# Exploring the role of illness identities on social media: A mixed methods approach

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## Background

- Sharing information has become a growing part of online engagement, especially within online subcultures.
- Social media has become a key site in mental health promotion. In which online communities have contributed to by creating mental health related hashtags, anti-stigma campaigns and promoting the self-help genre.
- But is mental health all that we talk about?
- It's possible that online engagement and identity construction may stem from the emergence of 'therapy culture' which became prevalent in the 1980's (Furedi, 2004).
- This could be leading to everyday problems becoming medicalised and framing issues as emotional problems.
- Olteanu et al's (2016) study, highlights fundamental questions that current literature continues to ignore including: Why might an individual choose to disclose their illness online? As well as whether or not they are being truthful about their disclosure.

## Aims

- The aims of the study is to develop a better understanding of how mental illness categories emerge on social media and how the language is used and has adapted over time.
- To understand the meanings and cultural value of illness labels and their relationship with online identities.
- To explore the historical emergence of certain keywords and how they've travelled across social media platforms e.g. trauma, triggered, resilience.
- To understand how these trends operate within western cultures, specifically within the UK and North America, where the majority of the research stems from.

## Method

- This study uses a Netnographic Content Analysis (NCA) to explore the above aims.
- It uses a combination of Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) and Netnographic methods.
- This enables the researcher to study social media platforms, whilst also tracing the historical emergence of words like trauma.
- In this study, both Twitter and Tumblr's mental health communities were observed.
- #mentalhealth was explored across both platforms, enabling the researcher to map out co-related and occurring hashtags.
- A handful of mental health hashtags were observed, including e.g. Trauma
- 1000 tweets per week were downloaded, and approximately 50 Tumblr posts per week were screenshot and uploaded into Nvivo and subsequently coded.
- Further data collection included 30-50 open-ended qualitative interviews, which are still taking place via Zoom or Skype.

**Figure 1.** This is a thematic map containing examples of prevalent themes identified during data collection so far. This figure was created using Mindnode software.
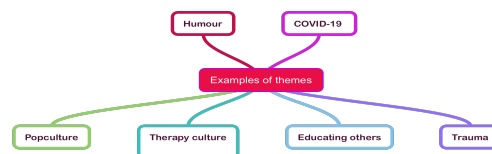


**COVID-19:** "Social distancing makes us see other humans as threats. This is essentially human induced trauma."-Twitter

**Popculture:** "Perks of Being a Wallflower" is a perfect example as to why we should avoid romanticising trauma and start romanticising good taste in music instead"- Tumblr

**Therapy Culture:** "Talking to my therapist about my childhood sleep trauma might have made my sleep anxiety worse or perhaps it's just pure coincidence?"-Twitter

**Trauma:** "Being introverted can be a trauma response to previously having your words and feelings invalidated"

**Humour**- Tumblr (GIF)



**Educating others-** Tumblr



## Preliminary analyses

- From the data collected so far, I can draw on 3 main preliminary analyses:

1) **Light Vs Dark:** This is a metaphor for comparing the sites Twitter and Tumblr. Twitter is the more acceptable face of the two, often where users post during the day. Tumblr in comparison, is a lot seedier and darker in terms of it's humour. Users will often post late at night or during the early hours.

2) **Self-presentations:** Goffman's description of 'self-presentations' can be applied in an online context due to our endless exposure to an archipelago of online identities, that we can try out and present according to the formality of each platform.

3) **A loss of meaning:** In our post-modern world, we have moved away from contemporary foundations like religion and family, which pointed towards something beyond the self. As a result, modernity promotes individualism and self-obsession, which could be why people find meaning in other things like illness labels.

## References
1. Furedi, F. (2004). Therapy Culture: Cultivating vulnerability in an uncertain age. London. Routledge.
2. Olteanu, A., Castillo, C., Diaz, F., & Kiciman, E. (2016). Social Data: Biases, Methodological Pitfalls, and Ethical Boundaries [Online]. Available at: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2886526 [Accessed on February 20th 2020].