Mass social media-induced illness presenting with Tourette-like behavior
Impact of unconscious intrapsychic conflicts, structural deficits, and maintaining factors

C Fremer1, N Szejko2,3, A Pisarenko1, M Haas1, L Laudenbach1, C Wegener4, K Müller-Vahl1
1Department of Psychiatry, Socialpsychiatry and Psychotherapy, Medical School Hannover, Germany; 2Department of Neurology, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland; 3Department of Bioethics, Medical University of Warsaw, Poland; 4Department of Audiodidactic Media Studies, Filmuniversity Babelsberg, Germany

BACKGROUND

Functional Tourette-like behaviors (FTB) are usually a rare presentation of functional movement disorders (FMD). However, meanwhile, FTB became a global phenomenon spread by numerous influencers on different social media channels including YouTube and TikTok.

But so far, little is known about predisposing factors for the occurrence of mass social media-induced illness (MSMI)1 presenting with FTB. This becomes of importance since we are currently faced with an outbreak of this new type of mass sociogenic illness (MSI) which symptoms spread solely via social media. Patients presenting in our specialized outpatient clinic showed similar or even identical symptoms as seen on the German YouTube channel “Gewitter im Kopf” (English: “Thunderstorm in the brain”). Here we present first data on underlying psychic processes including intrapsychic conflicts and structural deficits as well as timely-related psychological stressors and maintaining factors in patients with MSMI-FTB.

RESULTS

Sample

• patients with Social Media-induced FTB: n = 32
• women: n=16 (50%) • age: mean=20,1 Jahre, range=11-53 Jahre, median=18 Jahre •

Timely-related psychological stressors and maintaining factors

Timely-related psychological stressors (Fig. 1) were identified in 22 patients (68.8%) and maintaining factors (Fig. 2) in all but one (96.9%, multiple responses possible). Of these 11 patients (34.4%) reported displaying FTB on social media as tics/TS; another three patients (9.4%) each stated that they would like to do so, but parents would not allow or they would not be brave enough to do so.

Table: Relationship between unconscious intrapsychic conflicts, structural deficits and comorbidities in patients with social media-induced functional Tourette-like behavior (FTB) (n=32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comorbidities</th>
<th>n of patients (%)</th>
<th>Total number, mean (range, median)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intrapsychic conflicts only</td>
<td>11 (34.38%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural deficits only</td>
<td>12 (37.50%)</td>
<td>4 (3-9, 4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-existing intrapsychic conflicts and structural deficits</td>
<td>9 (28.13%)</td>
<td>5 (0-3, 5)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION

• Underlying psychological and maintaining factors in all patients were identified.
• Based on our data, it is suggested that co-occurrence of several different factors including timely-related psychological factors, unconscious intrapsychic conflicts, and structural deficits predispose for contagion with MSMI-FTB.
• This is in line with the theory of a multimodal etiology in FMD. Treatment of patients with MSMI-FTB should take these predisposing, but also maintaining factors into consideration.