

BLUE IS THE NEW BLACK

HOW POPULAR CULTURE IS ROMANTICIZING MENTAL ILLNESS

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ABSTRACT

There is a trend of romanticizing mental illness amongst the younger generation. I define this age group as high school to college-age, around 13-22 years old. In this thesis I clarify several reasons as to why this is happening, focusing on the influence of popular culture. I assert that due to the well-meaning intention of destigmatizing mental illness in society, there has been a movement in film and social media to humanize various mental illnesses, which in twist of perception has caused it to be sensationalized. I will be using the examples of depression, anxiety, personality disorder and schizophrenia. I use film as the main medium of influence because historically, film has mirrored and magnified social issues and changes of opinion as time progresses, a key example being both social opinions towards women's, and civil rights. The parallel is that the changing attitudes towards mental health are now being shown through film as well. I add social media to the mixture of influences because it is just as, if not more of an influence on attitudes as film is, because social media is interactive. The consequence of admiration towards mental illnesses are varied. On a lesser scale, it has shown in behaviors such as using disorders such as depression or anxiety as accessories to make one's personality more interesting. On a more critical scale, it may lead to the tendency to not seek out help if one is experiencing symptoms of poor mental health due to the weary opinions of the older generation suspicious of fakery for attention. On the flip-side, over diagnosis can also occur. There is nothing wrong with trying to humanize mental illness through depictions in film and social media. However, it needs to be done so more objectively, with realistic information, and with the "faded flower" aesthetic removed.

Historically, popular culture has romanticized and idolized illness. Most notable is the infatuation with tuberculosis, or in lay terms, consumption, during the mid-1800s. Medical doctors and common folk alike did not fully understand the nature of this disease, and the consequences were devastating. Tuberculosis manifested in the forms of great fatigue, coughing up blood, significant weight loss, and eventually death. As horrific and bloody as this may sound, and for as many lives the illness claimed, there was a strange, social phenomenon that occurred; the illness was addressed with an air of tragic loveliness. Those suffering from it were seen with a new, macabre kind of beauty (Mullin, 2016).

Tuberculosis was an equal opportunity disease, but was depicted in 19th century popular literature as the illness of a beautiful young artist, who despite being wracked with agony, continued to live and go on writing, painting, and engaging in other activities associated with an intellectual mind. The aesthetic of the ‘faded-flower’ gained immense popularity, so much so that young women soon began to do their best to appear thin, frail, pale and flushed of the face despite being unafflicted (Mullin, 2016). This is not to say that anyone went out of their way to convince a doctor that they were ill, but there was certain charm in obtaining such features.

As medical knowledge advanced, the tendency to romanticize tuberculosis abated. Since the mystery was gone, the illness became less of an issue. Advancement of medical knowledge reached not only doctors, but the layman as well. Better hygienic and nutritional practices became more prevalent, and illness was approached more methodically than superstitiously or with certain degrees of wonder. This explains why the romanization of tuberculosis and other physical illness stopped. Without the air of

mystery surrounding an affliction, the charm is lost. However, there is a curious phenomenon that has been rising over the past several decades that mirrors the Victorian era. Now, instead of romanticizing certain types of physical illness, there has been a trend of similar attitudes towards some mental illnesses. Despite advanced medical awareness for the physical aspect of the human body, there is still a great deal hotly debated about psychological illness, the research involved being just as controversial as it had been with physical illness in the centuries before. Illnesses of the mind are more of a mystery than tuberculosis had ever been, as often times the most extreme and detrimental symptoms of mental illness do not manifest physically.

This thesis asserts that there is a trend amongst the younger generation of romanticizing mental illness, because of unrealistic portrayal in film and social media, and general lack of understanding from producers of such films and social media platforms as to the implications of inaccurate material. I am defining “younger generation” as 13 to 22 years of age.-While it is true that the older generation is also capable of being influenced by popular culture, I am using the 13-22 age range because those have been the prime populations of discussion in the literature review I have conducted for this thesis. This is likely because this population is more concerned with fitting in, and is still constructing their ideals of themselves and the world. Naturally, film and social media will shape this process, as those are the main sources of information acquisition and entertainment for the younger generation. This population is also of special interest to me, as it is the age range I am in, where most of my relationships are, and where I have the best observational ability due to my collegiate environment.

I am choosing film for the main culprit of influence for several reasons. On a personal level, I have an extensive history with the world of cinema, as I grew up with my parents owning the only video store in town for over 11 years. My father always made a point to incorporate “film history education” into my childhood, so over time, I have seen enough of it to find trends such as those I will be describing in this thesis. Film has become a source of the misunderstanding of mental illness from the well-meant attempt to show mental illness in a better and more informative light, in response to decades of social stigma. I argue that Hollywood is a mirror that reflects societal stressors and anxieties brought to attention by individual and organizational advocates for social change.

With the rise of social media as another medium for popular culture, the same trend can be identified, and I will be using it as a secondary source of influence in regard to opinions on mental health. Social media are the primary source that most people, especially the younger generation, use to keep up with world events, celebrity gossip, and more importantly, societal shifts in opinion and popular trends. There has been a wave in the past decade of Tumblr and Facebook groups that support depression and anxiety; the disorders, not so much those that suffer from them. In the attempts of users on various social media platforms to humanize mental illness, they glamorize it, show it as an accessory, and illustrate potential sufferers as martyrs.

The attempt to demonstrate realistic and humanized instances of mental illness in film comes from good intentions as it can be a difficult thing for those are mentally well to wrap their head around. Those suffering from depression or anxiety will not (usually) cough up blood, or develop a rash, as was the case with tuberculosis. But there are

behavioral manifestations such as withdrawal from the community, isolation from friends and emotional outbursts. These symptoms can easily be misconstrued as someone simply being “unagreeable.” Mental ailments are so often initially silent and manifest themselves only after they have caused a drastic decline in one's quality of life. Many people do not discuss having mental health issues because it has been considered taboo by Western society, with more liberal perspectives only emerging in the mainstream since the early 1950s.

Through the dedication and persistence of associations such as the American Psychological Association (APA), and mental health advocacy groups, tremendous strides have been made to reduce the stigmatization of mental illness over the past several decades. This has occurred due to a better understanding of the existence of it, as well as causes and treatments. True reform of the way the mentally ill were treated occurred in a rapid burst in the 1800s. Dorothea Dix is the most common house-hold name amongst reformers. Dix was a Boston woman (alleged, but not proven to be mentally ill herself) who spent years interviewing the patients of various mental institutions across New England. Her results resonated the cruelty and inhumanity inflicted upon patients, documenting instances such as the mentally ill being chained to their beds, lying in their own filth, and physically abused (History of Mental Health Treatment, 2017). Her published findings asserted her as a respected reformer.

Another less-known, but equally influential reformer from the Victorian Era was a writer named Nelly Bly. Bly agreed to go undercover as a mentally ill woman for a local newspaper so that she may gain first hand experience of the way patients were being treated. She wrote long accounts of how in closed and locked-in she was, to the

point of if there was ever a fire in the institution, there would be absolutely no ability to escape. “Treatments” administered to her were often harsh, and included solitary confinement, hair pulling, and other forms of abuse (History of Mental Health Treatment, 2017). Bly outlined for the general public what living in such a facility was like, and argued that it clearly was not helping anyone get better, and that public officials needed to find an alternative solution.

In the modern 2000s, mental health treatment had taken a community approach. Medication, counseling, and psychotherapy are now implemented, instead of isolation and physical abuse. The system now is not perfect though, not by a long shot. Some states have laws that enforce the taking of psychotropic medication for certain cases, even if it is against the patient's' will. The mentally ill and their advocates are certainly still fighting for autonomy, but the situation is still much brighter than it was a few mere decades ago (History of Mental Health Treatment, 2017). There is no way to tell what the future of mental health treatment holds; however it is without a doubt that the reforms beginning in the 1800s have created a healthier climate for mental health issues. It only makes sense that once patients had ceased being locked up like animals and made to live as such, that the layman stopped viewing them as people to be gawked at and feared, and more as individuals that deserve compassion and legitimate medical attention.

Changing attitudes towards mental illness have become evident through representation in film, but in an unfortunate twist, it is film that has been the main source of misinformation. Ever since film became a mainstream form of entertainment, Hollywood has taken on the duty of mirroring various societal anxieties and pressures

through the decades. This is illustrated with the progression of films depicting hot topics such as race relations and women's rights. Before World War II, there was no cinema that touched on the difficulties of being a woman in a man's world. Before the 1960s, no films really showed the tension between black and white Americans. However, these things change. Around the middle to the end of the second world war, there were more films showing strong female leads who had ample wit and ambition in the absence of men. Likewise, around the 1960s, during the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, there were films coming out that not only had more African-American actors, but that also directly commented on the tensions of race-relations of the time.

In the present century, social reform is centered around the shifting attitudes regarding mental illness. It is easy to see the trend that film imitates life, as it had for women's issues and civil rights. It has even been directly commented on by the APA that issues of gender equality and racial tension are not so different from mental illness stigma. The APA vocalized this in an article discussing the nation-wide need for destigmatizing mental illness by stating that the negative feelings surrounding mental illness are, "in the same category as sexism and racism" (APA, 2016, pg. 10).

Hollywood takes a keen look into such societal stressors. Issues of sexism and the push for women's rights have also had their time in the limelight for mainstream entertainment. During the first world war, women had had to keep business running as usual with the men all taken away to battle. Since that point, there was an insurgence of films depicting stronger and more independent women. This theme of the self-sufficient women arose in film as early 1941 in titles such as "The Little Foxes," featuring a southern belle, Regina Giddens, played by the very popular Bette Davis. The film focuses

on Regina striving to get a hefty portion of family inheritance whilst battling her brothers. It was reviewed by The New York Times in a less than favorable light, describing Regina as “callous,” and that there was “nothing pretty or inspiring” about her (Crowther, 1941, p. 01). This is not a pleasant or kind review, but it was a product of its time. The idea of financially ambitious woman in 1941 was likely disconcerting. Despite an acid-tipped critique of an independent female lead, which was a product of the attitude of the time, Hollywood boldly marked a dramatized version of the changing roles of women in society and the tensions that rise with it.

Issues of racism got its time in the limelight a few decades after the rise of “women’s films.” The 1967 film, “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner” addressed the topic. It may have been ahead of its time, but it illustrated the awkwardness, tension, and desire for acceptance of an interracial couple. Acclaimed film critic of the time, Roger Ebert noted, “I wonder if Krammer [director] isn’t sneaking up on one of the underlying causes of racial prejudice when he implies that the fathers feel their masculinity is threatened” (Ebert, 1968, p.02). It certainly could be argued that this film put a spotlight on some key elements contributing to racial tension. Though produced in the middle of the 1960s, thus admittedly a bit late to the Civil Rights party, it has been remembered for decades after the fact as a quintessential film to represent the changing attitude of the time.

Issues of women’s rights and race relations still show themselves in modern films. Some most recent examples include “Get Out,” a horror movie about an African-American man visiting his Caucasian girlfriend’s family in the suburbs. The film took a gruesome twist following the cult-genre of horror, but more importantly, it satirized the awkward tension and still bumpy attempts to have smooth interracial relationships. In

regard to women's rights, what better way to highlight the strength of women than to revamp the on-screen version of the Amazonian goddess herself, “Wonder Woman.” This film was saturated in feminine strength, illustrations of leadership ability, and a general message that stated, “we don’t need men to thrive, thank you very much.” With these examples of such block-buster hits illuminating the tender parts of social conflict, we can now take a step in a slightly different direction, and evaluate cinematic expression of mental illness.

It was a rocky start, as to be expected, with initial films illustrating those with a mental illness as either dangerous and psychotic, or child-like and foolish. One of the more infamous films that uses mental illness as its main framework is Alfred Hitchcock’s “Psycho” in 1960. This film forms a frightening horror flick, the center-source of the horror stemming from Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) (sometimes called multiple personality disorder) in Mr. Norman Bates. This is explained using the twisted relationship he had with his mother. His mother in the film is deceased, but their warped and unhealthy relationship had such an impact on him that he begins to take on her identity, fluctuating from hers to his own in minutes. Psycho, while providing rich and suspenseful entertainment, unfortunately used the emerging understanding of mental illness coupled with fear and uncertainty in the layman’s perspective, and crafted horror from it. It portrayed DID as going hand in hand with psychotic and murderous behavior, while this is realistically not a common occurrence (Rose, 2017).

However, to the credit of Psycho, despite the use of DID to promote a horrific film, it is not without its redeeming qualities, and stands out as being a film of surprising psychological intelligence for its time. At the very end of the film the psychiatrist

character makes a compelling monologue explaining to the police officers and the sister of the murdered woman the psychological nature of the crime. Though a bit sensationalistic in delivery, the psychiatrist describes the history of Norman Bates as living with his mother after his father died, “as if they were the only two people in the world” (Csmoke365, 2016). This fostered extreme jealousy when another man came into the mother’s life. Bates could not bear it, so he killed the mother and the new man. However, his attachment to his mother had become so fierce that he was obsessed with forcing her to essentially live on, so he stole and preserved her body, and began to dress as her, taking on her personality alongside his own. Sometimes he was Norman, other times, he was “Mother.” This description of DID did in fact add a humanizing element to the film. Norman was not just a psychotic killer, he was mentally ill.

Another prime example of Hollywood representing mental illness in a way that is entertaining, yet may cause some misinformation was 1991 psychological thriller “Silence of the Lambs.” This more updated film that uses mental illness as a key focal point in its storytelling introduces us to Dr. Hannibal Lecter, a famous psychiatrist turned brutal cannibalistic serial killer. The premise of the film follows the events of fledgling FBI agent Clarice, whom Lecter assists from behind his prison bars in conducting a psychological profile on an active serial killer. Throughout the film, Lecter is presented as charming and well-spoken with superior intelligence and a knack for entangling people in his games of wit. The director of the prison that holds Lecter describes him in the opening scene, as a psychopath. “Silence of the Lambs” was an immensely popular film, and rather influential at the time. On top of carrying A-list names such as Anthony

Hopkins and Jodie Foster, it wove a story of intrigue around this psychopathic personality.

In light of the film's popularity, a misconception of psychopathy became prevalent in public thought. It was soon believed by a vast majority of people that psychopathy and superior charm and intellect were a packaged deal. This widespread misunderstanding has even been dubbed “The Lecter Myth” by some scholars (DeLisi, Vaughn, Beaver & Wright, 2010). Though this is not necessarily an unfavorable way to represent aspects of mental illness demonstrated in psychopathy, it is neither accurate nor realistic. The implication that psychopathy is coupled with superior intelligence is not only false, it is the exact inverse of what studies have shown. Though there are cases of individuals exhibiting higher than average intellect alongside psychopathic traits, it is most common that individuals who show three or more psychopathic traits (narcissism, lack of remorse, violence, etc) have lower than average verbal intelligence (DeLisi, Vaughn, Beaver & Wright, 2010). The idea of a suave, charming serial killer is certainly fun for the movies and an interesting idea to play with. However, Hollywood bears a responsibility to accurately portray mental illness, given the significant influence that films have on the public. We look to film for not only entertainment, but for representation (whether consciously or unconsciously) of our own environment. Misinformation is after all, the primary catalyst for bigotry.

In the last two decades there has been a strong resurgence of film and media exploring mental health in a more objective, sympathetic, and realistic light. Because Hollywood mirrors prevalent concern and upset in modern society, as it did with race relations and sexism, it is not surprising that there was a change in the mood of films

exploring mental health issues. Hollywood took on the task of exploring the changing role of women, as shown in “The Little Foxes.” It had also made the effort represent the stresses of race-relations in “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner.” Now, with more education and advocacy for mental health, Hollywood takes on its next task of depicting illnesses such as depression, anxiety, and even schizophrenia, with an informed sense of respect and realism. How mental illness actually started being portrayed though, did not exactly make the mark.

It should be made clear that it is not society as a whole who is pushing for better attitudes towards mental illness. For example, in a recent public opinion poll taken by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in April of this year, on the questions phrased around whether not one would elect a public official who had been treated for a mental illness. Results showed that 31 percent (out of a sample of 1,000 from the general population) strongly agreed that they would not (APA, 2017) This figure certainly does not indicate that everyone is comfortable with mental illness, however it is still a good improvement from decades previously.

Despite a prevailing sense of unease regarding mental illness and those it affects, some advocate for eliminating the stigma against mental illness. A foremost example is the APA, and a powerful example they are. The APA produced an article in July 2016 discussing the need for a “national push” to end the stigma that those suffering from mental illness face. The most important reason for this push to occur is that fear of judgment keeps many from seeking treatment (Lu, 2016). This can cause a destructive cycle, ending in extreme forms of mental illness that has gone untreated. These extreme

forms are what society fears; thus, the stigma is a self-fulfilling prophecy. Having disdain for, or ignoring something will not make it go away.

Aside from the APA, another wide-scale organization that has been shouting out against the stigma of mental illness is the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Upon visiting the online site, the first thing that I saw was a bold headline asking, “Are you stigma free?” NAMI offers everything from ways to donate to other smaller mental health facilities, links to where to find support for a whole range of categories such as LGBTQ, Veterans, Teens and Young Adults, and Family Caregivers. There is also a whole page dedicated to how mental health is just as important amongst our law enforcement as it is in civilian communities. This especially resonates with me, as I have family and loved ones in law enforcement who I have seen suffer, and even lose their lives to unresolved mental illness as a result of their careers.

Organizations such as the APA and NAMI are without doubt two major powerhouses behind the push to destigmatize mental illness in the United States, but there are also individuals speaking out. Chirlane Mcray, the leader of mental health advocacy group, Thrive NYC, discusses in her article “It’s Time to De-stigmatize Mental Health. We Can Start by Talking About It,” discusses how by avoiding the subject of mental illness, it is only exacerbated (McCray, 2016).

In the New York Times, there was a frank and emotional article written around Halloween of last year that discussed the implications of using psychiatric wards as material for haunted houses. Andrew Solomon, both a professor of Clinical Psychology and a psychiatric patient himself, disparaged Knotts Berry Farm in Buena Park, CA for their virtual reality horror experience of a mental institution. The attraction

would strap its patrons into a wheelchair and put VR goggles on them. The scenes that played out ranged from being escorted down terrifying halls with patients wandering aimlessly, to more horrific scenes such as bloody bodies scattered across the floor (as if they had been attacked by mental patients) (Solomon, 2016). Solomon, having gone through crippling depression, suicidal thoughts, and multiple hospitalizations, found the whole idea of using such environments as representation of horror revolting. When he and other mental health advocates were informed of the situation, the issue was taken to NAMI, who sprang into action and chastised Six Flags for having a similar attraction.

With such outrage underway towards Knott's Berry Farm and Six Flags, both respective entertainment industries caved. Knott's Berry Farm shelved their psychiatric horror idea, however Six Flags' compromise may have been even more insulting. Instead of having mental patients roam the haunted maze, they replaced them with zombies. Solomon points out that the idea that those contrived as mentally ill can be replaced with ghoulish creatures such as zombies, makes him feel like even more of an outsider.

It is quite evident that the respective voices of APA, NAMI and other individual mental health advocates have been loud enough to stir up public concern for how mental illness is being addressed and represented. Unfortunately, this has led to the issue being sensationalized. This just goes to show that for social issues to be sensationalized, not every single citizen needs to be on board with a movement. Powerful groups and individuals can cause enough interest in reform. This was exactly the case with sexism and civil rights. Big names and cases such as Susan B. Anthony, Griswold V. Connecticut, Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, Brown V. Board of education have all

been influential in stirring an interest in social reform. Hollywood in turn, has continued playing their role of mirroring such hot topics.

So, with the transition of representation of mental health in popular culture from silly and frightening to potent and sympathetic, where does this leave us? The optimal outcome would be for mental health to be addressed with realistic sobriety and respect. Unfortunately, we are a culture of extremes, and attempts to de-stigmatize mental illness have inadvertently glamorized it, creating an idea that to have a mental illness suggests mysterious, intellectual, unique, even ‘beautifully tragic’ qualities.

This may seem like an initially ludicrous and potentially insensitive assumption; however, I beg my audience to turn their attention to some unsettling discussion regarding the tones taken towards mental illness over social media platforms and recent TV programs. It must be kept in mind that each source I am about to describe has the well-meaning intention of humanizing mental illness, however it seems that their respective audiences have been taking it a step too far.

Hollywood in the last two decades has taken on the task of showing mental illness as something not to be feared and run from (as so was clearly the vibe obtained from *Psycho*), but to be understood and sympathized with, creating films such as “*A Beautiful Mind*” and others that provide an alternative perspective. “*A Beautiful Mind*” follows the life of a young mathematical genius who suffers from schizophrenia. This film does not belittle or make fantastical this particular illness, as films have done in the past when dealing with mental disorders. It instead provides a somber and realistic look into how the illness affects normal living, and the toll it can have on personal relationships. It has been hailed by film critics and news reporters alike of being one of the first films to really

hit the mark on depicting mental illness and associated struggles. However, despite accolades for this film's progressive take on mental illness, it also sets the stage for an overly positive misunderstanding. The main character and sufferer of schizophrenia is a "genius" and throughout the film, his intellect is his saving grace. This has the potential to couple mental illness with intelligence, just as "The Silence of the Lambs" inadvertently equated psychopathy to intelligence. Over time, this perhaps unintentional trend shows itself more.

Sheldon Cooper from "The Big Bang Theory" is practically the poster-child for the trope of the neurotic yet lovable weirdo. The sitcom aired in 2007, featuring four "nerdy" roommates and their respective adventures navigating extreme social awkwardness whilst grappling with superior intelligence over their peers. Sheldon's character is the quirkiest of them all, and though it is never outright stated what mental illness he has, he exhibits neurotic behavioral tendencies such as insisting on a set schedule of certain meals each week, and having rigid "roommate rules." He also has hints of grandiosity, and potentially borderline personality disorder in his lack of ability to empathize with others. The list could go on forever describing this character's quirks, but the moral of the story is that his character is also a "super genius" and the show has received a huge fan following, with praise that it has humanized certain mental illnesses.

It cannot be denied that the attempts to humanize mental illness in the eyes of the public have been tenacious and well-received. However, I would like to direct attention to a different consequence of such efforts that have gone unnoticed. Very much like the instance of romanticizing tuberculosis in the 1800s, mental illness has taken on the air of something that makes those it affects as seemingly more unique and interesting

than those who have not had to deal with any sort of mental struggle. This is especially problematic, as it has been frequently disproved that mental illnesses such as personality disorders or depression have any correlation with heightened intelligence or emotional intellect. Just recently at Texas State in fact, Dr. Abramovitch has dispelled a 115-year-old theory (now myth) of Freud's, that obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) is connected to superior intelligence. In fact, from a meta-analysis he conducted with colleagues from Israel and North Carolina, he concluded that most cases of OCD involved average or lowered IQ compared to the rest of the population (Abramovitch, 2017).

Unlike modern romantic ideals of mental illness, the issue of romanization came faster for the case of tuberculosis because it was not initially stigmatized. It was an unfortunate medical illness that, in a morbid twist of perception, made those it affected, beautiful martyrs. The fact that tuberculosis had not been initially stigmatized also meant that research as to what it was and how to cure it also came much swifter, and in turn, the romantic and uninformed perceptions of it dissipated.

There has been a trend in popular culture of portraying mental illness as a lovable quirk rather than a serious personal struggle, and young individuals are beginning to recognize and call out the effects. In 2014, Kayla Goldstein wrote an article to "Her Campus," a journal from Florida State, titled "Mental Illnesses are Not Accessories." (Goldstein, 2014). Kayla points out that it is predominately young girls who have fallen victim to what Janet Street Porter from The Daily Mail has dubbed "The misery movement" (Porter, 2010). The idea here is that mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety have become "trendy," and that they add some intrigue to an otherwise average

personality. Kayla attributes this phenomenon to the romanticization of mental illness as a whole. She laments over hearing peers make such quips to each as “urgh I want a clean room, I am so OCD!” and “my boyfriend broke up with me. I am depressed” (Goldstein, 2014, p.1). This kind of dialogue not only reveals romanization, but a similar trend of self-diagnosis in humorous tones. This trend is not only harmful in that it creates the idea that various mental illnesses are desirable, it is also incredibly insulting to those who suffer legitimately from debilitating mental illness. It can be rightly assumed that those who are truly suffering, do not wish to wear their illness as a badge of individuality.

It is not only in film and television that we see the glamorization of mental illness, it is also pervasive in social media. With the advancement of the decades, we see an advancement in entertainment and communication. Social media are an innovation that has made a profound impact on people’s lives, about as much as film did when it first became popularized. Social media is also arguably as, if not more than influential than film, considering the fact that it is entirely interactive. It comes as no surprise considering that Facebook and Twitter are a fast, easily accessible and digestible source of news, popular culture and speaking platform for all opinions. According to Blue Corona, an online marketing advice company, more than 56% of adults online use more than one social media platform. On top of this large percentage, 81% of millennials check Twitter at least once a day (McLeod, 2017). It is clear that social media has become an essential element of living in the modern world.

On popular social media platforms such as Facebook and Tumblr, there are support pages spreading awareness of depression and other mental illness. These pages also act as hubs for people suffering to share their experiences, gain peer support and

even references to professional help sources. However, as Dawnie Cheng points out in popular online journal, “Inkspire,” such social media platforms are taking a morbid twist on reality. She comments that at 13-years-old, her first experience with the romanization of mental illness was from the internet. “Suddenly it was ‘cool’ to have anxiety or depression. Photos of self-harm surfaced my Tumblr dashboard frequently.” (Cheng, 2017, p.1). Cheng then describes some disturbing aesthetic that comes into play. “Black-and-white pictures of girls, accompanied with tragic monologues about low self-esteem, were quite popular.” (Cheng, 2017, p.1). Cheng also points out that it was common to read stories from the mass media of those who suffer from mental illnesses, and their enduring romantic partners supporting them every step of the way. Cheng asserts that by witnessing this kind of romantic situation, that we begin to “want their perfect relationship” (Cheng, 2017, p.1).

Moving from social media, and onto a more theatrical version of popular culture, the 2017 Netflix series “13 Reasons Why” is another example of depression beautified and used as the foundation for romantic interest. This series is based off a popular young-adult novel that follows a high school girl who had gone through a good amount of bullying and blows to her dignity and self-esteem. Tragically, she commits suicide (while not graphic in the novel, extremely graphic in the TV series). This then sets up the story for her former friend and would-be love interest to discover a series of 13 tapes that she recorded, explaining each specific reason behind her suicide and who was responsible.

This series made headlines for shedding light on the topic of teen-suicide in a matter of fact and thoughtful way. The is leading lady, Selena Gomez even going so far as to call the series “beautifully tragic” (Jensen, 2017, p. 01). At this point, it is

appearing to be overtly evident that beautifying illness is not just reserved for Victorian times. However, it is easy to see why this is problematic. This depiction of how a beautiful girl went through depression and eventually suicide puts forth a powerful message that in order to be noticed and cared about if one is having a hard time in life, taking one's own life is an excellent method. In a way, the suicide gave Hannah the last word against her aggressors. This approach to dealing with conflict is not only unhealthy, it is dangerous. Depression, anxiety, any mental health issue that leads to suicide is not beautiful and it is not a mechanism to teach people a lesson; it is only tragic.

In many ways "13 Reasons Why" was well-meaning and is a far-cry more sensitive and respectful on the topic of suicide than some of the earlier illustrations. Any avid movie goer likely remembers cult classic film, "Heathers", a film which represented teen suicide as entirely vain, immature and laughable. The film was even turned into a musical. What is worse about "Heathers" is that the characters who committed suicide did not even undergo any harsh degree of bullying. The suicides were done on a whim for attention. I will acknowledge though, that this may have been done on purpose to satirize teen angst.

The consequences of the methods of dramatizing and sensationalizing mental illness that I described above are on a spectrum. Social media platforms such as Tumblr and series like "13 Reasons Why" are predominantly marketed to teens and young adults. Every popular culture niche requires a demographic, but there are liabilities of marketing heavily to a younger audience.

On a smaller scale, the glamorization of mental illness as illustrated by the younger generation could prove to be nothing more than an annoying trend. Maybe for

another decade we will need to endure sad—eyed models in black-and-white with subtitles describing why they feel so lonely on Facebook. Perhaps the phrase “I am so OCD!” will continue to be thrown around for attention until it dies out, as phases do. In the high school and even college years, “fitting in” is an important goal for social development. This opens one up to an impressionable outlook on the world, and by observing what is deemed “cool” or “popular” or even has a desired reaction of attention, the reaction of most young people is to replicate what they see.

Replication of an unhealthy view of mental illness may be harmless, however it can lead to a spiral of negative consequences if gotten out of hand. A dilemma that I already observe among my own personal peer relationships is that due to this trend of romanization of mental illness, the professional community and older adults are beginning to be suspicious of the younger generation. Those who verbalize or reach out about legitimate mental health concerns to their parents, teachers or any older adult, are not being taken seriously. This can lead to those younger individuals never feeling like they can reach out for help. This consequence circles the whole situation back around to the beginning of the issue around mental illness stigma in the first place.

On the other hand, maybe we should not be so quick to judge older adults for not taking the younger pleas for help seriously. The trend of admiring mental illness also leads to overdiagnosis. Cheung, in the same article relaying her experience of seeing romantic images of mental illness in social media, cites a troubling statistic. From 2013, according to Mirror Magazine, 34% of teens in the UK reported faking a mental illness (Cheung, 2017). The fact that such a large percentage of young people feel the need to lie

about a mental illness indicates that there is certainly something wrong with the way it is being advertised to them in popular culture.

The representation of mental illness in popular culture is not inherently a bad thing. In fact, it could do a great deal of good in the ongoing attempts to educate the mass public in a way that everyone can understand. However, the continuation of making those with mental illness seemingly more attractive, mysterious, intelligent or well-liked, needs to end.

I intend to address the limitations of my thesis in the near future. I believe that my current work has provided an excellent platform to launch a replication of the study, with the benefit of future resources that will come with more time and a graduate program. In the replication I would like to gather quantitative regarding attitudes on the general public towards mental illness before, and after the advent of film. I also find value in conducting extended personal interviews with members of the 13-22 age population, as well as mental health professionals. By the time this is feasible, it will be nearly half a decade after the initial opinion-based information I drew from was published. I predict that I will be able to unearth similar, and more detailed attitudes as what I drew from for this thesis in the articles I discussed.

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