Mental illness: Once stigmatized and now glamorized

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There is no denying that in recent years there has been an increased prevalence of discussion surrounding the topics of mental health and mental illness. What was once too taboo to even mention, is now discussed openly and is met with more acceptance and with more understanding than ever. It is undeniable that this acceptance is a positive thing, as it greatly lessens the stigmas associated with seeking out help, but as with most things, there is a good and bad side to this normalization. Some argue that social media has normalized mental illness a little too much and has instead glamorized it.

Background

- In the years between 2007 and 2018, Facebook continued to rise and dominate as a social media platform and became heavily intertwined with American culture, coincidently the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that suicide rates amongst 10-24-year-olds also rose 57.4% (Curtin, 2020).
- In one study, researchers found that access to Facebook, college-wide, led to a 7% increase in severe depression and a 20% increase in anxiety disorders among students (Braghieri et al., 2022). It is suggested that the introduction of this platform may have unintentionally contributed to more than 300,000 new diagnoses of depression across the United States college population (Office of the Surgeon General (OSG), 2023; Braghieri et al., 2022).
- A quick search of #mentalhealth on Instagram brings up over 51 million posts, and on TikTok, there are over 115.5 billion views under this hashtag. Much of this media is filled with exaggerated, inaccurate, and comical depictions of what it is like to have a mental illness and projects the idea of "beautiful suffering"
- This wave of "beautifully suffering" has made mental illness alluring, has changed societal views of mental illness into something to "want" or "strive for" and has made being mentally ill revered and trendy.
- Rather than educating and spreading awareness of the real struggles that come from having a mental illness, social media has turned mental illness into an unrealistic reality for entertainment.
- A study done by the University of Balamand found that anorexia nervosa, practicing self-harm, and having depressive or anxiety disorders are portrayed in a sensationalized or glamorized light online and are promoted as something to desire. One participant from this study confessed that "depression was appealing to me". Another participant confessed "I thought anorexia was nice. I wanted to be anorexic." (Jadayel et al., 2017).

Methods

Content Analysis & Qualitative Methodology

Data was collected from online content. A total of 420 online posts were obtained from two main social media platforms (TikTok and Instagram). Keywords for the search included terms such as "mental illness" "mental disorder" [specific disorders, e.g., "depression," "anxiety," "ADHD," "OCD," "neurodivergent"], "beautiful," "perfect" "awesome," "wonderful," "art," "cool," and "great," among others. To examine the posts, content analysis (Cavanagh, 1997; Hseih & Shannon, 2005) was used to examine the data and find patterns of perspectives/meaning. Posts were rated by the members of the research team and discrepancies were resolved. The following categories were identified: glamorization/ humor, self-diagnosing, validation and anti-glamorization.

Results & Discussion

Category 1: Glamorization

The "Glamorization" category includes comments that discuss mental illness or symptoms as something trendy, desirable, or revered. They can also describe mental illness in a "romantic" way ("romanticization").

- Wow Mental health is so cool and quirky
- Red was my favorite color, I thought as they laid there in the pool of blood, it was so beautiful
- I love being depressed. The comfort of feeling at my lowest
- Lucky I want autism. I wish I had autism its so silly >< ^^!! How do you get autism?
- I love mentally ill girls
- Can I have some of your pills? need happy pills.
- I wanted adhd only for a tiny bit because I wanted to feel different, now I've been diagnosed with adhd and add 🥺
- I NEVER would have self harmed if I wasnt looking at aesthetic pictures of cuts all day.
- I'm about to do my switch from binge eating to starving bc I hate how I let myself gain all the weight back
- I truly think I cosplayed having an ED and then ended up with one for 12 years. Manifested it ✨
- If ur happy and u know it shake ur meds! 😂
- I don't wanna heal myself. I want to be worse. I'm safer this way
- I want ADHD aswell, it would be cute
- I'm bout due for a grippy sock vacation myself

Category 2: Humor

The "Humor" category includes comments that discuss mental illness or related items in a humorous way.

- Decided I am rejecting my mental illness, doubling it , and giving it to the next person
- Live laugh lobotomy
- I need this or an exorcism
- I getting tired of this app telling me I might have adhd😂
- Live, laugh, ✨ lexapro ✨🤙

Category 3: Self-Diagnosis

The "Self-Diagnosis" category includes comments that suggest the individual is claiming a mental illness without proper assessments for an official diagnosis.

- Pov: you just found out you're neurodivergent
- Every day this app convinces me I have undiagnosed adhd
- Either people with anxiety need to stop being relatable or I need to have a conversation with my therapist
- So you're telling me, I have ADHD all this time?
- Not me going to my therapist with a new found diagnosis
- So maybe I do need to be medicated …
- Me realizing I have ADHD and severe hyperfixation

Category 4: Help-Seeking

The "Help-Seeking" category includes comments that seek advice on mental illness or a diagnosis on social media. This category can go hand-in-hand with Self-Diagnosis

- Ok I think I have adhd, it's not diognosed but I have all symptoms.. Help pls
- …. Do I.. do I have ADHD???
- Ok honestly. how do I go about getting screened bc this is triggering lmao
- None takes me seriously when I tell them, I feel so alone, I need serious help

Category 5: Validation

The "Validation" category includes comments that seek a community that share their struggles and/or affirmation that their feelings and experiences are valid

- Being sad is the only thing that makes feel safe
- It's insane Tiktok has shown me how many people struggle like I do
- It's not okay for ME to be okay
- So I'm not alone….
- Getting better is scary, I've been like this for so long to the point it's comforting, I'm in therapy but I might leave because I'm not ready to get better, I don't want to
- I want to prove that I - in fact - am NOT able to "act normal" because I'm brutally sick and not "needing attention" or "lazy"
- I want a diagnosis so that's family takes me more seriously.

Category 6: Anti-Glamorization

The "Anti-Glamorization" category includes comments that argue and attempt to educate others that mental illness is not something to make trendy, desirable, or revered.

- I don't understand do people think it is a fashion statement to have anxiety? I would give mine away right now!
- Guys just because you do this doesn't mean you have adhd!!
- Mental illness isn't cute or quirky it's mental ILLNESS
- Bro these are so annoying doing basic human things doesn't make you mentally unstable.
- People have watered down what depression actually is. Depression isn't just being sad like the world has taught everyone it is :/
- Admitting you have mental health issues isn't making mental health a trendy thing. 😳

These comments revealed patterns of glamorization/romanticization, humor, and self-diagnosis regarding mental illness, but they also show that some commentators take this as an opportunity to present anti-glamorization and educational perspectives. Additionally, comments with the intent of seeking out help, guidance, and/or validation were also identified. Although speaking openly about mental health can help to destigmatize it, it is important to note that the effect of glamorization on the audience, especially, young users can be negative. According to researchers, glamorization views can lead to a distorted understanding of what mental illness truly is and contribute to a culture that continuously sensationalizes mental illness, making it desirable and leading to an increase in individuals claiming an undiagnosed mental illness (Harper, 2005; Srivastava et al., 2018; Vidamaly & Lee, 2021).

Conclusion

De-stigmatizing mental illness is important, and it is wonderful that social media has helped to increase conversations about mental health and aid in lessening the stigmas associated with mental health. However, it needs to be understood that there is a difference between glorifying and romanticizing mental illness versus destigmatizing it. Currently, it seems that this line is not defined and in the long run this will result in social media having a more damaging effect on our mental health than we currently realize. This is why more research needs to be done analyzing the effect of glamorizing and romanticizing mental illness.
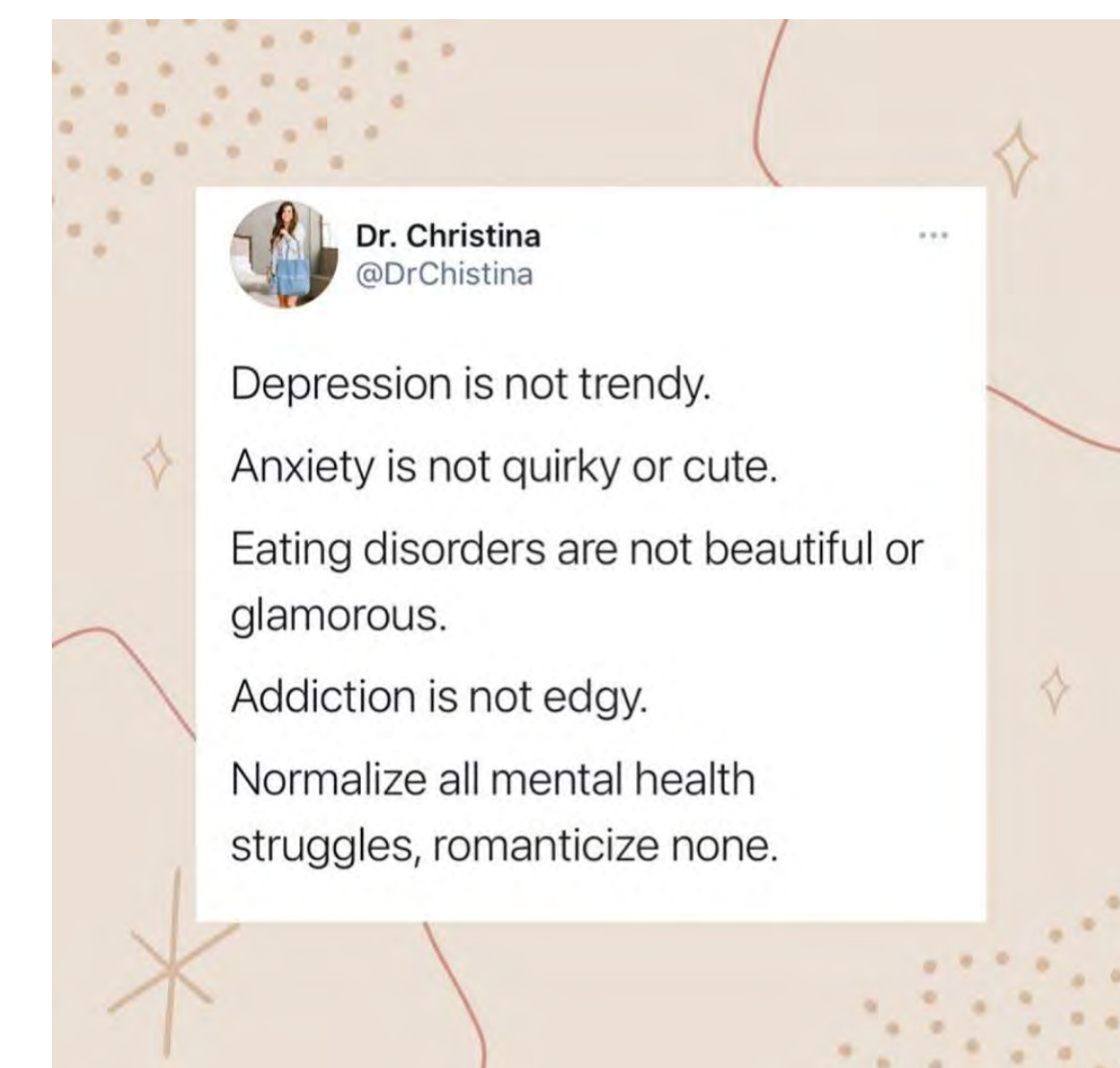
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