had this condemnation towards fat people. I could have been going on the street and I thought that everybody is fat. I was angry with these people because I thought that they cannot control themselves, are weak, and therefore deteriorate their health"</i> (Lilya, 15 y.o., Slobodskoy).
Do not pay attention	<i>"I do not pay attention. I try to always look not at the body but the personality. However, sometimes when I see thin women on the street I feel jealous"</i> (Rose, 23 y.o., Moscow).

Types of contemporary legend transmission

As Table 4 shows, the most important roles in the FBF talk networks were often played by mothers, fathers, grandmothers, current and former friends, classmates, current and former romantic partners, and internet friends. By internet friends, I mean other pro-ana women who participants met via pro-ana communities. The influence of mothers, grandmothers, fathers, former romantic partners, former friends, and classmates seemed to be decreasing over time. On the contrary, romantic partners and friends appeared to become more involved in FBF talk as time passed.

Table 4

Actors involved in the spread of the contemporary legend of obesity in the social surroundings of pro-ana women (percentages of women, who mentioned these actors)¹

Actor	Past	Now	Difference	FBF talk type
Mother	0.92	0.52	0.4***	T, A, G
Friend	0.64	0.78	-0.14	A, G
Classmates	0.58	0.04	0.54***	T, A, G
Father	0.54	0.32	0.22	T, A, G
Grandmother	0.54	0.2	0.34***	T, A, G
Internet friends	0.46	0.28	0.18	T, A, G
Former boyfriend / girlfriend	0.32	0.04	0.28***	T, A, G

¹ By past I mean before the start of ED and now — after and in the present time. Significance of difference between alters involvement in FBF talk in the past and now — *** — 99%, ** — 95%, * — 90%. Teasing — T, Giving advice — A, General talk — G. In the table are included both collective (generalized) actors such as doctors or classmates and individual ones as the participants sometimes did not name some actors in an individual manner.



End of Table 4

Actor	Past	Now	Difference	FBF talk type
Sister	0.26	0.2	0.06	T, A, G
Former friend	0.26	0	0.26***	T, A, G
Boyfriend/girlfriend	0.2	0.42	-0.22*	A, G
Stepfather	0.16	0.06	0.1	T, A, G
Psychologist	0.14	0.12	0.02	A
Brother	0.12	0.1	0.02	T, A, G
Aunt	0.1	0.02	0.08	T, A, G
School teachers (sport)	0.1	0.04	0.06	T, A, G
Cousin	0.1	0.08	0.02	T, A, G
Acquaintances	0.1	0.12	-0.02	T, A, G
Grandfather	0.1	0.04	0.06	T, A, G
Teammates	0.08	0.02	0.06	T, A, G
Neighbor	0.04	0.02	0.02	T, A, G
Aunt's friend	0.02	0	0.02	T, A, G
Cousin's wife	0.02	0.02	0	T, A, G
Groupmates	0.02	0	0.02	T, A, G
Model agents	0.02	0.02	0	T, A, G
Nephew	0.02	0.02	0	T, A, G
Former coach	0.02	0	0.02	T, A, G
Doctors	0.02	0	0.02	A
School nurse	0.02	0	0.02	T, A, G
Children in kindergarten	0.02	0	0.02	T, A, G
Boyfriend's friend	0	0.02	-0.02	G
Colleagues	0	0	0	G
Boss	0	0	0	G

Types of FBF talk included teasing, giving personal suggestions and recommendations, and general discussions about food. Teasing was performed by family members, classmates, former romantic partners and friends, internet friends, acquaintances, sports instructors, nurses, and teammates or other athletes. Personal suggestions and recommendations were given from the parties mentioned in the previous sentence and psychologists, doctors, current friends, and romantic partners. General discussion occurred between participants and all members of their personal networks, including colleagues and bosses who were not involved in teasing and giving advice and recommendations. In all cases, more than half of the people who were important to participants engaged in FBF talk.

Based on the ego-network data I distinguished three types of propagation of the contemporary legend of obesity: homophily, social influence and coevolution (Table 5).

Table 5

Types and descriptions of legend propagation^{1,2}

Variable	H	SI	CP	CSI	CH
number of cases	19	5	17	2	7
age range	14–25	15–24	14–24	19–23	16–20
pro-ana count	15	2	12	1	5
FBF talk count alters	1–2	4–7	3–13	6–7	3–6
do sport	13	1	16	1	2
do music, singing	8	3	7	1	1
do drawing, design	10	2	8	0	6
do dancing	5	1	5	2	1
do volunteering	3	0	2	0	0
do intellectual clubs	4	3	5	0	3
do culinary	1	0	1	0	0
study foreign languages	0	1	5	1	2
do modeling	0	0	1	1	0
have animals	1	1	5	0	0
were bullied	16	3	10	1	6
have consulted specialists	13	4	8	2	4
have comorbidities	17	5	15	1	7
had difficulties with romantic partners	17	2	12	2	7
ns range	3–33	4–9	4–20	5–8	3–9

¹ 1. Homophily is the situation when women become part of the pro-ana community due to shared values regarding the contemporary legend of obesity.

2. Social influence is the situation when women become part of the pro-ana community because the members of this community persuaded them and increased their degree of belief in the contemporary legend.

3. Coevolution is the situation when women become part of the pro-ana community due to both homophily and social influence.

3a. Coevolution-social influence is the subtype of coevolution characterized by the prevalence of social influence over homophily.

3b. Coevolution-homophily is the subtype of coevolution characterized by the prevalence of homophily over social influence.

3c. Pure coevolution is the subtype of coevolution that is characterized by the almost equal functioning of homophily and social influence processes.

² Network size is the number of people who belong to the personal social network (alters). ns indicates network size; homophily (H), social influence (SI), pure coevolution (CP), coevolution/social influence (CSI), coevolution/homophily (CH).



End of Table 5

Variable	H	SI	CP	CSI	CH
ns range (1 circle)	1–5	0–7	1–15	3	1–4
ns range (2 circle)	0–24	0–7	0–6	2–5	0–6
ns range (3 circle)	0–6	0–0	0–4	0	0–2
whole network (age range)	15–44	22.7–39.9	19.4–42.7	24.4–29.3	20.3–49
1 circle (age range)	15–46.5	26.3–39.9	13.3–56	27.3–38.7	17–81.5
2 circle (age range)	15–68	17–32	15.5–60	20–21.5	18–33.2
3 circle (age range)	16–80	-	18–70	-	18–41
network gender range	0.1–1	0.3–0.9.	0.4–0.9.	0.5–0.6.	0.3–0.8.
ns (1 circle) female proportion range	0–1	0.3–0.9.	0–1	0.3–0.7	0–0.8
2 circle female proportion range	0–1	0–1	0–1	0.5–0.6	0.2–1
3 circle female proportion range	0–1	-	0–1	-	0–1
friends proportion range	0–0.67	0–0.25	0–0.5	0.4–0.5.	0–0.6.
relatives proportion range	0–0.7	0.15–1	0.3–1	0.25–0.4	0–0.7.
ns (1 circle) relatives proportion range	0–1	0–1	0.2–1	0.7	0–1
ns (2 circle) relatives proportion range	0–1	0–1	0–1	0	0–0.4
ns (3 circle) relatives proportion range	0–0.67	-	0–1	-	0–1

Homophily

Homophily cases are characterized by a higher number of people in the participants’ surroundings who discussed FBF issues in the past relative to people involved in FBF talk either only now or both now and in the past. (See Figure 1 for an example of homophily). I encountered nineteen such cases among my participants. In these cases, the main attitudes towards FBF were usually developed by relatives; close friends and social media sources played only a secondary role in the development of pro-ana views. Almost all women were pro-ana. They strongly held their views, were teased and bullied by others, and had difficulties with romantic relationships. Most of them had multiple comorbid illnesses and more than half had consulted psychiatrists. These women actively participated in different types of extracurricular activities.

Participants influenced by homophily had three circles of significant figures and most people in their social surroundings belonged to the first and second circles of subjective importance. Their alters, in general, were older than them. Half of the people in their social surroundings were female, and less than half were friends and relatives. Only one of nineteen women had a pet. On the one hand, their support network was large and well developed. On the other hand,

the low percentages of friends and family members in the network demonstrate the difficulties these women had with forming and sustaining close relationships. This puts such women at risk and may explain why they sought support in online pro-ana communities.

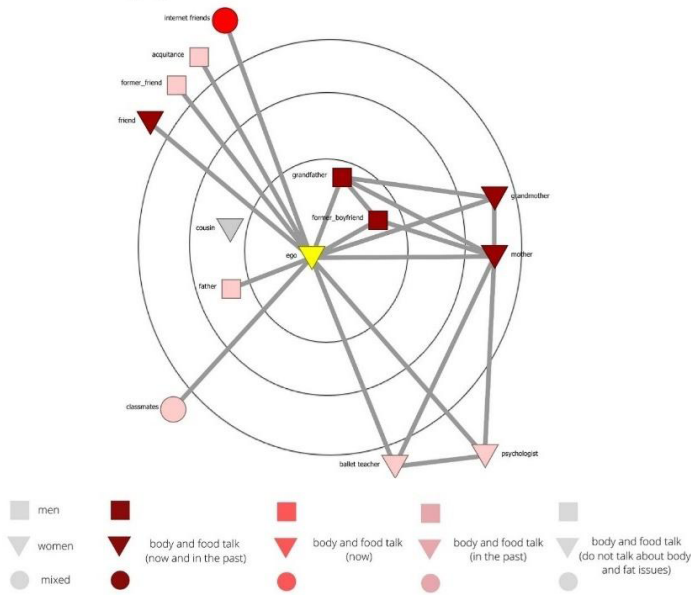


Figure 1. Types of contemporary legend of obesity propagation: Homophily¹.

Social influence

In social influence cases, more people surround the ego and discuss FBF issues with her now compared to the number of people who were involved in FBF talk either only in the past or both now and in the past. (See Figure 2 for an example of social influence). There were five such cases. In these cases, the impact of relatives and close friends in childhood was minimal. In the past, those in the social surroundings of these women were not actively involved in FBF talk; women gained their information about dieting from internet sources. However, after participants espoused pro-ana views, relatives and friends started to talk with them about weight. In all five cases, the participant’s father was not emotionally involved in parenting for varied reasons. He was either strict and unemotional, addicted to alcohol or other substances, dead, or divorced from the mother. Two women of the five were pro-ana and three were in remission. Nearly all of these women

¹ This is the ego-network of 17 y.o girl who lives in Moscow and is pro-ana. In the past, she discussed FBF with her ballet teacher, classmates, psychologist, father, acquaintance, and former friend. Both in the past and now she talks about these issues with her friend, grandfather, mother, and former boyfriend. Internet friends talk with her about body and weight now. The circles on the picture show the subjective state of importance. The inner circle is the most important to the ego, the second circle is less important, and the third circle is the least important. Those who are outside the circles have no importance.



had sought mental health treatment (one said she did not have money for it) and all had comorbid illnesses. Half experienced bullying and problems with romantic partners. Apart from school activities, these women took part in intellectual clubs or drawing/music; only one engaged in sports.

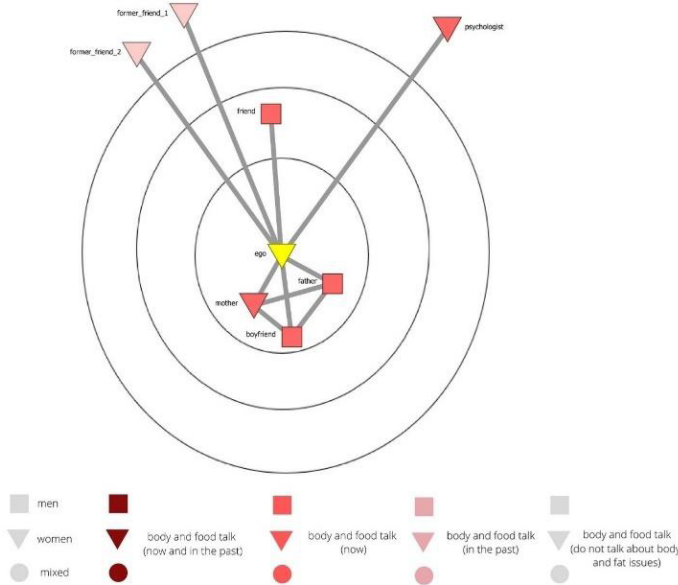


Figure 2. Types of contemporary legend of obesity propagation: Social influence¹.

Participants characterized by social influence had two circles of subjectively important figures out of three. Their network sizes ranged from four to nine people. Furthermore, those in their social surroundings were generally older than them. Their social surroundings were half composed of women, less than half relatives, and nearly no friends. Only one of five had a pet. Their support networks were medium-sized and less developed relative to homophily cases. The percentages of friends and relatives in these networks was extremely low, showing a greater degree of alienation in comparison with participants whose networks were characterized by homophily.

Coevolution

In coevolution cases, more people surround the ego who discussed FBF issues with her in the past and now compared to people who were involved in FBF

¹ This is the ego-network of 18 y.o girl who lives in Balashov and is pro-ana. In the past, she discussed FBF with her two former friends. Now she talks about FBF with her friend, mother, father, boyfriend, and psychologist. There are no people in this network who discussed body and food with her now and in the past. There are no people in her network of importance who do not speak with her about body and weight. The circles on the picture show the subjective state of importance. The inner circle is the most important to the ego, the second circle is less important, and the third circle is the least important. Those who are outside the circles have no importance.

talk either only in the past or now. I detected 26 such cases. In these cases, FBF talk in the family worked in addition to the influence of the pro-ana community. (The examples of coevolution cases are in Figures 3–5). These cases can be divided into “pure” coevolution (17), coevolution closer to homophily (7), and coevolution closer to social influence (2).

In the cases of pure coevolution, participants characterized their mothers as very involved in parenting (caring) and said their mothers tried to control them. More than half of these women were pro-ana. Half sought treatment and almost all had comorbid illnesses. More than half experienced bullying and problems with romantic partners. All women had hobbies and participated in different clubs, especially sports-related ones.

These participants had three circles of significant figures. Network sizes ranged from four to 20 people and most people in their social surroundings belonged to the first and second circles of subjective importance. Their alters were typically older than them. Their social surroundings were half composed of women and consisted of more than half relatives and less than half friends. Five of 17 had a pet. Their support networks were as developed as in homophily cases and more developed than social influence cases. The high percentage of relatives in these networks showed that these women were selective in the formation of relationships outside the family.

In situations of coevolution closer to social influence, both participants said mothers were too controlling (in both cases because they were concerned with their own body in their youth) and fathers were not emotionally present in their lives. One was pro-ana. Both sought treatment. Only one had comorbid illnesses. One had experienced bullying, and both had problems with romantic partners. Both danced and had other hobbies.

They had two circles of significant figures. Network sizes ranged from five to eight people. Those in their social surrounding were generally older than them, half female, and less than half each of relatives and friends. These women did not have a pet. Their support network was undeveloped compared to the other types in this study.

As for coevolution with the traits of homophily, participants stated that in addition to controlling mothers, they experienced abusive controlling relations with one or multiple boyfriends. In almost all cases the women were bullied by their classmates. Five cases were pro-ana and two were not. Half of these women sought mental health treatment and all had comorbid illnesses. They were mostly involved in drawing; other activities were less popular.

These women had three circles of subjectively important alters. Network sizes ranged from three to nine people. Those in their social surroundings were older than them, half female, and less than half each of relatives and friends. Participants did not have a pet. Their support networks were not very developed in comparison with homophily and pure coevolution cases. As with social influence cases, it could be argued that these women gain social support external to family and friends. They are highly vulnerable, and therefore seek support and communication in online communities.

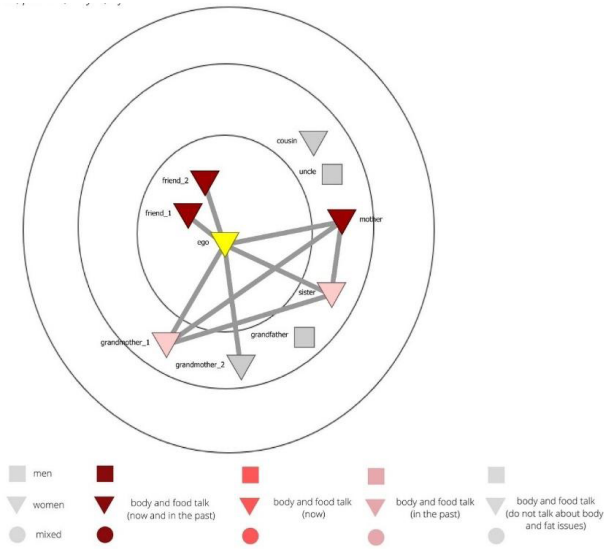


Figure 3. Types of contemporary legend of obesity propagation: Pure coevolution¹.

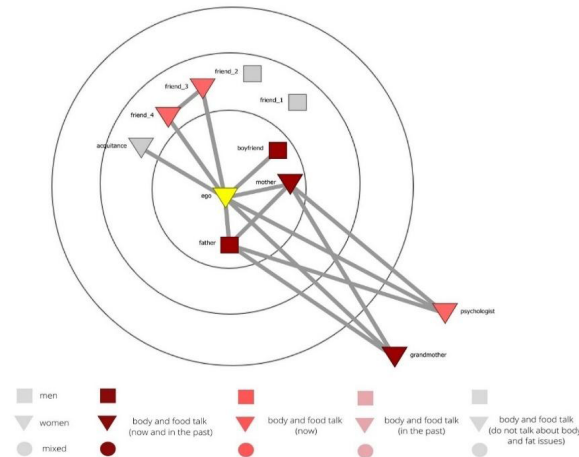


Figure 4. Types of contemporary legend of obesity propagation: Coevolution closer to social influence².

¹ This is the ego-network of 14 y.o girl, who lives in Ufa and is pro-ana. In the past, she discussed FBT with her sister and grandmother. Both in the past and now she talks about FBT issues with her mother and two friends. There are no people in this network who discuss FBT with this girl only now. The circles on the picture show the subjective state of importance. The inner circle is the most important to the ego, the second circle is less important, and the third circle is the least important. Those who are outside the circles have no importance. Cousin, uncle, grandfather and grandmother, who are important to her, do not talk with her about FBT.

² This is the ego-network of 23 y.o girl, who lives in Moscow and is pro-ana. There are no people in this network who discussed FBT with her only in the past. Both in the past and now she talks about mentioned subjects with her mother, father, boyfriend and grandmother. She discusses topics with two

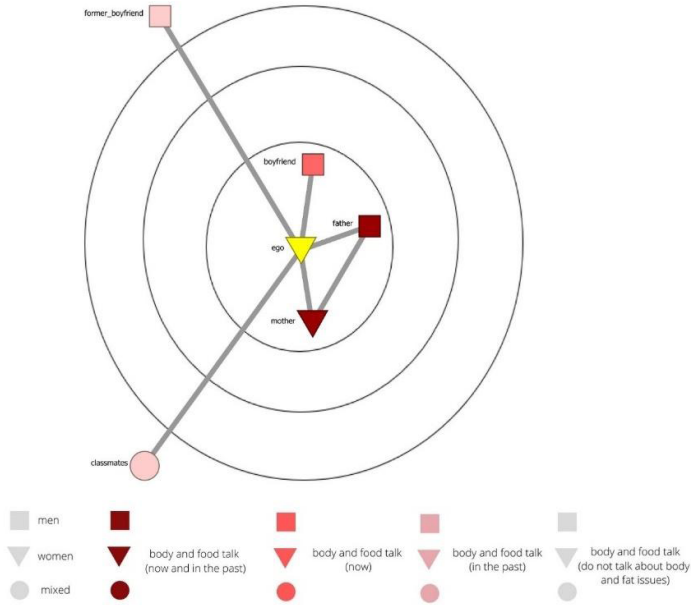


Figure 5. Types of contemporary legend of obesity propagation: Coevolution closer to homophily¹.

Discussion

In this paper, I described the application of ego-network analysis and biographical interviews to study MP propagation on the interpersonal level in the case of obesity MP. Additionally, I identified the ways moral panic on obesity is propagated on the interpersonal level. Since my paper has two focuses, I will address each sequentially.

Obesity MP content and interpersonal propagation

Concerning contemporary legend content, I identified twelve meanings attributed to thinness, which appeared in different combinations among the women studied. These meanings seem to be typical of women with anorexia [Espindola, Blay, 2009], and I did not notice cultural specificity in these meanings. Participants' anti-fat attitudes did not contradict the dimensions of fat phobia and obesity

friends and a psychologist only now. The circles on the picture show the subjective state of importance. The inner circle is the most important to the ego, the second circle is less important, and the third circle is the least important. Those who are outside the circles have no importance. Two other friends and acquaintances who are important do not talk with her about body and food.

¹ This is the ego-network of 19 y.o girl who lives in Nakhodka and is pro-ana. A former boyfriend and classmates discussed FBF with her only in the past. Both in the past and now she talks about FBF issues with her mother and father. Only now she discusses it with her boyfriend. The circles on the picture show the subjective state of importance. The inner circle is the most important to the ego, the second circle is less important, and the third circle is the least important. Those who are outside the circles have no importance. There are no people in her network of importance who do not speak with her about body and weight.



moralization scales [Crandall, 1994; Ringel, Ditto, 2019]. Similarly, participants' pro-ana practices did not differ from the general practices of such communities [Boero, Pascoe, 2012; Brotsky, Giles, 2007; Haas et al., 2011]. However, participants acknowledged one specific characteristic of the current Russian pro-ana community: the popularity of using medications such as antidepressants for weight loss. Women bought and exchanged these medications illegally, and many reported developing drug-related addictions and other medical problems connected with the excessive intake of unprescribed drugs.

Regarding research on social networks of pro-ana women and women with anorexia, I showed that sources of FBF talk are multidimensional and interrelated, therefore extending the mainstream research on this topic [Leonidas, dos Santos, 2014]. I demonstrated that although discussions with mothers and classmates were very important to participants, figures such as grandmothers, romantic partners, and former friends also played significant roles in participants' development of pro-ana views. Many other figures who appeared as sources of FBF-related information were described, and the types of talks they engaged in were specified.

Additionally, the findings showed that information from media sources was often included in the FBF talk of moral panickers and people from their social surrounding. Advice provided on this topic was based both on personal recommendations and information from the media. Often, general talks were motivated by particular events reported in the media, such as celebrity scandals or deaths of people from anorexia. Teasing was also sometimes based on comparing the individual to "normative" standards of thinness that were transmitted both by the media and by people who watched or read media items. Therefore, from my study, it could be concluded that the transmission of the obesity MP results from an interrelationship between media influence and the interactions of members of the public. This conclusion is consistent with the multidimensional model of the MP on obesity proposed by Monaghan and colleagues [Monaghan, Hollands, Prtichard, 2010]. My results not only support this model but also clarify the multiple ways in which the public is connected with the media in the process of MP propagation. However, it remains for future research to determine whether the same is true for other MPs or if this is a particular trait of this MP.

Methodological reflection

The methodological approach presented in this paper solves two problems of the current research on the diffusion of MP. Current research practices do not provide the opportunity to measure propagation at the interpersonal level, and they do not consider the influence of personal social surroundings on individuals' perceptions of contemporary legends. By contrast, my approach helped to reveal the content of the contemporary legend, means of transmission, and the relationship of personal surroundings to MP propagation. I concluded that MP on obesity among pro-ana women is spread by three different means.

Future studies could analyze the factors involved in and the prevalence of the types of propagation using surveys incorporating ego-network questions. The cases examined in this study show the importance of performing a complex

analysis of the sources of contemporary legend propagation, and quantitative longitudinal models such as ego-ERGM (exponential random graphs models) could be incorporated to predict the spread of a contemporary legend. For that purpose, a numerical value could be computed for each moral panicker, which could be calculated using methods of textual data analysis; alternately, the measurement could be formalized in a scale format. As for textual analysis, simple content analysis could be conducted to investigate the specificity of pro-ana speech, or neural network analysis could compute linguistic markers to indicate the degree of belief in a contemporary legend. Several researchers have attempted to investigate the speech of people with anorexia [Doba et al., 2008; Moessner et al., 2018], but the specifics of their language use were not attributed to belief in a particular contemporary legend.

Limitations

The main limitation of the present study relates to the application of the measurement to a particular MP. It is possible that differences between the MP on obesity and other MPs could influence the results of the study. There may be peculiarities in the spread of a panic depending on its content. In the introduction, I mentioned that the imagery of a contemporary legend could differentially impact people, specifically its discursive mechanisms, which could provoke various moral emotions. Additionally, people may differ in their perceptions of contemporary legend content based on their personality traits and life experiences. For example, people who have undergone a traumatic experience and developed PTSD could be more susceptible to legends that present potential threats to them or their significant others.

Limitations may also exist in regard to the cultural context. In MP studies, it is argued that the specific characteristics of claim-making and the range of moral entrepreneurs involved can depend on the country [Monod, 2017]. Therefore, research on MP propagation on the interpersonal level should take into consideration whether it is common to talk about the topic of the panic and with whom these topics are typically discussed in the investigated social group. Perhaps the importance of media sources for MP propagation varies from panic to panic, not only due to legend content and personal perceptions of the panic but because of the communication habits developed in the country. Some topics could be impolite to discuss in some societies (for instance, purging or loss of menstruation), or their discussions may be limited to certain groups such as dieting experts or physicians.

It is also important to note that the selected pro-ana community primarily comprised young female members; belief in a contemporary legend may not be connected to personal contacts in the same way among men. Network studies show gender differences in personal offline and online social network formation [Benenson, 1990; Igarashi, Takai, Yoshida, 2005]. For example, women usually have smaller social networks than men [McMillan, Felmlee, Osgood, 2018] and they tend to gossip more about physical appearance [Eckhaus, Ben-Hador, 2019]. Differences in age, race, minoritized status, socio-economic status and mental



health may also affect how people build networks and exchange information and should be taken into account.

Furthermore, [Falkof, 2020] and other contemporary MP scholars observe that different MPs sometimes coincide. Accordingly, when researching belief in one contemporary legend, beliefs in other legends should also be considered. For instance, when researching the obesity MP, some participants told me about their beliefs in religious deities such as Satan and forest spirits. Thus, while they considered obesity a social problem, they also expressed traits of involvement in Satanic moral panic.

Furthermore, the influence of the digital platform where the diaries were posted should be taken into account. The stories told by moral panickers could be affected by formal aspects of platforms such as word count constraints or limitations on images. At the same time, writing online should be understood as an act that implies being watched by others, and therefore an act through which self-performance can be managed and controlled. In this study, information from social media was triangulated with biographical interviews. Relying on interviews as a source of information about personal contacts and belief in a contemporary legend is risky since it is known that interviewees may not mention certain aspects of their lives or certain social connections in the interview. For example, [Doba et al., 2008] showed that women with anorexia were more likely to mention family members in their autobiographical narratives than their romantic partners. Also, people have difficulties accurately reporting their social networks [Bidart, Charbonneau, 2011], for example, mentioning fewer people than are present in their social surroundings or providing incomplete information about connections between their alters. Problems such as these could be solved with triangulation of data sources about connections. For instance, observations of and interviews with alters could be added to the interview data and personal documents.

Conclusion

To conclude, the current paper presented a new methodological approach to investigate and measure MP propagation on the interpersonal level. Knowledge of the possibilities and limitations of this methodology could stimulate further development of tools to examine MP diffusion and increase theoretical knowledge on this topic. The methodology described in the paper could be valuable for MP researchers, obesity researchers, and ego-network analysts. One acute pending question is whether this methodology could differentiate the influence of social media from the effect of interpersonal communication on the strength of personal belief in the contemporary legend. To my mind, as we now immersed in and socialized to a culture characterized by an array of media sources, it is unlikely that we will ever be fully able to separate these effects. Furthermore, such a separation is artificial, as the sources of the MP spread are multidimensional; by trying to differentiate the effects of various social institutions in MP propagation, we run the risk of oversimplifying the MP propagation process.

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Измерение моральной паники на межличностном уровне: случай женщин-про-ана блогеров

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Несмотря на большое количество работ, посвященных изучению моральных паник, практически отсутствуют исследования, касающиеся анализа эффекта социального окружения в их распространении. Эта статья вносит вклад в решение данной проблемы, предлагая методологический подход, который может быть использован при изучении распространения моральных паник в ходе межличностной коммуникации. Основанный на сочетании анализа эго-сетей и биографических интервью, этот подход позволяет показать как индивидуальные взаимодействия с членами социального окружения могут воздействовать на вовлеченность человека в моральную панику. Возможности этой методологии демонстрируются на примере моральной паники относительно ожирения. Женщины про-ана блогеры рассматриваются как моральные паникеры, которые создают моральную панику вокруг избавления от «лишнего» веса. Анализ проводится на основе 50 биографических интервью и публичных онлайн-дневников русскоязычных женщин, которые причисляют себя к про-ана культуре и ведут о ней блоги в социальной сети «ВКонтакте». Результаты обсуждаются в связи с исследованиями моральной паники относительно ожирения, а также литературой, посвященной изучению распространения моральных паник.

Ключевые слова: моральная паника; распространение моральных паник; ожирение; про-ана; эго-сети; биографический метод

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