



A content analysis of an online pro-eating disorder community on Reddit



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 June 2017

Received in revised form 2 January 2018

Accepted 2 January 2018

Keywords:

Disordered eating

Social media

Reddit

Content analysis

Social support

Eating disorder symptoms

ABSTRACT

Pro-eating disorder communities provide a refuge for individuals with eating disorders (EDs) who are ambivalent about seeking treatment. We investigated a pro-ED community on Reddit, an anonymous social networking platform with topical forums, to identify expression of behaviors aligned with ED symptoms and support for these behaviors. A content analysis on four weeks of topic-specific discussion threads ($N=125$ comments, 115 replies to comments) was conducted to identify behaviors consistent with ED psychopathology and support for these behaviors (informational, tangible assistance, esteem/emotional support). Results indicated that the content aligned with expressions of clinically relevant ED psychopathology, with eating concerns (49/125) and shape concerns (47/125) being most prevalent. The majority (92/115) of replies provided esteem/emotional support to the comment author. Online interventions and/or recovery programs are needed to counteract reinforcing dialogue that occurs on social media sites, like Reddit, and promote ED recovery through supportive messages on these platforms.

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1. Introduction

Eating disorders (EDs) are complex psychiatric disorders with a range of associated mental and physical health symptoms (Wade, Keski-Rahkonen, & Hudson, 2011). Up to 70 million people worldwide suffer from an ED (i.e., anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, binge eating disorder, or other specified feeding or eating disorder; Compan, Walsh, Kaye, & Geliebter, 2015), and most (95%) individuals with EDs are between the ages of 12 and 25 (Arseniev-Koehler, Lee, McCormick, & Moreno, 2016; Swanson, Crow, Le Grange, Swendsen, & Merikangas, 2011). The estimated lifetime prevalence of EDs in females is 4.2 times the prevalence in males (Qian et al., 2013). Girls aged 15–19 years, often considered the “highest risk” group for EDs, have seen an increased incidence of anorexia nervosa over the past decade, which is particularly concerning because this disorder has the highest mortality rate of all mental disorders (Smink, Van Hoeken, & Hoek, 2012). Despite these

alarming figures, less than 20% of individuals with EDs receive treatment (e.g., Swanson et al., 2011).

Low treatment utilization could be attributable to such factors as denial of eating problems by the individual, lack of problem recognition by professionals, and stigma (Swanson et al., 2011). In lieu of traditional ED treatment (e.g., psychotherapy, residential treatment programs, pharmacotherapy), many individuals with EDs gravitate to anonymous Internet-based forums where they have an opportunity to seek camaraderie while maintaining their offline secrecy and isolation (Gavin, Rodham, & Poyer, 2008; Tong, Heinemann-LaFave, Jeon, Kolodziej-Smith, & Warshay, 2013). As sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) writes, people need “sympathetic others”: those who share the same social stigma and help to normalize behavior and experiences in spite of appearances and self-doubt. Studies have shown that females exposed to thin or anorexic content on various media platforms have significantly higher negative body image (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2002). The Internet has been shown to use such content in order to reinforce unrealistic beauty standards, such as the thin ideal, which can negatively affect body image (Irving, 2001; Slater, Tiggemann, Hawkins, & Werchon, 2012).

Of particular concern is the widespread existence of online pro-eating disorder (pro-ED) communities that promote and

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sometimes even encourage disordered eating behaviors (e.g., harmful weight loss or eating control practices) and often shun recovery. Evidence from multiple studies examining pro-ED content online has shown that viewers of pro-ED websites have increased body dissatisfaction, increased eating disturbance, lower self-esteem, poorer ED-related quality of life and perceive themselves as heavier than they are (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008; Juarascio, Shoaib, & Timko, 2010; Peebles et al., 2012; Steakley-Freeman, Jarvis-Creasey, & Wesselmann, 2015). Moreover, systematic content analyses have found that pro-ED websites tend to display “thinspiration” material and explicitly discuss how to engage in ED behaviors, while few websites provide recovery-oriented information (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles, 2010). Previous research has analyzed the content and nature of pro-ED communities on various social media platforms including blogs, Facebook, and Twitter (Arseniev-Koehler et al., 2016; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015; Juarascio et al., 2010). One study in particular sampled 45 pro-ED Twitter profiles and identified that their networks tended to be saturated with followers who similarly tweeted content that promoted ED-related behaviors, which signals a potential to encourage a pro-ED identity (Arseniev-Koehler et al., 2016). According to a 2006 survey of ED patients, 35.5% reported visiting pro-ED websites; of those, 96.0% learned new weight loss or purging methods from such sites (Wilson, Peebles, Hardy, & Litt, 2006).

The risks of unfettered pro-ED content online may be best understood through the lens of behavior change and communication theories. Bandura (1989) social cognitive theory, for example, purports that modeled behaviors are more likely to be adopted when message receivers can relate to the model and perceive rewards with the communicated behavior. Vulnerable users may adopt conveyed behaviors not only when they admire online peers but also if they are repeatedly exposed to images of successful models, celebrities, and even real people with life-threatening and dangerously low body weights. Cultivation theory, developed by communication scholar George Gerbner, posits that when messages are pervasive and repeated, individuals with higher exposure levels are more likely to accept the conveyed messages as normative (Heath & Bryant, 2000). Therefore, frequenters of pro-ED online groups may perceive extreme dieting and exercise as normal rather than symptomatic of a dangerous disease. Engagement with pro-ED sites has been shown to negatively influence self-esteem and self-efficacy (Bardone-Cone & Cass, 2007), as well as encourage adoption of high-risk behaviors (Ransom, La Guardia, Woody, & Boyd, 2010). Further, interacting with pro-ED content online may put vulnerable individuals at risk for developing EDs (Rodgers, Lowy, Halperin, & Franko, 2016).

According to the Media Practice Model (MPM), individuals with stigmatized conditions, such as EDs, often turn to social media for guidance on life choices and accordingly disclose information on social media that reflects actual behaviors and traits or behavioral intent (Moreno & Whitehill, 2012). Increasingly popular with young adults (see Reddit, 2016), Reddit differentiates itself from other social media sites by promoting “throwaway accounts” and pseudonyms to facilitate anonymous discourse (van der Nagel & Frith, 2015). Prior analysis of mental-health related discourse on Reddit suggests that posts from “throwaway” accounts are more disinhibited, and are associated with increased negativity, lowered self-esteem, cognitive bias, and self-attentional focus compared to other social networking platforms. Additionally, online disinhibition of this nature has been shown to draw more emotional and instrumental feedback through commentary, with lowered inhibition and self-attention focused posts receiving greater support (De Choudhury & De, 2014). Reddit now hosts more than 10,000 anonymous online communities (known as “subreddits”) pertaining to user-generated topics and interests. Each subred-

dit has a moderator who engages regularly with subscribers and/or posts content that stimulates engagement (e.g., posting a “check-in” that asks subscribers to post about how they are feeling). Group members may also anonymously reply to posts. The open yet anonymous discourse uniquely facilitated by Reddit provides a natural refuge for individuals with stigmatized conditions.

To our knowledge, there has been no prior research analyzing pro-ED content on Reddit. In this study, we conduct a content analysis of a relatively large subreddit (>5000 subscribers) that describes itself as an online community for “people who engage in disordered eating behaviors but are not interested in working toward recovery.” Themed conversations, initiated by the community moderators, are posted with a new theme for every weekday. These themes do not vary from week to week and are primarily intended to stimulate and focus discussions among subscribers of this online community on topics that are related to pro-ED beliefs and behaviors. In recognition of the unique structure of this pro-ED online community and in order to make a contribution to existing social media studies examining ED discussions, we dissected the responses of individuals to moderators’ themed topics and honed in on the ED symptoms being discussed to examine the extent to which they aligned with symptomatology that could meet criteria for an ED diagnosis if it were professed within a clinical interview. The examination of ED psychopathology within a pro-ED social media community has not yet been accomplished and is a unique contribution to the social media content analyses of this nature. Moreover, we subsequently analyzed the reactions to comments containing ED psychopathology that came from other subscribers within this online community to delineate the specific types of social support offered back to the individual who posted the comment. In this way, we are able to comprehensively examine the social networking occurring between individuals on a platform that has not yet been studied for pro-ED content and that differs in structure from other social media platforms because of the moderator who oversees discussions within this community and works to steer all posts to be interchanges that promote ED psychopathology. Despite what would seem to be prominent negative content and themes, research has also suggested that online communities are complex structures that frequently provide a supportive function (De Choudhury & De, 2014). It is unclear the degree to which participants in this online forum actively seek and receive support. By analyzing the content of this subreddit, we hypothesize that subscribers to this group will not only reflect ED psychopathology but also engage in validated support elements. Given that EDs have the highest mortality of any mental health disorder, analysis of online community interactions among those with ED pathology is timely and important for development of novel treatments and outreach.

2. Method

The discussion threads and comments from the subreddit under study were publicly available. As such, this study was classified by the University’s Institutional Review Board as research not involving human subjects and was therefore not subject to institutional review board jurisdiction. Subscriber usernames as well as the name of the subreddit have been omitted from this report to protect the identity of these individuals and to maintain the ethical integrity of this study. Example quotes in the tables have likewise been slightly altered.

2.1. Data collection

Moderators of the analyzed subreddit post a discussion thread on a specific topic every weekday (Fig. 1). The topics of these

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