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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Understanding the countermovement to online presentations of psychiatric disorder that are perceived as "faked"

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ABSTRACT

Background: The self-presentation of psychiatric disorders on social media has generated a countermovement of sceptics who believe some are "faked" for reasons of self-promotion. This has been the focus of a Reddit forum called r/FakeDisorderCringe, an active community with almost 300,000 members. Given the influence of online discourse on public attitudes, understanding which diagnoses attract the most scepticism and what conversational themes surround these concerns is important in understanding lay controversies in mental health.

Methods: We used topic modelling using Latent Dirichlet allocation, a natural language processing technique, to analyse over 850,000 forum posts from August 2020 to December 2022 to identify the main topics.

Results: Topic modelling identified 15 topics, of which several identified specific disorders: anxiety, depression, OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder), ADHD (attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder), autism, Tourette's syndrome and tics, and DID (dissociative identity disorder). Other topics included faking and attention-seeking, school and childhood context, trauma and abuse, validity of self-diagnosis, medical research evidence, gender identity and sexuality, profanity, and sarcasm-laden commentary.

Conclusions: This scepticism does not mirror previously identified public doubts about the legitimacy of specific diagnoses and seems to more commonly focus on conditions that have seen a recent increase in diagnosis in young people.

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1. Introduction

There has been a recent transformation in public discourse relating to mental health problems. In the last 15 years, charities and public health bodies have run large-scale campaigns aimed at improving mental health literacy and reducing stigma in the general public, with some success (Song et al., 2023). At the same time, many more people, particularly young people, are reporting and presenting to services with mental health problems (Cybulski et al., 2021; Keyes & Platt, 2024; Slee et al., 2021). If more people are now identifying and seeking help for problems that previously went under-reported, this is, in part, a positive development (Foulkes & Andrews, 2023). However, there are also problematic consequences of this changed public discourse, particularly with regard to scepticism (Underhill

& Foulkes, 2024). Specifically, some individuals are sceptical of self-reports of mental health problems, believing them to be overinterpretations of common distress or deliberately "faked" (Dixon-Ward & Chan, 2022; Underhill & Foulkes, 2024).

Opposition to self-presentations of psychiatric disorder that are considered "faked" has been the focus of a forum called r/FakeDisorderCringe on the online discussion platform Reddit. This forum, or subreddit, which describes itself as focused on "Cringe content displaying people obviously faking or glorifying disorders" was created in August 2020 and hosts screen captures, quotes, and videos, where subreddit participants identify the original poster as "faking" their presentation. This is a sizeable community. At the time of writing, the r/FakeDisorderCringe subreddit has almost 300,000 members, is in the top 1% of

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subreddits by size, and has garnered national press attention (Dawson, 2023; Mellor, 2021).

r/FakeDisorderCringe often focuses on videos and excerpts from other platforms, particularly the social media platform TikTok and the microblogging site Tumblr, both of which have a culture of communities based around confessional mental health content (Haltigan et al., 2023). Professional concerns around mental health content on these sites have focused on inaccurate mental health information (Lookingbill et al., 2023), behavioural contagion (Giedinghagen, 2022) and the mental health impact on users (Chao et al., 2023). However, it is clear that an important concern among some sections of the public has been the use of online platforms to apparently “fake” disorders for personal or social advantage (Mulcahy, 2023; Taylor et al., 2024).

Concerns about authenticity are not evenly distributed across diagnostic categories, however. Public surveys, albeit largely conducted before many social media platforms were popular, indicate that schizophrenia is most likely to be perceived as a “genuine” mental illness compared to substance use disorders, which are typically rated as the “least genuine” (Angermeyer et al., 2013; Link et al., 1999). More recently, academic authors have documented scepticism focused towards online presentations of dissociative identity disorder (Greene et al., 2023), psychological trauma (O'Connor et al., 2024) and self-diagnosis of neurodivergence (David & Deeley, 2024). This scepticism is not simply a reflection of broader societal doubts about the validity of mental ill health but also indicates there is public concern around how disorder labels are used and potentially misused in self-presentation online.

Analysis of lay discourse on mental health most commonly focuses on its societal effects through its effect on promoting or challenging stigma (Zayts-Spence et al., 2023). Nevertheless, lay debates about mental health also impact policy and professional decision-making through constructing a “culture” of mental health that prioritises values, issues and problems (Morant, 2006; Ohlsson, 2018). Consequently, understanding public controversies is important in comprehending the role mental health plays in society and how mental health discourse becomes embedded in broader cultural narratives that govern what is considered normal, acceptable, or legitimate.

One challenge in understanding the thematic components of r/FakeDisorderCringe is the sheer size of the forum, which contains many hundreds of

thousands of comments that would be infeasible to analyse or classify using qualitative research methods. An alternative approach is topic modelling, a natural language processing methodology that uses statistical data mining to identify themes in large corpora of text (Gillings & Hardie, 2023).

Consequently, we used topic modelling to identify the topics of discussion in the r/FakeDisorderCringe subreddit and understand the components of the online countermovement to presentations of psychiatric disorders that are perceived by forum participants as “faked.”

2. Methods

This study was approved by the University College London Research Ethics Committee (Project ID CEHP/2024/604). Data from the r/FakeDisorderCringe subreddit was downloaded from a mirror of the PushShift archives – an online archive of Reddit posts designed for academics that covers the period from the beginning of Reddit to the point at which public access to fora was withdrawn. Therefore, the archive covers user-generated posts made between Reddit’s inception (20th August 2020) until the last archived post, dated 31st December 2022, consisting of 991,963 posts. The subreddit r/FakeDisorderCringe is an open forum that at the time of data collection described itself as focused on “Cringe content displaying people obviously faking or glorifying disorders.”

Deleted or removed posts, posts by known and probable bots (those from usernames ending in “bot” or “robot”) and posts solely consisting of bot feedback interactions (e.g. “good bot,” “bad bot”) were removed. Normalisation – a process of converting text to lower case; removing punctuation, non-alphanumeric characters and web links; and converting accented characters to unaccented characters – was applied.

Latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) is a widely used computational method for topic modelling and text summarisation, using a probabilistic model to automatically discover latent topics in large collections of text (Blei et al., 2003). It assumes that each text fragment within a collection of texts is a mixture of various topics, and each topic is a distribution of words. LDA identifies how words co-occur across texts and iteratively adjusts topic assignments to maximise the likelihood of the observed data, fine-tuning estimates about which words belong to which topics until the model best matches the words found in the texts. It produces a series of topics, each characterised by a series of high salience words that both statistically

associate with the topic and most distinguish it from other topics.

The standard natural language processing pipeline (Manning & Schütze, 1999) was implemented using Python 3.11 on a Linux x86_64 platform and is illustrated in Figure 1. English corpus stop words from the Natural Language Toolkit (NLTK; Bird et al., 2009) were removed and bigrams were generated from the subsequent text. The text was lemmatized using the spaCy library (Honnibal & Montani, 2017) and the “bag of words” model (Zhang et al., 2010) was applied to create a dictionary.

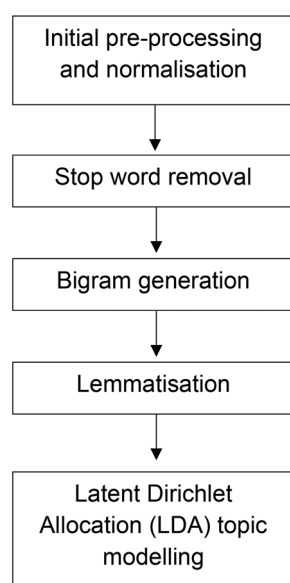


Figure 1. Natural language processing pipeline for analysis of text.

Topic modelling was applied using LDA (Blei et al., 2003) implemented in the gensim library (Rehurek & Sojka, 2011). LDA analysis was completed for 5 to 30 topics with UCI coherence score (Newman et al., 2010) recorded for each analysis. Candidate solutions were identified by examining the coherence plot using the elbow method (Khalid & Wade, 2020) and the interpretability of each solution was examined using LDavis (Sievert & Shirley, 2014). LDavis identifies salient words that most characterise each topic based on a balance between the frequency of the word within the topic and uniqueness to that topic. This balance can be adjusted by selecting a lambda value, with lambda values closer to zero prioritising words that distinguish topics, and lambda values closer to one prioritising high frequency words within topics. A lambda value of 0.6 was selected which has been identified as an optimal balance for interpretability (Sievert & Shirley, 2014).

The analysis is available as a Jupyter Notebook (Rule et al., 2019), a document that combines code and the output in a form that can be re-run and reproduced. All data, code, and output is available on the online archive: https://github.com/vaughanbell/fdc_analysis

3. Results

Out of an initial 991,963 comments, 850,274 were left after pre-processing. Posting frequency over the time period of the archives is illustrated in Figure 2. From the plot of coherence scores, 15-, 20- and 23-topic

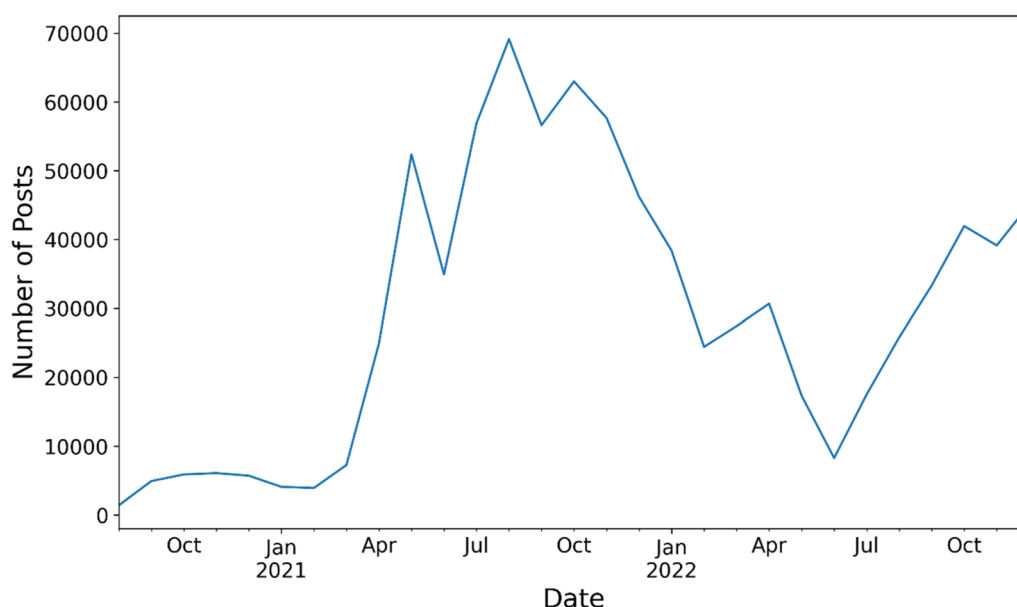


Figure 2. r/FakeDisorderCringe posting frequency.

solutions were retained and the 15-topic solution was selected as having the highest level of interpretability.

Topic salient terms were assessed by the study authors and interpretation labels were generated using a “close reading method” where topics were considered in light of the original text (Gillings & Hardie, 2023). The most salient terms for the alternative solutions (20 and 23 topic solutions) are included in [Tables S1 and S2 of the supplementary material](#) and the online archive.

As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the 15 identified topics were faking and attention-seeking, trauma and abuse, childhood and school, self-diagnosis vs diagnosis, visual commentary, medical evidence, making mental illness “quirky,” videos and TikTok, autism and ASD, tics and Tourette’s, DID and systems, gender identity/sexuality, subreddit policies, profanity-laden commentary, and sarcastic commentary. These topics reflect a wide spectrum of discourse, ranging from focus on specific disorder claims, to individual experiences and identities, to broader issues of credibility, representation, and platform governance.

4. Discussion

We conducted a topic modelling analysis of over two years of comments from the r/FakeDisorderCringe subreddit, which critiques online presentations of perceived “faked” psychiatric disorders to identify components of this discourse. The analysis identified 15 topics, including specific disorders like anxiety,

depression, OCD, ADHD, autism, Tourette’s, tics, and DID. Other themes included faking and attention-seeking, self-diagnosis validity, trauma and abuse, the role of medical evidence, gender identity and sexuality, and profanity- or sarcasm-laden commentary. These findings reveal how perceptions of legitimacy, diagnosis, and identity intersect with broader societal attitudes and internet culture in online controversies about mental health.

It is important to note that this study is not able to assess to what extent individuals identified by r/FakeDisorderCringe as “faking” actually have inauthentic presentations of mental and behavioural disorders or, conversely, are accurately describing their difficulties. Instead, this study aimed to understand which disorders and diagnoses are most discussed by sceptics in this particular community and which conversational themes are present with, support, and interact with this discourse. It is also worth noting that while topic modelling identifies themes, it does not identify the depth and range of the discourse itself. For example, it is clear from material on the forum that trauma and abuse discourse can variously consider published evidence for the role of trauma and abuse as causal factors in mental ill health, scepticism regarding the authenticity of an individual’s online presentation of trauma, and discussion over whether genuine trauma and abuse might be motivating individuals to apparently “fake” their online presentation of mental ill health. Similarity, discourse around gender identity may involve outright

Table 1. Topics identified from topic modelling analysis.

Topic	Interpretation	Most salient terms									
1	Faking and attention-seeking	people	attention	faker	want	community	hate	fake	internet	see	make
2	Trauma and abuse	trauma	experience	brain	cause	abuse	feel	thing	way	situation	happen
3	Childhood and school	kid	friend	year	day	go	parent	school	old	get	child
4	Self-diagnosis vs diagnosis	diagnose	diagnosis	self	doctor	adhd	get	help	therapist	professional	test
5	Visual commentary	hand	eye	head	face	hair	look	wear	get	walk	sleep
6	Medical evidence	disorder	symptom	research	study	rare	source	case	base	information	medical
7	Making mental illness “quirky”	mental	illness	disorder	fun	make	quirky	anxiety	health	depression	ocd
8	Videos and TikTok	video	see	tiktok	watch	say	comment	first	ask	hear	ever
9	Autism and ASD	autistic	autism	word	thank	mean	stim	stimming	speak	understand	people
10	Tics and Tourette’s	fake	tic	know	pretty	tourette	sure	song	seem	think	sign
11	DID and systems	alter	system	character	switch	real	personality	fictive	roleplay	claim	dream
12	Gender identity / sexuality	man	pronoun	gender	woman	tran	use	seizure	identify	white	gay
13	Subreddit policies	post	cringe	sub	joke	satire	op	reddit	comment	rule	account
14	Profanity-laden commentary	fuck	shit	lol	fucking	m	s	dude	eat	stupid	omg
15	Sarcastic commentary	play	love	game	wait	cool	dog	write	girl	guy	read

scepticism regarding claims to transgender identity, discussion of published studies indicating a link between autism and transgender identity, and discussion of subcultural concepts like “transautistic” where non-autistic individuals feel that they should be autistic. Nevertheless, and perhaps unsurprisingly given the declared purpose of the forum, scepticism about specific presentations appears the dominant focus of discussion.

However, it is also clear that scepticism expressed in this forum does not mirror broader concerns about the “genuineness” of psychiatric disorders from previous social surveys of the public (Angermeyer et al., 2013; Link et al., 1999; Swami et al., 2011). Indeed, the focus of online scepticism seems largely orthogonal to these concerns, as neither the diagnoses considered the “most” nor “least” genuine in those surveys (typically, schizophrenia and substance abuse disorders respectively) appear as major topics of conversation in r/FakeDisorderCringe. Concerns on this forum broadly focus on disorders that been shown in studies of diagnoses in clinical services to be diagnosed at sharply increased rates among young people (Cybulski et al., 2021; Russell et al., 2022; Steffen et al., 2020). The extent to which these increases in clinical diagnoses mirror possible increases in underlying prevalence of disorders is a matter of ongoing debate (Lenzen et al., 2025; Richter et al., 2019).

These findings have led to public debate about a “mental health crisis” with much discussion focusing on the extent to which these increases in clinical diagnoses reflect increased engagement with services, over-medicalisation of psychological distress, and/or the development of a mental health “culture” that encourages people to lean on the legitimacy of medical labels for social advantage (Ford & Cross, 2021). Likely all are factors to some degree, but it is interesting to note that the latter is clearly a considerable source of concern for large numbers of sceptics online although has received patchy research attention (Underhill & Foulkes, 2024).

The few studies that have addressed the changing cultural role of diagnosis do report some evidence for a growing mental health “culture” among young people (Acheson & Papadima, 2023). Armstrong et al. (2023) ethnography of how students at British university negotiate mental health labels and deploy self-diagnosis characterised this form of social identification as a collection of “campus technologies.” The authors noted that they act as “a pliable means of negotiating social interaction” that can alternately function as tools for self-discovery, communicate the

need for understanding and empathy, and signal alignment with the widely-discussed “soft boy” archetype in the dating scene that emphasises misunderstood vulnerability. Lindholm and Wickström (2020) qualitative study on how 15-year-olds negotiate mental health labels reported a dynamic relationship with concepts such as anxiety and depression that depended on the context in which they were employed which “transformed them into cultural categories rather than diagnostic categories.”

This study focuses on phenomena that are specific to online environments, in light of concerns that online platforms and communities may influence how illness behaviour presents. For example, research interest has focused on the increase in presentation of tic-like presentations during, and subsequent to, the covid pandemic (Frey et al., 2022). Pre-onset exposure to tics on social media was almost universal in a Danish study (Okkels et al., 2023). A study by paediatric movement disorder specialists reported that such videos frequently presented these tic-like behaviours as Tourette’s disorder but showed few of the features that would be common in this condition (Zea Vera et al., 2022). The extent to which, as a whole, these presentations are differentially explained as involuntary functional neurological symptoms (Frey et al., 2022) or feigning for secondary gain (i.e. “Munchausen’s by internet”; (Giedinghagen, 2022) is an ongoing debate, although we note here that “faking,” rightly or wrongly, has become a common explanation in public debates.

We also note that the lack of research on these social phenomena is a considerable obstacle in better understanding these issues. The simple binaries between “illegitimate” and “legitimate,” “destigmatising” and “self-promoting” likely do a disservice to the complex social processes at play. For example, online communities identified as “pro-ana” (“pro-anorexia”) and “pro-self-harm” have both pathological and harm-sustaining elements as well serving as a source constructive mutual support for the participants (Bell, 2007). Psychiatric diagnoses can be experienced as stigmatising but it is also clear that they can be valued identity labels that individuals become “attached to” beyond their uses in the healthcare system (Lane, 2024).

We note some limitations to this study. Topic modelling identifies broad themes in text but is poor at identifying the complexity of topics being discussed. Online forums themselves often implicitly encourage performativity and polarisation (George, 2024; Massanari, 2017), meaning that r/FakeDisorderCringe may itself encourage of

“displays” of scepticism beyond the committed beliefs of individual participants. Indeed, the extent to which the concerns expressed in this particular forum are representative of wider public scepticism regarding public presentations of mental health problems remains unclear from the data presented here. Furthermore, subreddit posts often contain informal language, slang, abbreviations, emojis, and other forms of noise that can affect the quality of topic modelling. While we conducted a number of preprocessing steps (tokenization, stop word removal, and lemmatisation) these may not fully reduce the amount of noise in the data. Finally, although we present the topics as produced by the analysis, the labelling of the topics was completed by the authors and includes an important subjective element.

In conclusion, we report a topic modelling analysis of a large corpus from the r/FakeDisorderCringe subreddit. Identified thematic components demonstrated scepticism regarding the online presentation of several psychiatric disorders, with conversational themes considering the role of self-diagnosis and perceived motivations of those believed to have “faked” psychiatric disorder.

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