



That's so OCD: The effects of disease trivialization via social media on user perceptions and impression formation



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 21 March 2015

Keywords:

Obsessive–compulsive disorder
Impression formation
Social media
Gender
Computer-mediated communication

ABSTRACT

Informal discussions of mental illness take place every day in social media. In the case of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), in particular, widespread use of the hashtag “#OCD” indicates that social media users often trivialize the disease. The present study used a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ between-subjects fully factorial online experiment ($N = 574$, recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk platform) to test the impact of trivialized framing of this disease on perceptions of social media users who employ such language, as well as on perceptions of people with OCD as a group. Additionally, this study tested the effects of the gender of the Twitter avatar and self-identification in the avatar biography as an individual with OCD on these perceptions. Three-way analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) assessed the impact of the manipulations (i.e., content frame, gender of the avatar, self-identification with OCD). Results indicate that language use, gender, and self-identification influence impression formation in a social media environment.

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1. Introduction

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) can bring together individuals from far and wide to the same online space. In this space, both the content of messages and identity cues sprinkled through avatar and profile choices can influence the impressions users form of each other. In the case of social media use that includes content related to the oft-stigmatized realm of mental illness, these content and identity cues gain added significance. They can help determine if users are educated about a mental illness, if users will join together to help raise awareness or funds for a disease, if a mental illness is collectively mocked or stigmatized, or if other users disassociate themselves with the users who treat a disease in a flippant nature.

In the case of obsessive–compulsive disorder (OCD), in particular, widespread use of the hashtag “#OCD” indicates that social media users often trivialize the disease. Research indicates that a disease can be trivialized in three distinct, yet related, ways: Oversimplification of symptomology or causes, skepticism about severity, and through overuse of humor, mockery, or levity to describe the condition (Pavelko and Myrick, 2015). Yet, little empirical work has tested how disease trivialization impacts other social media users' impressions of those who use trivial language

or hashtags in regards to OCD – a condition that impacts more than 2.2 million people in the United States (National Alliance on Mental Illness, 2012).

Furthermore, it is important to consider cues in users' profiles that may also influence impressions and perceptions of social media messages related to OCD, in addition to the effects of the framing of the condition. Therefore, both the gender of the Twitter avatar and his or her self-identification as someone with OCD are manipulated in this study in order to test the effects of identity cues on social media users' perceptions of disease severity, desired social distance from individuals with OCD, liking for the Twitter user, and identification with the Twitter user. This study contributes to the literature on online impression formation by analyzing the impressions social media users form about individuals associated with a stigmatized condition. Additional contributions are made to the literature on mental health communication by analyzing the possible effects of social media content on perceptions of both disease severity and individuals with a mental illness.

2. Literature review

2.1. Mental illness and society

Whereas the impact of legacy media framing and coverage of mental illness (e.g., news and entertainment via channels such as print and television) have been shown to impact society's

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impressions of people with a mental illness, little work has looked at the impact of social media on these outcomes. Understanding how social media shape perceptions of mental illness is important because those with a mental illness face an uphill battle for social acceptance. Individuals without a mental illness often choose to keep a distance from this stigmatized group. For instance, [Martin, Pescosolido, Olafsdottir, and McLeod \(2007\)](#) found that many Americans are hesitant to personally interact, or have their children interact with, children with mental illness. The label of mental illness is so strongly associated with mediated examples of violence and danger that people often reject the idea of social contact with such individuals in order to protect themselves and those they care about. [Smith and Cashwell \(2011\)](#) showed that the general public, in comparison to mental health professionals, holds more negative attitudes about and desires greater social distance from the mentally ill.

2.2. Media representations of OCD

In contrast to the common media depictions of those with a mental illness as dangerous and to be feared (e.g., [Hewitt, 2008; Stuart, 2006; Wahl, 1995](#)), OCD often serves as a source of comic relief in media portrayals. In fact, mainstream media is lacking portrayals of OCD that demonstrate to the audience that OCD is an anxiety disorder, instead focusing on repetitive actions that generate easy laughs from the audience ([Cefalu, 2009](#)). Mental illnesses other than OCD are rarely portrayed with such flippancy, which raises the question of why OCD is such a common target for comedic representations. [Cefalu \(2009\)](#) argues that the disparity between the seriousness of purpose with which most compulsive actions are undertaken and their largely frivolous nature sets up OCD as an easy target for comedy. Incongruity theory of humor posits that joke-making relies on cognitive dissonance, meaning, “you laugh when something creates disorder and then quickly and happily resolves that disorder” ([Cefalu, p. 47](#)). The desire to carry out seemingly insignificant rituals and compulsions is often juxtaposed with the perception of heavy consequences and insufferable obsessive thoughts. [Cefalu](#) explains that this mix of the solemn and the superficial is what fosters comedic portrayals of OCD in society.

Persons with OCD are fully aware that their obsessions and compulsions are irrational, yet feel powerless to stop them ([Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2013](#)). [Cefalu \(2009\)](#) argues that this lack of free will could provide another rationalization for why OCD is so often depicted as trivialized comic relief. Couple this loss of control with the rigidity of the repetitive, unrelenting behaviors, and this produces a backdrop for comedy. Without having a clear understanding of OCD as a two-part disorder, one that includes obsessive thoughts that drive compulsive behaviors, persons with OCD can come across as strange, impractical characters, whose absurd actions are good for a laugh.

2.3. Online impression formation and a trivialized disease

According to [Pavelko and Myrick \(2015\)](#), disease trivialization involves three components: oversimplification of symptoms or causes, skepticism about the severity of the disease, and/or mockery/levity. Grounding the present study in research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) and online impression formation provides insight as to how trivial social media content related to OCD may impact the ways in which other social media users form impressions about users who create such content and about people with OCD in general. Past literature on impression formation in cyberspace questions how the absence of visual and auditory cues impacts the interaction and impressions formed during online communication. [Jacobson \(1999\)](#) established that in virtual

communities, impression formation is influenced by the choice of the user’s pseudonym, the description of the virtual character, and the content of messages exchanged. In fact, cues as minimal as a brief biography or a profile picture can have a drastic impact on the quality of impressions that people form about one another online ([Tanis & Postmes, 2003](#)).

Such examples comprise the crux of [Walther’s \(1992\)](#) social information processing theory, which states that there are various ways for people to form relationships through the nonverbal communication inherent to online encounters. Additionally, social information processing theory highlights the individual cognitive processing of information rather than joint, social processes. The present study focuses on the juxtaposition of social media content about a trivialized mental illness with identity cues embedded in a social media profile (gender and self-identification as a member of an out-group) impact both impression formation related to individual social media users and to individuals with OCD. CMC is all but free from influences from the social, the cognitive, and the physical ([Tanis & Postmes, 2003, p. 692](#)). With the advent of social networking sites, once anonymous online user accounts have transformed into detail-orientated personal profile pages. Research by [Utz \(2010\)](#) established that people tend to present themselves online in a positive manner, and that it is far easier to construct an idealized self-presentation online than during face-to-face communication.

2.4. Framing of OCD on Twitter

Based on the explication of disease trivialization including messages that oversimplify, depress the severity of, and/or mock a medical condition, it is then possible to identify how messages framed in a trivial manner may impact others in one’s mediated social network. Previous research shows that Twitter is a viable platform for the process of framing and resulting effects to take shape ([Wasike, 2013](#)). A content analysis of tweets from both the nation’s top newspapers and major TV stations revealed that social media editors (SMEs) share common frames, such as a focus on human interest pieces, when reporting the news via Twitter. [Wasike](#) also established that personalized content was a commonality among the SMEs, which comes as little surprise based on the community aspect of Twitter and the flexibility to follow specific individuals to create a niche environment. [Park, Rodgers, and Stemmler \(2013\)](#) applied framing techniques directly to issues of health literacy by content analyzing tweets from various health-related organizations. The study established that the complex, multidirectional communication available via Twitter fosters public discussion, health literacy promotion, and shared resources. It is therefore the intent of the current research to use this atmosphere to measure how a frame that trivializes mental illness affects perceptions of exposed Twitter users.

Through the discussion of trivialization, it is important to identify the counter frame – the use of clinical language. The term clinical denotes an objective observation and treatment of disease, with a focus on realistic patients and patient care (“Clinical,” n.d., para. 1). Using OCD as the example, the clinical definition presents the illness as a psychoneurotic disorder characterized by compelling obsessions, compulsions, or both, where sufferers experience extreme anxiety and depression (“Obsessive-compulsive disorder,” n.d., para. 1). The focus on patient wellbeing therefore represents a certain level of decorum and sincerity built into the clinical definition of any disease. A clinical frame should, thus, include references to the symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment of disease.

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