The Function of Storytelling in Disability-Related Subreddits: Emotional and Social

Impacts

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Introduction

Reddit is a forum-based social media platform organized by communities called "subreddits" where people share and discuss topics related to their interests. That content is then voted upon by users based on whether or not it positively contributes to the community. Unlike many other popular social media platforms, Reddit takes a decentralized approach to content moderation, where each subreddit sets its own rules and enforces them through volunteer moderators within each community. Those moderators uphold both their own community guidelines as well as Reddit's sitewide rules, which include prohibiting harassment and hate speech, as well as protecting individual privacy (Roose, 2024). This, along with Reddit's upvoting and downvoting system, tailors discussions so that users have more democratic control over what content gets visibility on the platform. This approach is somewhat unique among other popular social media platforms today, which are known to prioritize content based on individual engagement metrics. As of February 2025, Reddit remains among the top 10 most visited sites in the world and ranks in the top five in the United States (Similarweb, 2025). Both Reddit's popularity and user-driven content aggregation make the platform an interesting focus of study.

Among the many communities on Reddit, disability-related subreddits give voice to those who wish to share on topics related to disability, either broadly or in relation to a specific condition the community is dedicated to discussing. Typically, these communities are most frequented by disabled individuals and those close to them, but they also attract those with a general interest in the topic who hope to learn more. Reddit also encourages users to remain anonymous, and the lower perceived social risk can permit some users to feel more uninhibited

with what they share. This affords both toxic and supportive behaviors, which the community then manages, typically by filtering out harmful or off-topic contributions and boosting content that adds value to the community (Brown et al., 2018). In subreddits dedicated to disability-related topics, conversations might range from personal storytelling to accessibility to medical systems and more (Palonis, 2021). This study will look closely at storytelling as a form of engagement and attempt to better understand its purpose and impact on individuals participating in disability discourse on Reddit. The following literature review adds context by addressing what is known regarding this subject and where there is a gap in knowledge.

<div align="center">**Review of Relevant Literature**</div>

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of human communication and connection, shaping how individuals share and build relationships. Within disability subreddits, analyzing how users share and engage with these stories can add valuable insight into the lived experiences of disabled individuals, those who care about them, and others who are interested in the topic of disability, while also revealing a bit about the cultural dynamics of those spaces.

Cultural dynamics play a significant role in how content is received on any platform. Reddit, in particular, has an interesting history regarding cultural dynamics, as the site was infamous for hosting toxic users and communities under the guise of free speech. In 2015, however, Reddit began to make major policy changes to its platform, ultimately deciding that its platform's hostility might alienate more users than it attracted. Brown and colleagues' 2018 article "Reddit's Veil of Anonymity: Predictors of engagement and participation in media environments with hostile reputations" discusses how Reddit's design for anonymous participation can both foster hostile and supportive behaviors and that men were more likely than women to risk active engagement, at least on news topics, perhaps in part due to this affordance.

This effect is not confirmed to transfer over to other topics, however, which might suggest user behavior is partially dependent on the culture of the subreddit.

Choudhury and De's (2014) article, "Mental Health Discourse on Reddit: Self-Disclosure, Social Support, and Anonymity," suggests this is likely the case. Choudhury and De's research explored how anonymity on Reddit can lead to disinhibition that actually inspires more emotionally engaging feedback in subreddits related to mental health. Their findings highlight the role of anonymity in reducing social barriers to self-disclosure. Even though the focus of Choudhury and De's study is mental health, their insights may also prove relevant to disability-related subreddits, where anonymity could serve a similar function in deflecting against social stigma.

With and without anonymity, storytelling alone serves a purpose in online disability communities. Niu, Liu, and Bian's (2024) article discusses how YouTubers use their platform to discuss their experiences and challenges with disability. The main themes the researchers found revolved around stigma and lack of support. They also found that the content creators used their platform to discuss systemic accessibility challenges to raise awareness and garner support. Through storytelling, YouTubers both build empathy and strengthen their communities. Trevisan's (2017) article builds on this idea through its investigation of storytelling as a form of disability advocacy. Focusing on blog posts from disability advocacy groups in the United Kingdom, Trevisan highlights the use of personal storytelling to develop counter-narratives in response to the negative perception of disability benefit claimants. Trevisan's article and Niu, Liu, and Bian's (2024) findings highlight the power of storytelling for advocacy.

Research Problem & Question

Although research has explored the role of anonymity in fostering open discussions and the use of storytelling as a tool for advocacy and empathy-building, there is still limited understanding of the function of storytelling within disabled communities on Reddit, one of the largest online discussion spaces, designed to support anonymity. While structured campaigns have provided some insights into how storytelling is leveraged to challenge harmful narratives and influence public discourse, little is known about how individual, user-driven, and often anonymous storytelling operates within subreddits and how it impacts the community.

This study seeks to fill that gap by analyzing how users in disability-related subreddits engage with storytelling content, both actively and passively. It examines what motivates users to share their stories online, what inspires community members to interact with those stories, and what this engagement's social and emotional effects are. Additionally, this study explores how storytelling shapes users' experiences within Reddit's disability spaces.

The results of this study aim to inform how online platforms like Reddit could better support storytelling within disability-related communities. Insights from this research may help identify design or moderation strategies that promote meaningful engagement, reduce stigma, and enhance emotional support among users.

Purpose/Research Question

This study explores the social and emotional effects of storytelling in disability-related subreddits, focusing on those who share personal stories as well as those who engage with them. What motivates disability-subreddit community members to share their stories? What emotions and social needs do they fill by doing so, and how do community members respond and engage with these narratives?

Central Research Question:

How does storytelling in disability-related subreddits emotionally and socially impact both those who share their stories and those who engage with them?

Detailed Research Questions:

- What motivates disabled users and those close to them to share personal stories on Reddit, and what emotional or social outcomes do they experience from doing so?
- How do community members engage with storytelling posts, and what emotional or social effects do they report from interacting with these narratives?

Method

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews. I conducted five interviews in person or over video, according to participant availability and preference. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling and consisted of family members and friends. To be eligible, participants needed to meet the following criteria: (1) be adults living in the United States, (2) either identify as disabled or have a close personal relationship with someone who is disabled, and (3) have used the platform Reddit to either actively or passively engage with storytelling content posted to a disability-related subreddit at least once in the past month.

The interviews explored participants' experiences engaging with disability-related content on Reddit, particularly around storytelling. Interviews were recorded (with participants' informed consent) and transcribed for analysis. Although a secondary method (content analysis of subreddit posts) was initially planned, time constraints prevented its thorough and high-quality completion. To maintain the integrity of this research, I chose not to rush the analysis. Future research directions are discussed later in this report.

Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I used a bottom-up, inductive approach within a thematic analysis framework. I first became familiar with the data by thoroughly editing the automated transcripts for accuracy, which helped me engage deeply with participants' responses. After preparing the transcripts, I conducted an initial coding pass, identifying important data units – such as words, phrases, or full responses –that captured meaningful ideas related to my research questions. Some responses received a single code, while others were assigned multiple codes depending on the ideas discussed. In a second pass, I refined and consolidated the codes, systematically looking for patterns and clustering similar ideas into subthemes. Subthemes were then grouped into broader themes reflecting different engagement types and emotional responses. I reviewed, revised, and named these themes carefully, selecting exemplar quotes to illustrate each.

To support the validity of my themes, I check in with participants during the theme development process, seeking their feedback to confirm that I have captured their sentiments as accurately as possible. This helped me refine my themes to better represent participants' lived experiences. Throughout the process, I practiced reflexivity by examining my own positionality to minimize bias in synthesizing the data.

Key Findings

Theme 1: Storytelling to Foster Community and Social Engagement

A prominent theme among participants was how storytelling in disability spaces on Reddit can foster a sense of community and connection. Many participants shared that posting their own stories or reading others helped them feel less isolated and more understood. When asked about how engaging with stories related to disabilities on Reddit has impacted them, one participant reflected:

My thoughts are that there's just more of us out there. I'm not really alone with this hypertension and-and tremors. And, so, being that there is a community out there, and I can always go online and talk to them and get their insight into different things, and discuss scenarios, and have somebody to talk to who understands.

For some participants, engaging with disability-related storytelling on Reddit helped meet social needs that their disability disrupted. For example, one participant expressed:

And I don't have a lot of energy, a lot of the time, because I'm a disabled person, to like, go out there. And like make commitments to, like, go see friends or be outside. And so having like, a social place that I could go to when I'm not feeling like getting up is nice to have.

Challenges with rare conditions. A key subtheme that emerged was the difficulty that participants with rare conditions faced in finding active online communities. Contrasting with subreddits dedicated to conditions with a larger online community, the small size of these groups often resulted in minimal engagement opportunities. The lack of active interaction created a sense of social disconnection, making it harder for participants to find meaningful community support.

And when I tried to find community on Reddit for [their disability], I found it wildly lacking; it was not active. I found a lot of useful things about people talking about similar struggles … It was really helpful from a resource perspective. But it was near impossible to find community…

These differences highlight how the availability of active storytelling can influence whether Reddit communities feel like a supportive space.

Theme 2: Storytelling and Engagement for Empathy and Emotional Support

Many participants described how engagement with storytelling posts both fostered their own empathy and served as an outlet for receiving emotional support. This theme focuses on how engaging with personal stories allowed participants to validate their own experiences, better understand others, as well as gain advice and support. One participant used reading others' stories on Reddit to work through the internalized ableism that made them resistant to accepting mobility support. They explain their experience as:

> I can relate to so many of these things, and they were asking, like, is it time to get a mobility aid? What are your guys' experiences with that? And so I was like, OK, cool. It's nice to also then read the comments and see, like, what people's suggestions were, and everyone was being very supportive and informational.

In reading how others navigated the choice around mobility aids, they felt more confident and supported in their own decisions.

Storytelling posts invoke sympathy in those who don't share the same disability, but want to better understand their loved ones who do. One participant shared how they felt closer to their disabled partner when reading storytelling posts on Reddit:

> It's kind of hard to get people's experiences just by looking things up online. So I think being able to … post my questions about the disability and have people who are way more informed than I am, or have more experience than me, be able to give me that kind of sense of relief and give me advice is super nice.

Another participant discussed how they used Reddit as a platform for venting about their disability as a way to seek empathy and emotional support. They discuss how having tics due to Tourette's syndrome has put them in awkward situations in public:

> It was just kind of like an awkward situation to be in because they're like, 'Oh, this is like super annoying, is that someone's phone?' and it was just me. So I made a post about that because I thought it was a little bit funny, but it was also something to vent about and then see whether or not people could relate.

Engaging with these stories has not only allowed participants a way to process personal challenges but also functioned as a source of community-based emotional validation and collective empathy. These findings provide important insights into storytelling's role in fulfilling the social and emotional needs of those involved in the disability space on Reddit.

Discussion

This research suggests that storytelling in disability spaces on Reddit plays a vital role in fostering community and providing emotional support. Participants described feeling less isolated and more validated through sharing and reading stories on the platform. Participants especially valued the sense of belonging that emerged from these exchanges. This seemed to be especially meaningful for participants who faced social barriers due to their disability in their offline lives. However, for participants seeking subreddits for rarer conditions, the lack of engagement led to adverse emotional and social outcomes.

The importance of active engagement is an insight from this study that can help inform the design of online communities for people with disabilities to better fulfill their social and

emotional needs. Based on these findings, here are some recommendations for design features that could help these communities feel more supported:

- **Active moderation**. For communities focused on rare conditions, active and intentional moderation may help keep users engaged. Moderators can pin posts intended to boost engagement, such as weekly discussion threads or live Q&A sessions, to encourage active participation.

- **Enhanced reaction buttons.** One participant's critique of Reddit's upvote/downvote system was that it did not allow for emotional nuance. A vote on a post does not convey anything specific to the poster, other than the person wanted to boost their content. Being able to express emotions like sympathy and support through reaction buttons can better cater to users' emotional and social needs.

Limitations

Due to the small sample size (n=5) of this study, all recruited through convenience sampling, the findings of this study are limited in their generalizability. Although this study did include the perspective of one participant with a rarer disability, their experience diverged significantly from the primarily positive experience of others, suggesting their perspective may be underrepresented. A larger, more diverse study is needed to capture the full scope of experiences with disability subreddits. Additionally, the absence of content analysis limited the ability to triangulate findings.

Future Implications

Future research should delve deeper into the experiences of those with rarer disabilities, as their challenges seemed to be unique compared to those who were able to find active spaces online. A larger, more diverse version of this study would also help validate these findings and

identify areas of improvement to help support disabled communities. Including content analysis alongside interviews would also help to validate found themes. Should online platforms hosting spaces for disabled users seek to improve their user experience, future research could use these insights to test new design features.

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Appendix

Interview length: 45-60 minutes

Interview guide: The Function of Storytelling in Disability-Related Subreddits: Emotional and Social Impacts

Intro (5-10 minutes)

- *Introduce yourself & why you're doing the research (the purpose, in brief)*
    - Hi, my name is Erin. This interview is for a class project, where our goal is to better understand storytelling as a form of engagement and its purpose and impact on individuals participating in disability discourse on Reddit.
    - Thanks for being able to participate! We are interested to learn from you about this topic!
- *Cover confidentiality, right to withdraw, consent to record*
    - A few things before we get started…
        - Is it ok for me to record this interview? It will help me remember the details of what we talk about, so we don't have to take detailed notes now.
        - I want to assure you that what you share with us/me today will be anonymized in any findings reports from this research. That means I will not use your name or photo associated with any comments you make.
        - There are some risks in participating. Some topics we discuss might bring up distressing emotions. To minimize this, I will tailor my questioning line to your comfort level. Your responses could also be exposed to the public.

To minimize this risk, I will be using encryption and password security in addition to anonymizing your data.

- I also want to let you know that you can end this interview at any point or skip any question you don't wish to answer.

● Any questions before we start?

● *[start recording]*

Warmup/background questions (5-10 minutes)

● Can you tell me a little about how you spend your free time?

● When was the most recent time you used Reddit?

   ○ If you recall, what led you to open the site?

   ○ What subreddits did you visit?

   ○ Can you describe how you engage with content on Reddit most often (actively, passively, or somewhere in between)?

   ○ What types of content do you currently find most appealing?

Main questions (30-35 minutes)

● What, if any, disability-related subreddits have you visited?

   ○ How often do you interact with disability-related subreddits?

   ○ What, if anything, draws you to those spaces?

   ○ What kinds of posts are you drawn to/interested in?

● Can you recall the most recent time you engaged with a storytelling post related to disability?

   ○ What about the post caught your attention?

   ○ How did you feel when reading it?

- ○ If you did respond, how did you reply?

- ○ What emotions did you experience in that moment?

  - ■ Is this emotional response typical for you when engaging with similar content?

● What motivates you to engage in personal stories in disability-related subreddits (this could include voting, commenting, or just taking the time to read)?

  - ○ Are there certain types of stories you are more likely to engage with?

  - ○ What determines your level of engagement on a post?

● If you have shared a personal story in a disability subreddit, what motivated you to do so?

  - ○ What emotions came up when writing your post?

  - ○ What was the response?

    - ■ How did the response make you feel?

● What types of interactions do you typically see among community members in the disability community you are involved in?

  - ○ If involved in more than one group, do you notice any differences in how users interact with others in one group?

● Has engaging in disability-related stories on Reddit influenced your thoughts, feelings, or actions in any way?

● How, if at all, has engaging with storytelling posts shaped your perception of disability communities on Reddit?

Closing (5 minutes)

Any final thoughts or feedback before we wrap up?

Thank you for participating! This was very helpful for our research project.