

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

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Background:

So far, little is known about predisposing factors for the occurrence of mass social media-induced illness (MSMI) presenting with functional Tourette-like behaviors (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”). Functional tic-like behaviors are usually a rare presentation of functional movement disorders (FMD). However, meanwhile, FTB became a global phenomenon presumably spread by numerous influencers on different social media channels including YouTube and TikTok.

Here we present first data on underlying psychic processes including intrapsychic conflicts and structural deficits as well as timely-related psychological factors and maintaining factors in patients with MSMI-FTB.

Methods:

Based on a thorough neuropsychiatric examination, standardized assessments, and a newly developed semi-structured interview, we collected data of 32 patients (mean/median age: 20.1/18 years, range: 11-53 years, $n=16$ females) with regard to FTB, underlying psychodynamics and further influencing factors. Using the Operationalized Psychodynamic Diagnostic System (OPD), we evaluated rater’s perception of the patient to further explore underlying psychic processes including intrapsychic conflicts. Furthermore, we assessed patients’ overall maturity of mental functions to determine pre-existing structural deficits, since ability to manage psychological stressors strongly depends on patients’ level of structural integration.

Results and Conclusions:

In all patients, unconscious intrapsychic conflicts ($n=11$, 34.4%), structural deficits ($n=12$, 65.6%) or both ($n=9$, 28.1%) were found. Of these, 14 patients (43.8%) exhibited relevant autonomy-dependency-conflicts. In almost 70% of patients timely-related psychological factors were found. Remarkably, in 99% of patients maintaining factors 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.