Young Adults' Mental Illness Aesthetics on Social Media

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Social media posts expressing mental illness such as depression are trending in today's society. The aesthetics of dark and depressing posts are highlighted in blogs or social media accounts of young individuals. Consequently, this study investigated why young people use mental illness as an aesthetic on social media. On top of that, this study contributes to the limited body of research on this subject. This study applied a method known as netnography, an analysis of social interactions online. Furthermore, the actor-network theory (ANT) was employed as an analytical tool to explore insights and draw conclusions. Seven mediators were identified as possible causes that prompted mental illness aesthetic use, including Tumblr, media, attention seekers, coping mechanism, victimhood, emo culture, and mental health awareness. These findings provided insights into developing interventions and systematic methods to discuss mental illness properly. This study also identified current challenges in social media research regarding mental illness detection.

KEYWORDS

Actor-Network Theory, Mental Illnesses, Netnography, Romanticisation, Young Adults

INTRODUCTION

Although social media serves as a platform for young people to express themselves and connect with other people, it had also created a trend of romanticizing mental illness (Yu, 2019). The idea behind romanticism is to improve the presentation of a notion to stimulate acceptance from the audience, such as portraying mental illness as attractive and desirable (Nicoara, 2018; Shrestha, 2018; Dunn, 2017). Basically, romanticization represents ideas of beautiful suffering or beautiful tragedy. The awareness of mental illness such as anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are not as prominent as mental illness related to low moods or the state of being sad, i.e., depression (Roberts, 2013).

Notably, the romanticization of mental illness is trending in the form of edited pictures, graphics interchange format (GIF's), or memes quoting misunderstood turmoil or sensationalized phrases (e.g., "I want to die a lovely death" and "Cute but psycho"; Bine, 2013). This trend could be observed all over social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Pinterest, and mainly Tumblr (Fu, n.d.; Jadayel, Medlej, & Jadayel, 2017; Thelandersson, 2018). Seeing that social media sites allow sharing and saving a photo to one's device, these materials are often circulated on various platforms via sharing, reposting, retweeting, and reblogging. Hence, mental illness has become seemingly alluring and necessary, given that many young people are using mental illness as their aesthetics, as a display of their quirky personality or accessories for their Instagram feed (Nicoara, 2017; Cham, 2016).

It has been demonstrated that popularizing mental illness has negative consequences as it distorts understanding of what mental illness truly is and contributes to a culture that promotes mental illness as alternative self-expression (Fu, n.d.; Shrestha, 2018; Dunn, 2017). To the best of the authors' knowledge, no recent study has investigated the underlying factors or potential reasons for romanticizing mental illness on social media. Undoubtedly, social media is central to our daily lives, particularly among the young (Lloyd, 2014). Generally, the youth use social media to express their emotions or thoughts and seek social support (Escobar-Viera et al., 2018; Naslund et al., 2017). Besides, current research has shown that social media is a powerful platform to seek social support on psychological distress related issues (De Choudhury & De, 2014; Andalibi et al., 2015; Andalibi et al., 2016). In fact, mental health discussions have become apparent on social media (Blair & Abdullah, 2018) and multiple platforms are used to seek and share mental health information (Gkotsis et al., 2016; De Choudhury; De, 2014). According to Huh (2015), these platforms provide the opportunity to connect with other people with similar problems, allowing them to exchange thoughts and emotional support by giving advice and psychological support. Boyd (2014) reported that the youth often turn to Facebook and Twitter to evade external pressures that threaten their mental health.

In general, social media offers the freedom to express thoughts (De Choudhury & De, 2014) and to openly discuss issues of mental illness to promote a sense of community (Yu, 2019). Nevertheless, there are fundamental risks of stigmatization and misuse of these platforms regarding self-disclosure or mental illness discussions (Blair & Abdullah, 2018). Past research has identified maladaptive behaviors on social media concerning mental illness such as depression, eating disorders, and even suicidal ideation (Lachmar et al., 2017; Tanner, 2015; Alderton, 2018).

It could be observed that a trend has emerged among adolescents and young adults where mental illness is romanticized on social media (Yu, 2019). Users of various social media platforms strive to normalize mental illness by presenting it as an accessory and demonstrating the corresponding sufferings as victims (Dunn, 2017). This phenomenon has discounted the significance of mental illness, as personal struggle and distress are regarded as a quirk admired by young individuals (Dunn, 2017). At the same time, aesthetically pleasing pictures related to mental illness and suicide are constantly being posted and shared by many (Shrestha, 2018). Furthermore, adopting the persona of being sad and mad is sought after and even considered as trendy (Thelandersson, 2018).

The major problem lies when mental illness is glamorized and romanticized, which produce deleterious effects. Although some argue that romanticizing mental illness is a coping mechanism for those who are suffering, it is evident that this phenomenon poses serious consequences (Shrestha, 2018). It should be noted that the beautification of mental illness has reversed the efforts to destigmatize them (Zhang, 2019). This romanticization also changes the societal views on mental illness, leading to a greater misunderstanding (Shrestha, 2018) due to the widespread misrepresentation of mental illness in the cyberworld (Shrestha, 2018). Mental illness is a serious health issue and should not be depicted as a cute accessory or a desirable characteristic. Nowadays, anxiety, depression, bipolar disorder, and OCD are deemed as socially-accepted characteristics, (Yu, 2017). Wahl (1995) stated that pictures about mental illness are often unfavorable and inaccurate as they promote stigma and discrimination which create barriers for treatment and recovery.

Besides affecting society, romanticization of mental illness undermines those with clinically diagnosed mental illness (Dunn 2017) because common experience has been described as a mental illness (Bine, 2013). In a way, this practice trivializes the debilitating experiences of individuals who struggle daily, discrediting them by glamorizing their conditions with mere factual information (Graham, 2019). Additionally, people diagnosed with mental illness might falsely think that their experience and struggles are normal, thus creating barriers to seeking professional help and treatment.

In addition, empirical evidence has highlighted the possibility of utilizing social media to predict, detect, or identify at-risk individuals for mental illness, namely depression and suicide (Moreno et al., 2011; De Choudhury et al., 2013; Gkotsis et al., 2016; Merchant et al., 2019). A study by Volkova et al. (2016) used social media to measure students' well-being across universities in the United States.

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