

Disability, Identity, and Community: A Content Analysis of Disability Related Blogs

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Abstract

Social stigma has a profound impact on the daily lives of individuals with disabilities. Within the last few decades, however, technological advancements have provided a new medium that has the potential to transform how people with disabilities express themselves and connect with community. The internet has opened the door to new methods of working around the pervasive nature of discrimination and prejudice that individuals with disabilities have to face. While the internet is not exempt from such forces, it offers a platform for unfiltered self-representation and community connection. This research aims to illuminate the ways that people with disabilities use the internet to navigate social stigma through virtual communities. An ongoing content analysis of a random sample of disability related blogs seeks to examine the helping capabilities of the internet for individuals with disabilities while also exploring issues and solutions pertaining to web accessibility. Using a grounded theory approach, blogs are coded for themes of identity, connection, and accessibility among others. Through this exploratory research, a better understanding can emerge regarding how the web can be utilized as an important resource for the millions of people living with disabilities.

1. Introduction

The topic of disability is a socially relevant one in terms of both numbers and lived experiences. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention announced in 2015 that 53 million Americans live with a disability; that is one in every five adults¹. It is commonly estimated that the actual number may be much higher due to different classifications of what disability is and who has one. Despite such staggering statistics, people with disabilities remain a marginalized group that is frequently subjected to social stigma that places little value on them and their humanity. The consequences of disability stigma manifest throughout all aspects of life. The stereotypes surrounding a stigmatized identity have tremendous effect on how individuals are represented and perceived by others. The ways people with disabilities are viewed is often rooted in outsider perceptions instead of firsthand accounts. Additionally, the feeling of isolation is one of the most salient ramifications of stigma as it holds great influence on the ways that individuals exist in the social world.

The stigma surrounding disability has vastly contributed to the misrepresentation and social isolation of people with disabilities, but within the last decade the internet has opened the door for new methods of self-expression and representation and has provided alternative ways of connecting with community. Through an examination of pre-existing literature on these topics paired with an original content analysis of disability related blogs, this research aims to bring to light the ways that the internet is helping individuals with disabilities navigate social stigma through the autonomy and community found online. Additionally, this research aims to examine the issues of accessibility that are specific to the internet while also looking into the ways that individuals are combating these issues. Specific attention is placed on the themes of self-representation, community building and connection, and web accessibility.

1.1 Literature Review

An examination of pre-existing literature on this topic brought to light several key themes that this review will focus on: stigma and isolation experienced by individuals with disabilities, combating that isolation through the internet, the positive outcomes of the internet on the lives of people with disabilities, and problems of accessibility found online.

The theme of isolation experienced by individuals with disabilities is very prevalent within pre-existing research. This is in large part due to the social stigma that is attached to disability. In Erving Goffman's 1963 book "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity", he describes stigma as a "deeply discrediting" attribute and discussed the relationship that is formed between that attribute and stereotypes surrounding it. It is that relationship that makes up the components of stigma². Stigma defines a person as existing out of the ordinary. This social othering often leads to alienation and isolation of the stigmatized person.

Patricia Obst and Jana Stafurik explain in their 2010 research how the lack of accessibility in public settings is also a large cause of isolation for people with mobility impairments. This lack of access leads to people not having the ability to participate in social activities and receive support information³. Michelle Putnam's article "Conceptualizing Disability: Developing a Framework for Political Disability Identity" discusses the socio-political context around disability. In her analysis, Putnam includes Harlan Hahn's minority group model of disability and notes that "in this model, Hahn located disability not with the individual but within the relationship between the individual and the environment"⁴. Some of the main obstacles that stand in the way of people with disabilities result from the societal attitudes and policies regarding disability, not the actual disability itself. In her piece, Putnam asserts that empirical research data indicates the attitudes of nondisabled individuals toward disability tend to be negative unless they have personal relationships with individuals with disabilities or have undergone specific disability-related sensitivity training⁴. The isolation caused by these harmful dominant attitudes often result in people with disabilities not being as actively engaged in normative cultural and social roles and activities as able-bodied individuals⁴. The framework around disability and identity is important to this research because it provides context regarding the stigma that people with disabilities face and how that stigma can lead to the common experience of social isolation and alienation.

The theme of people with disabilities using the internet to combat social stigma was found in multiple studies. In the research done by Natilene Bowker and Keith Tuffin titled "Understanding Positive Subjectivities Made Possible Online for Disabled People", the authors assert that the internet offers individuals with disabilities a public sphere free of automatic prejudice on the basis of disability. They note "negative responses towards disability are often absent online as participants were judged, not on their physical presentation, but rather on their textual contributions to online forums"⁵. This concept that Bowker and Tuffin call "uncontaminated judgement" makes way for folks with disabilities to represent themselves on their accord and not on the sole basis of disability as a master status for identity. Additionally, the internet also provides a platform for self-representation in a way that is very unrestricted. Elias Mpofu and Liza Conyers define self-representation as "the act of self-identifying or referring to the self in preferred or self-chosen terms⁶. It is the firsthand account of someone's identity. Self-representation is essentially how an individual is presenting their self outwardly to other people. The concept is centered around a person's own perspective of themselves as opposed to how they are perceived by others based off of stereotypes and misconceptions. The outcomes of internet use for individuals with disabilities in current research shows a majority of positive results. Hynan, Murray, & Goldbart conducted qualitative interviews with young people with disabilities who use the internet and found that internet use improves many areas of life for these participants. Answers included themes of increased independence, the ability to better develop relationships, and how the internet is helping interviewees to self-represent⁸. Obst & Stafurik note in their research "a study by Guo et al. in 2005 found that the internet could significantly reduce physical and social barriers for people with disabilities by allowing them to access education, information, and expanded social networks"³. In the article "Rediscovering Place: Experiences of a Quadriplegic Anthropologist" Gerald Gold talks about how he took to the internet as his new field site after becoming paralyzed from Multiple Sclerosis. He speaks on the barriers he originally faced regarding fieldwork as someone who is paralyzed, and how he navigated that by extending the conventional understanding of place to include virtual "places" within the internet. He asserted that this new type of fieldwork he was doing online crossed the boundaries of physical accessibility and social exclusion. Gold notes:

"a fieldworker working from a wheelchair or with the benefit of other assistive devices can do research in a new kind of setting. Working in "cyber places" implies negotiating complex experience without physically traveling to other places or without using feet or fingers. Moreover, in virtual places, a fieldworker is invisible and encounters few barriers of hearing, vision or mobility".⁸

Gerald Gold's experience of turning to the web as a means of continuing his anthropological career after becoming paralyzed is a salient example of how the internet is positively enhancing the way people with disabilities exist in the world.

In the research conducted by Jerry Finn, titled "An Exploration of Helping Processes in an Online Self-Help Group Focusing on Issues of Disability", the positive effects of online self-help and mutual aid groups for folks with disabilities are discussed in detail. Finn notes that the advantages of online groups for providing help and support have been found in multiple research studies. Findings include that these online groups can provide support for people when face-to-face groups are not available to them, and they eliminate restrictions of time and distance which is especially helpful for individuals with mobility impairments. The anonymity that comes with the internet is also a great advantage for people living with highly stigmatized disabilities to be able to more freely discuss personal issues and develop relationships⁹. The positive outcomes of the internet for individuals with partial or complete loss of the ability to communicate orally are exceptional. Finn asserts that "The computer allows them to develop and respond to messages at their own speed and to send coherent and complete personal communications"⁹. The negative outcomes identified are mostly theoretical. Obst & Stafurik note that there is a chance of increased isolation with excessive internet use, and "the absence of physical contact, the risk of receiving misinformation, and the existence of aggressive members may have an impact on trust and relationship development over the internet"³.

The last theme that arose when reviewing the literature on this topic was the problem of accessibility online for internet users with disabilities. Cara Peters describes web accessibility as "the practice of making websites accessible to people, such as individuals with disabilities, who are using more than just traditional web browsers to access the internet"¹⁰. Additionally, it refers to the ways that traditional web browsers, and the ways that we use them, can be modified to be more inclusive of people with differing abilities. Cynthia Waddell refers to these modifications as "electronic curb cuts" and explains that "just as curb cuts enable persons using wheelchairs to navigate a city, "electronic curb cuts" enable persons with hearing, visual, and learning disabilities to navigate webpages"¹¹.

In Waddell's research regarding web accessibility, she notes that in the early years of its existence, the internet was primarily a text-based communication platform. As it evolved into a more advanced graphical format, issues of web accessibility increased. She asserts that because of technological advancements online, people with disabilities are frequently unable to navigate websites unless webpages are explicitly designed with an accessible format¹¹. Finn's research raises concerns regarding development of online resources being targeted to only those with access and computer skills. This is a problem for people with low socio-economic statuses, those with little access to education, elderly people, and other marginalized groups who may not have the resources needed to explore the helping possibilities the internet can provide⁹. The specifics of web accessibility are outlined in Adam and Kreps' 2006 research "A critical approach to web accessibility". They give examples of ways the web is inaccessible including the fact that many sites do not contain the coding necessary for "assistive technologies" such as screen readers and voice browsers that help people with visual impairments. More examples include the lack of accompanying captions for audio multimedia, which benefit users who are deaf or hard of hearing, and the absence of keyboard shortcuts and mouse commands which make the internet more accessible for a wide variety of disabilities¹². Waddell also touches on specific issues of web accessibility and addresses how "inaccessible web page design either hides text within images, frames, applets, or animated gifs or renders the text unintelligently in table, columnar, or portable document format (pdf)". She notes "even online forms are inaccessible, especially when designed to prevent keyboard navigation and input. Whether the form is posted for school registration, online banking, or shopping transactions, people with visual and/or mobility disabilities face significant barriers to participation"¹¹. Adam and Kreps assert the need for internet users with disabilities to be involved in the testing and design of web sites, as well as development of online accessibility standards to make the internet a more disability-friendly avenue¹².

The goals of this current research are to look deeper at the ways the internet is being used by people with disabilities in the areas of self-representation as well as community building and connection. In addition, this research aims to further examine issues and solutions pertaining to web accessibility.

2. Methods and Data

This research draws on an ongoing content analysis of disability related blogs. Tjonndal notes that "content analysis is a method that involves an investigation of underlying themes in the texts subjected to analysis" and suggests that this methodology is one of the most prevalent approaches to the qualitative analysis of documents¹³. This method entails a systematic evaluation of texts, photos, films, etc for the emergence of common patterns and themes

throughout the content being analyzed. There are many different approaches one can take for conducting a content analysis.

This project utilizes a grounded theory approach to coding. Grounded theory is an inductive method meaning the coding scheme was developed from the data analysis as opposed to before data collection began. Kathy Charmaz asserts that in a grounded theory approach to coding, one “starts with individual cases, incidents, or experiences and develop progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain, and to understand your data and to identify patterned relationships within it.” Charmaz goes on to note that with grounded theory, “You begin with an area of study. Then, you build your theoretical analysis on what you discover is relevant in that actual worlds that you study within this area”¹⁴. While certain topics were considered before data analysis, this research heavily relied on a grounded theory approach for the emergence of the final coding scheme.

This methodology was selected with the intention that it would bring to light important patterns and themes regarding how the internet is being utilized by individuals with disabilities. By examining personal blogs, importance is placed on the individual’s voice; a practice that is far too overlooked when disability is addressed. This research draws directly on the original thoughts, ideas, and expressions of members of the community it seeks to draw attention to.

A sample population was formed from a combination of Equalitytime.co.uk’s list of top 100 disability blogs based on web traffic and other disability related blogs from various sites including the social media blogging site Tumblr¹⁵. For a blog to meet the criteria for inclusion in the sample population, it had to be active during the months that blog posts were being analyzed. In this research project, the time frame that was specifically being addressed was January through March of 2016. Blogs were required to have at least one entry during those months to be included in the sample population. Another criteria for inclusion was blog ownership. For a blog to be included in the sample population, it had to be owned and run by someone with a disability. This criterion eliminated thirty-nine blogs from the list of top 100 disability blogs. Of these thirty-nine blogs, the majority were run by parents of children with disabilities or other disability rights advocates who did not personally have a disability. The decision to eliminate these blogs from the sample population was made because these types of blog do not align with the purpose of this research. This project has the explicit intention of looking at how individuals with disabilities are utilizing the internet for various reasons, so analyzing blogs that are not run by people with disabilities does not fit the research questions that this project seeks to address.

After considering all criteria for inclusion, a sample population of 70 disability related blogs was formed. From this population, a simple random sampling strategy was utilized. This was generated by numbering each blog in the sample population starting at one and continuing onward. Then, those numbers were drawn randomly out of a hat. The order by which the numbers (blogs) were drawn provided the order in which the blogs were analyzed. Analysis started with the first blog that was drawn and then it continued down the list. Utilizing a simple random sampling strategy allows for generalizable claims to be made from the results of the analysis. The research presented in this paper draws on a content analysis of the first twenty blogs from the simple random sample.

The only criteria for inclusion within the entries themselves was the requirement of original content. When analyzing the sample, only original content was coded within the blogs. This criterion mainly affected the way that the blogs from Tumblr were coded. Tumblr is a social media site made up of individual blogs. Tumblr users have the option of posting original content or “reblogging” entries from other tumblr users to their blog. Users have the ability to “reblog” a post and add original content to the post, but it is not required. In instances where the owner of a tumblr “reblogged” a post without adding any original content to it, the post was not coded or included in my analysis. With the criteria for inclusion in mind, the content analysis included a total of 210 blog entries.

Blog entries were coded for three main themes, each of which included multiple subcategories. The themes were **(1)** Identity and the Self, **(2)** Community and Connection, and **(3)** Web Accessibility. Subcategories for **(Theme 1)**, themes of identity and the self, included instances of combating disability stigma/stereotypes, mentions of disability as an identity, and instances of acknowledging one’s ability to self-represent online. Subcategories for **(Theme 2)**, themes of community and connection, included instances of showing support of others with disabilities, expressing the importance/benefits of community and/or connection, and instances of using the internet as a medium for asking questions related to disability. Subcategories for **(Theme 3)**, themes of web accessibility, included instances of addressing an issue of web accessibility, discussing first-hand experiences with problems of accessibility on the web, and employing solutions to issues of web accessibility. For the complete codebook, see Appendix 1.

3. Findings and Discussion

From the twenty blogs and 210 entries that were analyzed, there was a total of 283 occurrences of the three major themes. Of these 283 instances, the data revealed 157 occurrences of themes of identity and the self (Theme 1), 95 occurrences of themes of community and connection (Theme 2), and a total 31 occurrences of themes of web accessibility (Theme 3). These statistics are shown in Figure 1.

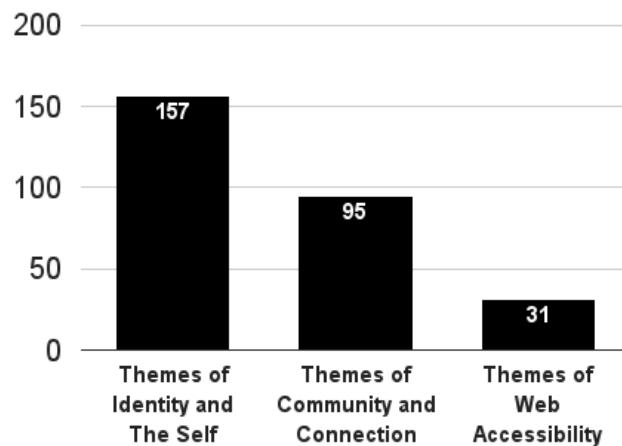


Figure 1: Total occurrences of each theme from the 210 blog entries analyzed

The data indicated that eighteen out of the twenty blogs in the sample included at least one theme of identity and the self during the analyzed time frame (January–March of 2016). Out of those twenty blogs, sixteen included at least one theme of community and connection, and twelve blogs included a least one theme of web accessibility. Figure 2 represents these statistics. Additionally, data analysis showed that four out of twenty blogs included just one of the key themes, eight blogs included two of the key themes, and eight blogs included all three of the key themes. The prevalence of major themes per blog is represented in figure 3.

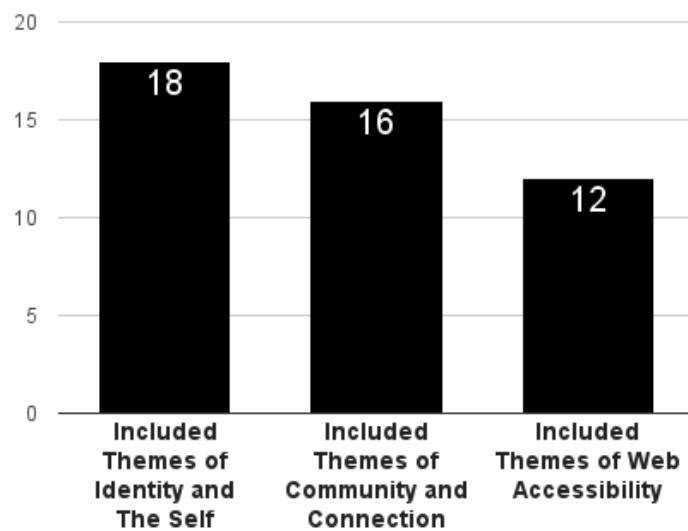


Figure 2. Total Number of Blogs That Included Each Theme

The next three sections will address each of the main themes and provide examples and discussion for each respectively.

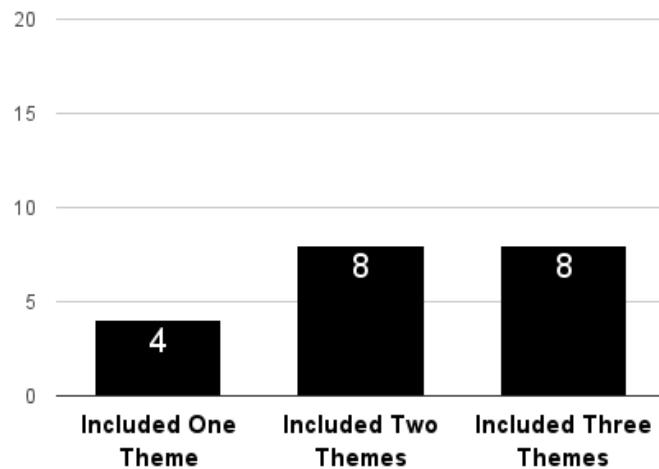


Figure 3. Prevalence of Themes Amongst Blogs

3.1 Theme 1: Themes of Identity and the Self

Data showed that (Theme 1), themes of identity and the self, was the most prevalent out of all the major themes. In the three-month time span that was analyzed, 90% of all blogs included at least one instance coded as a theme of identity and the self. This theme was centered around the key concept of self-representation. The themes and patterns that emerged surrounding themes of identity and the self focused around looking at how the internet is providing a platform for people to represent both themselves and disability from a firsthand perspective. This firsthand perspective of disability contrasts the outsider perceptions that dominate mainstream disability discourse. The subcategory from this theme that appeared the most throughout the data was “instances of combating common disability stigma/stereotypes”. This subcategory accounted for 80 of the 157 occurrences alone. Not only did this code occur the most within Theme 1, but it was also the most prevalent category within the entire content analysis. Only four out of twenty blogs in the sample showed zero instances of combating disability stigma/stereotypes.

One blog titled “autisticchoya.com” posted an entry on February 11th, 2016 that included the following text:

“Repeat after me: Disabled people are not your feel-good back-pats. Disabled people are not your cheap do-gooder points. Disabled people are not your good tolerant person moral yardstick. Disabled people are not your charity projects. Disabled people are not your community service. Disabled people are not your emotional commodity. Got that? Good”.

In this post, the blog’s owner, Lydia X. Z. Brown, is laying out commonly evoked notions about disability and rebuking them. This is an example of how blogs are being used as a space for people with disabilities to define for themselves what disability is and is not. This stands in contrast to the dominant narrative around disability that often stems from nondisabled people. Another example of this code comes from the blog “dearablebodied.tumblr.com”; a tumblr that is centered around sharing information that folks with disabilities want nondisabled people to know and understand. One entry from March 15th, 2016 notes “not everyone with a disability has the same level of functionality. But it should never be assumed that any of us can’t do something, particularly an everyday activity, just because of our disabilities”. This post deals tackles preconceived notions that nondisabled people make about functionality, and encourages people not to make broad assumptions about others.

One subcategory from this theme that is similar to “combating common disability stigma/stereotypes” is the code “instances of addressing the misrepresentation of disability within media”. This code looks at instances of specifically

addressing how portrayals of disability in media “get it wrong” so to speak. An example of something coded as this category comes from the blog “chronically-something.tumblr.com”. In an entry from March 30th, 2016, they state “I’m just saying disability and chronic illness being portrayed as a root cause of evil is hurtful and perpetuates the ‘other’ in the same way as portraying poc (people of color) as villains or victims and women as weak and one dimensional does.” The owner of this blog is expressing how inaccurate portrayals of people with disabilities in popular media are hurtful and reinforces stigma.

Another theme that emerged from the data under (**Theme 1**), themes of identity and the self, addresses the power and influence of voice. This code, labeled as “mentions of one’s own voice/telling one’s own story”, is another example of how the internet is a medium for self-representation. By telling one’s story and using one’s voice, individuals with disabilities are able to take the dominant narrative around disability back and recenter it around firsthand accounts instead of stigma-based assumptions. Additionally, the power of hearing others’ stories that are similar to your own provides a sense of shared experience which helps to combat feelings of alienation and isolation. One blog with the name “claimingcrip.com” posted an entry on January 24th, 2016 titled “Why Stories Matter”. In this post, they write:

“Being back in DC has reminded me why it is so important to tell your story. Disability rights activist, attorney, and author Harriet McBryde Johnson once said, “storytelling is a survival tool.” This is true beyond measure, but the power of stories goes beyond mere survival. Stories help us thrive.”

In the same post, the owner of the blog goes on to say:

“Every story we give voice to is a reminder that no one goes through this world alone, and that every experience has value. I learned to use my voice because I realized that there is value in telling our stories. I realized that stories validate, and they teach. I realized that stories give hope, light, and laughter in a world that can so often seem dark.”

This post addresses the power that the voice has and the influence that comes from providing personal narratives about disability. Sharing these narratives not only provide a way for people to express themselves and their life experiences, but they also provide a sense of shared experience for people who feel alienated from those around them.

The high rate of occurrences for themes of identity and the self could be attributed to many different things. One of those factors could be that people with disabilities are frequently spoken for and talked over by able-bodied individuals. With the advent of the internet, a new platform has opened up for people to say what they want, whenever they want to say it, without the threat of being cut off or spoken for. It has essentially removed that communication barrier and provided a space for individuals to use their voice in a more unrestricted way than ever before. The issue of misrepresentation of disability has never been due to people not wanting to share their experiences or represent themselves on their own accord, but instead it has largely stemmed from the lack of space and attention given to these individuals within the dominant discussion of disability. Data indicates that people with disabilities are using the internet to create space for themselves to self-represent and take back the narrative from nondisabled people.

3.2 Theme 2: Themes of Community and Connection

Data indicated that the second most prevalent theme found throughout the blogs was (**Theme 2**), themes of community and connection. 80% of all blogs included at least one theme of community and connection within the examined time frame. Themes of community and connection within blogs appeared in a variety of ways. The most common manifestation of this theme was “instances of showing support for others with disabilities”. This occurred 32 times within the three-month period that blogs were analyzed. Other subcategories that commonly occurred include “instances of using the internet as a medium for asking questions related to disability”, and “expressing the importance/benefits of community and/or connection”. For this theme, there were multiple subcategories that did not appear at all that were anticipated to. These themes included “expressing a want/need for community” and “expressing a desire for personal connection”. While these themes were not explicitly found within the data, there were indications through other themes that these concepts were still present amongst bloggers. Theme 2 is centered around addressing how the internet is being used as a tool for navigating the isolating consequences of stigma.

A salient example of an entry coded as “instances of showing support for others with disabilities” comes from the blog “chronically-something.tumblr.com”. The image below is a screenshot of an interaction between tumblr users regarding a hateful message about disability blogging.

Image 1: screenshot of the tumblr interaction between a user who had received an anonymous hate message and chronically-something.tumblr.com’s response to them.

Anonymous asked: You need to stop posting about your MS. You are pathetic.

weirdside25:

Wow. What can I say..please read the description of my blog again. That's what I use my blog for. Me. If you don't like it..don't follow? I don't feel pathetic. I feel empowered that I have the honour to connect with other individuals who go through the same struggles. Pathetic..? Yeah...I don't feel hurt being called pathetic by someone who writes me an anon message. Please don't read again. Or write me a message. Unless its as yourself.

Oh Anons. its 10% shy/reasonable messaging 90% people wanting to be assholes without owning it. MS fistbump of painful solidarity @Weirdside25 and don't worry.. anons happen to all of us. My favorite is the anon calling me a welfare queen. hah. #Peoplesuck

In this post, the owner of chronically-something.tumblr.com is responding to a fellow disability blogger (weirdside25) who had received an anonymous hate message regarding them posting too much about their disability. Chronically-something “reblogged” the hate message and weirdside25’s reply and added a message of solidarity. They expressed the shared experience of receiving anonymous hate and encouraged weirdside25 not to worry about it. This interaction sheds light onto the struggles and obstacles that come with speaking openly about disability, but it also brings attention to the community and support that exists online for disability bloggers.

Another common occurrence within this theme was bloggers agreeing with and/or connecting to someone else’s sentiments on disability. The most common platform in which this subcategory occurred was tumblr. This is most likely due to tumblr’s feature of “reblogging” someone else’s post with the option of adding one’s own thoughts onto it. The most frequent manifestation of this subcategory was when a user “reblogged” a post and added a single word of agreement either onto the post itself or in the “tags” section. Such words of agreement include “this”, “same”, and “preach”. Additionally, phrases such as “I’m not the only one” and “I thought this was just me” appeared in the data. An example of this code comes from the blog “<http://invisibledisabilitychameleon.tumblr.com>”. The owner of this tumblr “reblogged” a post on January 27th, 2016 that said “The worst part about having mental health issues is that you’re seemingly required to have a breakdown in order for people to understand how hard you were trying to hold yourself together” and added “preach” to the tags section. These instances of agreeing with others’ sentiments on disability show how the internet is providing a space for individuals to connect through shared experience.

An example of the code “expressing the importance/benefits of community and/or connection” comes from a blog titled “martynsibley.com”. On February 26th, 2016, Martyn posted an entry that included the following text: “I’ve had the usual care, equipment, housing and financial anxieties. I guess I’m just learning to focus on what I can effect, and not on the things I can’t. It always helps having close family and friends to pick us up during these testing times”. In this post, Martyn is expressing the benefits of having a support system be there for you when you are down. The 95 occurrences of (Theme 2), themes of community and connection, provide evidence that individuals are using the internet as a medium for connecting with others and forming community. Because social stigma defines a person as out of the ordinary, the very nature of being a stigmatized individual causes a divide between that person and others which can lead to feelings of alienation. Going online and connecting with similarly situated individuals is a way for people to feel like they are not so alone in a world that constantly labels them as abnormal. Using the web as a source of community and connection is an example of the way that people with disabilities are using the internet to actively combat the social isolation that comes from disability stigma.

3.3 Theme 3: Themes of Web Accessibility

The final major theme that emerged from the data is web accessibility. This theme occurred at a much lower rate than the other two themes with a total of 31 occurrences. 40% of all blogs included at least one instance coded as a theme of web accessibility. While themes of web accessibility occurred less frequently than the other two themes, it is an important aspect of this research nonetheless. There is a lot of room for improvement regarding accessibility on the internet, and this portion of the research seeks to shed light onto some of the ways that issues of web accessibility manifest as well as provide solutions one can employ to make online content more accessible for users with disabilities. This theme looked at instances of addressing an accessibility-related issue specific to the internet, discussing first-hand experiences with problems of accessibility on the web, and employing solutions to issues of web accessibility.

An example of a post coded for “instances of addressing an accessibility-related issue specific to the internet” comes from the blog “thatcrazycrippledchick.blogspot.com”. In an entry from January 7th, 2016, the owner blogged about a telephone conversation she had with representatives from a disability website in regards to improvements the site could make. After the phone call, she came up with a list of demands that she sent to the site, so they could become a more conscious resource for the community they seek to provide for. In the post, she includes the following:

“Include image descriptions and trigger warnings, if needed. Image descriptions are a short description of what a picture looks like so that those who are blind or visually impaired can access that content. Trigger warnings are warnings at the beginning of the piece that content may be triggering for people who are victims of trauma or who have specific phobias. If image descriptions and/or trigger warnings are not included in your piece, the editors may add them.”

In this post, the owner of the blog is addressing the need for websites to include helpful additions to posts that increase accessibility for readers. Coincidentally, data revealed the two most utilized solutions to web accessibility employed by bloggers from the sample were image descriptions and content warnings. This may be due to the simple nature of these solutions. Unlike other solutions to issues of web accessibility that involve software programming and web design, image descriptions and content warnings are two examples of what Cynthia Waddell refers to as “electronic curb cuts” that individuals with no experience in formatting and design can include to improve the accessibility of their online content.

The most prevalent solution within the code “employing solutions to issues of web accessibility” was the use of image descriptions. A total of 9 out of the 20 blogs in the sample included at least one image description during the first three months of 2016. An example of a blog utilizing image descriptions comes from “disabledparenting.com”. In an entry posted on January 22nd, titled “Reflections From Parenting With a Disability”, the blogger includes a photo of her and her daughter. The image below is a screenshot from the entry:

Image 2: A screenshot of an image with an accompanying image description



Daughter, me with cane, both smiling, standing together in dorm room

The literature review portion of this research brought attention to how the use of image descriptions are helpful for both individuals with image processing difficulties and people with poor vision. Pre-existing literature was also informative on how the use of content warnings benefit people with varying types of mental illness such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). By being able to prepare for something that triggers re-traumatisation in the brain, individuals may become more equipped to deal with that material. Another example of a blog that employed solutions to issues of web accessibility is autistichoya.com. In an entry from January 5th, 2016 titled “You want real change to stop gun violence?”, the blogger included both a content warning and an image description. The image below is a screenshot from the post.



Content/TW: Liberal profanity (including many f-words), gun violence, institutions, police violence, racism, ableism.

Photo: Hand-drawn cartoon of a hand holding a gun, and another person's hand putting the index finger down the barrel of the gun.

Image 3: a screenshot from a blog entry that included a content warning and image description

So while (Theme 3), themes of web accessibility, occurred at a much lower rate than the other major themes, it is still an aspect of this research that deserves attention. Data revealed various methods that individuals are employing on their blogs to combat issues of web accessibility, but it did not offer any insight into firsthand experiences with such issues. There were no blogs in the sample that addressed web accessibility from the perspective of personal experience with inaccessibility online.

A possible explanation as to why themes of web accessibility occurred at a lower rate than other themes could be that there is a general lack of information and education pertaining to this topic. It could also be due to the absence of any laws or regulations specifically pertaining to accessibility on the internet. Outside of cyberspace, laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act exist to provide protections and rights to individuals with disabilities, but no such thing exists for the internet. There are a lot of implications that come with government regulation of web content, and maybe that is not the right way to go, but as this research shows there are simple steps one can take to make the content they put online more accessible. Normalizing the use of methods for combating web accessibility such as image descriptions, content warnings, subtitles, and audio transcriptions can all help to create a cyberspace that is more inclusive and accessible for internet users with disabilities.

4. Implications

The research presented in this thesis is preliminary. This is an ongoing project. Future goals for this research include continuing the content analysis by including more blogs from the existing sample population as well as expanding the

content analysis to include not just disability related blogs, but also online forums and support groups. This addition to the analysis aims to look deeper into the community and connection component of this research. While this study provides insight into how individuals with disabilities are utilizing the internet through the emergence of themes via content analysis, it lacks firsthand narratives around what it is like to be an internet user with a disability. Furthermore, there is a lot of room for misinterpretation on the internet when factors such as tone and intention cannot always be easily detected. To address these implications, further research for this project seeks to include in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals with disabilities who use the internet. By interviewing internet users with disabilities, explicit attention will be placed on personal narratives and experiences. In conjunction with the content analysis, interviews will add an additional layer to this research by providing important insight directly from the people who this project affects most personally and directly.

Additionally, some modifications to the existing criteria for inclusion could be made in order to analyze more data within the blogs. When collecting data, specifically within Tumblr, the criteria for inclusion pertaining to original content excluded a lot of posts in which users “reblogged” entries from other tumblrs onto their blog without adding original content. Arguments could be made regarding the importance of that data. Additions to the codebook could include themes that emerged from non original content that users shared on their blog.

5. Conclusion

Through a content analysis of disability related blogs, this research provides a look into some of the ways that individuals with disabilities are utilizing the world wide web. Patterns surrounding the use of the internet as an outlet for self-representation as well as a medium for connecting with community were present in the majority of blogs included in the random sample. The presence of these themes is indicative of the helping capabilities that the internet holds for people with disabilities. Both the content analysis and the examination of pre-existing literature on this topic illuminated the platform the internet offers for individuals with disabilities to represent themselves and connect with community in a way that is unparalleled in history. The findings of this research align with much of what pre-existing literature says about the impact that the internet has for users with disabilities specifically regarding the use of the internet as a way to navigate social stigma. Data revealed substantial evidence of individuals using the internet as a method of combating the alienation and social isolation that accompanies disability stigma.

The analysis also provided examples of “electronic curb cuts” one can utilize to make their web content more accessible and inclusive for people with varying types of disabilities. These “electronic curb cuts” increase accessibility for a vast range of disabilities all the way from mental illnesses to vision impairment. Further research on this topic aims to highlight personal narratives relating to the three major themes found in this research: (1) Identity and the Self, (2) Community and Connection, and (3) Web Accessibility through qualitative interviews with internet users with disabilities. A thorough understanding of how individuals with disabilities are using the internet can lead to a better understanding of how this technological advancement can be better utilized as a resource and tool for this community.

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7. Disability Related Blogs

A list of the twenty disability related blogs included in the content analysis in the order they were analyzed.

1. <http://thatdisabledmom.blogspot.com>
2. <http://thatcrazycrippledchick.blogspot.com>
3. <http://chronically-something.tumblr.com>
4. <http://queerswithdisabilities.tumblr.com>
5. <http://invisibledisabilitychameleon.tumblr.com>
6. <http://www.claimingcrip.com>
7. <http://www.prettycripple.com>
8. <http://www.doitmyselfblog.com>
9. <http://disabledtalk.tumblr.com>
10. <https://crackedmirrorinshalott.wordpress.com>
11. <http://www.disabledparenting.com>
12. <http://douglascootey.com>
13. <http://timetolisten.blogspot.com>
14. <http://www.autisticchoya.com>
15. <http://dearablebodied.tumblr.com>
16. <http://martynsibley.com>
17. <http://toddworley.com/blog/>
18. <http://queerability.tumblr.com>
19. <http://www.curbfreewithcorylee.com>
20. <http://www.bluebadgestyle.com>