Beyond the backstage:
Stigma resistance and boundary work in the pro-ana community

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Abstract

Media scholars often employ concepts from Goffman's dramaturgical approach to study online communities of stigmatized individuals as a "backstage" -- a refuge from social disapproval. Research of the pro-ana, an online community for people with eating disorders as presented in this paper extends this view. Interviewed bloggers reveal that in order to protect these virtual groups and resist the stigma associated with their illness *and* with their online presence, they construct their own norms and rules resulting in normative front stage behavior in the online realm. Thus, what started as a protective circle of the "own" becomes a complex space in which bloggers shift from backstage to front-stage behaviors by finding support and expressing themselves but also engaging the group's boundary work. This paper contributes to the theoretical development of the study of online communities, specifically to communities of stigmatized individuals.

Keywords

Stigma, eating disorders, social media, norms

Introduction

The internet offers a highly valued opportunity for those with stigmatized illnesses to connect with, learn from, and provide support to others having similar experiences. Scholars often employ concepts from Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to study stigmatized online communities as the "back stage" of the physical life where people of similar experience feel no need to conceal their pathology and can openly seek out one another for support and advice (Adler& Adler, 2008; Corell, 1995; Deshotels & Forsyth; Jenkins et al., 2004 Koster, 2010; Quinn & Forsyth, 2005). This theoretical approach, however, contradicts one common understanding of organization of online communities: norms of language and behavior.

In this paper, the concept of stigma resistance is employed with referral to a specific community: the pro-ana, a community for people with eating disorders (Dias, 2003). The paper continues as follows: first, the concept's stigma (Goffman, 1963) and boundary work (Gieryn, 1983, 1999) are reviewed. After brief description of the case study, these concepts are used to analyze interactions in the community.

Stigma resistance

Goffman (1963) identifies stigma as a "mark" that signals to others that individuals possess an attribute reducing them to "tainted and discounted." To reduce the stigma, a person is likely to devise different methods to deal with the situation. One way would be to seek for sympathetic others or their "own" -- people who share their stigma (Goffman, 1963). Recent research demonstrates that online forum membership for stigmatized individuals alleviates feeling of isolation as they receive social support inspiring an encompassing sense of community (Adler & Adler, 2008; De Koster & Houtman, 2008; McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

As online communities are reliant on self-regulation for survival (Honeycutt, 2005), members must

collectively agree to preserve cooperation by monitoring their own behavior and punishing those who deviate. To maintain group norms, boundaries are formed. Boundary work (Gieryn, 1983, 1999) is defined here as the discursive attribution of selected qualities to online group members, for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between in-group members who consider themselves "authentically" sick and stigmatized and others less "authentic" members who are perceived not to share the same stigma.

The pro-ana: a deviant online community

The pro-ana, an online community for people with eating disorders (hereafter EDs) provides a place for people to receive support, share experiences, and offer encouragement (Harshbarger et al., 2009). As a mental illness, ED carries a stigma. Individuals with ED are portrayed as in denial of their behavior (Dias, 2003) and negative attitudes are held towards them (Mond et al., 2006). In addition to the ED-associated stigma, this online community has been met with public vilification. Health-professionals caution that such venues may trigger vulnerable individuals and encourage EDs (Giles, 2006). Complaints from ED support groups, parents, and the media resulted in blog hosting services shutting down pro-ana websites and blogs (Indvik, 2012; Ryan, 2012).

To provide an analysis of online communication as stigma resistance, this paper relies upon data from interviews with 33 pro-ana bloggers from seven different countries (for methods, see Yeshua-Katz & Martins, 2012).

Findings

To resist stigma associated with their illness and their online presence, community members invest efforts into protecting group boundaries in two ways. First, they monopolize by identifying the "wannarexics"-- people who want to take part in the community but whose credibility as eating disordered might be considered a specific form of a 'newbie' (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). Second, once the boundary-work is in process, a hierarchy is created, and bloggers exclude those who are perceived as wannarexics by blocking their electronic access and removing them virtually from the group.

Forming Group boundaries
Identifying members who do not belong to the group serves as a way to erect boundaries and develop a group identity. One way to identify the "wannarexics" is to judge their information requests, as Nora (26, living with an ED) describes[1]:

> *You can understand pretty quickly when you read a blog, if they have actually experienced what they are talking about. A lot of them for instance write exactly what they eat, and it's usually a lot more than what is normal for someone with ana.*

Fourteen respondents reported seeing themselves as the in-group and said they wish to exclude the wannarexics from the community, as Grace (18, living with an ED) described:

> *They want to know 'tips and tricks', and they're not aware that eating disorders cause severe damage, that they're not a choice. Often, wannarexics can cause people with eating disorders to fall even deeper by feeding their disordered thoughts... And I won't tolerate them.*

Excluding the Wannarexics
To protect the group from the public stigma of encouraging EDs, after identifying the members who do not belong, actions of exclusion take place. Six bloggers reported efforts to label, remove and derogate those felt not to belong. One form of removal is blocking the out-group from online communication, as

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[1] Pseudonyms are used to protect the participants' identities.

Stella (15, living with an ED) described: "Sometimes I get quite angry when they comment on my blog, asking for 'tips'. I usually block them, I just can't imagine anyone willing setting out to destroy themselves because it's 'trendy'."

Another way of exclusion from the group is to send them threatening messages, as Ellie (18, living with an ED) reported: "The girls who are wannabees receive hate mail because people who do actually have an ED are offended. It makes them feel like their ED is belittled."

The most severe example of intergroup derogation is the labeling of another inside the community. In one of the pro-ana forums, blogs that are published by users who were suspected to be wannarexics are screenshot and placed in a separate "wanna list" category. Ellis (27, living with an ED), the administrator of multiple pro-ana sites, described how the labeling process occurs on the websites: "People screenshot the posts and send them in to managers of the websites. (The wanna list)… is enormous, it's been so since 2009 and I think we are close to a million views on it." In the same group, members who were successful at identifying the "wannas" are promoted: "…the way they caught wannarexics on their site. They did such a good job just as members that I had to get them as managers." (Ellis)

Through the employment of "us versus them" language and an explicit exclusion of the wannarexics, the established members of the pro-ana community demonstrate both a growing self-awareness of themselves as a community and a more explicit understanding of how they expect newcomers to behave before they are allowed membership in the group. The in-group members begin to define their interests (for example, their interest in retaining their monopoly by removing those they perceive as harmful to the community) and uphold their rights to maintain their legitimacy as a group and enforce boundaries between themselves and the 'fake'.

Conclusion

By approaching online communities of stigmatized individuals as complex spaces, researchers find new paths for analysis of online interactions. In particular, by accepting the assertion that, as in face-to-face communication, online disembodied interactions include norms of language and behavior, this understanding offers us a legitimate opportunity to study these communities with other sociological approaches. In the online realm, as in physical life, we can expect that human beings have a drive for self-evaluation and desire for social affiliation. This desire for social affiliation, as we can see in the pro-ana case, leads to groups' engagement in boundary-work, to pressure to uniformity and to exclusion of rivals from within.

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