

Rebecca Watzlawek

# Language in Echo Chambers: How Metaphors Intensify Affective Phenomena

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**Language in Echo Chambers: How Metaphors  
Intensify Affective Phenomena**

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submitted by

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Date of Submission: 09/21/2023

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*New metaphors have the power to create a new reality. This can begin to happen when we start to comprehend our experience in terms of a metaphor, and it becomes a deeper reality when we begin to act in terms of it.*  
George Lakoff & Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*

## 1. Introduction

Our daily life and way of communication is infused with metaphors, more than we appreciate (e.g., Deutscher, 2005; Kövecses, 2003, 2010, 2015, 2020b; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a). Metaphors are so engrained in the use of language all around the world that we rarely recognize that a supposedly simple phrase such as “he was *full of pride*” (Kövecses, 1986, p. 43) or “she couldn’t *contain* her joy” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 14) are in fact metaphoric expressions, making use of concrete, physical experiences in order to grasp something that is difficult to put into words, namely emotions. As a means of grasping the abstract (see e.g., Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Kövecses, 2010; Kompa, 2021), metaphors are making more intelligible what is otherwise hard to convey. Since they are so omnipresent in communication, the effect of their (mis)use on individuals encountering them in certain environments should be of greater philosophical interest. Especially the affective impact on both those who express a metaphor and those who encounter it has been given too little attention, given that metaphors make up such a significant part of our communication and dealing with the world.

To poignantly demonstrate the effect of metaphors on epistemic as well as affective mechanisms of whole groups, I will look at two echo chambers that have formed within the virtual realm, namely ProAna (pro-anorexia) worlds and the Incel (involuntary celibates) community. ProAna worlds are communities of mostly adolescent and young women (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), brought together through the disorder Anorexia Nervosa (AN) which they consider to be an active lifestyle choice rather than life-threatening (e.g., Knapton, 2013; Maloney, 2013; Osler & Krueger, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019). Incels, on the other hand, are characterized by their frustration with women in particular and society in general, which they express by means of a deeply misogynistic, dehumanizing and degrading language (e.g., Baele et al., 2023; Bogetić, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021). Echo chambers such as these exert a particularly heightened use of metaphors as well as a very specialized and adapted vocabulary tailored to the respective needs, which makes them a fruitful space to examine the workings of highly expressive metaphors. These detrimental environments have been thoroughly studied regarding their epistemic mechanisms and impact on the individual (e.g., Nguyen, 2020), impeding on the probability of them leaving. Their affective mechanisms, however, have not been the focus of detailed research, even though affective phenomena deeply inform the discursive practices prevalent in the echo chambers under investigation in this thesis.

In this thesis I outline and defend the basis for the claim that *metaphors, used in the specific environment of echo chambers, are used as tools which corroborate, maintain, and reinforce the epistemic as well as affective scaffold that is already in place.* As such, metaphors contribute to the

atmospheres prevalent in the respective echo chambers, reinforce perceived boundaries between members and non-members and thereby further the stickiness<sup>1</sup> of the detrimental structure, impeding the possibilities for an individual to leave. To provide a basis for my claim, I first discuss the phenomenon of echo chambers and give insight into their detrimental allure, both from an epistemic but importantly also from an affective perspective by referring to the examples of ProAna worlds and the Incel community. I then introduce the Conceptual Metaphor Theory and thereby explain how metaphors are not just embellishments of language and a purely linguistic phenomenon, but rather a phenomenon at the basis of our conceptual system. On that ground, I will discuss specific instances and examples of metaphors pervasive in the two echo chambers to show how they reinforce and inform mechanisms already in place. Pro-anorexics, for instance, frame their disorder in terms of the conceptual metaphor ANOREXIA is a RELIGION, realized in expressions such as ‘you feel the need to just *get the food out of you*’ (Knapton, 2013, p. 470, emphasis added). The extensive conceptual framework gives the members of the community guidance, both epistemically and affectively. A similar in function scaffold can also be observed in the Incel community, who find comfort and a sense of power in degrading and objectifying women by means of conceptual metaphors. A resulting metaphor for example is the metaphor WOMEN are CONTAINERS, leading to an utterance like ‘delusional *cumbuckets*’ (see Appendix A) in reference to women.

The language and especially the metaphors typical of a certain echo chamber are predicative of the belief systems in place, but also what is binding the individuals affectively to the detrimental space in question. Understanding and appreciating the effects that linguistic tools such as metaphors bring about and which manifest in the epistemic as well as affective realm is of great interest as it in turn facilitates an understanding of polarization of views, radicalization processes and the strengths of communities. Not underestimating the impact metaphors have on an affective scale in charged environments and the influence they exert on individuals both synchronically and diachronically could foster measures to reduce and prevent detrimental practices. With this thesis I present an insight into the mechanisms at play in two very different spaces, pointing to their common feature of an epistemic as well as affective scaffold.

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1 I am aware of the very particular background of the term “sticky” and its related notion of “stickiness” when used in the context of affective phenomena. In this thesis, however, I am not using the term in the Ahmedian sense (Ahmed, 2004), but rather in its colloquial sense and how it is understood by Osler & Krueger (2022).

## 2. Echo Chambers

The goal of this thesis is to analyze the workings of metaphor in echo chambers. For that aim, a thorough description of the phenomenon of echo chambers is required and a distinction must be made between echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. In this chapter I therefore explain the phenomenon of echo chambers more thoroughly and compare it in some respects to the phenomenon of epistemic bubbles. The latter, however, does not play a leading role in the further discussion. The following sections serve a descriptive function, on which the later discussion of the effects of metaphor on affective phenomena in echo chambers, furthering their grip on the individual, is based upon.

Surrounding the discussion of echo chambers, two terms have often erroneously been used to denote the same phenomenon (Nguyen, 2020).<sup>2</sup> According to C. Thi Nguyen, the term epistemic bubble describes a related, but not identical phenomenon to that of an echo chamber. Following him, the most decisive difference between the two phenomena is their dealing with voices asserting a differing view on a subject: Whereas in epistemic bubbles other relevant voices are simply overlooked, often without bad intent or even knowledge of the omission, members of echo chambers “actively exclude[] and discredit[]” (ibid., p. 141) other voices. Where the former displays a mere lack of exposure to relevant epistemic sources, the latter is characterized by a profound distrust to all external information defending, arguing for, or simply stating a different view (Nguyen, 2020). Similarly significant is the difference between the two concerning an individual’s possibility for escaping the epistemic bubble or the echo chamber, respectively. Since in an epistemic bubble outside voices have, mostly by accident, been overlooked, exposure to new perspectives, arguments and information can “shatter [the] epistemic bubble” (ibid., p. 154) with relative ease, while in the case of an echo chamber such outside voices would most likely reinforce the underlying epistemic structure (ibid., p. 153). However – though they should not be dismissed as unimportant issues – I will not focus on either escape possibilities from an echo chamber nor their emergence. Rather, I am concerned with the self-sustaining mechanisms of echo chambers on an epistemic as well as affective level. By shedding light on how it is possible that individuals become entangled in such detrimental epistemic structures and actively engage in them, propagating their destructive impact, I give a tentative answer to Bruns (2021), asking “what is it that has so entrenched and cemented their [the members’] beliefs that they are no longer open to contestation” (p. 45).

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2 Recently, there have also been discussions of so-called epistemic bunkers. I am not taking these into consideration in the current thesis. Nonetheless, I suppose that the claims made here about echo chambers are just as applicable to epistemic bunkers. For a detailed discussion of epistemic bunkers see Furman (2023).

## 2.1 Echo chambers and their epistemic mechanisms

Echo chambers have emerged in all kinds of contexts, political as much as apolitical. They polarize their members' views on, among others, social issues such as health (see e.g., Gkinopoulos et al., 2022; Osler & Krueger, 2022) scientific topics (or not so scientific in the case of climate change deniers (see e.g., van Eck et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2018)) and technology related questions (see e.g., Fitzgerald, 2019; Jolley & Paterson, 2021). Echo chambers in the political realm however have gained the most attention, sparked by the exposure of several such environments related but not limited to for example alt-right movements (Lima et al., 2018; Valentini, 2022; Zannettou et al., 2018), Trump-supporters (see e.g., Vlachos, 2022; Zannettou et al., 2018) or most recently, Querdenker groups in Germany (Scheibenzuber et al., 2023; Vlachos, 2022). Characteristic for echo chambers is their far-reaching manipulation of trust (Nguyen, 2020).

The term echo chamber, as it is predominantly understood today, is in itself metaphorical. Originally, the term described a “room with sound-reflecting walls used for producing hollow or echoing sound effects” (Merriam-Webster.com, 2023b) and has since mostly lost its literal meaning. The echoing effect from the source domain of a bounded room with no sounds coming in or leaving has been transferred to the target domain of online spaces. The resulting metaphorical meaning describes a typically virtual environment in which there is little or no interaction with opposing views, little or no exposure to information that contradicts one's preexisting beliefs, and a high likelihood of reinforcement of one's beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Cinelli et al., 2021; Del Vicario et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2020; Vlachos, 2022). Echo chambers first and foremost occur online in the virtual realm (see e.g., Paggiaro, 2022), given that the structure and build-up of the internet (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021) provides a fertile breeding ground for their emergence. However, echo chambers are not just characterized by their echo-effect of one-sided views, they exhibit more malicious and epistemically detrimental features. Nguyen (2020) retraces the detrimental effects of echo chambers back to their manipulation of trust, through which a feedback loop of discrediting is initiated and reinforced. Throughout the current thesis, my use of the term “echo chamber” relies on the rationale presented by Nguyen in his 2020 paper, where he defines an echo chamber as

an epistemic community which creates a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This disparity is created by excluding non-members through epistemic discrediting, while simultaneously amplifying members' epistemic credentials. Finally, echo chambers are such that general agreement with some core set of beliefs is a prerequisite for membership, where those core beliefs include beliefs that support that disparity in trust (ibid., p. 146).

According to Nguyen, epistemic discrediting describes the process by which non-members are “actively assigned epistemic demerit, such as unreliability, epistemic maliciousness or dishonesty” (ibid., p. 146). This means that those not belonging to the respective echo chamber get denied epistemic credibility and are intently excluded from the conversation; they are discredited by the members before even voicing their opinions. By “voicing their opinions” I do not mean that members of the echo chamber and non-members necessarily have to have a conversation. The

discrediting happens without necessarily having a specific future disagreement in mind, it rather serves to epistemically “inoculate” (ibid., p. 153) the members against outside voices. By cutting the members off from external perspectives, diverse information and telling them a maliciously coherent story, the individuals can be “brought to hold a set of beliefs such that the existence and expression of contrary beliefs reinforces the original set of beliefs and discrediting story” (ibid., p. 147). This initiates a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism according to Nguyen. By predicting that the member of the echo chamber will encounter disagreement, trust in the perspective of the echo chamber is increased, as a disagreement with outsiders is very likely to occur and the prediction thereby to be fulfilled. Since the prediction made by the insiders of the echo chamber has become true, the trust of the members in what they are told within the echo chamber gets solidified and a disparity in trust is created.

There is a second part to the disagreement-reinforcement mechanism that can be found in Nguyen’s definition of echo chambers, namely the amplification of epistemic credentials. Not only is trust in outside sources undermined through epistemic discrediting but trust in the echo chamber and between its members is heightened, assigning them an inordinate amount of credence. Here, the loop-feature of the disagreement-reinforcement mechanism becomes most visible: “[T]he inner trust (...) reinforce[s] the outward distrust” (ibid., p. 146). This disagreement-reinforcement mechanism cannot be found within epistemic bubbles. Epistemic bubbles are not based on a manipulation of trust and thus do not exhibit such epistemically detrimental features that are typical for echo chambers. Nonetheless, as epistemic bubbles constrict information flow and access to diverse perspectives, they are not to be underestimated and can lead to a very one-sided and restricted world view.

However, there is a crucial difference between not being exposed to versus actively undermining the general epistemic credibility of other sources and perspectives.<sup>3</sup> The latter is a process that leaves the members of the echo chamber “overly dependent on approved inside sources for information” (ibid., p. 142) as they “systematically isolate[e] their members from all outside epistemic sources” (ibid.). The individual comes to rely more and more on the echo chamber; both socially (Osler & Krueger, 2022) as well as affectively (Del Vicario et al., 2016). This dependence on the echo chamber as an informational resource is based upon a core set of beliefs, which forms the heart of the echo chamber and represents its values and ideology. This set often includes beliefs that serve to inoculate the members against disagreement from outsiders, beliefs that further outward distrust and strengthen trust towards the other members. The individual comes to perceive outsiders as untrustworthy and must therefore rely on the conceptual structure created in the echo chamber to build and extend their worldview. Since echo chambers only open their (metaphorical or virtual) doors to those who have shown to already share the beliefs in place, the echo chamber’s

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3 A drastic example of such active undermining on a large scale is the silencing of independent media in Russia by the government. Here, one could say a politically dictated echo chamber has been deliberately built up, where people are persecuted if they do not follow the norms dictated by the regime. Those norms include rules about which terms are allowed to be used in public; there is a possibility to be incarcerated if one calls Russia’s war in the Ukraine as such instead of calling it a “special operation” as dictated by the regime. Many thanks to Achim Stephan for this insightful example.

core set of beliefs is rather proliferated and supported than questioned. What emerges is a circular structure; newcomers are only accepted if they share the value system in place, but by their joining also reinforce such a structure and are further sucked into the echo chamber's narrative. The longer the individual spends in the respective echo chamber, the firmer its grip (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Chancellor et al., 2016; Juarascio et al., 2010) and the higher the individual's dependence on it.

I have now outlined the most important features of echo chambers that Nguyen has identified.<sup>4</sup> To summarize, echo chambers create a disparity in trust between insiders and outsiders by epistemically amplifying and discrediting them, respectively. This manifests a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, which is based on a core set of beliefs that includes beliefs encouraging distrust of outside sources. The result of the structures characteristic for an echo chamber is an overdependence of its members on the echo chamber. Nguyen does identify dependence as a result of spending time in an echo chamber, however, he considers this dependence to be epistemic and fails to acknowledge that there are also affective needs echo chambers fulfill. To fill this explanatory gap is the objective of the following paragraphs where I turn to concrete examples of echo chambers and thereby explain their affective workings. On that basis, I then develop my own definition of echo chambers which is grounded in Nguyen's understanding, but also incorporates the just as important affective features by means of which echo chambers exert their grip.

## **2.2 Examples of Echo Chambers: ProAna worlds and Incel communities**

Examples of echo chambers are manifold. As already hinted at before, they can emerge with regards to all kinds of subjects. The examples I would like to focus on come from two very different areas, but this only furthers a general point concerning echo chambers: Regardless of their topic, the mechanisms in place are the same across different echo chambers.

The first example of an echo chamber are ProAna worlds, online communities promoting, supporting and sustaining the anorexic lifestyle of their members (see e.g., Bates, 2015; Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Norris et al., 2006; Osler & Krueger, 2022). Though often oversimplified as an informational resource (Osler & Krueger, 2022, p. 884), these communities are multidimensional and are, next to epistemic reasons, equally frequented for emotional support. In the following, the phenomenon of ProAna worlds is thoroughly discussed with regards to their epistemic as well as affective dimensions. The second example sheds light on the Incel (involuntary celibate) community, a community of men who do not have any sexual relationships and blame women in particular and society at large for their situation (Bogetić, 2022, p. 1). Though their interactions are soaked with hate speech, both directed at women and themselves (Daly & Reed, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021; Prażmo, 2020; Waśniewska, 2020), Incels frequent the community for affective resources; to get support and understanding for their situation as well as a

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<sup>4</sup> Since I am focusing on the (affective) maintenance of echo chambers rather than their formation or possibilities of escape, I am not discussing these two topics in this thesis. For a more thorough discussion of these, see Nguyen (2020).

space to voice their frustrations. I claim that both within the community of pro-anorexics and Incels, echo chambers have emerged. To give a basis for this claim, I discuss the epistemic as well as affective mechanisms and features inherent to the two communities. It is important to note, however, that in discussing the affective side of echo chambers I will not be focusing on particular instances of emotions; rather, the goal is to reveal the affective structures underlying the detrimental space of echo chambers. It is by means of these structures then that specific emotions arise.

The examples of utterances made by members of ProAna worlds and Incel communities are for the most part taken from linguistic studies<sup>5</sup>, however, some of the examples presented here I have found on ProAna- and Incel-websites myself. Those examples were obtained from downloads of the respective sites which I could then browse through without actually visiting the site.

### **2.2.1 ProAna worlds**

A prime example of an echo chamber are so-called ProAna worlds, termed as such by Osler and Krueger (2022) in reference to the Pro-Anorexia (ProAna) websites where they emerge. Of course, not every website promoting an anorexic lifestyle exhibits the features characteristic of an echo chamber, however, there are some that do. In the following, I follow Osler and Krueger's terminology and term ProAna sites that are also echo chambers 'ProAna worlds' in order to distinguish them from standard ProAna sites. Anorexia Nervosa (AN), the disorder at the basis of discussion on such websites, is a psychiatric disorder characterized by self-starvation, eventually leading to severe weight loss and possibly death (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The term ProAna world describes those epistemic structures that have formed within the realm of ProAna websites, and which go far beyond simply informing their users about the eating disorder in that they actively promote and support an anorexic lifestyle. The users do not see ProAna websites as merely an informational resource to be used until the relevant knowledge has been gained but access the websites for strong affective reasons as well (Osler & Krueger, 2022). On these websites, individuals struggling with AN find the support they miss outside the pro-anorexic community. Instead of being medicalized and feeling misunderstood, affected persons find a sense of belonging as well as emotional support on these websites (ibid., p. 885). However, it is exactly this combination of epistemic and affective resources that the individual comes to rely on that transforms ProAna websites from an informational resource into an echo chamber, i.e., a ProAna world.

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<sup>5</sup> Building my own corpus of metaphors from ProAna websites and Incel communities would have been much too time-consuming. Additionally, the content of both websites is extreme and harmful in their own ways. On ProAna sites, unhealthy ideals are promoted, to the impact of which I would not consider myself immune (for a detailed analysis of possible effects of exposure to thinspiration and the like, see e.g., Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Custers & Van den Bulck, 2009; Maloney, 2013; Rodgers et al., 2016. The same applies for the Incel community; I did not want to expose myself over a longer period of time to such a misogynistic, hateful and violent ideology.

ProAna worlds are echo chambers because they have a strong communal aspect and do not just provide information about the disorder, but “support and validate AN as a practice or even as a lifestyle choice” (ibid., p. 886). This might not sound epistemically harmful in itself, but supporting someone to stay in a toxic and detrimental mode of living is harmful from many perspectives, including from an epistemic one. Oftentimes, members are actively inoculated “against information that may challenge their anorectic lifestyle” (ibid., p. 885), underlining the fact that although the individual might experience support, this is not without epistemic pitfalls. Exactly this inoculation against outside information and arguments is what turns the community from a support system into a detrimental epistemic structure which becomes harder and harder to leave. It is detrimental to the individual in the sense that the disorder the affected persons struggle with is maintained by others in the echo chamber, as well as by the individual themselves, which can have a fatal outcome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Birmingham et al., 2005; van Eeden et al., 2021). In the next sections, epistemic and especially affective dimensions of ProAna worlds will be discussed.

### ***Why ProAna worlds are echo chambers: epistemic features***

Some of the ProAna websites can be classified as an echo chamber as they exhibit the characteristic features listed by Nguyen (2020). The most distinctive features of an echo chamber in general, but which importantly are present in ProAna worlds, are limited access, manipulation of trust, subscription to a core set of beliefs, a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, and a growing dependency on the epistemic and affective underlying structure of the community.<sup>6</sup> These features can be present to different degrees; however, if several can be identified in an epistemic structure, it is most likely an echo chamber.

Access to ProAna worlds is oftentimes limited to those who have proven themselves to be ‘true anorexics’ to ensure that dissenting voices and so-called ‘wannarexics’ (Osler & Krueger, 2022, p. 886) are kept out and not even heard. Members are expected to regularly post pictures of themselves and their weight-loss process (Maloney, 2013), thereby ensuring that nobody who is not fully committed to the ‘Ana project’ is part of the community. Speaking the community-specific language and using own abbreviations is also a powerful tool to keep unwanted people out (Bates, 2015; Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Maloney, 2013). Additionally, non-members are sometimes denied access by password-protecting the community (Osler & Krueger, 2022, p. 887). With the help of these measures – as is characteristic for echo chambers – other perspectives are not just overlooked, but actively dismissed and not even allowed into the conversation. These measures not only prevent that other voices are being heard, but also lay the groundwork for distrust. Other perspectives are often not even considered because those who would voice them have already been discredited and attributed epistemic demerit (Nguyen, 2020).

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<sup>6</sup> The term “structure” is meant to subsume the features and mechanisms present in an echo chamber, which in their coming together form its underlying epistemic and affective structure.

This also plays into the feature of trust-manipulation, which comes about via a two-way street: The individual encounters support and understanding from the other members, which stands in stark contrast to the experience of lacking support and incomprehension from family, friends, and doctors outside the echo chamber. This, in addition to very probable prophecies put forward in the echo chamber, increases inward trust whilst simultaneously decreasing trust in outside voices. Part of the core set of beliefs proliferated in the community are beliefs that foretell experiences that are very likely to occur such as the belief that “‘outsiders’ do not truly understand what it means to follow Ana” (Osler & Krueger, 2022, p. 887) and that they hence do not support this particular lifestyle. Oftentimes, individuals suffering from AN experience incomprehension from close-tie relationships, therefore, they already have the grounds to trust in such detrimental and dependency-fostering beliefs. If such an experience subsequently really does take place, i.e., the expectation of disagreement in fact becomes reality, a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism is set in motion: Since the member already expected an encounter with disagreement, instead of nudging the affected individual to reevaluate their stance, the disagreement rather reinforces the trust into the other members and the community as a whole. This process successfully inoculates the members of the ProAna world against the “epistemic impact of exposure to outsiders with contrary beliefs” (Nguyen, 2020, p. 147). The individual comes to believe that it is the community and its members who know the truth and what is best, not those outside the echo chamber. The growing inward trust furthers the members’ dependency on the approved inside sources of the community (ibid., p. 142) as they do not feel like they can trust their usual and diverse sources anymore. This epistemic dependency is corroborated by an affective dependency. Because the individual feels severely misunderstood outside the echo chamber and experiences a lack of support from people close to them, they turn to the echo chamber to fulfill their affective needs.

### ***Why ProAna worlds are echo chambers: affective features***

The affective allure echo chambers can exhibit are not to be underestimated. Affective processes are a major factor in making such spaces sticky, i.e., too attractive for individuals to leave. In his discussion of echo chambers, Nguyen sidelines their affective features and only mentions them in passing by acknowledging the communal and social role an echo chamber comes to play in its members’ lives. In their analysis of ProAna worlds, Osler and Krueger (2022) lay the cornerstone for this missing layer by highlighting that it is the community and its members that “support, shape and sustain” (p. 884) disordered eating practices and thereby have a strong affective influence on the individual. They claim that next to epistemic features, such as the creation of a trust barrier between members of the ProAna world and non-members, affective dimensions play a just as important role in erecting (metaphorical) walls to keep the individual from leaving. Environments like ProAna worlds exhibit affective allure, they are attractive to the individuals frequenting them as these are spaces where they experience solidarity, support and comfort that they miss outside the echo chamber (ibid., p. 888). Therefore, the individual is both subject to pressures from the inside and the outside; the reason for these pressures in both cases being the individual’s search for support. The lack thereof outside the virtual realm makes the echo chamber an attractive space and

represents an external pressure. Since there are no real physical barriers preventing a person from leaving, the internal pressures are socio-affective ties that are formed in the community and are hard to sever.<sup>7</sup> ProAna worlds therefore are not just frequented for epistemic reasons, but also continuously interacted with for affective ones because individuals with AN feel at ease in ProAna worlds. In what follows I extend Osler and Krueger's (2022) analysis of ProAna worlds to give a more fine-grained exemplary analysis of the affective workings in echo chambers. Osler and Krueger already incorporated Lugones' work on ease and worlds, therefore, I build upon their analysis of ProAna worlds by explaining the ways in which ease is facilitated and plays into the creation of an affective scaffold.

What does the term 'ease' describe and what is its connection to the notion of 'worlds'? The former has firstly been introduced in reference to the latter by Lugones (1987). She describes 'worlds' as spaces that are not tied to a physical place, but which rather represent "multiple ways of being (...) and demand different kinds of (affective) compartments" (von Maur, 2021, p. 4). A world may be an actual society based on a dominant way of life, but a world can also be a society based on a "non-dominant (...) or (...) idiosyncratic construction" (Lugones, 1987, p. 10). As such, worlds can be inhabited by a large group of people or a small number of individuals, creating many different worlds. Importantly, one usually does not inhabit just one world, but several at the same time. This is possible because of what Lugones calls "world-travelling" (ibid., p. 11), the switching between experientially and phenomenologically different worlds. A religious woman might inhabit the world of traditional Christian values based on her family background, whilst at the same time feeling at ease in the secular world of academic science and switch rather effortlessly between the two.

The word 'ease' denotes the level of comfort an individual experiences in each of their inhabited worlds. Ease can come about in various ways and is facilitated by several factors. One way of feeling more at ease in a given world is speaking its language (ibid., p. 12), both metaphorically and literally. Understanding and being able to adequately respond in a space makes one feel as part of that environment and confident in moving around in it.<sup>8</sup> Another way Lugones identifies is "being normatively happy" (ibid.), i.e., to be in accord with the norms of the respective world. The last two factors are social: Being humanly bonded as well as having a shared history with (some) of the other inhabitants of the world can further a feeling of ease (ibid.). ProAna worlds

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<sup>7</sup> Note that even though this might appear as positive and one might question why these ties should be severed, it should always be kept in mind that these ties are formed on the basis of a detrimental structure, one that in this case might mean the death of the individual if it does not manage to recover from the eating disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Birmingham et al., 2005). Recovery from an eating disorder such as AN is much harder if one is part of a ProAna community (see e.g., Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Chancellor et al., 2016; Juarascio et al., 2010)

<sup>8</sup> It must be noted, however, that speaking the language does not guarantee comfort. One can also feel very uncomfortable in a space where one speaks the respective language. Children belonging to the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> generation of migrants, for example, might, though having spent their whole life speaking the new language, never feel entirely at ease and comfortable. Though the generalization is not unproblematic, for my purposes, here it makes sense to assume a rather general perspective.

provide the breeding ground for all of these ease-facilitating factors Lugones identified, which I will apply to the echo chamber of ProAna worlds in the following.

Members of a ProAna world share a history in the sense that they have all gone through the same or at least very similar sequence of experience. Over time, they developed an eating disorder, leading to a feeling of shame. Once brave enough to share their struggles, they were then confronted with a lack of appropriate support from family and friends in addition to being medicalized by doctors. To counter these negative experiences, they turned to online communities in the hopes of meeting others struggling with the same problems. I am taking a general perspective here, but it should be noted that not every AN story is the same and the described process is very simplified. There may be individuals who do not experience shame or individuals who have not engaged with the medical profession.<sup>9</sup> There are many struggling with AN who do get the appropriate support and who do not feel the need to join online communities. Also, if one joins a ProAna community this does not necessarily mean that the encountered community is an echo chamber. However, for my purposes here, where individuals in fact do enter a space that can be considered to be an echo chamber and engage in it over a period of time, one can assume a certain shared history among the members, with more or less overlapping negative experiences. This shared history often leads to a connection of the individual to the others; one does not feel the need to explain everything to them but has a shared ground and knowledge base that those outside the echo chamber do not possess. This experience is shared by a pro-anorexic, asserting ‘I started to see how much we have in common, and all the same things that we were doing and feeling’ (Maloney, 2013, p. 113).

A shared history also feeds into feeling humanly bonded. Feeling bonded to the community is an important factor to staying in an echo chamber and is (in part) engendered by the emotional support and solidarity displayed by the other members. There is comfort in feeling understood and as if one finally belongs after having been misunderstood and put in a corner. ProAna worlds can be a place where individuals with AN find “companionship in a safe, anonymous and largely sympathetic environment” (Brotsky & Giles, 2007, p. 106), showcased by utterances such as ‘we can give each other strength’ (Stapleton et al., 2019, p. 327). That individuals struggling with AN feel normatively happy in a ProAna world might at first glance appear counterintuitive, after all, it is detrimental to them in the long run. However, the many encounters with disagreement and imposed control (e.g., in the form of recovery treatment) by others oftentimes engender an even stronger urge for autonomy, thereby reinforcing the eating disorder and ascription to an anorexic lifestyle. Finding a community which shares the same beliefs and values makes the individual feel normatively at home. This experience stands in stark contrast to how the world outside of the echo chamber feels, as is expressed by the utterance ‘because it is strange to you, or because you cannot understand and appreciate our means for supporting one another, does not mean that our method of support is not effective for us’ (Roberts Strife & Rickard, 2011, p. 215). Here, it becomes clear that the pro-anorexic does not find the needed support outside the ProAna world, finding comfort in the community instead.

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<sup>9</sup> Many thanks to Lucy Osler for this helpful addition.

Lastly, Lugones mentions the speaking of the world-specific language as a means to facilitate ease in a given space, in this case the ProAna world-specific language. Their very own language is a powerful tool to strengthen community-bonds whilst simultaneously maintaining a clear-cut boundary to outsiders (see e.g., Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Lukač, 2011; Maloney, 2013), which is why many groups develop their own particular language. What is meant by language here encompasses everything from what is said literally, i.e., what topics are brought up and the vocabulary that is used to convey one's thoughts and ideology, to what is expressed between the lines. The latter consists of the practices implicitly governing the discourse, such as how encouragement is conveyed and support is voiced, or on which conceptual structure the group-specific metaphors are based. Discourse in ProAna worlds for example is full of meanspo, hateful talk directed at one another which, as one might assume, is not meant to disparage each other but rather to motivate (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 20). Someone who is not accustomed to the practices and norms in place, manifested and reproduced through language, quickly exposes themselves as not fully belonging to the respective community.

All these ways to increase a feeling of ease are present to some degree in echo chambers such as ProAna worlds. Feeling at ease in and of itself is not a bad thing. At the same time, as Lugones cautions, it can be “dangerous because [ease] tends to produce people who have no inclination to travel across “worlds” or have no experience of world travelling” (Lugones, 1987, p. 12), exactly what is the case for individuals stuck in echo chambers. Because they feel so at ease and familiar with the community, they do not see the need to explore other worlds, showing that ease plays an important role in maintaining the stickiness of the ProAna world.

### *Affective feature: scaffolds*

However, ease is rather part of a larger structure that is created and maintained in the echo chamber by all its members; ProAna worlds and their members create ease by “sediment[ing] and scaffold[ing] AN beliefs and practices” (Osler & Krueger, 2022, p. 884). Making their members feel at ease allows the ProAna world to collectively support, shape, and sustain the disordered eating practices of its members. By providing an affective scaffold, echo chambers are very successful in making themselves “attractive and sticky spaces” (ibid.). In the following, I explain the notion of an affective scaffold and related phenomena and connect them to the specific affective habits of ProAna worlds. By means of an affective scaffold that appears as reliable, supportive, and trustworthy, the individual comes to depend on the echo chamber more and more, decreasing the likelihood of them eventually leaving the detrimental space.

The notion of an affective scaffold describes the myriad of ways in which “human affectivity (...) is environmentally supported” (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015, p. 1157) and how “agents engineer their affective environments so as to influence their affective states in an ongoing way” (Maiese, 2016, p. 2). Scaffolds therefore are environmental structures one resorts to in order to “enable, support, enhance, or regulate specific affective experiences of ourselves or to shape the affective experiences of others” (Coninx & Stephan, 2021, p. 39). Examples of affective scaffolds are contacting one's cheery friend when in need of encouragement or getting rid of anything

reminiscent of a past partner to alleviate the pain of separation (Stephan et al., 2014, p. 71). Though these examples showcase deliberate use of a scaffold, the manipulation of our surroundings to serve an affective purpose is often “just part of our repertoire of habitual dealings with the world” (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015, p. 1160) and occurs without conscious awareness. The pervasiveness of a scaffold can be examined along various timelines, directions, and dimensions, which should not be confounded nor be reduced to one another (Coninx & Stephan, 2021). Concerning echo chambers and their respective scaffolds, the dimensions of trust, robustness (sometimes also referred to as regularity), individualization, and collectivity as well as mind invasion as form of directional impact are most fruitful (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Coninx & Stephan, 2021; Griffiths & Scarantino, 2009; Krueger & Szanto, 2016; Maiese, 2016; Saarinen, 2020).<sup>10</sup> Explicating these notions and respective affective phenomena highlights the dangers of ProAna worlds and especially their stickiness.

Trust describes how reliable an agent perceives an environmental resource to be in having a certain effect on one’s affective state. In the case of ProAna worlds, the individual trusts the community and their members as a resource in that they are first of all believed to care, and secondly, to be supportive. By vocalizing understanding of the individual’s condition and struggles as well as being able to identify with them, the other members heighten the individual’s mood and thereby strengthen the individual’s trust into the echo chamber, as the affective needs are successfully fulfilled. Additionally, the individual trusts that they can access the environment and therefore the scaffold at any time, increasing its perceived reliability (Coninx & Stephan, 2021, p. 61). This trust however is dangerous in the case of echo chambers, the individual becomes dependent on and addicted to the affective resources the others provide. They regard the other members as “indispensable for the realization of specific affective states” (Colombetti & Krueger, 2015, p. 1162), resources they cannot receive from family and friends. Therefore, the individual returns to the echo chamber more and more as they trust that their affective needs will be satisfied in this space. The individual comes to perceive the echo chamber as robust, as it fulfills a “recurring, stable function” (Coninx & Stephan, 2021, p. 61). The more an individual trusts that they will find support in the ProAna world, the more regularly they will enter it, contact those they feel closest to and individualize the world to their needs. Individualizing an environment denotes the development of unique dynamics with an environment in order to adapt it to one’s affective needs (ibid., p. 62). The space of possibilities for a person in a ProAna world to construct the environment according to their needs are, however, limited. The social domain the individual enters into already has certain normative structures in place that govern affective practices, styles of comportment, and habitual ways of being (Slaby, 2016) from which the individual as part of a larger collective cannot significantly deviate from. Therefore, due to the collective character of epistemic structures such as ProAna worlds, “individual emotions are beholden [emphasis omitted] to the larger dynamic, interactive, and normative frameworks that partly shape and influence them”

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<sup>10</sup> The notions specified here are only a fraction of the taxonomy concerning affective scaffolds, which is more extensive. However, for my purposes, the notions listed here suffice. For a more detailed overview, see Coninx & Stephan (2021).

(Slaby, 2014, p. 41). Importantly, once the individual has adapted to the specific affective norms in place, they then play an important role in maintaining and reinforcing exactly those norms (Slaby, 2016, p. 8) they firstly had to get accustomed to. Trusting the scaffold, perceiving it as robust and individualized to one's particular affective needs makes the environment feel familiar; the individual feels at ease in the community of the ProAna world and at ease with the respective scaffold it provides.

That this scaffold – albeit seemingly providing support, structure and encouragement the individual can resort to when it lacks these affective resources outside the virtual realm – is detrimental to the individual's wellbeing in the long run cannot be stressed enough. The scaffold provided in ProAna worlds is a structure that is successful in bringing about certain affective phenomena that are desired by the individual, allowing for the premature conclusion that the scaffold has a positive impact. However, what the affective scaffold supports and enables are life-threatening practices. Though instances where a scaffold is actively contributing to the maintenance of detrimental habits are not prominent in the debate surrounding affective scaffolding (see the examples provided by Colombetti & Krueger, 2015; Maiese, 2016; Stephan & Walter, 2020)<sup>11</sup>, it must be noted that support structures, no matter what kind, can always be subjected to manipulative and detrimental agendas.

### ***Affective features: Mind invasion***

The bi-directional character inherent to and crucial for the maintenance of the ProAna world, i.e., the constant shaping *of* the echo chamber while being shaped *by* it at the same time, is for the most part nicely captured by the notion of mind invasion, coined by Slaby (2016). He employs the term to describe instances where “affectivity is dynamically framed and modulated from without, often contrary to the prior orientations of the individuals in question” (ibid., p. 1), having detrimental effects in the long run (ibid., p. 2). In echo chambers generally, and in ProAna worlds specifically, mind invasion plays a major role in 1) quickly and seamlessly getting new members to *adapt to* the very specific affective practices, styles of comportment, and habitual ways of being, as well as 2) having them *adopt* just those practices in order to maintain the overall detrimental structure (Slaby, 2016). Since I am rather concerned with how the mechanisms inherent to echo chambers exert affective allure than with how new members come to adapt to these affective structures, I am focusing on the ways in which mind invasion maintains as well as reinforces the stickiness of the ProAna world and therefore only briefly discuss the role of mind invasion in inducing the individual to adapt to the practices.

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<sup>11</sup> Slaby (2016) discusses instances of detrimental scaffolds; however, his focus is rather on the mechanisms guiding individuals to adopt certain habits that might be detrimental, rather than taking on the underlying scaffold (which also exhibits detrimental features). The example of the workplace he raises, though very informative, is only to a certain extent comparable to ProAna worlds concerning detrimental effects. Krueger (2018) on the other hand, discusses an example of an affective scaffold that is detrimental, namely the negative and even torturous impact of music played in the specific environment of prisons.

The phenomenon of mind invasion is a detrimental but unconscious affective process whereby the individual is gradually brought to adapt to the social and deeply affective norms distinct to a certain community (ibid., p. 1). Adopting implicit customs and affective ‘feeling rules’ is of social interest for the individual if they want to stay in a certain community; the need for social recognition builds the perfect breeding ground for mind invasion. The members of the community in question therefore have normative authority over the newcomers and benefit from them conforming quickly to the unwritten rules. Accordingly, mind invasion bridges the uncertainties of joining a new, unknown community and puts the individual’s focus on getting accepted into the community rather than questioning its content. In ProAna worlds, by means of mind invasion, the individual comes to adopt, next to the epistemic belief system, the affective norms and implicit feeling rules and practices which add to the affective scaffold of that space. These affective norms include, but are not limited to, what kinds of jokes are laughed about or even made, how people talk and interact, what topics are brought up and which are circumvented, but also the kind of language that is employed, rather formal or informal, amount of emojis included and so on. Though this might sound positive – after all, the person successfully joins a community which alleviates their not seldomly experienced loneliness – it is detrimental to the individual’s flourishing because this community promotes a deathly disorder. Staying and actively participating in a ProAna world increases the individual’s dependence on the echo chamber and decreases their possibilities of leaving, at the worst leading to their death. After all, a major part of the lived by rules in ProAna communities dictate starving oneself.

Once the mind of the individual has been successfully invaded and they have adopted the affective rules in place, the individual is able to partake in maintaining these rules. The shaping of affective repertoires is not one-sided anymore but bidirectional, making it even more pervasive. The affective scaffold is further strengthened because the individual is not just subject to the environmental structures exerting their pressures on them, but rather active in maintaining them. The individual’s mind is now continuously shaped with their intent and awareness.<sup>12</sup> This happens by committedly engaging in the conversations, reproducing what is received from the others but also by voicing support, sharing their own stories and by that corroborating what is already in place. Therefore, what is maintaining both the affective structures and practices as well as the epistemic belief system is a continuous mind invasion, exercised by those who are at the same time subjected to mind invasion.

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<sup>12</sup> One could also read Slaby to only consider those cases as mind invasion where the individual is mostly unaware of the affective manipulation of their repertoire, and if they were to become aware of this invasion, recognize it as detrimental and try to put a stop to it. For my purposes, however, I take Slaby (2016) to allow for instances to count as mind invasion where the individual actively and consciously partakes in their own (and other members’) mind invasion and thereby follow Haq et al. (2020) in their understanding of Slaby. I am aware of the more general notion of mind shaping (Coninx & Stephan, 2021), which in the bidirectional case explicitly allows for the active participation by those affected. However, this notion is not intended to capture the detrimental effects of adapting to certain affective norms and practices and therefore cannot fully account for the alluring mechanisms of echo chambers.

To sum up, the ProAna world embodies an especially attractive scaffold for those struggling with AN and lacking support outside the echo chamber. This scaffold provides the individual with a sense of security, belonging, and emotional support from a group they can identify with. Through mind invasion, the individual is brought to adapt to the affective styles, habits, and practices of the respective echo chamber, letting themselves get molded in order to be accepted into the community. Having adopted the specific practices and feeling rules, the individual can then actively participate in maintaining the detrimental structures that both lured them into and kept them in the ProAna world, thereby effectively mind invading themselves *and* other members of the community. The mind invasion effects that the individual comes to rely more and more on the overall affective scaffold, as the scaffold more and more fits and fulfills their personal needs. With the implicit conception of a scaffold in place that is perceived to aid with the individuals' struggles, the individual feels at ease in the respective world; they share a history with other members, feel humanly bonded to the community, are normatively happy as they are convinced of the belief system in place, and are able to speak the echo chamber's language. Feeling at ease because the individual trusts in the scaffold to bring about positive emotions makes the ProAna environment an attractive space, a space that is extremely sticky due to it providing the affective resources the individual lacks outside the echo chamber (Maloney, 2013). However, this stickiness is dangerous as it makes it less likely that an individual will find the strength to resist the allure of the scaffold and the short-term alleviations it presents. Due to the sense of others, those outside the ProAna world, not understanding the individual's condition and situation, the individual has finally found a space where they feel at ease and therefore do not *want* to leave. The affective scaffold as well as mind invasion enabling a feeling of ease feed into and support each other, stabilizing and furthering the grip of the scaffold and thereby of the echo chamber. The individual is highly affected by the echo chamber and plays an important role in maintaining it. The scaffold at the basis of the echo chamber, though it seemingly supports individuals struggling with AN, also makes the environment sticky and keeps affected people in an environment that increases the dangers of their disorder.

By corroborating the belief system of the echo chamber with affective scaffolds that make the members feel at ease in the environment, echo chambers are able to significantly increase their grip and power over their members. Though those who are part of an echo chamber already believe in its value and belief system, having an affective connection to the community representing these beliefs only increases one's convictions about the positive impact of the ProAna world. The affective mechanisms I described in the previous sections can also be found in Incel communities, pointing to the fact that the affective phenomena of ease, scaffolds and mind invasion are part and parcel of detrimental mechanisms at play in echo chambers generally.

### **2.2.2 Incel community**

The Incel community is oftentimes linked to a larger online phenomenon, the so-called manosphere (see e.g., Baele et al., 2021; Bogetić et al., forthcoming; Koller, 2022; Labbaf, 2020; Lilly, 2016;

Lindsay, 2021)<sup>13</sup>, and has gained infamy fueled by several terror attacks motivated by Incel ideology. The manosphere can be described as a “loose online network whose members are linked by sexist beliefs and resistance to feminism” (Koller, 2022, p. 364), whereas the Incel community can be characterized as a community promoting more extreme, misogynistic, dehumanizing and racist views (Bogetić, 2022; Scotto di Carlo, 2023; Waśniewska, 2020). Incels, short for involuntary celibates, are a group of mostly white, heterosexual and oftentimes young men who struggle to find sexual partners (Bogetić, 2022; Heritage & Koller, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2020; Koller, 2022; Prazmo, 2020; Regehr, 2022; Scotto di Carlo, 2023; Waśniewska, 2020). One of the most popular communities, incels.is (Pelzer et al., 2021), counts more than 20,000 members and over 9 million written posts (accessed 16.03.2023) and describes itself as “a community for men that struggle with or are unable to get into romantic relationships with women despite trying” (*Incels.Is - Involuntary Celibate*, n.d.). Incels blame “women, feminism or society at large” (Bogetić, 2022, p. 1) as well as their perceived unattractiveness (Fowler, 2022; Furl, 2022; Marveggio, 2020; Prazmo, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021; Waśniewska, 2020) for their situation. The most prevalent themes pervading the Incel community are a deep-rooted misogyny, a dehumanized view of both women and men and a hierarchy with Incels representing the bottom and women the very top (see e.g., Chang, 2022; Fowler, 2022; Marveggio, 2020). The hierarchy is almost exclusively based on physical characteristics, with women embodying the perpetrators of this hierarchy (Pelzer et al., 2021). According to Incels, women manifest this hierarchy by only giving those men ‘access’ to their bodies who are deemed attractive. The Incel mindset is based on the belief that the world owes them sex (Lilly, 2016; Scotto di Carlo, 2023) and that “women are cruel and oppressive in denying them their wont” (Lilly, 2016, p. 50), thereby exercising their power and securing their position at the top of the hierarchy. As such, their ideology centers on “the desire for society to revert to absolute patriarchy that dehumanizes women as mere sexual commodities” (Labbař, 2020, p. 17). In the following sections, I will discuss epistemic as well affective features of echo chambers in the realm of Incel communities and thereby outline their deeply misogynistic and racist ideology. By focusing on the affective side of the Incel community, I point to the mechanisms that make even such a hostile environment attractive and sticky to vulnerable individuals.

### ***Why the Incel community is an echo chamber: epistemic features***

The Incel community, just as ProAna worlds, is an instance of an echo chamber according to Nguyen’s definition presented above. All of the features listed by Nguyen (2020), namely limited access for outsiders, manipulation of trust, a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, a core set of

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<sup>13</sup> Scholars are torn whether Incels are or are not part of the manosphere. The two have a similar cultural background, but whereas the manosphere is goal oriented towards men’s right activism, Incels are interested in broader topics and are rather based on imageboard culture. Therefore, Incels can be said to be linked to the manosphere, their connection however is complex. I thank Matias Nurminen for this helpful insight into the complexity of their relationship (conversation with M. Nurminen via Mail, 04/20/2023).

beliefs representing the ideology and an overdependence on the echo chamber, are present to at least some degree in the Incel community. In this section, I outline for each of these features the ways in which they are manifested and enforced in Incel echo chambers.<sup>14</sup>

Outsiders either have limited access to specific conversations or no access at all which is enforced in a myriad of ways. Generally, women are denied access qua being women (Labba, 2020, p. 19), but also those who transpire not to be ‘true’ Incels are sifted out. Non-members are usually exposed as such because they do not know the implicit practices and rules governing the interactions in the Incel community (Dyner, 2020; Jaki et al., 2019; Labba, 2020; Witt, 2020). For example, an outsider might be unable to fluently use the language and vocabulary typical of the echo chamber, does not understand certain jokes, might share stories that show they have or have had sexual relations and therefore are not true Incels, and so on. Access can also be technically limited, for example by only letting registered members and those who have proven themselves according to strict guidelines participate in the conversations.

In Incel communities, trust is manipulated to such an extent outright hate develops which, in some cases, has culminated in terror attacks. These have been aimed first and foremost at women but also at men who were considered successful in attracting women’s attention (Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021; Salojärvi et al., 2020). According to Incel ideology, women are the root of all their problems and aware of the misery they are putting Incels in (Jaki et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2022; Pelzer et al., 2021; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021). Therefore, women should not be trusted. I regularly stumbled over Incels sharing stories of how they thought women sent them positive signals, which they interpreted as a promise of subsequent intercourse. Frequently, the story ended in the Incel complaining that they were then rejected, accusing the woman of sending misleading signals and blaming her – it was her who sent the misleading signals after all – if violent actions followed, such as stalking, harassing or in the worst cases, even raping her. These kinds of experiences, which are obviously brought on by the Incels themselves as they do not respect boundaries and/or misread simply friendly signals as invitations to sex, reinforce their ideology that women are on a mission to keep men, especially those who are not as good-looking, down. Such stories bolster the Incel ideology in the sense that they convince other members that all women are evil by denying Incels ‘access’ to their bodies and do so with the intent of keeping a hierarchy up that secures women’s position at the top.

Additionally, stories such as just outlined fortify the disagreement-reinforcement mechanism typical for echo chambers. In the case of Incels, disagreement manifests in the experience of rejection and reinforces hate and distrust towards women. This disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, which here is rather a rejection-hate-reinforcement mechanism, is especially hard to overcome for Incels: They are indoctrinated with the belief that women are gatekeeping them from sexual relations, cannot be trusted and should therefore be the object of their hate. It is possible that

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<sup>14</sup> Each of these features might be more or less pronounced in different echo chambers of the Incel realm. The goal of this section is to give a rough outline of the ways in which typical Incel echo chambers might realize their detrimental structure. Although each echo chamber is unique in their practices, I claim that they all follow similar strategies which I try to decipher here.

Incels enter interactions with the opposite sex already apprehensively and defensively, letting their hate of women get in the way of making a connection. Expecting to be rejected, especially given their indoctrination that they are ugly, stands in the way of them genuinely connecting with someone and reinforces their experience of rejection by all women. Incels, however, do not just distrust women, they also distrust men and consider them rivals in the pursuit of women. The perceived imbalance that 20% of men, namely only those that are attractive, ‘get’ the majority of women (Salojärvi et al., 2020, p. 199) is however again blamed on women who are insulted as being shallow and as only acting according to ‘lookism’. Lookism refers to discrimination based on one’s appearance and is a popular term in the Incel community (Fowler, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Regehr, 2022), as they perceive themselves to be victims of lookism. Such convictions are the result of several beliefs and pseudo-scientific theories being distributed in the Incel echo chamber, in this case the 20/80 theory according to which 80% of women choose the best-looking 20% of men (Salojärvi et al., 2020, p. 199), leaving the rest behind.

These convictions, theories, shared stories and beliefs together make up the core set of beliefs representing, manifesting, proliferating and stabilizing the Incel ideology. This set already includes beliefs such as “personality isn’t enough when you are ugly” (Sugiura, 2021b, p. 42); beliefs which are then supported by real life experiences as sketched out above, manifesting the detrimental and self-loathing beliefs of the Incel ideology in every individual who is an active member of the echo chamber. As the individual isolates themselves more and more and their hate towards women in particular and society in general amplifies, the more they depend on the social structures provided by the Incel echo chamber. As more and more time is spent on Incel platforms, the more the individual is exposed to and actively becomes more susceptible to the specific Incel ideology spread in the echo chamber. At the same time, as more time is spent within the echo chamber, face-to-face interactions, particularly with women, decrease (Sugiura, 2021b, p. 40). The conversations in the Incel community come to be the major source of social and affective resources, human connections and understanding, leading to an overdependence of the individual on the echo chamber. Though the tone in echo chambers among Incels is full of self-hate and other-directed hate (Bogetic et al., forthcoming; Daly & Reed, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021; Prazmo, 2020; Waśniewska, 2020), Incels nonetheless frequent the community for social reasons, coming to depend on the echo chamber to fulfill their epistemic, social and affective needs.

### ***Why the Incel community is an echo chamber: affective features***

Similar to ProAna worlds, echo chambers in the Incel community thrive on affective resources. They provide their members with social contact, support, and a sense of belonging as they are a space where people can share their suffering and distress. The Incel community, similar to the ProAna community, thrives on hateful language against one another. However, whereas in ProAna worlds such language has a motivational connotation in that it is meant to motivate anorexic individuals to stick to their restrictive lifestyle, this is not the case in Incel communities. Incels’ conversations are filled with hateful rather than (even indirectly) supportive posts (Baele et al., 2023; Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021; Prazmo, 2020, 2022; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021), giving

reason to believe that Incels do not frequent this community for affective reasons. Nonetheless, though counterintuitive at first glance, Incels do get support from one another (Marveggio, 2020; Regehr, 2022; Sugiura, 2021b). This support however comes from the others' suffering. Realizing that others suffer with similar issues and bonding over their shared perceived victimhood alleviates the individual's suffering as they do not feel alone in their sorrow anymore. What emerges is a habit of hate (Szanto, 2020), directed at women, more attractive men, and themselves. Unfortunately, instead of reassuring one another and trying to collectively mitigate and work against the Incels' issues, they disparage each other and seemingly find comfort in victimizing themselves and others (Bogetić et al., forthcoming; Labbaf, 2020; Szanto, 2020). What makes the Incel echo chamber sticky for their members is that they can openly commiserate in their loneliness, self-hate and self-loathing in this space, something they cannot do outside the Incel realm. Additionally, using shared hateful language allows Incels to "commit [them]selves to the attitude *together*" (Szanto, 2020, p. 477). To explain the affective stickiness exerted by Incel communities I again draw on Lugones' notion of ease to then integrate it into the larger picture of affective scaffolds. As these notions and phenomena have already been outlined in great detail for the ProAna case, I will presuppose them here and directly apply them to the Incel community.

Enabling the stickiness of detrimental structures, especially in the case of echo chambers, is a feeling of ease. As described above, the perception of ease is facilitated through various ways. Incels feel more comfortable in such a hateful space because they all share a history of rejection by women, having regularly experienced rebuff or even disgust. Through the Incels' perceived victimhood as those who have been left behind by society and dismissed in their self-proclaimed right to a sexual partner, they feel humanly bonded to each other. One can even concur that Incels feel normatively happy in the echo chamber; they fully agree with the ideology of misogyny, anti-feminism and the desire to return to strictly traditional and patriarchal structures. The ease-facilitating factor of speaking the community's language is, similar to ProAna worlds, also very palpable in Incel echo chambers. Incels make ample use of coded language, abbreviations, and have their own terminology by means of which they predominantly and in a dehumanizing manner describe women. The boundaries established through language serve to strengthen the interconnectedness between the members of the Incel echo chamber (Labbaf, 2020) and at the same time exclude those who are unable to respond in a manner that fits the normative expectations. Therefore, all of the ways through which ease may be facilitated according to Lugones are present in Incel echo chambers, presenting the space as more attractive and familiar. The feeling of ease can be misleading; this space, even though it appears as a place where like-minded people meet and converse on topics that are of utmost import to them and where they can share in their distress, is nonetheless a detrimental space. Though it presents itself as a "socially acceptable outlet for venting their anger and hate" (ibid., p. 18), therefore as a space to alleviate their emotional load by being able to openly express their feelings, it is detrimental in the sense that it fosters radical views, increases depression and even suicidal thoughts (Hoffman et al., 2020; Labbaf, 2020; Pelzer et al., 2021). Even though the individual feels at ease, something that can usually be associated with a positive outcome and enhancement of the individual's wellbeing, in fact produces the opposite

effect in the long run. Feeling at ease in an echo chamber is also not just misleading from an affective viewpoint, but also an epistemic one. The other members, by pushing and reproducing their dehumanizing and misogynistic ideology, are destructive for the individual's epistemic growth, a destruction wherein that individual actively partakes.<sup>15</sup>

Facilitating ease is a not to be underestimated factor in the success of an affective scaffold. One can talk of a scaffold being successful when it is regularly resorted to and as such brings about a desired affective outcome. In the particular case of Incels, members of that echo chamber resort to the scaffold that the community provides in order to “find kinship, camaraderie, obtain emotional support and develop a sense of belonging through a shared sense of victimhood” (Labbaf, 2020, p. 18), i.e., to satisfy their affective needs that are not satisfied outside the virtual realm. Incels trust that in posting about their own experiences with rejection on the perceived basis of their looks, posting about their anger at women and society in general, and objectifying and dehumanizing women generally, others will identify with their utterances and join them in their negative outlook on life. Therefore, they trust that others will support them in their views, giving a sense of being understood and not alone. By learning which kinds of posts will most likely foster the most response and adjusting one's posting manners accordingly, the scaffold, part of which are the practices inherent to the Incel discourse, are individualized to the needs of its members. This individualization however is somewhat limited; the individual can only individualize their niche within the limits dictated by the community. By entering and staying in a community where the language, norms, practices and factors determining group identity are already established, the individual rather comes to adopt the already-in-place ways of being and comporting oneself. This is due to the collective character of the specific scaffold present in the Incel echo chamber. To not be exposed as a ‘fakecel’, i.e., not a true Incel, it is imperative to adjust and adapt to the “existing, collectively sustained niches” (Saarinen, 2020, p. 823). For certain emotions such as anger and hatred to occur, but also to foster the specific atmosphere of distrust and resentment, the collective of the echo chamber plays an active role in discursively sustaining such detrimental structures.

In the general debate surrounding affective scaffolds, the construction of such scaffolds is mostly considered to have a positive impact<sup>16</sup> because they allow the individual to build structures around them (or submerge themselves in already existing structures, only minimally individualizing them to their needs) in order to bring about or regulate one's affective experiences. Though the definitions provided for affective scaffolds theoretically allow for negative interpretations, scaffolds are generally understood to be positive for the individual. In the case of echo chambers, however, it becomes clear that even though the affective scaffold is successful in fostering certain emotions and atmospheres and is resorted to for exactly that reason, this by no

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<sup>15</sup> Thanks to Nikola Kompa for this insight concerning the possibly misleading aspect of feeling at ease in a certain space.

<sup>16</sup> See footnote 11.

means is positive for the individuals relying on the scaffold.<sup>17</sup> It aids in radicalizing the members' views and furthers their dependence on the scaffold, i.e., the echo chamber.<sup>18</sup>

Because the individual already feels very sympathetic towards the ideology presented in the Incel echo chamber due to their own personal experiences, they are much more vulnerable to mind invasion, preying upon their need for social and affective resources. Due to social membership in echo chambers being constantly negotiated (Andersen, 2022, p. 7) in order to keep those who do not fully commit to the Incel ideology out of the conversation, the imperative is to constantly showcase one's membership. In the virtual realm, this is achieved via linguistic means, i.e., by being able to use the 'correct' rhetoric, understanding and actively participating in the practices, as well as doing one's part in exposing fakecels. This is exactly what is understood under the term mind invasion, adopting the affective feeling rules in order to fit in, without necessarily noticing that this has a detrimental effect on the individual's wellbeing. By means of mind invasion, which brings the individual to adapt to the norms and practices already established in the echo chamber, the breeding ground for their active participation in that mind invasion has been built. The power of mind invasion now becomes even more pervasive; it henceforth serves to maintain the implicit rules, through bidirectional shaping and being shaped. By partaking in the hate that is spread in the community, dehumanizing women, objectifying and demeaning them and legitimizing such speech acts by means of shaky pseudo-scientific theories (Lindsay, 2022; Sugiura, 2021a; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021; Waśniewska, 2020), the affective scaffold is kept in place and strengthened in its impact on each individual subjecting themselves to its power. As such, the Incel echo chamber presents itself as an attractive space, when in fact it is sticky. Exactly as I described above for the case of ProAna worlds, what is maintaining both the affective structures and practices as well as the epistemic belief system in the Incel community is a continuous and bidirectional mind invasion.

In the last sections, I outlined in detail the mechanism at play in echo chambers using the examples of ProAna worlds and the Incel community. Both echo chambers not only draw on epistemic mechanisms, such as manipulation of trust and a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, but importantly also make use of affective mechanisms, exploiting the social isolatedness of their members. Providing affective scaffolds that appear trustworthy and reliable, the individuals come to depend on the echo chamber and the affective resources it presents, subjecting themselves to the stickiness of these detrimental structures. Therefore, based on the insights gained from the analyses above, I now introduce an extended definition of echo chambers to account for the affective dimension of echo chambers.

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<sup>17</sup> What is considered to be positive or negative for an individual is to a large degree determined by the norms in place in a given society. The effect of a scaffold might be positively felt, which might make it a successful affective scaffold – even if it gives rise to results which are deemed detrimental in that society. Many thanks to Lucy Osler for this insight.

<sup>18</sup> I am aware that it is not unproblematic to equate the scaffold with the echo chamber in which it is grounded, however, both echo chambers I am considering in this thesis have constructed such pervasive and encompassing scaffolds (which can be analyzed from an epistemic as well as affective perspective) that one can consider the echo chamber to be the scaffold the individuals resort to in order to fulfill their epistemic and affective needs.

### 2.3 An extended definition of echo chambers

By virtue of the detailed analysis of the affective side of echo chambers provided above, exemplarily described based on Pro Anorexia websites and the Incel community, it becomes clear that the definition of an echo chamber proposed by Nguyen (2020) does not sufficiently capture the affective allure these environments exert on their members. Though he successfully grasped the epistemic features and mechanisms, he missed to address the affective dimension that is inherent to echo chambers. I would therefore like to propose an extension of Nguyen's definition to also encompass the affective features that echo chambers exhibit, making them such sticky spaces.

An echo chamber is an *epistemically as well as affectively detrimental space*. From an epistemic viewpoint, echo chambers make use of epistemic discrediting and a disagreement-reinforcement mechanism, leading to a significant disparity in trust between members and non-members. This boundary is both instantiated as well as kept in place by the requirement to agree with some core set of beliefs. Affectively, echo chambers provide their members with an encompassing scaffold, presenting the individual with a seeming support system to resort to. This affective scaffold consists of the habits, practices and comportments that are normative in the space. In order to be able to exploit the affective scaffold according to the individual's needs, it must adapt to and eventually adopt the implicit feeling rules in place, which is achieved and sustained by means of mind invasion. The scaffold serves to facilitate a feeling of ease in the space, making the echo chamber affectively sticky. If the echo chamber propagates detrimental belief systems, this feeling of ease is dangerous, as it decreases the probability of an individual leaving.

Having outlined the epistemic as well as affective features of both ProAna worlds and the Incel community, I now turn to the linguistic part of this thesis to show how the affective scaffolds described above are corroborated by a metaphor-use that is specific to the respective echo chambers. The leading claim for the current thesis is that metaphors increase the stickiness of a given echo chamber by corroborating the epistemic and affective scaffold it presents its members with. In order to understand how metaphors work, I first present a widely accepted theory of metaphor, the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, to then show how this theory allows for an understanding of metaphor as a tool. This tool-use will be exemplified in chapter 4, by discussing examples of metaphoric expressions found in ProAna worlds and the Incel community. Lastly, I will argue that the epistemic as well as affective mechanisms and features present in echo chambers are maintained, corroborated and reinforced by metaphor use. The metaphors utilized in ProAna worlds as well as in the Incel community are grounded in the respective ideologies, their effects on the echo chambers' scaffold can nonetheless be generalized.

### 3. Metaphors

Language has important effects on affectivity; it is the way in which we not only communicate to others how we feel, but also aids in making sense of our emotional world and grasping emotional situations. Importantly, it is a way of influencing others' affective condition; words can hurt, and words can mend. In this thesis, I only concern myself with the effects of metaphors rather than language in general. The reason to focus on metaphors is threefold: Metaphors appear to have more power than ordinary language does in attracting attention and putting things into words one otherwise is at loss for. They are able to provide a new understanding, without literally explicating the matter in question. I am interested in further analyzing what brings about metaphors' allure, and how this allure might have a subliminal effect on an individual's affectivity. The second reason for focusing on metaphors is that they have long been viewed as mere byproducts of language; used to embellish ordinary language but without intrinsic use, much less an underlying system. As such, metaphors were considered to be rhetoric devices (Kompa, 2021; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a), a means to capture the recipients' attention. Since then, this reductive conception has mostly been left behind in favor of a more profound view of metaphor, with metaphors playing a pivotal role in the very makeup of our conceptual system (see e.g., Deutscher, 2005; Kövecses, 2008, 2010, 2020, 2023; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Reddy, 1979). I would like to build on this development by giving an insight into the mostly neglected affective side of metaphors. The last reason to concentrate on metaphors is purely practical; broadening my focus and including considerations concerning language more broadly would go beyond the scope of the current thesis.

Philosophers have been intrigued by the phenomenon of metaphor at least since antiquity, both in Western as well as Eastern philosophy (Koller, 2022, p. 365). Though long seen as “device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 3), metaphors have since been discovered to not just appear in poetic writings and as a rhetoric device, but to be at the basis of human thought. Instead of being a mere byproduct of language as long thought to be the case, metaphors bring to the surface what is already conceptually manifested in the mind. Metaphors, since they can only be realized through language, are nonetheless grounded in the specific language in which they occur. That language on the other hand mirrors the cultural values, norms, and practices of the people speaking the language. The spoken language, however, also has an effect back on how speakers of that language perceive their world (Baier et al., 2023; Boroditsky, 2000, 2001, 2006; Casasanto, 2016). Speakers of Spanish, for example, perceive bridges (male noun markers) as more masculine and describe them as “strong, sturdy, and towering”, whereas Germans (female noun markers) describe bridges as rather “elegant, fragile, (...) and slender” (Boroditsky, 2006, p. 4). Boroditsky (2006) concludes that “even a small fluke of grammar (the seemingly arbitrary assignment of a noun to be masculine or feminine) can have an effect on how

people think about things in the world” (p. 4).<sup>19</sup> It becomes clear that the relation between the languages we speak and our socio-cultural perceptions of our environment is a close and bidirectional one that is not without its language-specific intricacies. The same bidirectionality applies to metaphors; the metaphors we use mirror our underlying conceptual system and values. At the same time, when we encounter an unknown metaphor, this can have an influence on how we, from then on, perceive certain aspects the metaphor highlights, thereby slightly modifying the conceptual basis through which we perceive and evaluate the world.

A lot of philosophical work has been done on metaphors concerning their structure, irresistibility, and linguistic power (Camp, 2017; Kövecses, 2003, 2010, 2023; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a; Searle, 1979; Semino, 2009). With regards to affectivity, especially metaphors *for* emotions have caught philosophers’ attention (Cian et al., 2015; Kövecses, 1986, 2003, 2010, 2014, 2020a; Lakoff, 2016). Metaphors such as ANGER is a NATURAL FORCE, an instance of which is ‘his face *clouded* over with rage’ (Kövecses, 1986, p. 119), or PRIDE is (A FLUID) IN THE HEART, a realization thereof being ‘her *heart swelled* with pride’ (ibid., p. 43), have been thoroughly analyzed. The effects of metaphoric expressions *on* affectivity, however, have mostly been sidelined.<sup>20</sup> It seems as if the effects on affectivity, though registered, have simply been considered as self-evident and not worthy of further investigations. With this thesis I provide an insight into the affective workings of metaphor and their ability to corroborate specific scaffolds as a result.

This chapter serves the purpose of giving a brief theoretic background of how metaphors accomplish the elicitation of intended associations, highlighting certain aspects of the target whilst downplaying others. Supplementing the examples of metaphors common in ProAna worlds and the Incel community with a theoretic foundation enables a deeper understanding of the means by which metaphors add to and even build the conceptual structures at the bases of the two echo chambers under investigation. As such, metaphors constitute an integral part of the bridge between the epistemic and affective features of scaffolds present in echo chambers, aiding in the creation and maintenance of a coherent scaffold the individuals can resort to.

### 3.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and further developments

Conceptual Metaphor Theory (hereafter CMT) has been introduced by Lakoff & Johnson in 1980 and come to be the dominant paradigm concerning metaphor (Gibbs, 2011; Koller, 2022). The respective book, *Metaphors we live by*, provided a fundamentally new perspective on the role of metaphor in our thoughts, and consequentially, lives. Former, traditional theories considered

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<sup>19</sup> There is however a heated debate over the claims of linguistic relativity according to which we perceive the world around us differently depending on the language we speak. Samuel et al. (2019) for example, reviewing the findings of Boroditsky (2006), conclude that support for the effect of grammatical gender on the perception of the respective objects “was strongly task- and context-dependent” (p. 1767). Bohmeyer (2020) suggest to rather look at the “larger question of the role of culture in the mind, via the role of language as a conduit for the cultural transmission and diffusion of cognitive practices” (p. 27).

<sup>20</sup> Some exceptions to this observation are Chkhaidze et al., 2021; Hendricks et al., 2018; Mohammad et al., 2016.

metaphors to be purely linguistic tools and a matter of language, rather than a mode of thought (Kövecses, 2008, 2010, 2020b; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a; Reddy, 1979). CMT is based on the claim that our “ordinary conceptual system is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 3), where “the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (ibid., p. 5). According to their theory, metaphors both mirror and shape the conceptual system at the basis of our minds. As such, metaphors that are especially powerful have the ability to bring about a change in that conceptual system.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980a) ascribe metaphor a sense- and meaning-making function in that they aid in making sense of the world as we experience it. Metaphors do so, according to Lakoff and Johnson, by means of partially structuring one experience in terms of another (ibid., p. 77) and give an experiential account of metaphor, i.e., one that is firmly grounded in the fact that we make experiences with our bodies in a physical and socio-cultural environment (ibid., p. 57). Accordingly, they claim that the kinds of body a person has and the kind of environment they encounter shapes how they in turn conceptualize the world (ibid.). People do not define concepts according to their inherent, objective properties, but rather in terms of their interactional properties, i.e., in terms of what they afford us and how they are perceived given our bodies and socio-cultural backgrounds (ibid., p. 119). Lakoff & Johnson (1980a, p. 119) claim that most of the definitions of the concepts inherent to our conceptual system are metaphorical in nature, down to the most basic concepts. Happiness for example is often understood and expressed in metaphorical terms, such as HAPPY is UP and SAD is DOWN, respectively. Derived expressions are “my spirits *rose*” or “I *fell* into a depression” (ibid., p. 15), which are grounded in the physical experience of an erect posture when one is in a good emotional state and a drooping posture when one is feeling sad or depressed. In contrast to these concepts that are almost directly grounded in our experience, other concepts are more abstract; Lakoff and Johnson name for example the concepts of emotions, ideas and time. Because these concepts are “either abstract or not clearly delineated in our experience (...) we need to get a grasp on them by means of other concepts that we understand in clearer terms” (ibid., p. 115) to then transfer some of their experiential properties in order to facilitate the understanding of the more abstract concept. Exactly this understanding of more abstract concepts in terms of more concrete ones is the essence of metaphor, namely “understanding one kind of thing in terms of another” (ibid., p. 5). What emerges are metaphorical definitions of abstract concepts, i.e., conceptual metaphors, which can be realized in discourse by means of linguistic expressions thereof. To be more precise, metaphors “conceptualiz[e] *one kind* of object in terms of a *different kind* of object or experience” (ibid., p. 195); they map specific correspondences from a source to a target domain (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff, 1993; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a). The source domain describes the domain which is strongly grounded in physical experience (Kövecses, 2010, p. 7), by means of which we can grasp the more abstract object that is represented by the target domain. Generally, conceptual metaphors are unidirectional in that “they go from concrete to abstract domains” (ibid., p. 29), allowing us to “think about relatively abstract, complex, subjective, and poorly delineated areas of experience (...) in terms of more concrete, simple, embodied, well-

delineated, image-rich experiences” (Semino, 2009, p. 222). It can therefore be concluded that “conceptual metaphors (...) map more concrete source domains onto more abstract or subjective target domains” (Kompa, 2021, p. 32), though there are exceptions to this generalization (see e.g., Kompa, 2021; Kövecses, 2010).

Importantly, by “structuring one experience in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 77), some aspects of the target domain are highlighted, whereas some aspects of the source domain are downplayed or even hidden (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a). In the metaphor ARGUMENT is WAR for example, the focus is on the battling aspects of arguing, and the cooperative aspects are implicitly hidden. Therefore, only certain (and possibly intended) aspects of the source domain WAR are “conceptually utilized and activated in the comprehension of a target domain” (Kövecses, 2010, p. 94), in this case the domain of ARGUMENT. Importantly, if the metaphorical structuring at play here would be total and not, as is the case, partial, “one concept would actually *be* the other, not merely be understood in terms of it” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980a, p. 13), yielding no insights. What is connecting source with target domain is a shared experiential basis (ibid., p. 20), which can be physical, biological, cognitive as well as cultural (Kövecses, 2010, p. 86). Therefore, the cross-domain mappings achieved by metaphor are not arbitrary, but “grounded in the body and in everyday experience and knowledge” (Lakoff, 1993, p. 245), which are greatly influenced by socio-cultural norms and practices.

In a similar vein, which metaphorical expression emerges in a given discourse is also not subject to random factors, the study of which is part of more recent developments within the realm of CMT in particular and cognitive linguistics in general (see e.g., Gibbs, 2011; Kövecses, 2010, 2015, 2021; Semino, 2009). CMT has been the subject of discussion ever since it has comprehensively been spelled out in detail by Lakoff & Johnson (1999; 1993; 1980a) and has, since then, been criticized, refined and further developed. One of these developments has been a more profound consideration of contextual factors when analyzing conceptual metaphors and their linguistic expressions (Cameron et al., 2009; Gibbs, 2011; Kövecses, 2010, 2015, 2021, 2023; Semino, 2009). Semino (2009, p. 232) for example distinguishes between situationally and topic-triggered metaphor use and asserts that “different aspects of communicative situations can be exploited to provide metaphorical source domains” (ibid.). Kövecses (2010, 2015, 2021) refined her proposed distinction and added further factors influencing which conceptual metaphors might be employed in the form of linguistic expressions in a given discourse. He proposes five types of contexts, namely situational, discourse, conceptual-cognitive as well as bodily and local/global context. In real discourse, these cannot always be clearly delineated as they generally cooccur (Kövecses, 2010, p. 298) and jointly have an influence on which metaphor is more likely to be chosen by the conceptualizer.

The situational context comprises the physical environment and social as well as cultural situation. The discourse context differentiates along different timescales, taking into consideration possible previous discourses on the same topic as well as the elements of the current one. It also captures the knowledge the conceptualizer has about those participating in the discourse, i.e., themselves, their audience as well as the topic under discussion (Kövecses, 2010). An important

insight provided by Kövecses (2021) is that “certain forms of discourse can acquire *dominant status* in a community” (p. 199), alluding to conceptual metaphors and their linguistic expressions which gained so much prominence in the discourse that they from then on make up a major part of that discourse. In the echo chambers discussed below, metaphors such as ANOREXIA is a RELIGION or SEX is POLITICAL POWER in the cases of ProAna worlds and the Incel community, respectively, have become so pervasive that they are part and parcel of the discourse and thereby shape the community-specific habits, linguistically as well as epistemically and affectively.<sup>21</sup> The next context considered by Kövecses is the conceptual-cognitive one, which encompasses “the metaphorical system at large, ideology, knowledge about past events, and the characteristic interests and concerns of a community or individual” (ibid., p. 199f.). Having a shared history, which also facilitates ease as discussed above, as well as shared interests and concerns about the world makes the use of certain metaphors more probable and more salient for the members of that community, thereby manifesting and solidifying ideologies and belief systems which are, at least in the case of ProAna worlds and the Incel community, already firmly in place. The bodily context, which could for the virtual environment mistakenly be considered to have a much smaller influence on the emergence of certain metaphorical concepts than those explicated before, should not be underrated. Both Incels, but especially pro-anorexics are very successful in bringing their bodies into the virtual realm and take the body as a source for various metaphors. Metaphors such as THINNESS is RIGHTEOUSNESS or FOOD is SIN are part of the conceptual system of pro-anorexics, showcasing an, in this case alarming, focus on the body.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, the local and global contexts pertain to the “specific knowledge conceptualizers have about some aspect of the immediate communicative situation” (ibid., p. 200) and knowledge shared by the entire community about their physical, social and cultural environment (ibid.), respectively. Taking all these possible contextual influences together, it becomes obvious that “conceptual metaphor theory cannot simply be conceptual; it also needs to be contextual” (ibid.). The context in which a specific discourse takes place majorly determines which metaphors are likely to emerge, which metaphorical concepts are understood by the audience, and which conceptual metaphors acquire a dominant status.

To aptly discuss the conceptual metaphors and their respective linguistic expressions at the heart of both the ProAna and Incel echo chambers it is important to keep in mind the most defining pillars of both standard CMT as well as its developments. To summarize, metaphors conceptualize a typically more abstract domain in terms of a less abstract one, thereby providing a better understanding of the harder to grasp concept. This mapping of correspondences, however, is partial, thereby (possibly intently) highlighting certain aspects of the target domain and implicitly hiding certain aspects of the source domain. Importantly, metaphors are always embedded in a multidimensional context, thereby mirroring, but also manifesting, shaping, reinforcing and practicing the norms and values of a given individual and the community in general.

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<sup>21</sup> I further develop this thought in the respective sections down below and therefore only mention it in passing here.

<sup>22</sup> These metaphors are further analyzed and discussed down below and only serve an exemplary function in the current section.

### 3.2 Metaphor as insight vs metaphor as tool

Most scholars take metaphors to produce some kind of insight, further an understanding of an abstract concept or shed light on something thus far kept in the dark (Black, 1962; Davidson, 1978; Kompa, 2021; Shengold, 1981). Metaphors are also taken to allow for a new perspective, suddenly attained when hearing (and understanding) the metaphor (Camp, 2017; Kittay, 1989, as cited by Kompa, 2021, p. 37). By highlighting some specific aspects of the target domain and thereby hiding others, the target domain is portrayed differently, i.e., in light of the highlighted aspects. This understanding of metaphor as an insight is the most common view of the phenomenon. However, I claim that metaphors and metaphor-use in particular can be viewed as a tool, deployed deliberately. The conceptualization of metaphor as a tool does not contradict its conceptualization as an insight; rather, the former includes the latter.

However, the understanding of metaphor as a tool needs to be further dissected in order to not confuse a fruitful insight with an insight that, though it does provide a new perspective, is based on a deliberate manipulation of peoples' thoughts and consequentially, behaviors. In general discourse, metaphors are usually employed to help the recipient perceive a concept differently, that is, to guide their focus to specific aspects, allow them to gain a new perspective or give insight into a hitherto unclear concept. In the realm of echo chambers, exactly this power of metaphor is often victim of manipulation: Through metaphor, a concept can be framed in a way that is intended by its utterer. As Koller (2022) puts it, "selective mappings serve the ideological agenda of speakers and writers by enabling them to represent an aspect of experience (...) from a particular (...) viewpoint and from a position of relative power" (p. 367). This power has two sides to it; on the one hand, it describes the power those have who are accepted members of a community and therefore possess interpretational sovereignty, on the other hand, I consider the term to also refer to the power metaphors in general exert. Metaphors have power over their recipients in the sense that they cannot elude from interpreting and wanting to understand what is conveyed (Camp, 2017). This allure that metaphors exude can therefore be easily abused. Camp describes this phenomenon as the 'irresistibility' of metaphors (Camp, 2017, p. 49). An individual cannot help but subject themselves to the allure of metaphors, making it a powerful device that can readily be abused. Therefore, metaphors can be considered to be tools in that they can provide insight and invite to switch perspective in a fruitful manner, but at the same time, can be abused as a tool that leads astray. Framing an object in a specific way by means of metaphor can be a powerful tool to hide certain aspects that could just as well be picked up.

What makes the use of metaphors in echo chambers so attractive is that they are simple tools with powerful effects that can be deployed by almost everyone. Metaphors' capability to give new insight into a concept by portraying it in terms of another, less abstract concept, is the quality that makes them apt for being used as a tool in the linguistic sense. Employing exactly the "right" metaphor in front of a fitting audience can be a powerful tool to make them understand what one is trying to convey, with just a couple of words. The term 'right' addresses the fact that the most successful metaphors are those that are coined towards a specific audience, where the speaker has some knowledge about the members of that audience and vice versa. The audience also needs to

have some knowledge about the speaker in order to put what is said into context and understand the utterance the way it was intended. Additionally, understanding a metaphor always requires some knowledge about both the source as well as target domain, in order to decipher the insight that might be gained by the metaphor put forward by the speaker. Once a compelling picture has been planted in an individual's mind, the possibly misleading association has been accomplished. Since the metaphors common in echo chambers such as ProAna worlds and Incel communities do not come out of nowhere but rather emerge based on many contextual factors as well as from a coherent conceptual system, their absorption into one's own conceptual system is facilitated. Members of ProAna worlds and Incel communities are from the onset sympathetic to the belief system that is proliferated in these spaces, giving them the grounds, and importantly, knowledge, to incorporate specific metaphors into their own repertoires and conceptual systems.

Conceiving of metaphors as tools allows me to investigate how metaphors can be deliberately deployed conducive to the scaffold that is already in place, thereby increasing distrust towards outsiders while at the same time strengthening community bonds and furthering the affective stickiness of the respective echo chamber. At the same time, metaphors are not always used with a specific intent in mind, but oftentimes just 'fit' the current conversation given the respective contextual constraints. This also underlines the observation that metaphors do not come out of nowhere; they are products of echo chamber-specific dynamics including language, content of the respective environment as well as its structure and general themes. The echo chamber and its particular characteristics have an influence not just on which metaphors emerge, but also on the meaning of the metaphors and how they are most likely interpreted. The meaning of a metaphor being used in a certain echo chamber and its discourses is therefore a conglomerate of the conventional meaning of the words used, background knowledge, filtering effects due to the respective echo chamber, situational effects and contextual constraints. It is possibly even dependent on who put forth the metaphor and to whom it is addressed. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980a) put it, "meaning is always meaning *to* someone" (p. 184), alluding to the fact that an individual always brings with them a certain knowledge base, a normative value- and belief system as well as an affective repertoire, even though these can be subject to change in spaces such as echo chambers. Which metaphors are uttered in the first place and how they are then interpreted is therefore a question of both the characteristics of the individuals who are members of the respective echo chamber and the specific dynamics at play. Nonetheless, though employment of metaphors is somewhat contextually limited, metaphors are deliberately deployed within those constraints in order to maintain the conceptual structure of the echo chamber, i.e., its ideology.

Language as the means through which metaphors are communicated is an important part of the environment-specific dynamics and mirrors them at the same time. Therefore, I will first give an insight into the echo chamber-specific languages and then discuss particular metaphors that have emerged through this language. As will become clear, discussing the metaphors present in ProAna worlds as well as the Incel community without taking a closer look at the language and vocabulary by means of which these metaphors are formulated is a vain endeavor, one would barely understand what is being conveyed (which is exactly the intent behind the specific language and metaphors).

## 4. Metaphors in Echo Chambers

Different groups speak different languages. They speak different languages not in the sense that due to their different nationalities they have a different first language through which they communicate, but rather in the sense that due to their belonging to a specific social group they have their own specialized vocabulary, their own lexis and their own way of comporting themselves when bringing forth ideas. Different groups might for example all speak English, but if taking a finer grained look, actually be “speaking” ‘Incel’ or ‘Anorexic’.<sup>23</sup> By means of language – which in the following should be understood as a broader system encompassing what is typically understood by the term language, i.e., vocabulary and lexis, but also demeanor, gestures, and habits of talking – groups can demarcate themselves from other groups and other individuals. If a person does not understand what is being conveyed or is unable to respond in an appropriate manner, they immediately identify themselves as an outsider to the group represented by that specific language. At the same time, speaking the language can make one feel proud to be part of a certain group and heighten a feeling of belonging. As is the case with any kind of social group – be it a group of friends, colleagues, or a family – ProAna worlds and Incel communities also have their very own and very niche language. The fact that such communities are not situated at the center of society but rather a fringe phenomenon is also manifested in their very specific languages through which the community is able to represent their ideology (Fowler, 2022). I will refer to the specific language of ProAna members as ‘Anaspeak’ and to that of Incels as ‘Incelspeak’ (following Prażmo, 2020).

Both Anaspeak as well as Incelspeak are grounded in everyday language and its underlying concepts. The ideals presented in ProAna worlds are “extensions of Western societies’ accepted conceptualisations of female beauty as opposed to novel or radical ideas” (Knapton, 2013, p. 462), pointing to the fact that rather than having constructed an entirely new worldview, pro-anorexics have extended already-existing beliefs in an extreme manner. As such, the metaphors that emerge in ProAna worlds are not surprising if their background is given a second thought. Metaphors rarely come out of nowhere as they demand a certain shared ground between speaker and recipient on which the metaphor can then unfold and be understood. Additionally, as discussed above, the usage of metaphors in a given discourse is always constrained by multiple contexts. Therefore, some metaphors are much more likely to occur in the environment of ProAna worlds than others, some of which I discuss in more detail down below. The same holds for the Incel community; though their dehumanizing and violent metaphors are extreme, the difference is one “in degree, rather than kind, from more mainstream metaphors” (Koller, 2022, p. 378). The breeding ground for the extreme metaphors utilized by Incels is the Western patriarchal culture and “increasingly prominent far-right anti-feminist discourses” (Bogetić et al., forthcoming, p. 15), in which “metaphors for

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<sup>23</sup> All kinds of groups develop their own languages, they do not need to be extreme or radical groups (though these oftentimes exhibit especially coded and specialized languages). An example from Germany is KiezDeutsch, a language popular among Berlin youth, expressed through many modalities such as specialized vocabulary or visuals in the form of graffiti (for several extensive corpora, see KiezDeutsch-Korpus, 2023).

sexuality contribute to male-centric scenarios that serve to degrade and disempower women” (Koller, 2022, p. 369). Similar to ProAna worlds, rather than having constructed a new worldview, “[I]ncels merely articulate these conventional metaphors in more extreme and more negative terms” (Koller, 2022, p. 378). The concepts underlying the misogynistic, degrading and dehumanizing discourse practiced by Incels are – to a much lesser extent – already present in everyday discourse, subliminally maintaining patriarchal structures (Bogetić et al., forthcoming; Koller, 2022).

Having clarified the conceptual basis for the metaphorical language of both pro-anorexics and Incels, it also makes sense to briefly discuss how the two groups modify the language in which they communicate. Both Anaspeak as well as Incelspeak, which are based on the English language, modify or extend the vocabulary available to them by means of neologisms, blendings of two words and other alterations of the original language. Such alterations make the language more echo chamber-specific and thereby less accessible to outsiders. Additionally, a coded language that only a limited group of people understands and converses in connects its members on a shared ground. It has been shown that both ProAna as well as Incel communities make use of a very specific and often coded language, a significant part of which is metaphorical in nature (Bates, 2015; Bogetić, 2022; Maloney, 2013; Marwick & Caplan, 2018; Scotto di Carlo, 2023; Sugiura, 2021b). As Bogetić (2022) observes, “shared vocabulary is the main symbolic connection for the Incel subculture” (p. 2), which becomes even more palpable through metaphors. This claim is just as applicable to ProAna worlds.

In order to understand the metaphors used in environments such as ProAna worlds and Incel communities, some specific terms very common in their conversations must be clarified. If one does not know the linguistic background and the discursive practices from which the metaphors distinctive of an echo chamber arise it is impossible to understand the resulting metaphors or to make use of them. In the following, I therefore first give an insight into the ProAna vocabulary and some metaphors that have evolved in ProAna worlds. Afterwards, I go into detail on the Incel vocabulary to then explore examples of metaphors from the Incel realm, many of which employ the echo chamber-specific vocabulary.

#### **4.1 Anaspeak**

The language used in ProAna worlds, though based in the English vocabulary<sup>24</sup>, exhibits several community-specific peculiarities (Bates, 2015; Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Maloney, 2013).<sup>25</sup> Independent of content, the members of the community make ample use of youth idiolect, such as

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<sup>24</sup> Although I am referring to English here, this is by no means meant to imply that ProAna communities are confined to the English-speaking, Western-oriented world. Despite a lack of research into the subject, it is very likely that these communities span non-Western cultures as well since AN has been on the rise globally (Paggiore, 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Depending on the website or kind of media one is examining, there are again differences. The overall themes however stay relatively consistent across different media (Paggiore, 2022).

‘idk’, ‘lmao’ or ‘omg’<sup>26</sup> (Paggiore, 2022, p. 47), confirming the general observation that those frequenting the platforms are rather young (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; van Eeden et al., 2021). Content-wise, the conversations in the community primarily revolve around food and food restriction, body talk and weight loss tips as well as the individuals’ struggles with the eating disorder; they are, however, also concerned with more personal matters, such as daily life and relationships outside the ProAna world (see e.g., Lukač, 2011; Paggiore, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019; Ward, 2007). Nonetheless, the most prominent discourse categories remain the body, weight, and food, representing the primary objects of concern for the anorexic individual (Lukač, 2011; Paggiore, 2022). All of these are characterized by a deeply affective dichotomy; the skinny body is celebrated, whereas bodies which are not perceived as such are the object of (self-)hate, weight-loss is the top priority, whereas weight-gain is perceived so negatively that it is considered a moral failure which must be avoided at all costs, and food, especially the intake thereof, is subjected to constant scrutiny in the form of food diaries and calorie counting (Juarascio et al., 2010; Knapton, 2013; Paggiore, 2022). Restricting one’s food is perceived as the “complete submission of the body to the will” (Lukač, 2011, p. 205) and the disorder is therefore depicted as a “way of life” (Roberts Strife & Rickard, 2011, p. 215) that provides a sense of control, success and perfection to the affected individuals (Lukač, 2011; Norris et al., 2006; Roberts Strife & Rickard, 2011). Lukač (2011) summarizes the ideology underlying the discourse in ProAna worlds as a “struggle for and idealization of thinness” as well as a search for “control of mind over body” (p. 205).

To discuss the topics inherent to the ProAna world and share one’s struggles with the other members, a specialized jargon is used (Bates, 2015; Maloney, 2013; Paggiore, 2022). For example, abbreviations are utilized to introduce and portray the individual through their bodily statistics, such as current weight (CW), goal weight (GW), lowest weight (LW) and so on, thereby bringing the anorexic body of the individual online into the virtual realm (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). A pro-anorexic’s introduction might look something like this example from Maloney (2013, p. 116): ‘CW: 152 HW: 184!!! LW: 132 GW1: 127 GW2: 117’.<sup>27</sup> Often, these introductions also include diet plans such as 2468, referring to a highly harmful diet, or indications of the mental status of the member, where AC for example stands for ‘anorexic’ and ‘cutting’, referring to self-injurious behavior (ibid.). This use of symbols and abbreviations, which are familiar to members of the ProAna world but remain obscure to outsiders, increases the gap and perceived differences between ingroup and outgroup, “between those who easily understand the pro-ana jargon and those who do not” (Paggiore, 2022, p. 107). By means of so-called thinspiration, which is realized by sharing pictures of extremely thin celebrities meant to inspire the pro-anorexics to keep on starving, as well as meanspo, the mean-spirited counterpart, the members linguistically encourage and motivate

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<sup>26</sup> The term ‘idk’ is an abbreviation for ‘I don’t know’, ‘lmao’ stands for ‘laughing my ass off’ and ‘omg’ denotes ‘oh my god’ (Merriam-Webster.com, 2023a)

<sup>27</sup> All of the utterances presented here (as well as those discussed later on in the case of Incelspeak) are exactly reproduced as I have encountered them in either other research or in forums, they therefore sometimes include spelling and grammar mistakes, abbreviations or punctuation errors.

each other, strengthen their community bonds, and indirectly expose wannarexics. Thinspiration provides the anorexics with their perceived ideal, an image they can aspire to, thereby motivating them to be even stricter in their diet and lifestyle (see e.g., Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Paggiaro, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019). Though at first glance counterintuitive and appalling to outsiders, meanspo serves a similar function. An example is the utterance ‘Oioi fatties. Yeh u all better be fasting. Cos ur all fat as fuck and need to!!!!’ (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, p. 47). Calling oneself and each other fat, ugly or the like first of all shows that one is committed to the cause and a true anorexic (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 20). Secondly, meanspo serves to motivate “more extreme food intake restriction, exercise or purging practices” (ibid.) and is usually met by encouragement rather than reassurance (ibid., p. 21). Lastly, misunderstanding such discursive practices as hateful and discouraging signals that an individual has little knowledge of the norms and habits at the heart of the community, exposing them as wannarexics (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, p. 47). Performing one’s identity through self- and other-directed aggression becomes a powerful tool for community building as well as sifting out those that do not fully and devotedly subscribe to the ProAna lifestyle (Boero & Pascoe, 2012).

Some of the practices inherent to the AN eating disorder<sup>28</sup> also become linguistically palpable in ProAna worlds. For example, AN is characterized by an obsession with the appearance of one’s body and weight (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), realized in the practice of calorie counting and constantly weighing oneself. This usually private practice becomes visible in the ProAna community in the form of daily food diaries and logs that are required to be shared with the community in order to be accepted as a true anorexic (Bates, 2015; Boero & Pascoe, 2012; Lukač, 2011; Paggiaro, 2022). It is therefore no surprise that numbers combined with words denoting calories, weight, and times are among the most frequently used words in ProAna communities (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 44). Similarly, the practice of advice-seeking and advice-giving is prominent in ProAna discourse (Paggiaro, 2022), affective practices aimed at showing one’s commitment. The former is realized in expressions such as “what are your top tips to get back to restricting?” (ibid., p. 60) and is used by the individual to “position themselves on a par with other community members” (ibid., p. 80). Advice-giving frequently occurs unprompted, which in other contexts would be considered to be unwarranted. In the ProAna realm, however, it is very much welcomed, as “no advice on the upkeep of the eating disorder is considered too personal” (ibid., p. 79f.). Oftentimes, especially the utterances of advice-seeking, include presuppositions made by the speaker about the recipients of their request, i.e., about the other members of the ProAna community. It is assumed, firstly, that the others share one’s personal struggles and have probably encountered the problem at hand in their own history with the disorder, and secondly, that on the basis of this shared ground, they are able to provide the relevant information and tips. These implicitly made presuppositions are linguistic evidence of the “community-wide belief that pro-

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<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion of linguistic practices and rituals present in the pro-anorexia community, see Paggiaro, (2022). Boero & Pascoe (2012) discuss some of the general practices exhibited in the ProAna community, e.g., of how pro-anorexics manage to make their bodies present in an environment that is usually conceived of as disembodied.

ana bloggers on the platform, as opposed to outgroup individuals, all share common life experiences” (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 81), thereby strengthening the community and creating a space of perceived closeness, both factually and emotionally.

By means of slang, abbreviations, and practices that are realized and shared linguistically, the ProAna community has created its own specialized vocabulary, tailored to the needs of its members and the medium. However, not only does Anaspeak facilitate and speed up communication among members, but also ensures that those who do not speak the language and therefore are not perceived to be fully committed to the anorexic lifestyle are excluded from the conversation. The community-strengthening and demarcating effects of a specific language use are also evident in metaphor use, a tool to further reinforce the created scaffold and its boundary-maintaining effects.

## 4.2 Ana metaphors

Most prominent in the pro-anorexic discourse on ProAna websites is the overarching metaphor ANOREXIA is a RELIGION, from which other, therewith coherent metaphors, such as FOOD is SIN or LOSING WEIGHT is SALVATION, are derived (DeBerry, 2003; Knapton, 2013; Stapleton et al., 2019). Generally, it can be observed that the orientation towards religious concepts, specifically Judeo-Christian ones, has persisted over the years since ProAna websites have first emerged (DeBerry, 2003; Stapleton et al., 2019). This orientation is most obvious in the texts drafted and distributed by ProAna members, for example the Ana Prayer and the Thin Commandments, paralleling the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm and the Ten Commandments, respectively (DeBerry, 2003; Knapton, 2013). Additionally, a so-called ‘Letter from Ana’ (see Appendix A) introducing the deity Ana, who personifies the disorder of AN, has been developed within the community (DeBerry, 2003, p. 51). The metaphors that can be found in these texts are also pervasive in everyday conversations amongst members of the ProAna world (Bates, 2015; Knapton, 2013; Stapleton et al., 2019), showing that individuals in ProAna echo chambers have ingested and adopted the underlying concepts of the aforementioned texts into their own understanding of the disorder.<sup>29</sup> To give an overview of the vast array of metaphors present in the ProAna discourse, I first discuss the metaphors presented in the texts that parallel familiar Judeo-Christian texts. These lay down the ProAna ideology and thereby provide the conceptual structure from which other metaphors emerge. I will then look at how these texts inform everyday conversations in ProAna worlds and what other kinds of metaphors have been developed by analyzing the most prominent metaphors underlying members’ utterances.

The Letter from Ana is the only text produced within the community that is not directly based on a specific religious text; rather, it provides the basis for the Ana-religion by introducing its deity, Ana (DeBerry, 2003, p. 51). In the letter, the premises for the metaphor ANA is GOD are depicted,

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<sup>29</sup> Of course, these texts were only developed because pro-anorexics understood their disorder in terms of a religious structure and then manifested them as such in the texts such as The Thin Commandments. However, since these texts have been around for a long time, I am now taking them to have an influence back on those in the community today and not being subject to significant change or further development.

attributing Ana the godlike qualities of omniscience, omnipotence, commanding obedience, and forgiveness (ibid., p. 52ff.). The overarching metaphor ANA is GOD allows pro-anorexics to present Ana as the protector of those struggling with the disorder, providing the means, i.e., diets and calorie restrictions, through which they can be saved from the sin of food (DeBerry, 2003, p. 27). But importantly, the metaphor also withdraws the pro-anorexic movement from scientific and medical models. Analogical to God being beyond science as he has power over life and death in the Christian belief, Ana is attributed ultimate power, especially over science. She is presented as omniscient in knowing the truth, namely that firstly, the anorexic individual is worthless, and secondly, that their friends and family are lying to them about their figure. This “monopoly on truth” (ibid., p. 53) is presented for example in the expression ‘Your friends (...) are not truthful’ (Letter from Ana). Omnipotence in the form of total control over the individuals’ actions and thoughts is attributed to Ana through phrases such as ‘you cannot defy me’, ‘I fill your mind with thoughts of food, weight, calories’ or ‘I am in your head, your heart, your soul’ (Letter from Ana). As is the case with the Christian, or any, deity, Ana demands full obedience from her followers: ‘I will expect you to drop your calorie intake and up your exercise’ (Letter from Ana) and alike expressions present the idea that obedience means following the diet demanded by Ana and if one has sinned, i.e., eaten, “the *sin* must be *purged* from the body” (DeBerry, 2003, p. 55, emphasis added) through forced vomiting. Here, a recurring metaphor becomes visible, FOOD is SIN. This sin of food intake may be forgiven by Ana, who allows followers to ‘*purify* themselves’ (ibid., p. 56, emphasis added) by vomiting. The metaphor of FOOD is SIN, and the related metaphor THINNESS is RIGHTEOUSNESS, are also prevalent in The Ana Prayer, a text strongly influenced by the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm (DeBerry, 2003; Stapleton et al., 2019). These two metaphors put the reader’s focus on the importance of dieting (DeBerry, 2003, p. 41). With food intake being portrayed as a sin, the idea that diets and the ensuing thinness of the individual are a sign of righteousness is not farfetched. Thinness shows that one adheres to the rules of Ana, follows her diet and is therefore righteous. Accordingly, one’s weight and food diaries, calorie charts and the like act as a scale to judge the individual’s level of righteousness (ibid., p. 30), as is conveyed in the phrase “I will dwell in the *fear of scales* forever” (The Ana Prayer, emphasis added).

The metaphor FOOD is SIN is meant to invoke associations with the concepts of guilt, shame, and punishment, a connection made explicit in The Thin Commandments (DeBerry, 2003; Knapton, 2013). These state for example that ‘[b]eing thin is more important than being healthy’ and that ‘[t]hou shall not eat without feeling guilty’ (Knapton, 2013, p. 470). The only way to avoid the sin of eating is through abiding by a strict diet, vividly expressed through the metaphor DIETS are PROTECTORS. Diets are presented as protectors as they provide clear rules about which foods are safe to consume, which are to be avoided at all costs and essentially, how to become thin. This explains why anorexics assign control such high importance; it is the only means available to them to reliably resist the temptation of food. In the Ana Creed, an allusion to the Apostle’s Creed from the religious realm, control is described as ‘the only force mighty enough to bring order to the chaos that is my world’ (DeBerry, 2003, p. 47), linguistically manifesting one of the disorder’s

main struggles (Elrod & Dykeman, 2019; Knapton, 2013; Paggiaro, 2022; Roberts Strife & Rickard, 2011; Stapleton et al., 2019).

Related to the importance of control is the metaphor ANOREXICS are the CHOSEN PEOPLE. Being able to follow the rules of restrictive diets – essentially surviving on ‘green beans and lettuce’ (The Ana Prayer) supplemented with water – is extremely distressing, arduous, and all-encompassing. As a consequence, not everyone is able to exert this amount of control over their mind and body. Thus, as being the few who are able to do just that, anorexics portray themselves as the chosen people who do not fit the traditional, i.e., medical, model of anorexia. As such, they are not subject to science; their weight loss is considered to be the proof of their success and a sign of their righteousness (DeBerry, 2003, p. 61f.). In the same vein that Christians view stories of Jesus supposedly healing people or near-death experiences where people see a light as evidence for the existence of god, pro-anorexics view their weight loss as proof that the restrictions laid upon them by Ana are worth the struggles connected to harsh diets (ibid., p. 96f.). As the chosen people, they are the only ones that should have access to the *sacred knowledge* (ibid., p. 65, emphasis added) that can be found in ProAna worlds. Disclaimers that can be found on their websites therefore function as filters to keep the *unfaithful* from reading the conversations (ibid., emphasis added); the coded language in which the posts are written then acts as a second and more pervasive layer to exclude wannarexics and others who are not true anorexics and not committed to the pro-anorexic lifestyle.

Though what I provided here is only a rough sketch of the conceptual system that pro-anorexics have constructed around the metaphor ANOREXIA is a RELIGION, what emerges is a pretty good idea of how they legitimize, maintain, and enact their disorder. Rather than perceiving themselves as victims of their disorder, pro-anorexics consider subjecting themselves to strict and harmful diets an active lifestyle choice where they possess control, thereby defying the limits put on them by science (and society). The application of the overarching metaphor ANOREXIA is a RELIGION is insofar astonishing that almost the whole framework of the source domain, religion, is transferred to the target domain of anorexia, providing a very productive and encompassing conceptual system. Not only are positive aspects carried over, such as Ana and her diets as protective figures, but also negative ones, such as the concept of sin and punishment. In the last paragraphs of this section, I look at how the metaphors that were established in texts distributed in the ProAna world are sewn into the daily conversations of its members. However, ANOREXIA is a RELIGION and its derivatives are not the only metaphors present in pro-anorexics’ exchanges; the metaphors of ANOREXIA is a SKILL as well as ANOREXIA is a JOURNEY are also common (Knapton, 2013; Paggiaro, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019).

The ANOREXIA is a RELIGION metaphor underlies many conversations among pro-anorexics and is realized in various derivatives, all pertaining to the same conceptual system. By being able to draw on a rich pool of metaphors, ProAna world members are able to aptly describe and capture their feelings, struggles and concerns as well as voice encouragement and motivation, thereby corroborating the epistemic structure of the echo chamber. The metaphor ANA is GOD for example is oftentimes used as a motivator, both when Ana is portrayed as a supportive, guiding force

(Knapton, 2013, p. 470) as well as when she is depicted as a “harsh and demanding figure” (Stapleton et al., 2019, p. 322). Outsiders would not detect the motivation and encouragement pro-anorexics draw from expressions such as ‘Your so weak. Ana doesn’t want girls like you !’ or ‘Ana doesn’t want fat ass, she doesn’t want a glutton, Ana hates you, and you should hate yourself’ (ibid., p. 333). Those not accustomed to the practices common in ProAna worlds would simply consider such utterances to be bland insults. To members, however, this meanspo is a motivator to restrict food intake even more and adhere to Ana’s demands of self-control (Paggiaro, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019). Conceptualizing food intake as inherently bad and weak connects back to the metaphor FOOD IS SIN, therefore as something that requires punishment. The guilt that pro-anorexics attach to most kinds of food becomes apparent in expressions such as ‘I wanted to *punish myself and not eat*’, ‘I know the frenzy of *guilty, accusatory thoughts* that run through your mind when you feel the need to just *get the food out of you*’ (Knapton, 2013, p. 470, emphasis added) or ‘I want to not feel this *weak and out of control and guilty*’ (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 62, emphasis added). The only means pro-anorexics see to gain control over one’s life are diets, a means the deity Ana provides them with (DeBerry, 2003, p. 57).

Next to framing the disorder in terms of religion, pro-anorexics frequently deploy the metaphor ANOREXIA IS A SKILL (Knapton, 2013). By means of this metaphor, AN is again framed as a lifestyle choice that is practiced, rather than a disorder to be treated. The metaphor maps the aspects of being talented at something, learning a skill, as well as progress and competition onto the target domain of anorexia (ibid., p. 467ff.). Similar to conceiving of themselves as the chosen people within the religious frame, here, the metaphor of ANOREXIA IS A SKILL allows pro-anorexics to view themselves as the few talented people who “possess the anorexia skill set” (ibid., p. 467). Linguistic realizations of this conception are the utterances ‘Anorexia is a skill, perfected only by a few. The *chosen, the pure, the flawless*’ or ‘[w]atch other people eat, and feel *superior!!!*’ (ibid., p. 468, emphasis added). To be good at one’s chosen skill one has to constantly increase one’s knowledge about it, work on the skill and thereby improve in its execution (Knapton, 2013, p. 468). This idea can be clearly identified in the following utterance: ‘It takes much *skill and determination* to starve yourself and exercise all the time’ (ibid.). Pro-anorexics track their progress in improving their skill, i.e., their ability to follow their strict diets and starve themselves in pursuit of thinness, by means of calorie counting, food diaries, and regularly weighing themselves. They measure the level of their perceived success by the pain the disorder is causing them, as is evident in the assertion ‘The pain is necessary, especially the pain of hunger. It reassures you that you are strong, can withstand anything.’ (ibid.). More disturbingly, pro-anorexics also measure their success by evaluating the appearance of their bodies, perceiving them merely as “passive object[s] to be worked upon” (Malson, 2008, p. 35, as cited in Bates, 2015). As a result, they equate their thinness with their value as a person: “[N]ot to be thin enough means not to be good enough as a person” (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 89). Lastly, the aspect of competition is mapped onto the disorder (Knapton, 2013, p. 469), mirroring the constant need in ProAna worlds to prove themselves as true anorexics and not be perceived as wannarexics (Bates, 2015; Maloney, 2013; Paggiaro, 2022). This is achieved by setting extremely high goals, following harsh diets and participating in group fasts

(Boero & Pascoe, 2012; DeBerry, 2003; Knapton, 2013; Maloney, 2013; Paggioro, 2022). Conceiving of the disorder as a skill allows to conceptualize AN as a game, hiding its detrimental and health-damaging aspects.

The third type of metaphorical construction common in ProAna worlds is based around the metaphor ANOREXIA is a JOURNEY (Paggioro, 2022; Stapleton et al., 2019). Applied to AN, this metaphor highlights that there are ups and downs to the disorder, that it will accompany the individual for a long time, and that the journey in itself is the reward rather than there being a goal. Though anorexics do have a goal in mind, namely being as thin as possible, they focus on the path of getting there. This becomes apparent in the observation that once an individual has reached a goal weight of theirs, that does not necessarily mean that they will stop at that point. Oftentimes, this rather encourages them to see how much further they can go, possibly with a fatal outcome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Birmingham et al., 2005; van Eeden et al., 2021). Therefore, by highlighting that AN is a journey, the important and dangerous aspect of this journey possibly ending in death is hidden. Oftentimes, the ANOREXIA is a JOURNEY metaphor comes up in instances of advice-seeking or giving, as is the case in ‘will someone be my *companion* as I start out on my *journey*’, ‘help me *grow* with Ana’ or ‘we can encourage each other and give each other strength on this *journey*’ (Stapleton et al., 2019, p. 327, emphasis added). Conceptualizing the disorder as a journey has a community-strengthening effect as it highlights that one is not alone in the ups and downs inherent to the disorder. To take on the journey of anorexia becomes a community effort, whose practices such as diets and communal fasting can be taken on together.

With the ANOREXIA is a RELIGION metaphor making up the major part of the conceptual system and the ANOREXIA is a SKILL as well as the ANOREXIA is JOURNEY metaphors adding to that coherent system, pro-anorexics have successfully created an epistemic as well as affective scaffold consisting of powerful metaphors. These metaphors provide them with support, motivation, encouragement and present a whole, in itself coherent structure to refer back to when doubting the restrictions imposed by the diets. The scaffold is brought about by linguistic means, which has far-reaching ramifications from several perspectives. From an epistemic perspective, the scaffold provides the conceptual system and its respective beliefs, presenting a comprehensive belief system in which the individual can trust and which is in itself coherent. From an affective perspective, the scaffold provides the support and motivation to follow those beliefs and adhere to them, as well as presents the pro-anorexic with the prospect of losing all that seeming support if they decide to leave, thereby attaching an enormous emotional value to the echo chamber.

As already mentioned at the outset of this thesis it is this combination of epistemic mechanisms with affective ones which come together in one encompassing scaffold, that turns supposed communities into extremely dangerous, detrimental spaces. In the context of ProAna worlds, the scaffold that these metaphors provide is immensely harmful; though the individual finds support and strength through it, this strength is aimed at starving the members of the echo chamber. It can be claimed, therefore, that metaphors, in the realm of ProAna worlds, fulfil the specific function of keeping the individual members in a loop of dieting. Constantly being confronted with metaphors

such as FOOD is SIN, ANOREXIA is a SKILL, or ANOREXIA is a JOURNEY, manifests the beliefs that food must be avoided at all costs, that AN is rather a competition to be good at than a life-threatening disorder, and that coming close to death is just '*part of the ups and downs*' that are typical of journeys. These metaphors also implicitly allow for members, on the individual level, to build their identity around the disorder, and on a collective level, to strengthen community bonds. Through implementing the beliefs expressed by the metaphors at the basis of the scaffold, those who do not fully subscribe to the beliefs and do not regularly resort to the scaffold can be easily identified as wannarexics. By clinging onto such detrimental beliefs presented by the scaffold, which supposedly provides support, leaving the echo chamber becomes almost impossible. Leaving would mean giving up a highly cherished and lived epistemic as well as affective scaffold, one the individual feels at ease with.

### 4.3 Incelspeak

Compared to Anaspeak, Incelspeak is harder to access in that Incels make more extensive but also less straightforward use of their own vocabulary. Additionally, a lot of their vocabulary as well as the hierarchy at the basis of their ideology are grounded in metaphors, making it hard to draw a clear line between their language, the emerging metaphors and their underlying ideology. For the most part, Incelspeak centers around and manifests a hierarchy Incels supposedly have identified in the social world (Fowler, 2022; Furl, 2022; Heritage & Koller, 2020; Lindsay, 2021; Marveggio, 2020; Prazmo, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021; Waśniewska, 2020). This hierarchy categorizes people along the dimensions of, firstly, gender, but also attractiveness and behavior, thereby robbing people of their individuality. This hierarchy can be summarized under the metaphor SEX is POLITICAL POWER (Fowler, 2022, p. 1411), where women represent the very top.

Women's perceived dominant position can be explained by means of a certain narrative dominant in the Incel discourse. According to this narrative, men have been constantly losing political power in linear accordance with women's empowerment (Brzuszkiewicz, 2020; Cottee, 2021; Lindsay, 2021, 2022; Marveggio, 2020). Sex is perceived as representing one's standing in society, and thereby determining one's political power (Fowler, 2022, p. 1411); not being able to have sexual encounters is equated with losing that power. Therefore, the times when women were subordinated to men are considered by Incels as the 'golden age' (Baele et al., 2021, p. 1679), as this was a time when "[a]ll men ha[d] thus 'access' to women and their 'entitlement' to sex [was] never 'denied' by women" (ibid.). Feminism and a shift away from patriarchal, traditional values is blamed to be the cause of Incels' suffering; as women successfully fought for more rights and were able to emancipate themselves from men, they also gained more power over their bodies. The Incels' patriarchy-idolizing narrative explains why they deem women to now have power over men (Lindsay, 2021, 2022), a power they exercise by only 'giving access' to the men they deem attractive. It also explains the derogatory language guiding Incelspeak. Such misogynistic language is aimed at dehumanizing, degrading, and most importantly disempowering women in order to demonstrate the position that women should actually occupy, namely the bottom of the hierarchy.

Baele et al. (2021, p. 1679) quote a member who claims that ‘women are for fucking and raising families, not for having ‘rights’’, summarizing Incels misogynistic conception of women.

Based on the overarching metaphor SEX is POLITICAL POWER, where those who can grant access to sex, i.e., women, and those who are granted sexual relations, i.e., good-looking men, hold political power and have a higher social standing (Fowler, 2022)<sup>30</sup>, the hierarchy is then further constructed. Group membership is determined according to gender and outward appearance, including the person’s ethnic heritage and other physical traits such as height and weight (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 67). Other factors playing into who is assigned which label are mental or psychological traits as well as personal views (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 67), though these play rather minor roles. Based on the intersection of gender and outward appearance, Incels classify people into mainly five categories<sup>31</sup>, namely Chads, Stacies, Beckies, Normies and Incels themselves (see e.g., Furl, 2022; Marveggio, 2020; Prażmo, 2020; Waśniewska, 2020). The label Chad (also called alpha male) refers to an attractive male person who gets a lot of attention from women (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 72). Though despised for their relations with women, Chads are also idolized by Incels and object of their jealousy, as Chads personify the maximum level of political agency achievable for men (Fowler, 2022, p. 1412). Stacies are the female counterpart to Chads and – because of their attractiveness – deemed unattainable to Incels. The term Becky refers to women who Incels categorize as less attractive. Their perceived diminished attractiveness serves as justification for Incels to claim a right on their attention and ‘access’ to their bodies, both sexual and emotional (Prażmo, 2020). Since this expectation is not seldomly denied, women labelled Beckies are often the target of especially hateful speech (Andersen, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Prażmo, 2020). Normies are the male counterpart to Beckies. They are the target of hate speech due to their supposed mindless conforming to the new, anti-patriarchal structures (Andersen, 2022; Cottee, 2021; Fowler, 2022; Labbaf, 2020). Lastly, Incels consider themselves to be ugly, unable to gain women’s attention and therefore see themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Often, they blame their perceived ugliness on their race, which is visible in their self-describing use of the terms currycel, ricecel, blackcel or even niggacel (Bogetić, 2022; Pelzer et al., 2021; Scotto di Carlo, 2023; Waśniewska, 2020). Importantly, there is no female counterpart to the position that Incels occupy in the hierarchy. According to Incel ideology, women, qua being women, can find sexual partners at any point in time, regardless of their own physical appearance. Though Incels perceive themselves as ugly, they nonetheless accuse women – especially Beckies – of denying Incels their ‘basic right’ to sexual relations (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2721).

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<sup>30</sup> Incel ideology is based on a hetero-normative worldview, assuming the perspective of a heterosexual white cis man. Therefore, other orientations and other possible combinations for sexual relations are not discussed as a viable option in the Incels’ ideology. If non-hetero practices do come up, they are usually the target of hate and derogatory speech.

<sup>31</sup> There are many more categories (especially into which men are categorized (Fowler, 2022, p. 1412)), namely, PUAs, MGTOW, redpillers, bluepillers, blackpillers, etc. All of these groups are part of the same hierarchy, which is structured according to the metaphor SEX is POLITICAL POWER. For a more detailed discussion of these subgroups, see e.g., Fowler, 2022; Furl, 2022; Sugiura, 2021a; Waśniewska, 2020.

Incels' perceived mistreatment at the hand of women and resultant rage is visible in the deeply sexist and misogynistic language Incels use in their conversations with one another, where women are regularly the victims of hate speech. Insults such as 'landwhale', 'bitch', 'slut' or 'noodlewhore' (Baele et al., 2023; Jaki et al., 2019; Waśniewska, 2020) are part and parcel of the Incel community. Though women are the most frequent subject of discussion (Bogetić et al., forthcoming; Fowler, 2022), they are rarely referred to as women; rather, Incels refer to women – among other degrading terms – as '*foids*' or '*femooids*' (Baele et al., 2023; Bogetić, 2022; Furl, 2022; Prażmo, 2020). This metaphoric blending of the terms 'female' and 'android' (or 'humanoid') reduces women to their reproductive qualities and, at the same time, denies them their emotional capacities (Prażmo, 2020, p. 24). This language mirrors the pervasive dichotomy at the heart of the Incel ideology: On the one hand, women are perceived to be at the top and in some of the metaphors described as *hunters*, i.e., as having power over men. On the other hand, women are the subject of derogatory, dehumanizing and objectifying language, denying them their autonomy and agency. This dichotomy makes sense with regards to the hierarchy through which Incels perceive the social world to be structured; women currently occupy the dominant position, but in fact belong to the bottom, a supposed fact which Incels try to illustrate by means of their language.

#### 4.4 Incel metaphors

The metaphors used by Incels underline the misogynistic perception illustrated above; they are aimed at degrading and disempowering women (Koller, 2022, p. 369) in order to return back to a patriarchal order where women are weak and in need of men. Even though Incels perceive the current social order to be very much in favor of women, their specific metaphor repertoire shows that they actually consider them to belong to the very bottom, in order to be easily accessible for men. Within the Incel community, the hope to return to a patriarchal order has however mostly been given up, which is referred to under the term "blackpill". This term stems from the movie "The Matrix" (Wachowski & Wachowski, 1999) and is part of a bigger metaphor, TRUTH IS MEDICINE (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 68). In the movie, the main protagonist has to choose between the bluepill or the redpill, representing to "continue to live blissfully unaware of the façade he is currently living in [or] know the truth about the world" (Sugiura, 2021a, p. 9), respectively. This talk of *swallowing pills* is adapted to the Incel ideology in that those who are *bluepilled* "are tricked into having naïve and unrealistic expectations regarding romance and sexual relationships" (Andersen, 2022, p. 7). *Taking the redpill*, on the other hand, stands for accepting the supposed fact that Incels are at the bottom of the hierarchy, with men generally at the mercy of women. *Redpillers* have accepted the fact that women are political gatekeepers to sex (Fowler, 2022, p. 1409), however, they still have hopes that one day society will return to a patriarchal, traditional order. *Blackpillers* have given up on this hope, their outlook on the world is the fatalistic version of the *redpill* (Sugiura, 2021a, p. 9). They "recognize the 'ultimate truth', that they are incels, but they are powerless to change these constructs both for themselves and for society at large" (Fowler, 2022, p. 1415). By discursively mirroring the *swallowing of hard pills* (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 68) and what the respective pills represent, Incels constantly negotiate their group membership. Those

who expose themselves as subscribing to the *redpill* ideas are often degraded to fakecels. Here, the metaphor of TRUTH is MEDICINE allows members of the Incel echo chamber to convey their beliefs and ideology, as well as to show their commitment to exactly those beliefs and ideology. Therefore, the metaphor provides the structures through which true membership can be determined.

Through the two metaphors described so far, SEX is POLITICAL POWER and TRUTH is MEDICINE, the ideology Incels subscribe to has been clarified. To showcase the pervasiveness of especially the former metaphor and its presence in daily discourse in Incel echo chambers, I now turn to metaphors that can be considered to be derivatives of the overarching metaphor SEX is POLITICAL POWER. These establish, manifest and reproduce the Incel ideology. Some of these metaphors are comprehensible to the general public; their meaning can be derived without the need of a specific background knowledge. There is, however, also a myriad of metaphors that have emerged on the basis of the very specific Incelspeak outlined above, which unfold their full meaning only for members of the echo chamber. Therefore, people who are not familiar with the highly specific vocabulary and terms employed by Incels cannot access the metaphor's full meaning in all its nuances (Waśniewska, 2020). The common metaphors shared by the Incel community serve to “bind[] incels together and strengthen[] their negative views of women” (Fowler, 2022, p. 1409). The topics of the most prominent metaphors all circle around sexual intercourse, women and social status, with the former two making up the majority. In the following, I present some of these metaphors and their respective realizations to underline the highly coded language utilized in Incel echo chambers. With reference to each example I outline what purpose this metaphor serves. Generally, it can be said that the metaphors common in such echo chambers are employed to communicate and reinforce their ideology, strengthen inner group bonds and establish boundaries to those they despise (Andersen, 2022; Fowler, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Waśniewska, 2020). These metaphors, therefore, can be said to aid in constructing an encompassing scaffold that is both epistemic as well as affective in its function.

On the topic of sexual intercourse, the most common metaphors are SEX is a TRANSACTION, SEX is WAR or SEX is EATING (Waśniewska, 2020). The metaphor SEX is a TRANSACTION for example is realized in metaphoric expressions such as “I remember the first time we ... did the *business*” (Koller, 2022, p. 369, emphasis added) and related terms such as *sexual market place* (SMP) or *sexual market value* (SMV) (Koller, 2022; Waśniewska, 2020). The former describes a metaphoric platform where people showcase their *sexual goods*, the latter describes the level of perceived sexual attractiveness. Incels usually employ these terms in the abbreviated form, making their conversations unintelligible to outsiders who do not know the Incel vocabulary. The SEX is a TRANSACTION metaphor and its related realizations downplay the “intimate and emotional aspects” (Koller, 2022, p. 369) of sexual intercourse as well as its cooperative aspects whilst highlighting the supposed transactional ones (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 76). Metaphoric expressions likening sexual relations to business transactions serve to, as is common in Incelspeak, degrade women to objects that one can do *cold business* with, robbing them of emotional and individual qualities. Such metaphors aim at engraining the belief that women are the gatekeepers of sex and

only engage in sexual relations for personal gain. This belief feeds into the overall conception that women hold power over men, which has to be changed according to Incel ideology.

Another metaphor frequently used by Incels is that of SEX is WAR. This metaphor is particularly disturbing as it is used to justify violence – especially against women – in sexual relations and hides the cooperative and loving aspect of intimacy. Instead, it highlights “the adversarial nature of human relationships” (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 76) and implies that there is no need for mutual consent. Realizations of this metaphor are for example ‘Would I *slay* in France maby’ (see Appendix B) or ‘*Slaying* is more for ego than for actual pleasure’ (see Appendix B). These realizations are a prime example for the incomprehensibility of some of the Incel metaphors. If a person is not fluent in Incelspeak, they do not know that the term *slay* denotes a sexual conquest by a man, where the noun *slay* is the object of said conquest, i.e., the woman, and the *slayer* the person who successfully and frequently has sexual intercourse (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 76f.). More conventionally in line with the metaphor of war is the description of the woman to be slayed as a *target* (ibid., p. 77). Metaphors where women are denied their sexual agency and presented as passive objects are a means of spurring on the urge of Incels to bring women down from their alleged position at the top of the hierarchy. Presenting women as violative and vulnerable makes it seem more feasible for Incels to succeed in their “war against women” (Sugiura, 2021a, p. 6), i.e., a war against feminism and women’s increased rights with the goal of returning to patriarchal, heteronormative and traditional structures with men at the top of the hierarchy. The notion of a ‘war against women’ has been coined in a manifesto of an Incel known for his deadly attack in 2014, leaving six people dead (Brzuskiewicz, 2020, p. 10). The manifesto has since been referred to in various ways by other Incels showing their admiration of the attack.

The last major metaphor to be discussed under the general topic of sexual intercourse is that of SEX is EATING or WOMEN are FOOD. Here, women are conceptualized as foods that are consumed when having sex with men (Koller, 2022; Waśniewska, 2020), which, again, is extremely degrading, objectifying and meant to disempower. The metaphor WOMEN are FOOD is realized for example in the expression of a user wishing that ‘some chad gave me his *leftovers*’ (Koller, 2022, p. 377, emphasis added). A subcategory of this metaphor is that of WOMEN are MEAT, where women are described as *rapemeat*, *roast meat* or *roastie* (Prażmo, 2020, p. 22). These terms denote the alleged resemblance of a woman’s labia to a slice of roasted beef after having had intercourse; a belief mirroring the Incels’ “lack of experience of any contact with said organs” (Waśniewska, 2020, p. 76). The metaphors and its related expressions verbalize the ideology at the heart of Incel echo chambers: Women are objects with no feelings and should be readily available to be consumed. Such metaphors portray women as impure who *indulge* in sexual activities with selected men (Andersen, 2022, p. 9, emphasis added), whilst demeaning and degrading women. Especially expressions such as *rapemeat* convey the deeply misogynistic ideology of Incels who, because they consider women to be at the top of the hierarchy qua their political power of being able to provide intercourse, aim at disempowering women. Through this language, the underlying belief that women in fact belong at the bottom of the hierarchy and should be subject to men and their desires (Baele et al., 2021; Fowler, 2022; Jaki et al., 2019; Lindsay, 2022), is realized.

Women are however not just referred to as foods, but oftentimes also degraded to animals and objects in metaphors popular with Incels (Bogetić et al., forthcoming.; Koller, 2022; Pražmo, 2020; Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021; Waśniewska, 2020) due to the highly productive nature of especially the animal source domain. Utterances such as ‘she immediately *hops* onto the next Chad’s cock’ (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2724) or ‘it’s just that femoids have a retarded dual *mating strategy* while men do not’ (Chang, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added) are just a few examples of the metaphor WOMEN are ANIMALS. In the former example, the metaphor is achieved through the verb to hop, which is normally attributed to animals such as frogs or rabbits (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2724). The latter example puts women’s search for a partner into animalistic as well as purely biological terms, describing it as *mating behavior* and *mating strategy* (Chang, 2022, p. 10, emphasis added). Oftentimes, the degradation to animals and objects occurs within one utterance as is the case in this post from a user saying ‘hippity hoppity women are *property* Revert them to *breeding cattle* Violently and properly’ (see Appendix B). Another metaphor that is related to the metaphor WOMEN are ANIMALS is that of WOMEN are HUNTERS, realized in metaphoric expressions using the verbs *baiting*, *chasing* or *fishing* (Bogetić et al., forthcoming, p. 10). Though only broadly situated in the animal realm, it more generally represents agency relations as perceived by Incels. An instance of this metaphor is the utterance ‘[c]learly *baiting* him’ (Koller, 2022, p. 376, emphasis added), referring to women’s alleged practice of luring men in and then denying them sexual intercourse. This metaphor alludes to the hierarchy by which Incels perceive the social world to be structured, which in itself is structured by the metaphor SEX is POLITICAL POWER. Here, the perceived powerlessness by Incels, who deem themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy becomes apparent (ibid., p. 378); they are supposedly fully at the mercy of women’s will, who might *bait* the Incel but not have sex with them.

Especially dehumanizing and objectifying are metaphors belonging to the type WOMEN are OBJECTS, particularly instances of the metaphor WOMEN are CONTAINERS. Examples for these are utterances such as ‘delusional *cumbuckets* (more commonly known as women)’ (see Appendix B), reducing a woman’s vagina to the “receptacle of men’s penises and semen” (Tranchese & Sugiura, 2021, p. 2720). Objectifying metaphors allow Incels to conceptualize women as objects which can be “*smashed* (in the sense of having sex), *wreck[ed]*, [or] *pick[ed]*” (Bogetić et al., forthcoming, p. 11), again glorifying violence against women. Other prominent derivatives of the more general metaphor WOMEN are OBJECTS are the metaphors WOMEN are MACHINES, or WOMEN are DIRTY OBJECTS. The former serves to underline the belief that women are “*robots* that only resemble humans” (Scotto di Carlo, 2023, p. 7, emphasis added), as becomes clear in the utterance ‘in our minds you’re all fucking *robots*’ (ibid., p. 8). This conception of women as incapable of having emotions and their own thoughts is underlined by Incels’ description of women as being ‘scary’ and ‘creepy *femoids*’ (ibid.). The metaphor WOMEN are DIRTY OBJECTS is realized in highly derogatory, dehumanizing utterances such as ‘you should view *foids* as *toilets*’ (ibid.), denying women their humanness, and agency whilst depicting them as impure and worth of disgust. What these objectifying metaphors achieve is a “transformation of the object of incels’ desire into the target of their hatred” (ibid., p. 7).

The last type of metaphors common in Incel discourse to be discussed here is also worth mentioning. Not only those metaphors are prevalent which demean women, but also those conceptual metaphors which demean Incels themselves (Bogetić et al., forthcoming, p. 9). Incels linguistically manifest that they perceive themselves as unattractive and as the victims of society at the bottom of the social ladder by applying the source domain of SUBSTANCE to their situation (ibid., p. 11). What emerges are expressions such as ‘I pretty much spent my entire 20s *rotting away*’ or ‘the only thing you can do to spare your sanity is to *LDAR*’ (ibid., emphasis added). The term LDAR is a perfect example for the specific and coded language used by Incels which is full of abbreviations. LDAR is short for ‘lay down and *rot*’ (ibid.) and is a derivative of the metaphor INCELS are SUBSTANCE. Though this is only one example of several metaphors employed by Incels to describe themselves, it pointedly displays the means by which Incels discursively corroborate their worldview and their own position in it.

Most of the metaphors employed in Incel discourse aim at degrading, dehumanizing, disempowering and objectifying women, thereby weakening their supposed position at the top of the social hierarchy. Ironic in this regard is that Incels employ conceptual structures that are in fact sadly still in place in our everyday conversations, maintaining exactly those patriarchal structures that Incels claim are not present anymore. On the basis of the conception that women must be kept down for men to maintain their power, Incels have simply extended and extremized metaphors that are still common around the globe (Koller, 2022, p. 378). The metaphors prominent in Incel conversations maintain and feed into their overall conceptual system by “lend[ing] coherence to large stretches of discourse or entire discourses” (Kövecses, 2023, p. 172) according to which women should be freely ‘accessible’ and subordinated to men. By making constant use of metaphors and their derivatives, such as SEX is POLITICAL POWER, WOMEN are FOOD, or WOMEN are ANIMALS, Incels linguistically manifest their conceptual system into a scaffold, which they can then rely upon epistemically and affectively. This scaffold provides, from an epistemic perspective, the conceptual system and the core set of beliefs, thereby presenting the members of the Incel echo chamber with a comprehensive belief system they can readily refer to when in need of explaining and legitimizing their ideology. From an affective perspective, the scaffold makes way for strong emotions, such as anger, hate, loneliness and feelings of rejection, as well as pride to belong to a group which has discovered the ‘truth’ about the social world surrounding them. Additionally, the scaffold seemingly provides support and a safe space to voice the individuals’ frustrations, thereby allegedly alleviating the loneliness many Incels experience (Jaki et al., 2019; Pelzer et al., 2021; Sugiura, 2021b; Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023). That this is in fact a deception presented by the scaffold has convincingly been demonstrated by (Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023, p. 1), who show how “loneliness is exacerbated rather than alleviated through the incel community”.

As I hope to have demonstrated through these examples, the metaphors used in ProAna worlds and Incel communities are based on conventional language adapted to the specific needs of the respective chamber. Individuals combine everyday language with their specific rhetoric, adding their own vocabulary and blendings (for example in the case of *femoids* or *foids*) into the mix to

make the metaphors less accessible. However, the metaphors and the overall language quickly become comprehensible, given that an individual spends a lot of time in the chamber to “learn the vocabulary”. The usage of very specific and pointed metaphors allows the members of echo chambers to communicate their ideology, viewpoints, and emotions clearly, quickly, and without outsiders understanding. Metaphors therefore combine many advantageous features in one, they can be constructed in a way that only those supposed to understand can in fact understand and others are left in the dark.

#### 4.5 Epistemic and affective scaffolds in echo chambers

What I discussed in the previous sections is a representative insight into the language and metaphors employed by pro-anorexics and Incels. The provided examples nonetheless point to the overarching function of metaphor in these echo chambers; to aid in the creation, maintenance and reinforcement of an overarching scaffold that fulfills both epistemic as well as affective functions. In this sense, metaphors can be considered to be tools that by linguistic means reproduce and make the ideologies at the heart of the respective detrimental structures more palpable. Considering the epistemic dimension<sup>32</sup> of the scaffold, I claim that metaphors aid in communicating and “lend[ing] coherence” (Kövecses, 2023, p. 172) to a common conceptual system, facilitate information exchange and general discourse as well as corroborate boundary work done in the echo chambers. From an affective perspective, metaphors that are part of the echo chamber’s scaffold direct affective phenomena and provide an encompassing structure the individuals come to rely on in order to satisfy their needs. Since the scaffold provides them with both epistemic as well as affective resources, the danger of becoming overly dependent on the scaffold and the echo chamber as a result becomes real and ubiquitous.

From an epistemic perspective, metaphors linguistically corroborate the belief system in place and facilitate the discourse between ingroup members by allowing them to converse and share information of whatever kind efficiently and without outsiders understanding. Rather than needing to explain thoroughly what needs to be conveyed, metaphors allow to swiftly verbalize a supposed fact, emotion, or general experience that is shared by the ingroup. Pro-anorexics for example, by expressing a combination of the metaphors FOOD is SIN and THINNESS is RIGHTEOUSNESS in the utterance “I will dwell in the *fear of scales* forever” (The Ana Prayer), convey a lot in one short sentence. What this sentence discloses to those who are familiar with the conceptual structure of the epistemic scaffold is that the individual prioritizes thinness over health, considers eating to be a sinful activity the result of which must be purged from the body, and uses scales to judge their bodies, possibly even themselves as a person. Therefore, not only are metaphors capable of

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<sup>32</sup> ‘Epistemic’ in the realm of echo chambers is not implying that the knowledge being shared is fruitful. Discourse in detrimental structures such as ProAna worlds or Incel communities does not produce epistemic growth whereby the individual gains something in the sense of learning some deeper truth. It is rather to be understood that there is a side to scaffolds that can be analyzed from an epistemic perspective; after all, the individuals do learn something, that something, however, is not epistemically fruitful whatsoever.

expressing experiences and current emotional episodes, but also of discursively practicing the underlying ideology at the same time. An analogous example can just as easily be found within the Incel community. The utterance ‘it’s just that *femoids* have a retarded dual *mating strategy* while men do not’ (Chang, 2022, p. 10) communicates to those fluent in Incelspeak that the person behind this utterance considers women to only have a reproductive purpose and to lack emotional qualities, that women follow genetic prospects and that they are inferior to men. Someone not familiar with the term ‘femoid’ or the conceptual system in which this expression is embedded would have a hard time understanding and therefore partaking in the Incel discourse. It is exactly by means of metaphors that make use of a niche vocabulary and draw on a rich conceptual system that boundary work is accomplished, i.e., the constant demarcation from other groups (Gauche, unpublished manuscript).

Affectively, metaphors produce emotion-engendering associations and thereby enable quick bonding of the individual to the group, can motivate action and bring about specific emotions such as guilt. The utterance ‘[w]atch other people eat, and feel *superior!!!*’ (Knapton, 2013, p. 468, emphasis added) for example communicates that the pro-anorexics feel like they are one of a few talented individuals, in line with the metaphors ANOREXIA is a SKILL and ANOREXICS are the CHOSEN PEOPLE. The expression ‘I want to not feel this *weak* and *out of control* and *guilty*’ (Paggiaro, 2022, p. 62, emphasis added) induces emotions of guilt as well as motivation to further restrict one’s diet in order to gain back control that supposedly has been lost. At the same time, it exposes those not familiar with the motivational aspect of meanspo as wannarexics, combining epistemic and affective mechanisms in one utterance. Incel metaphors are rather garnered at fostering strong emotions such as hate and anger towards women, but at the same time express a certain motivation to reverse the hierarchy they have allegedly identified in the social world. Incels communicate their desire to return to patriarchal structures through metaphors such as WOMEN are CONTAINERS, conveying at once their degrading ideology and hate towards women in utterances like ‘delusional *cumbucket* (more commonly known as women)’ (see Appendix B) in reference to women. Insults such as *cumbucket* produce emotions of disgust at women having intercourse, convey envy at the Chad who has ‘access’ to women, and at the same time connect those who do not, i.e., Incels, in their perceived victimhood. As such, metaphors and their derivatives subliminally or even explicitly direct the individuals’ affectivity, making certain emotions more probable.

It becomes apparent that the scaffolds present in echo chambers are significantly supported by the specific metaphor use of each group. Metaphors play upon both the epistemic as well as affective features of the scaffold, whose effects are thereby almost inescapable. The result of epistemic as well as affective resources being satisfied by one and the same scaffold is the stickiness that detrimental structures such as ProAna worlds and Incel communities exert on their members. The danger of echo chambers consists of the fact that those who become engulfed in it do not *want* to leave and feel at ease, despite them being detrimental for the individual.

## 5. Conclusion

Metaphors are a phenomenon of great allure, both when one encounters them in everyday conversation as well as for researchers from many fields, and especially philosophers, examining them. However, their affective dimension has, though identified as present, been neglected for the most part. The same holds for so-called echo chambers, detrimental epistemic structures that present their members with a coherent belief-system that is based on a very one-sided perspective enabled by a pervasive manipulation of trust, which creates a clear boundary between those who ascribe to the core set of beliefs and those who do not. Though a certain social and affective side of echo chambers has been investigated (see e.g., Del Vicario et al., 2016; Osler & Krueger, 2022), the very specific mechanisms at play in these eminently affective spaces have not been laid out and analyzed in further detail. Importantly, the epistemic and affective sides of echo chambers have not been connected, leading to a one-sided definition thereof.

Providing a glimpse into the thus far neglected affective layer of both metaphors as well as that of echo chambers was the goal of this thesis. To give basis for my claim that metaphors corroborate a both epistemic *and* affective scaffold, I examined two echo chambers, ProAna worlds and Incel communities. The former is a community of individuals struggling with Anorexia Nervosa, an eating disorder where the affected individuals regard starving themselves as an active lifestyle choice rather than a life-threatening disorder. Incels on the other hand are mostly young, white, heterosexual men who are unable to form (any kind of) relationship with women. Though they perceive themselves as extremely ugly and undesirable, they blame society at large and women in particular for their unfortunate situation. Incels manifest their frustration with a progressing society and women gaining more rights, especially over their bodies, through a deeply misogynistic, dehumanizing, and racist ideology which is targeted at mostly women. What phenomenologically connects ProAna worlds and the Incel community are their similar epistemic as well as affective mechanisms, corroborated by a very specific and metaphor-infused language.

Epistemically, as Nguyen (2020) demonstrated, both ProAna worlds and certain Incel communities manipulate the individuals' trust in order to increase trust into other members whilst decreasing trust in those who are not part of the epistemic structure. By means of a disagreement-reinforcement mechanisms, the members are inoculated against outside perspectives, arguments, and information, only being presented with what fits the proclaimed core set of beliefs. These mechanisms serve to maintain and strengthen community bonds whilst creating a clear boundary to those outside the echo chamber. Resulting from these epistemic mechanisms is an overdependence of the individual on the respective echo chamber; because they have been isolated from outside sources, they have to rely on information that has been approved by and is propagated by the echo chamber. However, as I have shown for both ProAna worlds and the Incel community, members become also affectively dependent on the resources provided by the respective spaces. By means of mind invasion, the individual is brought to adapt to and thereby adopt the affective feeling rules in place, i.e., affective practices, styles of comportment and habitual ways of being in the space. This is facilitated by the experience of feeling at ease in the echo chamber. Since not just anyone can enter this highly guarded space, members usually share a similar history, come to speak

a common language, ascribe to the same core values and are thereby able to bond with one another on a shared ground. Importantly, mind invasion eventually allows the individual to actively participate in the maintenance of these affectively and normatively laden rules. What emerges is an affective scaffold, providing the members of the respective echo chamber with the resources they lack outside the detrimental structure. Because they feel at ease with the scaffold and receive support, feel a sense of belonging and can alleviate their loneliness experienced in other spaces, they resort to the echo chamber in order to satisfy their affective needs. In the cases of ProAna worlds and the Incel community, the stickiness exerted by the epistemic structures and their scaffolds is detrimental to the individuals. For pro-anorexics, engaging in a ProAna world for a longer period of time decreases their chances of recovery (see e.g., Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Chancellor et al., 2016; Juarascio et al., 2010), possibly leading to a fatal outcome (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Birmingham et al., 2005; van Eeden et al., 2021). Regarding Incels, the danger concerns both the individual as well as the general public. Rather than alleviating loneliness, such communities instead aggravate these feelings (Pelzer et al., 2021; Tietjen & Tirkkonen, 2023), further hateful speech against women and possibly lead to a radicalization of the individual, which in the past has led to deadly terror attacks. By analyzing the mechanisms in ProAna worlds and Incel communities, it has become clear that they are driven and maintained by both epistemic as well as affective mechanisms.

Metaphors reinforce and substantiate these mechanisms in the communities' discourses. By means of metaphoric language, pro-anorexics and Incels are able to swiftly convey their ideologies without outsiders understanding the underlying conceptual system and implicit meanings. Affectively, metaphors make certain atmospheres and the occurrence of emotions such as pride or disgust more probable, as is achieved by the metaphoric expression 'you should view foids as *toilets*' (Scotto di Carlo, 2023, p. 8, emphasis added), thereby implicitly directing affective phenomena and possibly whole emotionally laden discourses. Importantly, metaphors linguistically realize the affective scaffold by expressing, sometimes implicitly, support and motivation. In ProAna discourse this is achieved through expressions such as 'Oioi fatties. Yeh u all better be fasting' (Boero & Pascoe, 2012, p. 47), which counterintuitively indicates encouragement. It can therefore be asserted that metaphors congregate both epistemic and affective mechanisms in one, thereby corroborating an encompassing scaffold the individual comes to rely on. As metaphors thereby contribute to the overall stickiness and strong grip of the echo chamber, their role (and that of language in general) must be given the appropriate attention and may not be underestimated.

Although only two echo chambers were more closely analyzed, their similar mechanisms allow for certain generalizations to be made concerning their effect on the individuals. Nonetheless, further research into echo chambers concerned with other topics would be helpful in supporting the claims made here. Additionally, to better assess especially the affective impact of echo chambers generally and the metaphor-use in them specifically on individuals, more detailed analyses than the one provided here are in order. Gaining a better understanding of the mechanisms at play in echo chambers of all kinds are conducive to possibly preventing individuals joining such

structures in the first place. In order to provide alternatives to those who are subjected to the epistemic and affective scaffolds presented by echo chambers such as ProAna worlds and Incel communities, a thorough understanding of what is keeping them in these structures is indispensable. Individuals stay in these detrimental environments because here they find what they miss outside the community; support, a feeling of belonging, understanding, a place to vent their frustration and anger, and so on. Making other, non-detrimental spaces more attractive and able of facilitating at least a similar feeling of ease might therefore be a possibility of recovering individuals from echo chambers. This is of utmost importance, since “the ‘real’ and the virtual are not separate experiential realms” (Lewis et al., 2016, p. 1465), the practices that are displayed discursively in ProAna worlds and Incel communities have material consequences. For pro-anorexics and Incels, their respective communities are a means through which they cope with life’s grievances, which are very much real and deeply entangled with their perception of their own life as well as the world surrounding them.

By studying how pro-anorexics and Incels communicate about their struggles, not only inferences about their discursive and affective practices (which cannot always be clearly delineated) can be drawn, but also about subliminal structures of everyday discourse. As I demonstrated for both communities, their respective metaphors are strongly informed by the socio-cultural norms in place of the societies in which they emerge. Therefore, the metaphors used by either community can give a hint about problematic practices – which were thought to have been left behind – that are still very much shaping and informing whole discourses and societal norms. The metaphors employed in ProAna worlds for instance mirror the still very pervasive idealization of the slender woman, whereas Incels’ metaphors have their basis in patriarchal and anti-feminist traditions. This demonstrated that there is still a lot to be worked through in order for women to truly have agency over their bodies and appearance, as well as for women to be seen as fully equal in society.

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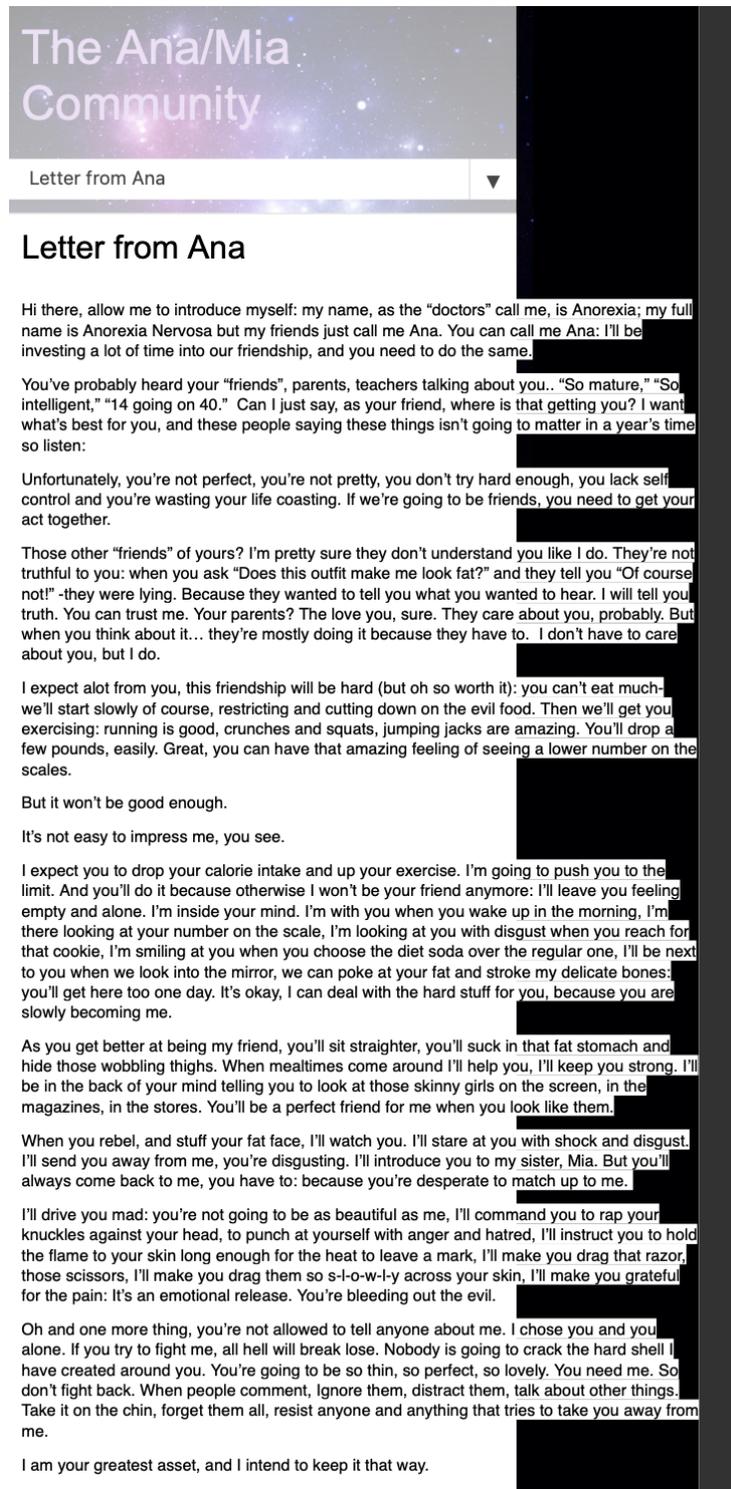
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# Appendix

## Appendix A



The Ana/Mia Community

Letter from Ana

### Letter from Ana

Hi there, allow me to introduce myself: my name, as the "doctors" call me, is Anorexia; my full name is Anorexia Nervosa but my friends just call me Ana. You can call me Ana: I'll be investing a lot of time into our friendship, and you need to do the same.

You've probably heard your "friends", parents, teachers talking about you.. "So mature," "So intelligent," "14 going on 40." Can I just say, as your friend, where is that getting you? I want what's best for you, and these people saying these things isn't going to matter in a year's time so listen:

Unfortunately, you're not perfect, you're not pretty, you don't try hard enough, you lack self control and you're wasting your life coasting. If we're going to be friends, you need to get your act together.

Those other "friends" of yours? I'm pretty sure they don't understand you like I do. They're not truthful to you: when you ask "Does this outfit make me look fat?" and they tell you "Of course not!" -they were lying. Because they wanted to tell you what you wanted to hear. I will tell you the truth. You can trust me. Your parents? The love you, sure. They care about you, probably. But when you think about it... they're mostly doing it because they have to. I don't have to care about you, but I do.

I expect alot from you, this friendship will be hard (but oh so worth it): you can't eat much- we'll start slowly of course, restricting and cutting down on the evil food. Then we'll get you exercising: running is good, crunches and squats, jumping jacks are amazing. You'll drop a few pounds, easily. Great, you can have that amazing feeling of seeing a lower number on the scales.

But it won't be good enough.

It's not easy to impress me, you see.

I expect you to drop your calorie intake and up your exercise. I'm going to push you to the limit. And you'll do it because otherwise I won't be your friend anymore: I'll leave you feeling empty and alone. I'm inside your mind. I'm with you when you wake up in the morning, I'm there looking at your number on the scale, I'm looking at you with disgust when you reach for that cookie, I'm smiling at you when you choose the diet soda over the regular one, I'll be next to you when we look into the mirror, we can poke at your fat and stroke my delicate bones; you'll get here too one day. It's okay, I can deal with the hard stuff for you, because you are slowly becoming me.

As you get better at being my friend, you'll sit straighter, you'll suck in that fat stomach and hide those wobbling thighs. When mealtimes come around I'll help you, I'll keep you strong. I'll be in the back of your mind telling you to look at those skinny girls on the screen, in the magazines, in the stores. You'll be a perfect friend for me when you look like them.

When you rebel, and stuff your fat face, I'll watch you. I'll stare at you with shock and disgust. I'll send you away from me, you're disgusting. I'll introduce you to my sister, Mia. But you'll always come back to me, you have to: because you're desperate to match up to me.

I'll drive you mad: you're not going to be as beautiful as me, I'll command you to rap your knuckles against your head, to punch at yourself with anger and hatred, I'll instruct you to hold the flame to your skin long enough for the heat to leave a mark, I'll make you drag that razor, those scissors, I'll make you drag them so s-l-o-w-l-y across your skin, I'll make you grateful for the pain: It's an emotional release. You're bleeding out the evil.

Oh and one more thing, you're not allowed to tell anyone about me. I chose you and you alone. If you try to fight me, all hell will break lose. Nobody is going to crack the hard shell I have created around you. You're going to be so thin, so perfect, so lovely. You need me. So don't fight back. When people comment, Ignore them, distract them, talk about other things. Take it on the chin, forget them all, resist anyone and anything that tries to take you away from me.

I am your greatest asset, and I intend to keep it that way.

source: <https://theanamiacommunity.blogspot.com/p/letter.html> (accessed 03/14/2023)

## Appendix B



source: incels.is (downloaded 03/08/2023)

