IS MENTAL ILLNESS TRENDY?

By Pranjal Suthar

INTRODUCTION - WHAT DOES ROMANTICIZING MENTAL ILLNESS MEAN?

When we romanticise things, we talk about them in a more exciting way than they are. While it's important to acknowledge mental health problems, making them look desirable can cause problems for those experiencing the symptoms and their loved ones. Depression is now the Gucci, Versace to your Balenciaga outfit - everything is so decorative but real people are suffering. The pain from mental health is unbearable - maybe to someone, depression only means a black and white filter but to another, it means a loved one lost forever. Sad or not, life is filled with ups and downs and not every second can be an aesthetic Pinterest board. Your emotions are not a trend.

In the past 50 years, efforts have been made to reduce the stigma around mental illness. There is more information about mental health available online, in articles, podcasts, TV shows, and documentaries. Many people on Instagram share about depression, with 25 million posts under the #depression hashtag and some accounts with thousands of followers focus on depression and anxiety content. Unfortunately, there are YouTube videos (with cute thumbnails like “Hello Kitty”) promoting self-harm, schizophrenia, and suicide. People use mental illness terms casually, like saying they're "depressed" when they're just feeling a bit down.

After the TV show "13 Reasons Why" became popular on Netflix in 2017, there was an increase in internet searches related to suicide. Phrases like "how to commit suicide" went up by 26%, and a study found that suicide rates among 10 to 17-year-olds increased by 29% after the show's release. The show, criticized for its portrayal of mental illness, didn't

emphasize mental health issues, and the main character's suicide was shown as an act of revenge. This is harmful because 90% of people who die by suicide have an underlying mental illness. It can give kids a wrong idea about what leads to suicide.

Melissa Mayorga says, “People romanticise mental illnesses as a phase or that everyone has one. It’s messed up because when the people who need help try to reach out, others call them emo or say me too.”

THE SAD GIRL AESTHETIC

Why do we connect beauty with sadness? Associating beauty with being the main character of a tragic story and romanticising self-destruction is not healthy. It's okay to feel sad, but the internet has made sadness a trendy thing. This glamorization relates serious issues, like mental illnesses and destructive behaviours to a fashionable trend.

Who is a sad girl? Black and white photos of roses, tears and cigarettes hanging from red, chapped lips. The Sad girl era became popular in 2015 on Tumblr and Instagram, and is still relevant. Urban Dictionary describes a sad girl as aloof, self-possessed, and reserved. She is constantly depressed and miserable, only talks about lost love, memories, etc. and uses a type of substance to “mask the pain” reminiscent of a Hollywood Noir Film. Some examples include Lana Del Rey, Effie Stoneham and Balaswan from Twilight.

Girls would post blurry selfies, cry in the bathroom with deep captions, tweet about missing their ex, and share pictures with teardrop motifs on their cheeks, making sadness attractive. Sadness became marketable, creating the Sad Girl Club (membership costing $24.55). The aesthetic choices are deliberate, and everything looks poetic and deep to make depression appear mysterious. Seeking professional help does not look as stylish as posting a crying selfie in the bathroom.

Sadness is a natural part of life, but there's an over-romanticization of it in movies, TV, and social media. The portrayal of a tragic heroine with sorrows, but still looking beautiful, adds to unrealistic expectations.

The "sad girl" theory was created by artist Audrey Wollen in Los Angeles. Originally, it studied the cultural portrayal of women contemplating suicide but transformed into the idea that a woman's sorrow can be a political force. While it sounds empowering, it highlights how society views women's independence. Expressing emotions shouldn't require an apology, and sorrow is a part of the human experience, just like happiness but the "sad girl" aesthetic goes beyond celebrating various emotions. It romanticises the sadness associated with death and illnesses. Writer Devcollab talks about her experience with the "sad girl" aesthetic, explaining that when an entire style is based on being sad, there's no space for people who want to mentally heal.

Music also plays an important role. Billie Eilish is an artist known for her lyrics not being good for young minds. In songs like "bury a friend," where she says "I wanna end me," the sad words can affect teens negatively. It's not about blaming Eilish, but her popularity shows that many in this generation like to describe suicide and depression as tragically beautiful.

MENTAL ILLNESS AS AN EXCUSE FOR LAZINESS

Some people misuse "mental health" as a catch-all excuse for their behaviours and moods. They use mental health as a shield, avoiding responsibility for their actions and neglecting their work. For example, "I can't go to work because it's bad for my mental health", "I can't discuss this issue because it negatively affects my mental health." Most concerning situation is when someone justifies being unkind by saying, "I was a jerk because I suffer from mental health issues that are beyond my control."

FAKING MENTAL ILLNESS - ONLINE EPIDEMIC

Many people online are pretending to have illnesses, exaggerating and faking conditions like autoimmune disorders, leukaemia, Tourette's syndrome (exaggerated symptoms known as TikTok tics), and dissociative identity disorder. This trend is known as factitious disorder, noticeable on TikTok, Instagram. Some users create videos to educate, but some do it to feel special by having a dramatic diagnosis.

A study from Rush University Medical Center in Chicago found that the recent increase in Tourette's awareness is closely linked to TikTok's popularity. Although boys are diagnosed with Tourette's more, 64.3% of the subjects were females, with an average age of 18.8 years old. This has been described as a "mass sociogenic illness" and a "pandemic within a pandemic" since the spread of COVID-19.

Most of those showing signs of MBI (Munchausen by Internet) are in their teens, while those with factitious disorder offline are in their 30s and 40s. They also display symptoms of personality disorders like narcissistic or borderline personality disorder.

Why would someone fake a disorder? With increased isolation, there's a desire for belonging and uniqueness. Some do it to seek attention and create an identity. Some incorrectly diagnose themselves after watching online videos about disorders. Many young people see this behaviour as more naive than malicious, considering it an dramatisation of common teenage behaviours.

Munchausen by the Internet can be damaging. The discussion can get intense, causing online criticism, harassment, accusation of faking for those suffering from these conditions.

"People faking it doesn't allow for the people who have the disorders to tell their story in their way."

CONCLUSION

Glorifying and normalising mental illness as a trend can hinder real struggles and discourage individuals from seeking help. Some individuals targeted are genuinely sick. News outlets, TV studios, and others should be mindful of their content to avoid sensationalising mental illness.

Depression is not just feeling sad; it affects every part of a person's life. Around 300 million people worldwide suffer from depression, and it requires intensive treatment. There's nothing desirable or artistic about depression. Anxiety causes pain, panic attacks and self-harm. People with anxiety don't see it as something that makes them 'feel good.' Struggling to have normal conversations due to anxiety is not a 'glamorous' experience; it's isolating.

Skipping breakfast is not anorexia, and starving is not 'fun.' A bad sleeping schedule is not insomnia. Claiming to have them without a proper check up is not cool. It's problematic, especially for teenagers who genuinely suffer from mental illness but do not get the treatment they need. Making such comparisons minimises the seriousness of these illnesses.

There's also a romanticization of mental illness in art, citing examples like Vincent Van Gogh. While it might be a form of therapy, it doesn't enhance artistic talent. Van Gogh himself expressed how his illness hindered his work. Mental illness doesn't boost creativity. Thinking about suicide as a graceful option is dangerous. Those struggling with suicidal thoughts are not 'angels'; they are human beings who need help. It's our duty to support them, offer treatment, and not suggest suicide as a possible solution.

In our society today, it's good that people feel comfortable talking about mental health but there's a problem when anxiety attacks and depression are seen as interesting traits. Mental illness is serious and has a big impact on someone's life. It's not easy to talk about, and the

glamorous image around it is ridiculous. Mental illness is a treatable condition, and help is available for managing symptoms effectively. It's important to work towards a world where mental illness is destigmatized, and conversations around mental health progress positively.

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