



“Hi Elmo, I’m Not OK”: The structure, use, and role of trauma dumping on social media

Valeria Li*

Abstract. This project aims to outline the contours of trauma dumping as a discursive action and delineate its pragmatic, conversational, and sociocultural implications. Trauma dumping, while commonly known as an inappropriate divulging of sensitive and often upsetting personal information, has not been widely studied in the field of linguistics. By studying the responses to a tweet posted by *Sesame Street* character Elmo through a corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) methodology, this project aims to establish four conclusions: structurally, what makes up trauma dumping; thematically, what are the pragmatic features that underscore trauma dumping; conversationally, how does trauma dumping embed itself in canonical linguistic exchanges between speakers and listeners; and socioculturally, what motivates speakers to trauma dumping and what could this imply about the broader social and cultural context of the virtual anglophone world. The results of thematic coding establish that trauma dumping is best defined by explicitly traumatic content personal to the speaker as well as a deliberate disregard for the listener stemming from the listener’s lack of consent to the action. Conversationally, the phenomenon violates canonical procedures by once again disregarding the listener in order to create an interaction that is decidedly uncomfortable and socially deviant. Finally, motivators of trauma dumping, such as cultural in-group indexing, point towards an evolution of the phenomenon as a form of expressing solidarity and camaraderie.

Keywords. Trauma Dumping Internet Linguistics, Social Media, Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction. On January 30, 2024, Elmo from Sesame Street posted a nine-word tweet, saying “Elmo is just checking in! How is everyone doing?”. What followed is a collection of news articles commenting on the maelstrom of sadness, anger, and hatred Elmo had received as a response. Users and reporters alike seemed to agree that what was happening was clearly trauma dumping, a decidedly anti-social expression of traumatic or otherwise negatively affective events and related emotions.



aoe_beale_ · 1y ago ·

Typically, it's frowned upon because it puts the streamer and their community in an awkward position. It's normal for people to try to make others feel better, but when someone is trauma dumping, the stream could start to be focused on them, not the streamer.

There's a difference in being a regular in a smaller community oriented stream and mentioning that you've had a bad day vs. coming into a stream and going into great personal detail of the negative things in your life. But in larger streams, I wouldn't talk about having a bad day - it's just not the appropriate place for it.

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Figure 1. Screenshot, Reddit user defining trauma dumping

Trauma dumping's rise into the linguistic canon of the internet, while difficult to pinpoint its exact moment of emergence, can be attributed to social media platforms and the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Twitch, a livestreaming platform where streamers can interact with users live on camera, began to see repeated occurrences of viewers posting long unending walls of text in streamers' chats, often to the discomfort of both the streamer and other viewers (Lucas, 2022). Since its solidification in the Internet's lexicon, trauma dumping has been paired with conversations around mental health, consent, internet culture, and the general well-being of netizens today.

One of the term's earliest appearances was on February 24, 2010 from the online lexicon Urban Dictionary, defined as "unloading all of your emotional crap unmercifully onto one or more of your friends." As of the development of this project, the term has yet to establish itself in academic literature, having only explicitly appeared in a master's thesis exploring the therapeutic effects of trauma dumping on TokTok (Johnson, 2023). The author posits that trauma dumping has potentially positive effects on individuals who experience loneliness, questioning if trauma dumping's primary nature is that of a coping mechanism.

Several definitions of trauma dumping include mention of the listener, who explicitly lacks consent (Thurrott, 2022; Dicere, 2022; Molina, 2023; Reddit, 2024). Attached are also contrasts with venting, which is differentiated from trauma dumping due to a more iterative or productive nature from the former and a more one-sided quality from the latter. Criticisms of trauma dumping often involve concern over the listener's wellbeing and the speaker's explicit neglect thereof. Particularly topical is also the phenomenon of online disinhibition, where people are more likely to act differently, and even inappropriately or extremely in online settings. Coined by John Suler in 2004, online disinhibition is supported by six main factors: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of status and authority. Furthermore, the parasocial nature of public figures, particularly online, is threaded to the concept of trauma dumping, as the illusion of intimacy and closeness by viewers can encourage excessive verbal vulnerability to the point of antisociality (Paravati et al., 2019; Hoffner & Bond, 2022). Scholars also posit that social distancing and isolation, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbates the cultivation and maintenance of parasociality in online users (Jarzyna, 2020; Bond, 2022).

The present study observes the structure, conversational role, and sociocultural context of trauma dumping to establish it as a legitimate linguistic phenomenon. It addresses a gap in the literature where trauma dumping has seldom been discussed empirically, with a broader goal of opening the conversation about how the virtual world confounds human interactions, both online and offline. The study of trauma dumping not only cements it as a specific sociolinguistic behavior that speakers of the current era engage in, but also points to a shift in the cultural norms of the computer-mediated English-speaking world.

At the time of this project's development, trauma dumping was only directly featured in a master's thesis by Joi Johnson (2023). This study investigated the effects of trauma dumping on TikTok users. After surveying participants, the researcher found that trauma dumping behaviors were associated with therapeutic effects even if the participants themselves did not personally experience these emotions when they experienced trauma dumping from someone else. The re-

searcher notes that further research should be conducted on the effects of trauma dumping on the speaker. Given that the present study aims to identify what trauma dumping explicitly is, Johnson (2023) helps to establish that perhaps it does not have a necessary negative or antisocial effect that previous popular accounts establish by citing the therapeutic effects their participants experienced. Trauma dumping had almost exclusively remained in the pop virtual world, mostly becoming a term and concept discussed by netizens casually instead of being formally studied.

Previous research has looked into the practice and effects of digital trauma, or the consumption of traumatic content and experiences as well as related emotions and evaluations. Meek (2018) posits that the “representation of trauma” has become much more complex due to the invention of digital media, which allows users to very quickly broadcast as well as access these experiences; this makes it harder to predict the exact impact of largescale news. Cultural trauma researchers have particularly focused on the desensitization that users experience due to a prolonged exposure to traumatic content (Sparks & Sparks, 2000; Kansteiner, 2007; Kaplan, 2011). This desensitization is thought to lead to a normalization of expressing traumatic experiences.

The virtual nature of trauma dumping is a primary factor in its manifestation. Online disinhibition, originally coined by John Suler (2004), describes the loss of control over one’s behavior due to the features of the virtual world. Suler identified six main components that support online disinhibition: dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of status and authority. The thesis that ties all of these components together is the explicit disconnection that people often feel when interacting in the virtual world. In the context of Twitter, for example, users are represented as disembodied usernames and profile pictures, their language communicated primarily through a written format devoid of a face and a person, and thus direct social consequences. The lack of synchronous sociality (including paralinguistic cues like body language) and the promise of anonymity, Suler then concludes, motivates much more extreme behavior and language that might not otherwise occur during in-person interactions. The present work is informed by this research and explores the concept of trauma dumping as it manifests itself during an interaction between Twitter users and the *Sesame Street* character, Elmo.

2. Methods. A theoretical framework for trauma dumping was proposed, where the two primary factors contributing to the manifestation of trauma dumping are (1) explicit and excessive mentions of trauma and (2) a disregard for the listener. This working definition of trauma dumping was derived from pop psychology articles and Internet user accounts of the concept.

This study employed a corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS) methodology. A small corpus of 201 tokens was created from direct replies to Elmo’s original post, collected in late July/Early August 2024. Exclusion criteria were quite loose given the already small size of the corpus gathered. The only data points that were excluded were tweets written in different languages. Tweets that were included contained text information, emojis, GIFs, pictures, and videos. A thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) was the primary approach for the quantification of qualitative features. The thematic tagging of tokens was done by one coder through an iterative process of refining the themes and retagging data points. The analytical portion of this work reports on the results of the thematic coding with exemplars of text that support a definition of trauma dumping. The thematic tagging offered a way to operationalize the definition of trauma dumping in the context of the data utilizing frequencies to estimate trends found in the collected tweets.

The first round of coding focused on testing a preliminary set of tags. *Irony* and *sarcasm* were originally included among these tags. After the first iteration of the coding process, these tags were subsequently removed due to their decidedly complex nature as pragmatic constructs. After the first round of coding, the subsequent rounds functioned much of the same way, by looking at exemplars that challenged the proposed definitions of tags and either adjusting the definition to comfortably include the data point or creating a new tag if sufficient data points fit that description. The *Social Deviance* tag, for example, was created from the *Dark* tag, as enough exemplars demonstrated not only macabre, grotesque, and violent language but also demonstrated a specific target (Elmo). The *Incongruence* tag was created after much debate about *Irony* and *Sarcasm*, since the operationalization of both of these constructs involved some kind of incongruence in the data point in combination with other pragmatic features. In the end, *Sarcasm* was operationalized as *Incongruence* + *Contempt*, as previous definitions of sarcasm involved expressions of irony to express frustration or contempt.

Incongruence referred to the clash of ideas, concepts, conventions, or other themes. All elements of a post, including visual content such as images and GIFs, were considered when tagging for *Incongruence*. The incongruence could be encoded in tone (e.g. expressing negative themes or experiences with positive language), formality (e.g. corporations being informal or unprofessional), multimodal (e.g. serious text and light-hearted imagery), or pragmatic (e.g. rhetorical questions, sarcasm). *Dark* referred to content that is macabre, grotesque, or otherwise related to death, doom, or suffering, including the mention or imagery of weaponry, death, and injury. *Contempt* was primarily identified by the contrast of a negative experience with positive emotions (which overlapped with some Incongruence tags). *Social Deviance* referred to antisocial qualities of a post, particularly language that would be rude or inappropriate (e.g. expletives) and the mention of controversial topics (e.g. politics). This also included text or imagery that depicted Elmo (playing the role of the listener) in awkward, controversial, negative, or otherwise unflattering situations. *Hyperbole* referred to exaggerations or depictions of extreme situations, such as disasters, absurdities, and the use of universal quantifiers. *Not Ok* was the mention of negative emotions or experiences directly tied to the speaker. *Optimistic* referred to the mention of positive experiences or emotions as well as the mention of hope (e.g. “I will be ok”). *Commentary* referred to replies that discussed other users’ replies. *Nostalgia* referred to themes of childhood and the passage of time. *Familiarizer* referred to terms of familiarity, such as “man” and “bro.” *Elmo* referred to the explicit mention of Elmo by name.

3. Results. As pictured in Table 1, 54.23% of the data set was tagged as *Not Ok*; this means that more than half of the replies included some mention of personal negative emotions or experiences. The most common tag was *Incongruence* at 65.17%, which implies that users were engaging in incongruous communications, such as sarcasm and humor, more than they were engaging in explicit trauma dumping as defined by the thematic code. As seen in Table 2, 82 out of 131 *Incongruence*-tagged tokens were also tagged with *Not Ok*, implying a large portion of self-reported negative experiences and feelings being paired with positive imagery or language. The combination of *Not Ok* and *Social Deviance* can be used to operationalize canonical trauma dumping consistent with previous definitions. As depicted in Table 2, the co-occurrence of these two themes was 17 out of 201 tokens, or around 8.46%.

Tag	N	%
Incongruence	131	65.17%
Not Ok	109	54.23%

Hyperbole	83	41.29%
"Elmo"	61	30.35%
Dark	48	23.88%
Optimistic	45	22.39%
Contempt	38	18.91%
Social Deviance	31	15.42%
Commentary	22	10.95%
Miscellaneous	10	4.98%
Nostalgia	6	2.98%
Familiarizer	5	2.49%

Table 1. Thematic tags and frequencies. Note: N = 201

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
	Incongruence	Contempt	Social Deviance	Dark	Hyperbole	Not Ok	Optimistic	Commentary	Miscellaneous	Familiarizer	Elmo	Nostalgia
1 Incongruence	131	32	26	35	68	82	18	16	4	3	34	7
2 Contempt	32	38	12	16	23	34	1	0	1	1	13	5
3 Social Deviance	26	12	31	18	19	17	1	4	0	1	9	0
4 Dark	35	16	18	48	36	37	1	2	1	0	14	1
5 Hyperbole	68	23	19	36	83	60	7	5	2	0	19	3
6 Not Ok	82	34	17	37	60	109	12	0	1	3	41	5
7 Optimistic	18	1	1	1	7	12	45	0	0	2	22	1
8 Commentary	16	0	4	2	5	0	0	22	0	0	1	0
9 Miscellaneous	4	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	10	0	0	0
10 Familiarizer	3	1	1	0	0	3	2	0	0	5	2	0
11 Elmo	34	13	9	14	19	41	22	1	0	2	61	3
12 Nostalgia	7	5	0	1	3	5	1	0	0	0	3	6

Table 2. Co-occurrence matrix of thematic tags

Based on the thematic tagging, subsequent data points of interest were pulled from the corpus as exemplars to analyze further to illustrate the significance of the results found in Tables 1 and 2. The operationalization of trauma dumping as the co-occurrence of *Not Ok* and *Social Deviance* highlighted a subset of data points like Example (1) depicted below:

- (1) Been on this planet nearly 61 years and feel I have no purpose anymore. It's all pointless. It's as if I'm in a film watching everyone else go about their materialistic business 'want this want that'. 'Want it free'. 'Me me me me' This world is fill of pain, anger, violence, disease, power grabbing despots and poverty. The chasm is widening as HG Wells put it, between the 'haves' and 'have nots'. Celebrity crassness, greed and ignorance, especially the hypocritical so called religious righteous! This planet is being destroyed by the powerful 'few'. Many are waking up to the truth but the majority just cannot and will not 'see' what is happening to the world – and happening very fast now. Im not suicidal. I just hate what I'm witnessing right now and cannot see where i fit any more. I feel like oping out in a faraway wilderness now without 'people' People often say 'Life is hard'. It's not at all – it's PEOPLE who ruin everything and destroy lives and the simple things.



Figure 2. Screenshot, GIF attached to Example (1); Muffin from *Muffin and Nuts*

This excerpt fits the canonical definition of trauma dumping based on the co-occurrence of the tags *Not Ok* and *Social Deviance*. The post is composed of 987 characters, 707 above the standard 280 that Twitter defaults to for free accounts. Quantitatively, this can be seen as an excessive response to Elmo, overwhelmingly exceeding the one-phrase length of the original question. There is a clear expression of trauma and negative emotions and evaluations by the user as well, reporting on feeling a lack of purpose which is followed by a continuous evaluation of the world: “this world is full of pain, anger, violence...,” “the world is being destroyed,” “it’s all pointless.” The user also included a GIF of Muffin, a cartoon rabbit. This added the *Incongruence* code, as the childish imagery directly contrasted with the negativity that is coded in the text. Other users are seen contrasting negativity and positivity as well:

- (2) I lost my job and had to sell my home, My monthly health insurance premiums have gone up 30% My electric bill has gone up 400% My electric bill has gone up 400% But I can recite my ABCs and count to 7 in Spanish. So it’s not all bad, Elmo.
- (3) Eating healthy, exercising, drinking water and working my life away. You didn’t prepare me for this .

Similarly to Example (1), Examples (2) and (3) were tagged with both *Not Ok* and *Social Deviance*. Example (2) describes in conventionally inappropriate detail very uncomfortable pieces of knowledge relating to the user’s financial situation. The comparison between demoralizing events relating to one’s sense of stability, safety, and comfort (bills, professional dismissal, sacrifice of their home), contextualized by large numbers (e.g. 400%) and a comparatively insignificant achievement (being able to recite the alphabet and count in Spanish, an experience often related to childhood or school years) followed by an evaluation (“it’s not all bad”) indicates the *Not Ok* tag. The employment of detail relating to traumatic experiences (listing specific bills and amounts) contextualized by the setting (a public, casual space online) supports the *Social Deviance* tag, as it breaks conventional socialization expectations (e.g. not telling strangers about one’s sufferings in great detail). Example (2) was also tagged with *Incongruence*, due to the inclusion of the “But” statement followed by the “it’s not all bad” evaluation utilizing a comparatively insignificant experience. The dissonance between heavy real-world crises and an insignificant detail relating to childhood school years also creates *Contempt*, particularly when including the addressee, “Elmo,” in the evaluation. As previously stated, sarcasm, operationalized as *Incongruence* and *Contempt*, is often socially deviant and thus further supports the *Social Deviance* tag.

Example (3) begins differently from Example (2), establishing a much more positive tone (listing out good life habits one is engaging in is often synonymous with reporting a positive state of being). The inclusion of “working my life away,” however, instantly creates a dissonance that warrants the *Incongruence* tag. The user reporting that they are “working [their] life away,” in contrast to the life habits being listed before, can be interpreted with the *Not Ok* tag, as it describes an undesirable state of being. This is further reinforced by the subsequent evaluation, where the user reports feelings of not being prepared which communicate a violation of expectation. The addressing of the tweet directly to a second person (Elmo) with the pronoun “you” indicates that the user is placing blame on the addressee. Blaming others for one’s own displeasure is also a socially deviant behavior, which tags this exemplar with *Social Deviance*. Furthermore, the direct second person address also warrants the *Contempt* tag, as it is expressing a negative evaluation (frustration, perhaps) of the addressee. Much like Example (2), Example (3) employs sarcasm and trauma dumping simultaneously given the operational definitions of these concepts.

A few replies, while also embedding both positivity and negativity, were decidedly optimistic in nature in contrast to previous exemplars:

- (4) I have been good, Elmo. Livin’ the dream but afraid of the nightmare, you know? I hope Sesame Street is treating you well, brother.
- (5) Much better now, E 🥰❤️
- (6) Well, little red. I myself have been doing alright, alive and well. Enjoying life after high school, 2nd semester of college really is something. Been happily in love for 8 months now and am considering bending the knee within the next year. Something just feels different this time around

The use of comparison is heavy in these three exemplars, as seen by the contrast in “livin’ the dream but afraid of the nightmare” as well as the comparison of time periods, by the use of “now” and “this time around” in Example (4). The use of familiarizers, which only 5 out of 201 tokens were tagged with, is also to be noted. These three replies were all coded as *Optimistic*, which overlap with *Familiarizer*. Examples (4), (5), and (6) differ from previous exemplars not only due to their comparative lack of reporting of traumatic experiences but also the much more prosocial language. Example (4), aside from reporting that the user is “livin’ the dream” and currently in a desirable state of being, only reports being afraid of an unspecified “nightmare.” This is also followed by an epistemic hedge (“you know?”), which softens the impact of a statement and relates it to the addressee. Finally, Example (4) ends with the user wishing the addressee, materialized as “brother” and indicating camaraderie, well. Example (5) employs an implicature via the word “now,” which creates a comparison with the user’s current state of being and a decidedly worse one that they had previously been in. The use of emojis as well as the familiarizer “E” as a nickname for Elmo, the addressee, further points to politeness strategies (as described by Brown & Levinson, 1987 to be strategies speakers employ to mitigate their relationship with the addressee) that impact the addressee positively. Example (6) functions in a similar way as Examples (4) and (5), seeing as it is mostly a positive evaluation of positive experiences. Example (6) also uses soft euphemistic language (e.g. “really something,” “different”) instead of explicitly evaluating something negatively.

4. Discussion. The present study presents a working definition of trauma dumping based off its linguistic components, conversational power, and sociocultural role as a linguistic action comprised of expressions of traumatic experiences against the listener's volition. Overall, it seems that speakers do stay true to the definition of trauma dumping that, over everything, is characterized by a distinctly antisocial coloring. The overwhelming number of tweets tagged as *Incongruence* points to a potential cushioning that speakers are engaging in, where otherwise negative content is softened by the inclusion of positive or unserious features, such as emojis, memes, cartoonish imagery, and others. This overlaps into the world of dark humor and engaging in the discussion of uncomfortable, serious, or otherwise taboo subject matter from an amusing or lighthearted perspective.

The evolution of trauma dumping as a decidedly negative and antisocial behavior into a seemingly more publicly acceptable branch of humor falls in line with various theories of cultural linguistics. Agha (2003) posed the process of enregisterment, where a linguistic feature became embedded with social meaning that was capable of indicating membership of a particular community. Following this framework, we can also interpret trauma dumping or adjacent language to be indexical of a community, particularly that of young internet users. There is camaraderie found in mutual misery, and sharing in despair not only becomes a source of comfort but also denotes speakers as belonging to the same group of sufferers.



Figure 2. Screenshot, direct reply by Domino's Pizza UK

Figure 2, for example, was an interesting case. The tags *Incongruence* and *Not Ok* were initially given due to the dissonance between the reported evaluation of “totally fine” in contrast to the disaster being depicted in the image included. *Hyperbole* was added due to the larger-than-life depiction of a pizza factory disaster. In order to categorize this as trauma dumping, however, the exemplar also needed the tag *Social Deviance*. The added context of the user being Domino’s Pizza UK, an account representing a corporation selling a product, muddies the socially deviant aspect of this tweet. By default, corporations and any related public communications they publish cannot be perceived to be socially deviant or friction-inducing; despite the seemingly congruent pattern between Figure 2 and Examples (2), and (3), where they all employ a contrast between a positive report and a negative experience, Figure 2 can actually be considered to be socially congruent. Contextualized by the user’s identity as a public corporation with an image to protect and a product to sell, any communications published with the brand’s name on it will never be intentionally abrasive or otherwise antisocial. This can then be interpreted as Domino’s Pizza UK attempting to conform to social norms and appeal to current trends instead of genuinely reporting on a traumatic experience. The additional context of the picture being generated by artificial intelligence also supports the lack of authenticity relating to the *Not Ok* aspect despite being superficially present. This illustrates the evolution of trauma dumping as more than an antisocial and undesired behavior and instead demonstrates the embedding of trauma dumping and similar acts as part of current online culture that corporations are able to appeal to.

The motivations of trauma dumping somewhat mirror those of early 20th century dada and post-WWII absurdism. A social, political, and cultural climate outlined by uncertainty, turmoil, and suffering to a global scale as a result of the hyperconnectivity that modern technology affords us is not at all dissimilar to the economic instability and international tension that underscored the schools of thought defined by chaos and a willingness to embrace and surrender oneself to it. Absurdism is highly relevant to the study of trauma dumping and its enregisterment as a part of the online community, as it is no longer just a socially deviant linguistic behavior. Instead, it offers an explicit acknowledgement of pain and senselessness to achieve freedom from the burden of reasoning. Furthermore, a mutual understanding between users regarding not only the accurate use of the term *trauma dumping* to describe what the replies to Elmo’s tweet are doing but also a generalizable trend in themes of negativity in users point to a greater evolution of the phenomenon. It has evolved from a purely socially deviant behavior to being an index of belonging to the same community of internet users, commiserating over the same types of experiences and subsequent feelings of hopelessness. Beyond just an unwanted expression of traumatic experiences, trauma dumping is seen to be acquiring a new function in expressing solidarity between users as a way to communicate camaraderie amidst uncertain and tumultuous times.

This study also raises a bigger question: what is the listener’s role in trauma dumping? Previously, the definition proposed a “disregard for the listener” that was integral to trauma dumping. How far does the requirement for the listener’s own discomfort go in order to define something as trauma dumping? Does the intention to disregard matter regardless of the listener’s own evaluation of the interaction? The role of the listener in trauma dumping is something that needs further study as the concept heads further into the grey area between speaker and listener meaning.

The main limitation surrounds the nature of the corpus. Firstly, the small size makes it hard to draw robust conclusions that span across a broad range of scenarios. Secondly, the inclu-

sion of multimodal data made the coding process a lot more challenging. Future research on the pragmatics of trauma dumping would help uncover the degree to which the listener, and not the speaker, becomes the central piece in meaning making.

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