


Letter to the Editor

The only Special Interest Group with a Stack – Evolution, Psychiatry and the Substack Platform

G. Brar^{1,2} , A. Hunt³ and H. O'Connell^{2,4}

¹Trinity College Dublin, Dublin, Ireland, ²University of Limerick, Limerick, Ireland, ³Institute of Evolutionary Medicine, University of Zürich, Zürich, Switzerland and ⁴Laois-Offaly Mental Health Services, Dublin, Ireland

The Evolution and Psychiatry Special Interest Group as part of the College of Psychiatrists has been active since 2020 (Brar and O'Connell, 2024a). Since then, the group has produced a steady output of articles (Rafferty et al., 2023; Brar and O'Connell 2023; Brar and O'Connell, 2024b) and has hosted events with leading researchers, which have been uploaded onto the college's YouTube channel. We believe it may be useful for readers if we share our experiences on the successes and opportunities of online platforms in growing interest in lesser-known areas of psychiatry, such as evolutionary psychiatry, and building communities and knowledge bases in an ever-more online world.

In May 2023, Henry O'Connell and Gurjot Brar (chair and vice-chair of the Special Interest Group, respectively) began an online collaborative journal through the 'Substack' platform dedicated to discussing and exploring how evolutionary science can inform our understanding of psychiatry. What began with relatively few subscribers quickly blossomed into over 400 regular subscribers and 25,000 reads to date and is now celebrating its first year anniversary. The Evolution and Psychiatry Substack contains a wide variety of articles published fortnightly, including clinical case series delivered in a problem-based learning format, winning essay entries from trainees from the UK and Ireland, commentary on recent research articles in the evolutionary field, interviews with notable evolutionists, and primer articles aimed at introducing basic concepts in evolutionary psychiatry. Our most popular articles include 'Evolution – basic principles & applications to health and illness' and 'Personal and professional reflections on the power of an evolutionary perspective', available online at epsig.substack.com.

Substack is often touted as an email newsletter platform but is arguably much more. Since its inception in 2017, its novel and simple interface has attracted journalists, thought leaders and authors from various backgrounds. Many notable 'Substackers' include Richard Dawkins, Anne Helen Peterson, Matt Taibibi and Salman Rushdie. There are also several notable 'Substacks' run by psychiatrists such as *Psychiatry at the Margins* by Dr Awais Aftab, *Rational Psychiatry* by Dr Thomas Reilly and the *Socratic Psychiatrist* by Martin Greenwald. Although the platform allows monetisation, many choose to disseminate their work for free. Currently Substack has over 20 million monthly active subscribers and 2 million paying subscribers (Backlinko, 2024).

Corresponding author: G. Brar; Email: gurjotbrarmd@protonmail.com

Cite this article: Brar G, Hunt A, and O'Connell H. The only Special Interest Group with a Stack – Evolution, Psychiatry and the Substack Platform. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipm.2024.17>

There are advantages and disadvantages of using Substack to publish. Positively, it reduces the barrier to entry for novice readers who are seeking simple introductions to a field. Many concepts and theories for emerging fields such as evolutionary psychiatry can be unfamiliar and difficult to digest, and the platform allows for them to be presented in ways that are more accessible than found in academic publications, both aesthetically and by use of accompanying multimedia, hyperlinks and so on. Interested individuals who subscribe will have new articles delivered straight to their email inboxes. This is essentially a modern form of journalism, with all the improved reach, cost reduction and multimedia integration made possible by the internet, distributed without the formal need to go through a publisher. A major drawback is the lack of a peer-review mechanism (unless the author(s) choose to embed this in their process) and the resulting cost to credibility – readers rely on a journal's credibility when reading academic articles, but such credibility needs to be earned independently and over time by a new Substack. Additionally, articles published on a Substack are likely less valuable on an academic CV than articles published in a peer-reviewed journal and will not earn citation counts for scholarly profiles (although they can be cited as online articles). Substack thus serves as an ideal enhancement for introductory, training and journalistic-type materials rather than for publishing original research.

Substack is therefore the latest in a suite of online platforms supporting electronic communication of educational materials, joining the various platforms which offer free hosting. Today, audio, video, academic discussions, both informal and formally presented at conferences, workshops and symposia can now be uploaded online and be freely accessible. The College of Psychiatrists' YouTube channel uploads the Evolution and Psychiatry webinars, which are presented live to members of the group, with a Q&A. These recordings have now received several thousands of views and will be available in perpetuity. Their value, and the speaker's time, is therefore multiplied immeasurably. The UK sister group, the Evolutionary Psychiatry Special Interest Group of the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Evolutionary Psychiatry Section of the World Psychiatric Association also upload their live and online events onto their 'EPSIGUK' YouTube channel, which has almost 6000 subscribers and over half a million views. These presentations are aimed at academic audiences, but YouTube and podcast platforms also afford the possibility for general-audience, more casual conversations, as seen in the 'Evolving Psychiatry' podcast by Dr Adam Hunt and 'Evolution

Talk' by Rick Coste, another form of media rapidly growing in interest (Quintana and Heathers 2021).

The internet has put exceptional tools in the hands of interested researchers who seek to grow and educate on their field, for free. The 'open science' movement has suggested that academic publishing can be viewed as antiquated, costly and unnecessarily restricted, sometimes benefitting publishers over researchers and the public (Siew 2017). Via the internet, interviews and presentations can be conducted remotely and recorded, and pieces of writing can be uploaded and distributed in easily accessible forms. We encourage others seeking to grow subfields and specialities in psychiatry to do so by harnessing these tools – and for those interested in the relationship between evolution and psychiatry to check out the available resources. Information transmission and community building are now possible in an unprecedented way; psychiatry can undoubtedly benefit from these new possibilities.

Acknowledgements. The authors have no acknowledgements to declare.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Competing interests. The authors have no competing interests to declare.

Ethical standards. This manuscript did not require ethical approval and as such complies with the authors' assertion that all procedures contributing to this work comply with the ethical standards of the relevant national and institutional

committee on human experimentation with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2008.

References

- Backlinko** (2024). Substack user and revenue statistics. <https://backlinko.com/substack-users>.
- Brar G, O'Connell H** (2023). Evolutionary psychiatry: Current perspectives on evolution and mental health edited by Riadh Abed and Paul St John-Smith, Cambridge University Press. 2022. £49. 99(Hb). 338 pp. ISBN 9781316516560. *The British Journal of Psychiatry* **223**, 396. doi:10.1192/bjp.2022.209.
- Brar G, O'Connell H** (2024a). Evolution and psychiatry: the formation of a special interest group. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* **41**, 1–3. doi:10.1017/ipm.2023.30.
- Brar G, O'Connell H** (2024b). The use of psychedelics in psychiatric treatment – evolutionary perspectives. *Irish Journal of Psychological Medicine* **41**, 148–149. doi:10.1017/ipm.2023.10.
- Quintana DS, Heathers JAJ** (2021). How podcasts can benefit scientific communities. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* **25**, 3–5. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2020.10.003.
- Rafferty G, Brar G, Petrut M, Meagher D, O'Connell H, John-Smith PS** (2023). Banging the drum: evolutionary and cultural origins of music and its implications for psychiatry. *BJPsych Bulletin* **47**, 251–254. doi:10.1192/bjb.2023.44.
- Siew K** (2017). The open science movement: revolution is underway. *Physiology News* **2017**, 24–29. doi:10.36866/pn.107.24.