Narratives for healing: an exploration of interactions within an online community on navigating bullying trauma

Subhasree Sengupta and Yin Yang

Abstract

Introduction. Online channels can be powerful vessels offering community bonding and support to cope with bullying-induced trauma. Drawing on the theoretical framework of narrative identity, through this initial exploration, we explore the emergent conversational themes of the subreddit (r/bullying) to understand how trauma is disclosed, its impact on the communal identity and the nature of support provided through such online collectives.

Method. Data was collected using the Reddit API (praw) from the subreddit r/bullying. A random sample of 50 comments was analysed using thematic coding for this initial exploration.

Results. A final set of five themes was developed as an outcome of the analysis. These included a wide array of topics ranging from disclosing deep-rooted resentment and trauma to ways of regaining one's self-esteem to cope with psychological stress and struggle. Some themes also covered strategies and resources to develop endurance and resilience.

Conclusions. These initial insights set the stage for unpacking how narrations of bullying and similar traumatic experiences shape and are shaped by information behavior in mediated contexts (such as online channels), which can hold essential perspectives for conceptualizing the future maintenance and sustenance vision of such virtual spaces.

Introduction.

Bullying and other similar incidents of interpersonal harm can severely injure one's self-worth and impair one's ability to function effectively in society (Vanderbilt & Augustyn, 2010). Bullying is an act of domination and often occurs due to deep-rooted resentment, feelings of jealousy, social stigma or a form of perceived inferiority that subjects the one bullied to torment and a depleted sense of self (Einarsen, 1999). Bullying can cause severe trauma and can culminate in several adverse outcomes, which can prove to be damaging to both individuals and society (Brank et al., 2012). Supporting and understanding the bullied individual and their trauma can be pivotal for personal well-being and readjustment (Craig et al., 2007). Hence, finding and creating channels encouraging those experiencing such duress to disclose their experiences becomes crucial to discerning and curbing Bullying (Zych et al., 2015).

In this regard, several studies have indicated how online forums (such as Reddit) offer varied dimensions of support, solidarity, and empathy and help those experiencing traumatic experiences or struggling with self-expression (Kamarudin et al., 2021; Boettcher, 2021; Sengupta & Semaan, 2015). However, community dynamics (including tensions and manifestations of incivility) and norms of information exchange can dictate the type and extent of disclosure (Bilewicz & Soral, 2020; Martey & Stromer-Galley, 2007). While existing scholarship has widely investigated causes and possible mitigation of various types of bullying behaviors, there remains a gap in understanding how online channels (such as Reddit) provide a forum for discussing and processing the impact of Bullying at the individual and societal level.

To address this gap, understanding the type of conversations that manifest through the discourse patterns of these channels in the context of Bullying can play a crucial role in outlining how such online forums can offer empowerment and healing. The framework of narrative identity is a robust framework that outlines the vital linguistic markers that characterize how people construe life stories and, through that, shape their perceptions of self (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Despite the widespread use of this framework to understand conversational dynamics in several social contexts, an understanding of how this framework applies or can be extended to explore information exchange patterns in technology-mediated channels (online forums) remains to be explored, a gap this exploration addresses. Drawing on this framework, we investigated the discourse patterns of r/bullying, which is a commonly used subreddit that focuses on Bullying and associated support. Since the goal is to explore emergent conversational trends, we selected a sample of 50 conversational units to conduct this initial exploratory analysis. The key questions this present study focuses on are:

1. *How does narrative identity manifest through the conversational exchanges of the chosen subreddit (r/bullying)?*
2. *How do community practices and technical features of the online channel impact the perceived narrative identity unfolding in the discourse of r/bullying?*

The key contributions of this initial study are:

1. Providing a novel application and extension of the theoretical lens of the narrative identity framework to investigate how the narration of traumatic life events unfolds within a technology-mediated context of an online forum,
2. Providing a glimpse into how narrative identity construction in cyberspace is impacted by community norms and the technical features associated with such platforms
3. Providing a novel typology of how Bullying and trauma-linked disclosure patterns emerge and color the conversations in online forums can inform a novel extension to existing scholarship on information behavior in cyberspace.

Related work.

This related work section provides a deeper understanding of narrative identity and its link with traumatic information-sharing patterns. Narrative identity is defined as one's internalized and developing life story, which synthesizes characters, plots, and events in the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with purpose, meaning, and unity (McAdams & McLean, 2013; McLean et al., 2018). By constructing life stories, individuals communicate to themselves and others who they are, their experiences, and where they envision their lives heading in the future (McLean et al., 2007). The framework of narrative identity covers critical dimensions of life, such as possessing the agency to change one's life course, as well as an interpersonal layer focusing on the importance of communal care, support and fostering a sense of togetherness (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Adler et al., 2016).

In developing narrative identity, social support (i.e., the material and psychological resources individuals perceive to be available or provided to them when needed) is crucial. Aligned investigations indicate that familial bonds and friendships impact the construction of narrative identity (McLean & Jennings, 2012). Further, de Moor et al. (2021) showed that increasing social support might be associated with the presence of redemption sequences (i.e., reframing a negative experience to convey positive meanings) and self-event connections (i.e., connections between life events and self-concept), two aspects of narratives that are essential for understanding identity development (McLean et al., 2019). Taken together, social support exchanged through conversations with social networks has been found to relate to narrative identity in one way or another, which further motivates this exploration.

Despite its applicability, only a few explorations have investigated how the narrative identity framework manifests through the online landscape's emergent conversational dynamics. These explorations, however, mainly focus on understanding the constituents of online identity as constructed through the narration of life events (Baams et al., 2011; Craig & McInroy, 2014). Synergistic scholarship exploring the use of online forums by LGBTQ+ youth has highlighted an emergent misalignment of real vs. virtual identities, offering insights into how narratives in online spaces act as a way for people to explore and expand their existence, which can have both positive as well as negative ramifications (Emmanuel et al., 2015; Bates et al., 2020). Thus, the mediating impact of technical features and conversational norms that promote or deter the constructed narrative pattern becomes important (Halsema, 2021). While many studies situate identity and its manifestation in the digital context, these are mainly based on self-reported data. Thus, they do not capture how identity negotiations happen through interactions and are constrained or enhanced by community dynamics. Thus, our investigation further builds on these studies by providing a deeper insight into how narrative identity is tied to conversational habits and platform tools, especially in trauma-informed information sharing and support.

Data collection and analysis

Given the premise of this study, we selected a subreddit focused on bullying (r/bullying), which had a similar focus and aimed at the project's vision. Data was collected using the Reddit wrapper (PRAW), which resulted in a set of (990 posts and 6564 comments). Posts here refer to the top-level conversation in a thread that initiates further discussion. The data was pruned to remove any missing data points. While no date and time range for the collection process was specified to allow for a full historical search of retriable data, we report the accessible data based on the API norms, policies, and query limits (Proferes et al., 2021). Table 1 presents further information regarding this dataset.

Number of unique authors	1510
Earliest creation date (Month, Year)	02/2024
Latest creation date (Month, Year)	09/2024
Average score (Posts)	6.74
Average score (comments)	2.07

Table 1: Descriptive characteristics of the entire dataset

To conduct this initial analysis, a random sample of 50 comments was analysed using a thematic coding framework (Williams & Moser, 2019). The authors individually coded the develop the first stage of themes. While coding, each author also noted how the emergent theme aligned or did not align with the narrative identity framework. Initial thematic categories with similar meanings were combined to create or refined based on subsequent discussions and deliberations. For example, the categories of '*offering validation towards redemption*' and '*Redemption in the form of solidarity*' were combined as authors found both categories captured similar linguistic signatures. When mapping constructs from the framework of narrative identity with the emergent themes, the construct most closely aligned with the emergent theme was selected. For example, for a theme on '*despair and hopelessness*,' while both meaning-making and contamination were applicable, contamination was selected given that it aligned best with the overtly hostile tone manifesting in the conversations associated with the theme. The final coding schema had a set of five main themes that best captured the observed conversational patterns of the online forum.

Results.

Next, we describe the five resultant themes from the content analysis.

Exploratory narrative processing through sharing personal anecdotes and experiential wisdom

These conversations allude to personal travails and struggles and often attempt to offer empathy to help others cope with pain and suffering encountered when dealing with trauma while also providing a path for endurance. These conversations thus capture a deep sense of self-processing and self-growth, engaging in catharsis (healing their injuries through bonding with others in their shoes), which aligns with the construct of exploratory narrative processing.

For instance, when commenting on one Reddit user's story of their child being bullied, another user shared a similar experience, laments as they recall painful memories but also offers encouragement by emphasizing the importance of self-preservation as a circumstantially essential survival strategy:

> ...I lost my son to the hands of a school yard bully, and I miss him every damn day!! I believe only fight or punch back if necessary and try and make good decisions. You seem like great parents, so keep up the good work, and I hope things work out for you!!

Redemption through solidarity and advice on survival tactics

These conversations suggest pathways that bullying survivors need to adopt to cope with a painful memory or harm caused by bullying or traumatic experiences. These include strategies for emotional regulation, self-development strategies, and communication approaches (especially if the matters need to be escalated to authorities). These narrations often capture a stand on how to transform the negative experience induced by the trauma into a positive outcome (by seeking redressal or by resisting), the construct of redemption best aligned with these conversations.

For example, the following quote analyses the psychological processes behind bullying and the relevant strategies to deal with bullying.

> *Schools compete with other schools and the amount of damage popular people can do far outranks what loners can do and this is only ever balanced out when media gets involved from things like mass shootings therefore power dynamics will always favour the popular. Curiously the best Anti-bullying approach is actually to sacrifice your own reputation to drag the bully down with you knowing you have a much smaller climb back up as a result of this...*

The author of this comment explains how bullying is a systemic issue of neglect that creates an uneven power dynamic. The discussion on handling bullying provides strategies that can alter the power dynamic by changing response strategies, thereby causing the bully to change their approach.

Contamination through expressions of hopelessness and resignation

These conversations indicate a lack of self-esteem and a feeling of extreme hopelessness and grief. Most of these, similar to the quote below, express a sense of deep resentment and sorrow due to the emotional injury experienced as part of a traumatic event. Hidden in this type of content is a cry for help and support, which may lead other community members to provide support. The excessive negative outlook and self-loathing that emerge through these conversational themes indicate the alignment with contamination. An example comment in this category stated:

> *I am feeling like a failure. I am heavily depressed. I wanted to join another office, interviewed there but haven't heard back yet. I'm losing my mind. I feel so done.*

Meaning-making through acceptance and developing a strong sense of self.

Posts and comments on r/bullying sometimes depict how a person develops a resistive stance when dealing and negotiating with emotionally scarring events such as bullying. Embedded in these conversations are feelings of acceptance, processing of what all a person has tolerated, and, through this, emerges an emotional shield of strength that demonstrates their ability to withstand and move forward with determination. The narrative approach of processing the impact and grasping the key takeaways from the experience aligns with the meaning-making construct of the narrative identity framework.

An example comment (as mentioned below) highlighted the need to break from dysfunctional familial ties as a necessary process to cope with emotional strains and to regain their self-worth:

> *... When we're children, we have no choice and are stuck with family and classmates who bully us. But when we become adults, we have more choice in our lives and can cut ties with bullies much more easily...you have control in most of these situations as an adult and don't have to tolerate such treatment.*

Balancing communion and agency within the online community

Another type of conversation on r/bullying orients to how community members align themselves with other members through either expressing gratitude or handling tensions that may arise as one tries to embed oneself within the community, trying to negotiate the norms and struggles of finding similar others who resonate and understand their reasons for participation. Thus, these narratives capture identity construction as a balancing act between a developing agency or a voice within the online space while negotiating the norms and existing power structures within the online forum. These conversations are best captured through two sub-themes: (a) **acknowledgment of community** and (b) **navigating community tensions**.

The first sub-theme, **acknowledgment**, is often expressed straightforwardly by expressing honest thankfulness for the online community's support. Here is an instance: '*thank you so much for the support. If anything happens, I'll update.*'

Given the volatility and emotional investment associated with handling traumatic interactions, tensions may arise within the online community, too. The quote below shows an example of a community member discussing how certain behaviors in the community seem offensive or cause discord.

> *First time I said, why are you making fun of that guy who just lost his friend due to some misunderstanding? The second one was when I asked why your Avatar doesn't match your real face. Moreover, someone instantly replied who are you to ask this having no Avatar?*

Discussion and conclusion.

The different emergent themes highlighted how the framework of narrative identity intertwines with traumatic life stories about bullying, weaving together several interconnected nuances of self-identification, development of courage and communal stances to provide solidarity and empowerment. Addressing RQ1, we see how the online community creates its unique voice, which manifests in the distinctive patterns of narrative gleaned. As the themes suggest, we see a certain degree of openness, expressions of anguish, torment, and agony in conjunction with the expectation of support and a manifestation of collective empathy. Akin to the conceptual lens of resilience through resistance, most themes offer strategies for resisting and carefully navigating the traumatic ordeal as coping mechanisms (Rodriguez, 2016). Thereby adding additional dimensions to how narrative identity unfolds in trauma-sharing circumstances. These insights may inform how such channels function, are sustained and are essential for augmenting support to navigate bullying and similar traumatic circumstances.

Addressing RQ2, we see exciting glimpses of how technical features (in the form of auto-moderator contributions) play a role in setting a norm of conversational exchanges in the patterns. Auto-moderator, an automated agent, occasionally posts a standard message that outlines key policies and extended norms of engagement. The engagement of auto moderator can play a critical role in constraining conversations, which may impede open conversations, thereby impacting willingness to participate and associated engagement trends. Further, the conversations that show expressions of gratitude and the discussions on tensions within the online forum also highlight how expressing oneself can become constrained by community standards. However, such regulation and moderation can also help preserve the community from misinformation or from emotionally stirring narratives that disrupt the sanctity of such online forums (Stewart, 2021). When taken together, these observations can impact policy and governance mechanisms of online spaces, especially those dealing with trauma-influenced information sharing.

Future work.

Future work will expand on this initial exploration in multiple ways. Firstly, a deeper and more rigorous conversational analysis will be conducted to quantify narrative trends and present a robust framework on how trauma impacts information-sharing and seeking behaviors, as observed through the microcosm of online channels. Emotions play a key role in narrative framing and thus future inspections will unpack the manifestation of emotion and its linkage with narrative identity. Further, augmenting the textual trends with network analysis to explore the roles of different actors and patterns of reciprocity can provide insights into how online channels function as conduits for mobilizing support and empathy in helping the trauma recovery process. Finally, interviews and self-reported data can add validity and motives for participation, informing design and communal policies on making such spaces open, fair, transparent, and safe, which can be crucial for identity negotiation when navigating trauma.

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About the authors

Subhasree Sengupta is an Assistant Professor at Florida State University, holding a joint appointment with the Learning Systems Institute and the School of Information. She completed her PhD from the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University. Her interdisciplinary research focuses on the intersection of human-AI collaboration, responsible use and adoption of AI, AI literacy, STEM workforce development, and the impact of technological innovation on learning and teacher training. She can be contacted at ss24da@fsu.edu

Yin Yang is an Assistant Professor in the School of Communication at Florida State University. She completed her Ph.D. from Pennsylvania State University. Her research examines how media messages affect recipients' beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors in health and environmental contexts, with a focus on narrative persuasion and emotions. She is particularly interested in the messaging efforts to promote awareness of and engagement with overlooked and/or stigmatized issues. She can be contacted at yin.yang@fsu.edu

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