#Recovery of Eating Disorders on Social Media

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to create a grounding understanding of the sensitive topic of eating disorder recovery (EDR) on social media.

This paper analyzes shared information on Instagram, trying to understand how the EDR community works and how this term is constructed by affected users.

Moreover, existing psychological research shows that there is no clear definition of recovery so far: "A longstanding problem in the field is that there are almost as many different definitions of recovery in eating disorders as there are studies on the topic." (Bardone-Cone et al., 2018, p.1). Thus, the perspective of the affected persons themselves could point out a helpful direction. Additionally, there already has been research regarding eating disorders on social media. However, the recovery of eating disorders has rarely been studied.

Design/methodology/approach

The study was conducted using a mixed-method approach. To obtain representative results, data was scraped from Instagram every four hours for two weeks, using a self-written crawler. This process took place between the November 16-30, 2018. Like Gerrard (2018) said, „hashtags are the most visible form of social media communication and important for community-building" (Gerrard, 2018, p.2). Therefore, four hashtags were searched, which covered different areas of the eating disorder spectrum. Those hashtags (#recovery, #edrecovery, #anarecovery, #miarecovery) consisted of topic hashtags and sentiment-topic hashtags (Wang, Wei, Liu & Zhang, 2011, p.1032).

Over twelve days, 7031 postings were collected. After cleaning the data set by removing duplications and other languages than English and German, the final sample included 2698 postings. The data were then adjusted and qualitatively analyzed, concerning the three

components picture, caption and hashtag. By specializing on the sharing person, interactions with other users via comments were deliberately omitted.

Findings/expected Findings

Within the study implementation, the focus was in a first step on the three components picture, caption and hashtags and afterwards on all three areas as an entity. It was possible to make issue-specific observations which could be regarded as typical for the EDR-Community. Concerning the posted pictures, homogeneous contents were found, which allowed a clear division into the three distinct groups. Visually, the role of food played the most significant role. Also, selfies and comparison pictures were shared, which reflect the topic of recovery from eating disorders.

Regarding the caption, both the content and the form of expression were examined. The open manner in which private, sensitive information was discussed was striking, as was the great role of mutual support. Interactions with followers were recognized independently from comments.

The hashtag analysis revealed the use of topic related hashtags, community oriented hashtags and descriptive hashtags. In particular the usage of Pro-ED (pro eating disorder) related hashtags for recovery posts, attracted attention.

One of the main findings of this study showed, that the health community of EDR can be divided into four contribution types. Those are based on the interaction of the three components picture, caption and hashtag and contain specific characteristics. The largest category is "the eating diary", second "the proof of eating", third "the personal experience/transformation" and last "quotes".

Furthermore, answers could be found within the data regarding the role of mental problems resulting from the membership of the EDR community or the distinction between contributions of the ED-Community and the EDR-Community regarding the high proportion of food.

Research limitations/implications

By focusing exclusively on the shared Instagram data, no contact was made with affected persons. In a follow-up study, this perspective could be used to answer open questions which arose from the data. This limitation is to be overcome with a follow-up study.

Furthermore, at the time of the study, the data were publicly accessible without the usage of a profile. Now a lot of eating disorder related hashtags were banned or deleted, which also affects the EDR-Community. Followed by that, some hashtags are not available anymore. Also, Instagram developed further access restrictions that prevent viewing sensitive content and selected hashtags without a profile. This includes the four search criteria of this paper as well.

Practical implications and/or Social implications

Sensitive topics like recovery are important because of their huge impact on today's society. Trying to understand the personal thoughts of affected users to help them and to find better solutions, could support the decision-making process for social media provider.

Since sensitive content containing eating disorders is now completely blocked and deleted, it is even more important to look at the recovery community. Pro-ED content is sometimes shared with recovery hashtags, which could lead to a negative impact on this community.

It is helpful to understand the ERD-Community in order to protect it. Due to the great role of support among each other, destroying this community could have fatal consequences. As previous studies have shown, both mutual support and helpful contact with "sympathetic others" in the same situation would be more difficult to find and access (Sowles et al., 2018, p. 137).

References

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