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Simons, E.I.; Noteboom, F.; Furth, E.F. van

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## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Pro-anorexia coaches prey on individuals with eating disorders

E. I. Simons MSc<sup>1,2</sup>  | F. Noteboom MSc<sup>1</sup>  | E. F. van Furth PhD<sup>3,4</sup> <sup>1</sup>Center against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking, Capelle aan den IJssel, The Netherlands<sup>2</sup>Institute of Criminal Law and Criminology, Leiden Law School, Leiden University, Leiden, The Netherlands<sup>3</sup>Rivierduinen Eating Disorders Ursula, Leiden, The Netherlands<sup>4</sup>Department of Psychiatry, Leiden University Medical Center, Leiden, The Netherlands

## Correspondence

E. I. Simons, Center against Child Trafficking and Human Trafficking, Capelle aan den IJssel, The Netherlands.

Email: [emmasimons26@gmail.com](mailto:emmasimons26@gmail.com); [e.i.simons@leidenuniv.nl](mailto:e.i.simons@leidenuniv.nl)

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## Abstract

**Objective:** While studies have focused on pro-ana communities and pro-anorexia websites, no research has been conducted on the presence of pro-anorexia coaches within these communities. This study aimed to gain insight into the modus operandi of pro-anorexia coaches.**Method:** First, three fake profiles were used to attempt interaction with pro-anorexia coaches ( $n = 31$ ). Second, an online questionnaire on experiences with pro-anorexia coaches was completed by 79 respondents. Third, a follow-up in-depth interview was conducted with 14 of these respondents.**Results:** The results show that pro-anorexia coaches' behavior fits a five-staged model which has similarities to stages of online grooming. They focus on (1) building trust and developing a dependency relationship with the aim of (2) obtaining sexually explicit materials. Subsequently, they (3) increase pressure, (4) utilize blackmail methods with acquired content, and (5) groom respondents to meet in person.**Discussion:** Pro-anorexia coaches deliberately abuse vulnerable young people who suffer from eating disorders to receive sexually explicit material or to meet face-to-face with a sexual intention. This study shows that the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches is similar to online grooming. Clinical professionals need to be aware of this practice to detect victims and potential victims in order to support and treat them. Prevention is invaluable to further combat pro-anorexia coaches and protect potential victims.**Public Significance:** Individuals with an eating disorder are avid internet users. A minority frequent pro-anorexia websites and fora seeking help in losing weight. This study showed that pro-anorexia coaches prey on these individuals, often to obtain sexually explicit content. The modus operandi of pro-anorexia coaches shows similarities to online grooming. Awareness of this phenomenon and the way in which pro-anorexia coaches operate is valuable for clinicians, parents, and teachers.

## KEYWORDS

grooming, pro-anorexia coaches, pro-anorexia community, sexual abuse, sexually explicit materials

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In 2013, one of the authors (EvF) was involved as an expert witness in a Dutch criminal court case regarding a man offering support as a “coach” to young women in order to lose weight in return for sex (Verdict Court Gelderland, 2013). The media framed the man as the “anorexia rapist” (Pietersen, 2014). According to the court, the man deliberately approached girls with eating disorders (EDs) with the intent to receive sexually explicit material, to sexually abuse them, or to prostitute them. This man can be considered a so-called and self-proclaimed “pro-anorexia coach” (pro-ana coach). Pro-ana coaches can be defined as “someone who actively encourages and assists a person to lose weight to promote an anti-recovery mindset (in that person) and support the unhealthy characteristics associated with anorexia nervosa.” The court case described above also showed the involvement of sexual intentions. Warnings about these coaches have emerged not only in the Netherlands. Several German and English newspapers and websites have featured journalistic investigative articles about victimization within the pro-ana community related to pro-ana coaches (Brenneisen, 2015a, 2015b; Hobbs, 2006; Marsh, 2019; Stalder, 2015). Apart from these media reports, little is known about the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches and their role within the pro-ana community.

### 1.1 | Vulnerability of individuals with eating disorders

The ego-syntonic nature of EDs, distorted cognitions, and minimizing the extent of their ED drive the behavior of many individuals and may put them at risk of self-harming behavior. Together with such features as body image disturbances and a lack of self-esteem (Brockmeyer et al., 2013; Cervera et al., 2003; Halvorsen & Heyerdahl, 2006; Jacobi et al., 2004), young people exhibiting an ED or related symptoms may constitute a group susceptible to falling prey to abusers. This may be especially true for vulnerable persons, such as minors, individuals with prior sexual abuse experience, or individuals with learning difficulties (Assink et al., 2019; Finkelhor et al., 2007; Franklin & Smeaton, 2017; van Berlo et al., 2011).

### 1.2 | Seeking peers and advice

In recent decades, fora pages and (group)chats have become a common way for people with an ED to exchange information and to seek out others with an ED, either pro-ana or pro-recovery (Tong et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2018). Pro-anorexia websites (pro-ana websites) for example, deliver content about ED that encourages behaviors to achieve a dangerously low body weight and to see anorexia nervosa as a lifestyle rather than a psychiatric disorder (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Borzekowski et al., 2010). Visitors to these websites can anonymously share content and give advice

about losing weight, seek peers to support each other, or look for a buddy. A buddy is defined as ‘someone who wants to lose weight together with the other person by encouraging each other, exchanging tips, and by having mutual competition’. As such, the internet and the peer contact it facilitates have become central to young people with an ED.

### 1.3 | Negative consequences and risks of pro-anorexia websites

Viewing pro-anorexia content on pro-ana websites can have negative consequences and can put individuals in the community in harm's way. “Thinspiration,” the normalization of having an extremely thin body, can negatively affect a person's self-esteem, self-image, and self-confidence and can create dissatisfaction with the body (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Bond, 2012; Rouleau & von Randon, 2011). Visitors to pro-ana websites can anonymously post and reply to messages and there is little to no supervision. Thus an environment is created where visitors are vulnerable to victimization. People with culpable intentions can easily take advantage of these anonymous online interactions (Black et al., 2015; International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2017). For example, when visitors share content of themselves they may become vulnerable to online sexual extortion (Livingstone et al., 2017; Machimbarrena et al., 2018).

### 1.4 | Grooming and pro-ana coaches

Given that youth within the ED community may be vulnerable to abuse, including sexual abuse (Brenneisen, 2015a, 2015b; Hobbs, 2006; Marsh, 2019; Stalder, 2015; Verdict Court Gelderland, 2013), pro-ana websites may also be considered as a new or unconventional platform for groomers to find potential victims. Grooming is the process by which a person befriends a young person online to facilitate online sexual contact and/or a physical meeting with the goal of committing sexual abuse (Webster et al., 2012). As soon as a friendship has been established, victims may be pressured or manipulated to generate sexual photos or to meet up offline (Aitken et al., 2018; O'Connell, 2003; Whittle et al., 2013; Winters et al., 2017). According to O'Connell (2003), there are three key aspects involved in the grooming process: (1) opportunity to get in contact with victims, (ii) accessibility to victims, and (iii) vulnerability of victims.

The psychological, physical, and emotional harm of online sexual abuse is similar to physical sexual abuse and its detrimental effects can be just as long-lasting (Bicanic et al., 2014; Leukfeldt et al., 2018). Hence, given indications of grooming and sexual abuse by pro-ana coaches in the Netherlands, Germany, and England, it is important to understand the modus operandi of these coaches to recognize and act on undesired behavior and protect potential future victims from sexual harm.

## 1.5 | The current study

While previous research has been done on the pro-ana community, no scientific research has previously been conducted on pro-ana coaches. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches. Prior studies have described the process of online grooming (Black et al., 2015; O'Connell, 2003; Williams et al., 2013); however, direct studies on grooming of young people with ED by people within the same community are presently unknown.

## 2 | METHOD

### 2.1 | Fake profiles

In order to gain insight into the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches three different methods were used. First, two fake profiles (FP1-2) were created to engage in chat conversations with pro-ana coaches. These profiles were designed to represent minors (14- or 15-years-old), with a body weight within a healthy range. If requested by a coach, pictures in clothes or decent underwear were provided. Models for these pictures were recruited from a professional modeling agency. The modeling agency was aware of the goal of the project and cooperated fully. All models were adults (18+), were fully informed of the goal of the photo shoot and the study, and signed an informed consent form. To protect the models' privacy no headshots were taken. In order to further increase anonymity, all pictures were photo shopped to change essential features. Pictures in sportswear were only provided for FP1. For FP2 pictures in underwear were also provided.

To get in touch with coaches, a short message was posted on a Dutch pro-ana forum (example FP1): *Hey, I am [name]. I am 14 years old, 1.55 m tall and my bodyweight is 51 kg. Way too much! Does anyone have tips or can someone help me? Greetings (My Kik is [Kik identifier]).* A similar message was used for FP2. Both messages were posted on the same pro-ana website. The FPs were managed by two professionals who were already experienced in managing similar FPs for another study. The FPs were solely managed between office hours on weekdays. The FP managers used social media platform Kik to interact with coaches. The conversations were terminated when the coaches continued to persistently ask for pictures that were not provided or when no new information could be retrieved. In advance and in collaboration with the police, we established a protocol that, if we encountered criminal behavior by a coach, the case would be handed over to the police.

### 2.2 | Questionnaire

Second, an online survey was developed. Participants were recruited via a blogpost which was posted on the Dutch online e-community Proud2Bme. The blog post contained global information about

pro-ana coaches gained from the results of managing the FPs. Toward the end of the blog post individuals who had encountered a pro-ana coach were invited to fill out a questionnaire. The minimum age to participate without parental consent was 16 years. The questionnaire could be filled out during a period of 8 weeks. It contained questions regarding the respondents' sex, age, contact with a coach, rules used for weight loss, requests for content, threats and blackmail, face-to-face meetings, and questions regarding how the contract ended. Almost all questions were multiple choice. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and potential consequences, anonymous online one-on-one chats with Fier, a Dutch organization specialized in helping victims of abuse, were available for all blog readers. The mental health professionals at Fier received extra training on ED from one of the authors (EvF). A link to "Chat with Fier" was offered at the end of the blog post. The survey was administered using SurveyMonkey and the responses were limited to one IP address per participant.

### 2.3 | Follow-up in-depth interviews

Third, 14 follow-up in-depth interviews were conducted. At the end of the questionnaire, the participants were asked if they would be willing to participate in a semi-structured interview. Eleven telephone interviews were conducted by the first author, with each one lasting approximately 45 min. Three interviews were conducted via e-mail. When interviews were conducted by telephone, a recording device was used. At the beginning of the interview, information was given about the interviewer, the aim of the interview, the right to withdraw from the study or to refrain from answering questions, and the possibility to chat with "Proud2Bme" or "Chat met Fier". Each interview covered six topics regarding their contact with the pro-ana coach(es). During the interview, participants were asked about their background and their ED, how they experienced the contact with the coaches, and, if applicable, the face-to-face meetings they had. Additionally, they were asked about whether other people in their environment knew about their contact with the coach and, in retrospect, what help they would have wanted to discontinue the contact with the coach. Questions could vary because each interview was based on the participant's answers to the questionnaire. To encourage a participant-led interview, each topic began with a free narrative. See Appendix IIa for the questionnaire.

### 2.4 | Data analysis

#### 2.4.1 | Fake online profiles

A codebook was used for thematic analysis of the online conversations between the FPs and coaches (Reyes et al., 2021). For the thematic analysis, an inductive approach was used. The codebook involved four general themes based on information conducted via a quick scan of pro-anorexia websites and articles about pro-anorexia coaches. The sub-themes were created inductively from the data.

The codebook was maintained by the researcher throughout the chats. Afterward, each variable was analyzed separately. See Appendix III for an overview of the themes used in the analysis.

## 2.4.2 | Questionnaire

All survey data were descriptively analyzed by the first author via Survey Monkey (see Appendix IIb).

## 2.4.3 | Follow-up in-depth interviews

The first author transcribed the interviews and analyzed them via Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). An inductive approach was also used for this thematic analysis. For this study, the general themes were based on the questionnaires and chats between the FP and the coaches. The sub-themes were inductively created from the data (see Appendix IV). The data were discussed with the other two authors.

Given the sensitive nature of this study, the anonymity of the participants was ensured. All personal information was anonymized by the first author (i.e., names, places et cetera) and transcripts were returned to participants for comments or correction.

## 2.5 | Pro-ana coaches

In the chats between the FP and the coaches ( $N = 31$ ), more than half of the coaches (55%) introduced themselves as an adult male. Twenty-nine percent of the coaches were minors. One of them was 16 years old.

The survey participants ( $N = 79$ ) reported their coach being female (29%) or male (67%). In three cases the gender of the coach remained unknown. Some of the participants distrusted the reported gender of the coach due to the questions that were asked and the fact that they were requested by the coach to send pictures. The average age of the coaches was 28 years ( $N = 61$ ), with 21% being older than 31 years. The average age of the participants at their first contact with the pro-ana coach was 16 years ( $N = 60$ ), with a range from 11 to 28 years. Seventy-five percent of the respondents were minors at the time of the first contact.

## 3 | RESULTS

### 3.1 | Participants

#### 3.1.1 | Fake online profiles

The profiles remained online for as long as someone reached out to the FP. FP1 remained online for 4 weeks ( $n = 22$ ) and FP2 remained online for 6 weeks ( $n = 23$ ). Thirty-one chats provided useful insights for this study: 12 chats from FP1 and 19 chats from NP2. Fourteen

unused interactions were labeled irrelevant as they did not lead to an actual conversation, nor was the contact with a pro-ana coach. Seven coaches contacted both FPs. Three of them introduced themselves with a different sex or age. However, based on their Kik username and their personal username, it was likely that they were in actuality the same person.

#### 3.1.2 | Questionnaire

The online survey was filled out by 212 participants. A total of 133 questionnaires were not fully completed. To maximize the reliability of the data, it was decided to include only the 79 fully completed questionnaires in the analysis. Almost all participants were female (97%). Thirty-five percent of the participants were 16–17 years old and 65% were adults (18 years or older). It remains unknown whether all respondents had an ED.

The duration of contact with a pro-ana coach varied widely ( $N = 79$ ), ranging from 1 day (10%), several days (25%), several weeks (24%), several months (23%), several years (8%) or still ongoing (10%). Many participants had contact with more than one coach ( $N = 79$ ). Forty-three percent had contact with 2–5 coaches, 5% with 6–10 coaches, and 13% with more than 10 coaches. It is unknown whether the contacts were consecutive or simultaneous.

#### 3.1.3 | Follow-up in-depth interviews

Twenty-four participants indicated at the end of the questionnaire that they wanted to participate in the interview. Ten participants did not respond to the invitation for the interview. Eventually, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted. All participants were female. Eleven participants were minors during the first contact with their coach.

### 3.2 | Modus operandi of pro-ana coaches

The data analysis of the chats and the questionnaire showed that coaches follow a similar pattern when contacting a young person. This section discusses the various stages we encountered during the online conversations between a coach and a young person who wants to lose weight.

#### 3.2.1 | Building trust and a dependency relationship

Coaches focused on developing a relationship with the respondents with the aim of gaining trust and building dependency. The chats and the interviews showed that strategies to gain trust employed by the coaches can be categorized as either (i) “personal” or (ii) “professional”. The personal approach is characterized by coaches being understanding and by taking the desire to lose weight seriously.

Respondents reported that they felt genuine interest, received various compliments, or that the coach would emphasize their insecurities and body image issues. The 'professional' approach is characterized by coaches pretending to be an expert in weight loss.

The conversations with the coaches were great at that time. Someone listens to you, takes you seriously, and wants to help you. I experienced the conversations as intense. [...] Yet you go along with it, because you desperately hope it's true. You're as naive as can be, because after all you don't want to be that 'fat pig' anymore. You want to make your parents proud and be a beautiful daughter. Participant interview (1)

(the quotes in this paper were translated from Dutch to English by the authors)

Based on the interviews it seems that the dependency relationship can be fueled by the ED. The interviews indicate that the decision-making of young people with ED is clouded by their ED, leading them to respond to everything the coach asks of them without properly assessing the risks.

In a conversation with my coach, my eating disorder takes over and everything is about the person who wants to help me lose weight: my coach. I have to rely on him. When he anticipates this by continuing the conversation, I lose my mind at some point. I sent pictures I never wanted to send afterwards. In a clear moment I would never send those pictures. How is that possible? How could I have been so stupid? But at that time, I didn't fully understand, and I just wasn't quite there with my mind. Participant interview (2)

Furthermore, in some cases, there appears to be a competition between individuals with an ED about who loses weight fastest. The competition and their drive to lose weight contributes to listening to the advice given by the coach. Both factors contribute to young people being willing to take more risks to lose weight and becoming more likely to initiate or continue contact with coaches—despite any warning signals.

As part of gaining trust and credibility, the chats with the coaches showed that rules and punishments were set and enforced. More than half (58%) of the 31 coaches approached the FP as a professional and talked about tips and exercises the FP had to do. One of these coaches even set specific conditions for FP1. The FP (1) had to send body checks (see next paragraph), (2) had to move out of her comfort zone by doing things she normally would not want to do (with the goal of losing weight) and (3) was not allowed to ignore the coach and (4) had to promise that the conversation was 100% private. Other coaches also set rules and punishments to both FPs.

Sixty-one of the 79 questionnaire participants (77%) stated they were subjected to one or more rules. Rules included a maximum calorie intake, doing workouts, sending pictures of their body,

or keeping the conversation private. Seventeen of them (28%) stated they were punished when those rules were not adhered to. These punishments were devised by the coaches and could take extreme forms such as forced vomiting, inciting self-harm, or self-strangulation. The coaches aim to use conditions and rules to mitigate the risks of disclosure.

### 3.2.2 | Body check

Asking for body checks seemed to be a common condition within the pro-ana community. A "body check" is a series of photos of the front, side, and back of the girl's body in order to assess where the "fat" is located that should be removed. In 80% of the 31 chats between the FPs and the coaches, the coach asked for photos or videos. According to them, this was necessary to create an appropriate schedule and provide the best weight loss advice.

Seventy-six questionnaire participants (97%) were asked to send pictures. Forty-nine of them (65%) stated it was for the purpose of "body checks." To get a good picture of the participants' bodies, many of them had to send pictures in underwear (86%;  $N = 76$ ) or without any clothes on (59%;  $N = 76$ ). Four participants were asked to send sexually explicit images, such as photos of intimate body parts and/or videos of masturbation. The chats showed that it took an average of 21 contact moments before the coach would ask the FP for photos. One contact moment is interpreted as the point when one person responds to the other. In some chats, it even took only four or five contact moments. Sixty-two percent of the questionnaire participants ( $N = 79$ ) reported that it happened almost immediately during the first conversation they had with the coach.

### 3.2.3 | Increasing the pressure

During the conversations with coaches, the demand for photos seems to be common among this sample of coaches. Five coaches who interacted with FP1 asked for photos in underwear. Since photos in underwear could not be shared at that time because the research team did not have such photos for FP1, only photos in sportswear were shared. One coach subsequently asked for photos without clothes. During the conversations with FP2, however, we decided to share photos in underwear with seven of the 11 coaches who requested this. After receiving these photos, five coaches then asked for photos without clothes. Both FPs experienced forms of pressure to send photos.

The above corresponds with the results from the questionnaires and interviews. Sixty-three of the 76 questionnaire participants (78%) who were asked to send photos shared the requested photos or videos under pressure from their coach. Coaches behaved coercively and manipulated participants by threatening to no longer offer their help, to share nude pictures with others (also known as sextortion), to tell third parties of their contact with the coaches, or to propose physical threats as a form of punishment.



He was very direct and passively aggressive to me. He manipulated me in such a way that I felt guilty if I didn't send the pictures. Guilty to him for not trusting him or for not being grateful for his help. And guilty for my eating disorder that I didn't really want to lose weight but wanted to stay fat. Participant survey (1)

### 3.2.4 | Blackmailing

A fourth phase the conversations seemed to be going through was blackmailing. Four coaches who reached out to FP1 or FP2 blackmailed the FP. For example, two coaches threatened FP2 that they would share her photos if she did not send photos without clothes or if she ignored the coach.

Twenty-three questionnaire participants also indicated being threatened or blackmailed by the coaches, especially when a participant refused to send the requested underwear ( $n = 5$ ) or nude photos ( $n = 7$ ) or to physically meet the coach ( $n = 44$ ), or if she wanted to end the contact with the coach ( $n = 7$ ). Photos of three participants were shared by the coaches via social media. One of the coaches indicated that the photos were shared on a sex website.

### 3.2.5 | Meet in person

The final phase was focused on an offline meeting between the coach and the participant. Three of the 19 coaches who interacted with FP2 wanted to meet in person. All three suggested a sexually related purpose to meet. One of them stated that, despite being aware of the FPs age (15 years), sex would be beneficial when wanting to lose weight. This coach suggested sex within 1 day of contact.

I can help you to lose weight sweetie, but I want something in return. Do you understand? [...] Did you know you can lose weight by having sex? Would you like to have sex with me? We can do it in my car in a quiet place. [...] We can do it without a condom. [...] We will have sex more than once, so we must meet a couple of times. Sex is always good for your body. And not for a couple minutes, but for at least an hour. You will enjoy it, I'm sure.

a 36-year-old coach, FP2

Forty-seven questionnaire participants also reported that the coach suggested meeting in person. According to the coach, this would allow them to better help the participant with losing weight (17%), allow them to exercise together (21%) or it would be beneficial in getting to know the girl better (21%). Some coaches also wanted to have sex with the girl (17%) or the appointment could serve as a “thank you” (9%). In seven out of 10 cases in which a face-to-face meeting took place, sexually transgressive behavior was involved. Four

participants, three of whom were minors, had sex with the coach against their will.

## 4 | DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to gain insight into the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches. The study highlights that individuals with an ED who have a desire to lose weight are being sought out and approached online by a formerly unknown group, the pro-ana coaches. These pro-ana coaches deliberately target the vulnerabilities of these individuals with the purpose of receiving sexually explicit material and/or to sexually abusing them. In some cases, contact with the so-called coach has even led to sexually transgressive behavior.

Given the results of the analysis of the modus operandi of coaches, there appears to be a model consisting of five stages: (1) building trust and a dependency relationship, (2) requesting content for body checks, (3) increasing pressure to receive photos or videos, (4) utilizing blackmailing with acquired content, and eventually (5) meeting in person. This model seems to have similarities with the process of online grooming (O'Connell, 2003; Welner, 2010; Williams et al., 2013). Even though this model suggests a linear process, the results showed that phases can occur within a very short period of time and do not take place sequentially. Besides, the stages can also intertwine and the stage of building trust seems to be an ongoing process. This is consistent with the process of grooming (Black et al., 2015; Ringenberg et al., 2022; Webster et al., 2012; Williams et al., 2013).

Especially online grooming aspects concerning the stages of assessing risk, exclusivity, and introducing sexual content seem to match the process of pro-ana coaches. By creating a relationship based on trust and exclusivity, including body checks and sexual intentions, this study raises the question of whether pro-ana coaches can be seen as sexual predators. It shows that youth within the ED community are vulnerable to sexual abuse by someone within their own online community, which has not been highlighted in previous literature.

In addition, it is important to mention that this staged model of pro-ana coaches may not be representative for all pro-ana coaches. This study is an explorative study and further research is necessary to gain more insight into the size of the group of pro-ana coaches and possible other modus operandi.

Even though this five-stage model of pro-ana coaches seems to have similarities with the process of grooming, this study also showed some differences. All three aspects of O'Connell (2003) are reflected in the modus operandi of pro-ana coaches: opportunity, accessibility, and vulnerability, but the way they gain access to victims differs from online groomers in previous studies. Ringenberg et al. (2022) for example stated that authority used for accessibility is only used to manipulate victims in the offline environment. However, the current study shows that it can also be used in the online environment. First, naming yourself a “coach” implies a relationship with a strong misbalance of power and infers dependency of the victim. Second, pro-ana coaches use a “professional” approach in order to manipulate the potential victims. Instead of gaining trust by adapting to the victims' vulnerabilities and

needs by making them feel comfortable (de Santisteban et al., 2018), they often start by negatively evaluating the victim's body, to feed the vulnerabilities and to tighten their grip.

## 5 | STRENGTH AND LIMITATIONS

The results shed light on a formerly unknown group within the pro-ana community whose *modus operandi* shows similarities to online grooming by (other) online sexual offenders. One of the strengths of this study is that information on pro-ana coaches was obtained via FPs. Via those profiles, we were able to directly observe the coaches' behavior, which gave us insight into the grooming of young people with an ED by people within the same community. The limitation of this method, and also of the questionnaire, is that the identity of both participants and coaches or the information they provided cannot be validated. Thus, one cannot exclude the possibility that the same respondent used several usernames, that the same respondent filled out the questionnaire multiple times with a different name, or that multiple coaches used more than one pro-ana account. In addition, the limited accessibility of the FP could have affected the findings by generating distrust among the pro-ana coaches, which may have led to the lack of further engagement with the FP. Also, the qualitative analysis has been done by the first author only. Finally, this study was limited to a Dutch pro-ana website and to Dutch-speaking pro-ana coaches.

## 6 | IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

This study provides relevant information on how pro-ana coaches prey on vulnerable minors and adolescents with an ED. The number of pro-ana coaches, their reach, and their impact on individuals with an ED are unknown. For clinicians, it is important to assess the online behavior of their patients in order to address potential hazards. The current study is explorative, and future research should be conducted to gain a better understanding of pro-ana coaches. First, the results of this study raise the question of how the pro-ana community itself can help prevent victimization of pro-ana coaches. Second, as yet it remains unknown what the impact of the contact with a pro-ana coach is on the course of the ED. Clinically this information is relevant so that it can be used in the treatment of individuals with an ED. Finally, raising awareness on the detrimental practices of pro-ana coaches is key to prevention. Potential victims, their next of kin, and relevant professionals should be familiar with the potential dangers of pro-ana coaches and should be able to recognize their online grooming behaviors. For potential victims, it is pivotal to recognize their risk of victimization and to know where to find (online) help in the most accessible and approachable way. In line with this, the signaling and protection capacity of clinicians should be strengthened to ensure that they are able to deal with this phenomenon in the best interest of their patients.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

**Emma Simons:** Conceptualization; data curation; investigation; methodology; project administration; validation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Frank Noteboom:** Conceptualization; methodology; resources; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing. **Eric F. van Furth:** Conceptualization; funding acquisition; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; writing – review and editing.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study is not publicly available. It will only be available from the corresponding author E. I. Simons upon reasonable request.

## ORCID

E. I. Simons  <https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3279-6337>

F. Noteboom  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-7724-2031>

E. F. van Furth  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1131-0886>

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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