An Analysis of Online Chat Forums and discussions on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder

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Introduction

Little is known about the impact of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on individuals living with Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD).

Emerging literature has been mixed. Survey studies suggest OCD-related anxiety or distress may worsen due to various factors associated with the pandemic.

Online chat forums where posters describe their experiences with mental illness have been shown to elucidate novel phenomena and themes of patient experiences.

No studies to our knowledge have attempted to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communication among various OCD-centered online communities within virtual platforms including Reddit and Quora.

Incorporating applied thematic analysis for studying online OCD-focused communities on public forum platforms, we assessed this environment in relation to the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, through August 2020.

We sought to investigate the perspectives in online communities of individuals living with OCD during the COVID-19 pandemic and study:

- What are the topics discussed on these forums?
- What are the aims of the posters within this community during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Note: This sample set was derived from a larger study that was further worked on and subsequent coding was completed in June 2021 of N > 210.

Methods

Systematic Searching Through Public online forums (Reddit, Quora)

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Identify Posts Discussing OCD symptoms, experiences (N= 210)

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Compile Data (Excel)

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Applied Thematic Analysis for Node Development

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4 Independent Raters Classify Posts Based on Node Structure (Nvivo12)

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Filter Posts Within COVID-19 Pandemic Time Range (N=100)

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Disqualify Repeated or Irrelevant Posts (N=84)

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Analyze Remaining Posts

Results

Authority/ Positionality	n,(percentage of N*)
Essential Worker	1 (1.19%)
Experience with COVID-19	2 (2.38%)
Personal, Self Experience	2 (2.38%)
Experience with OCD	13 (15.48%)
Personal Experience	12 (14.29%)
Self Experience	11 (13.10%)
Second-Hand Experience	1 (1.19%)
Undisclosed or Unspecified	69 (91.67%)

No explicit “clinician/physician” or “not a physician or clinician” nodes were found N*= 84 posts

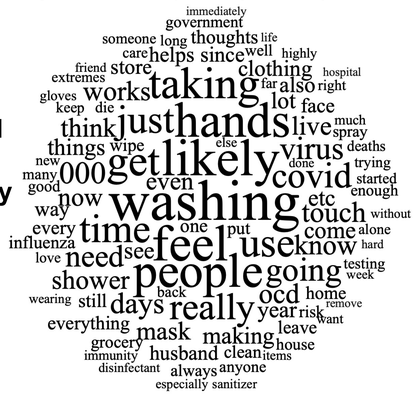
Main Findings:

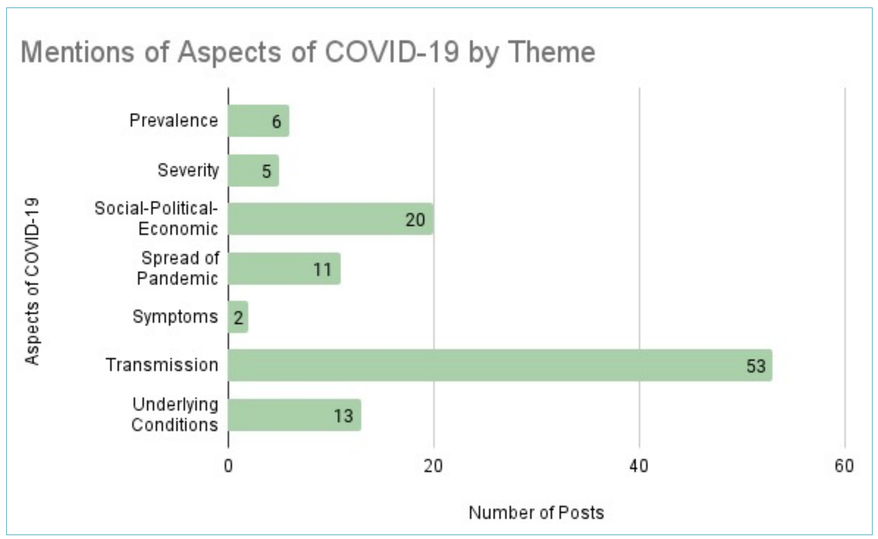
1.) 15% of all posters explicitly stated experience with OCD

2.) The most frequently discussed aspect centered around ”transmission” (~63%), followed by the social, political, and economic impact of COVID-19

3.) Routines and habits were *not always modified* in response to COVID-19

Figure 1: Most Frequent Key Words by Size





Common Themes in “Transmission” related Discussions:

- Worries about hygiene and hygienic routines
- Strategies for “sanitizing”
  - Proper hand washing
  - Changing of clothing, ““changing your outer clothes,”
  - Cleansing exposed body regions
  - “Shower[ing] after shopping,”
- Reassurance versus strain from increased hygiene practices
  - “You can never be too careful”, “[I] had so much health anxiety”
- Helplessness despite increase in hygienic routines
- Indifference to current state of pandemic
  - “I’m not worried about Coronavirus”
  - “for me, COV-19 isn't a direct OCD trigger.”

Conclusion

- Posters expressed their personal perspectives as well as their experiences and whether they have changed their lifestyles in response to the pandemic
- Within this online medium, posters are mostly unspecified in their positionality but provide many unfiltered experiences
- These findings capture perspectives through an early stage of the pandemic, through August of 2020
- Our findings seem to suggest that the lived-experiences of individuals with OCD during the COVID-19 pandemic may continue to evolve and impact clinical care for years to come
- This exploration into the themes of COVID-19 affecting the OCD community can help raise awareness about its impact on individuals living with OCD
- Along with direct surveys conducted in a clinical setting, this qualitative analysis can be utilized to gather a more holistic view of the experiences of those with OCD during the COVID-19 pandemic
- This sample size was derived from a larger data set, whose results may inform us of more plentiful and complex themes discussed on these platforms around the topic of COVID-19 and a greater variety into expressed perspectives

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