

Media romanticizes mental health

Portrayals of mental health in the media are often misrepresentative of the realities people with mental health issues face and traumatizing to viewers who consume this media. However, more accurate depictions can also be damaging to impressionable viewers.

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COMMENTARY

Whether it be scrolling through social media feeds, binge-watching a favorite Netflix show, enjoying a family movie night or simply reading a book for English class, people constantly absorb media in their day-to-day lives.

However, media is often unreliable and misrepresentative of the world, leading to dangerous, problematic depictions of mental health conditions that romanticize the matter.

Many forms of content distort the gravity of mental health conditions with the use of humor or unnecessary drama to entice people and increase viewership.

These inaccurate portrayals add to malignant stereotypes around mental health conditions and their impact on people, which reduces access to support for people who need help with these struggles.

On the other hand, accurate portrayals of mental health conditions can also be distressing for viewers, hence finding the balance between content requiring viewer discretion and depictions that simply cross the line is not straightforward.

Eating disorders

In the 2017 movie “To The Bone,” the main character, a young woman named Ellen, has anorexia. She perfectly encapsulates the “I’m not like other girls” trope, only for body dysmorphia: “I’m not like other anorexics.” This trope glorifies the appearance of an eating disorder and minimizes awareness of detrimental health impacts.

The glorification of eating disorders is made abundantly clear through Ellen’s light-hearted tone indulged by sinister humor and witty comebacks to characters offering her help, which leaves viewers in the dark about how harmful anorexia can be.

Additionally, “To The Bone” alludes to many habits of those who struggle with eating disorders, such as calorie counting, food avoidance and vomiting after eating, all without any trigger warning or indication of how harmful these practices can be.

The behaviors are then reiterated to people who may already have an eating disorder and could potentially teach someone who is already struggling with body image how to develop one, instead of warning viewers against such practices.

In fact, shortly after the film’s release, screenshots and quotes from “To The Bone” started appearing on

pro-anorexia “thinspiration” blogs, labeled “pro-ana sites” by their users. While these sites originated on Tumblr, younger generations utilize apps such as TikTok and Pinterest instead.

These sites were originally meant to act as sources of support for people with eating disorders who are on their way to recovery, but social media has warped the concept into something else entirely.

Now, these communities focus on posting tips for how to become unhealthy thin, and teenagers are frequent targets. While it cannot be said whether or not movies like “To The Bone” are directly responsible for the spread of negative views seen on pro-ana sites, they certainly haven’t helped to combat the romanticization of mental health conditions.

Inaccurate portrayals add to malignant stereotypes around mental health conditions.

Anxiety and OCD

Social media popularized the usage of phrases such as, “I’m having a panic attack” and “I have OCD” by those who don’t actually have these conditions. Usually, what people mean is that they are feeling worried or are a perfectionist.

Without considering the repercussions of extreme statements like these, society normalizes them, which makes it harder for those who have anxiety or OCD to receive help and have their condition taken seriously.

In reality, anxiety and OCD can cause intrusive thoughts and not just during a particularly stressful period, but in everyday life too.

For people to start making comments about their mental health halfheartedly in one-off moments discredits the seriousness of these conditions and often turns them into a joke, minimizing the struggles of people who deal with them.

However, “Turtles All the Way Down” released in 2017 by John Green, is a book that informs people of the realities of these mental health conditions that social media glosses over; spiraling thoughts can send people out of control and should not continue to be addressed indifferently.

The book provides an understanding of what intrusive thoughts feel like to a person who struggles with severe anxiety and OCD. Green achieves this by elucidating the mind of a 16-year-

old girl named Aza whose thoughts are constantly interrupted by anxiety and OCD-based interferences, indicated through the use of italics.

Accurate depictions of anxiety, such as that in “Turtles All the Way Down,” educate viewers on mental health conditions and raise awareness for the harmful clichés appearing in the media.

Suicide

Many television shows depicting suicide or acts of self-harm have been known to cause distress to viewers. For instance, the popular teen drama “13 Reasons Why,” which aired 2017-2020, is a series with a plotline centered around suicide.

The first season tells the story of Hannah Baker, a girl who killed her-

events that led up to Hannah’s death by listening to a collection of tapes Hannah left behind for them in order to seek revenge on the people who ultimately pushed her to take her own life.

The show depicts suicide as a strategic game to young impressionable viewers as the tapes are essentially a cruel method of torturing students from Hannah’s high school, which could further urge those with suicidal thoughts to harm themselves.

Many forms of content distort the gravity of mental health conditions.

Depression

In recent years, awareness for mental health conditions has grown, leading to increased accurate representations of the topic within the media. Shows like “BoJack Horseman,” which ran 2014-2020, depict depression with both precision and compassion.

The adult animation from Netflix follows an actor, BoJack, whose career peaked long ago and must now navigate relationships as well as his fading celebrity status, all the while grappling with the realities of addiction and depression. The show reflects modern-day issues and the realistic impacts current events in the world can have on someone with a mental health condition.

Nevertheless, in an article from Health Magazine, Psychiatrist Carole

Lieberman said this type of authenticity in the media can act as a trigger for people with depression since witnessing struggles that hit close to home can be painful. Therefore, preparing viewers with trigger warnings to emotional content is vital in preserving mental well-being.

Intended audiences

While it’s refreshing to see shows like “BoJack Horseman” raising awareness for mental health conditions in such humanizing portrayals, people viewing their own struggles may undergo severe trauma.

In fact, people who have a mental health condition can be alarmed when digesting mental health-related content, regardless of the accuracy of its depiction.

Yet, others may feel a strong connection to the exactitude of the media and recognize it as a mechanism for recovery. Hence, it is challenging to know what is appropriate for viewers as everyone has different circumstances.

Media outlets should avoid sensationalizing mental health conditions or painting them with ways in which viewers can interpret as a how-to guide.

Social media and entertainment should both work to more accurately portray mental health, while still keeping in mind viewers who struggle with the issues that are being depicted.

Perhaps through more accurate portrayals of mental health conditions, society can terminate the stigma surrounding these issues.



Google searches following the release of “13 Reasons Why”



19 %

All suicide-related searches



26 %

“How to commit suicide”



23 %

“Suicide prevention”



21 %

“Suicide hotline number”

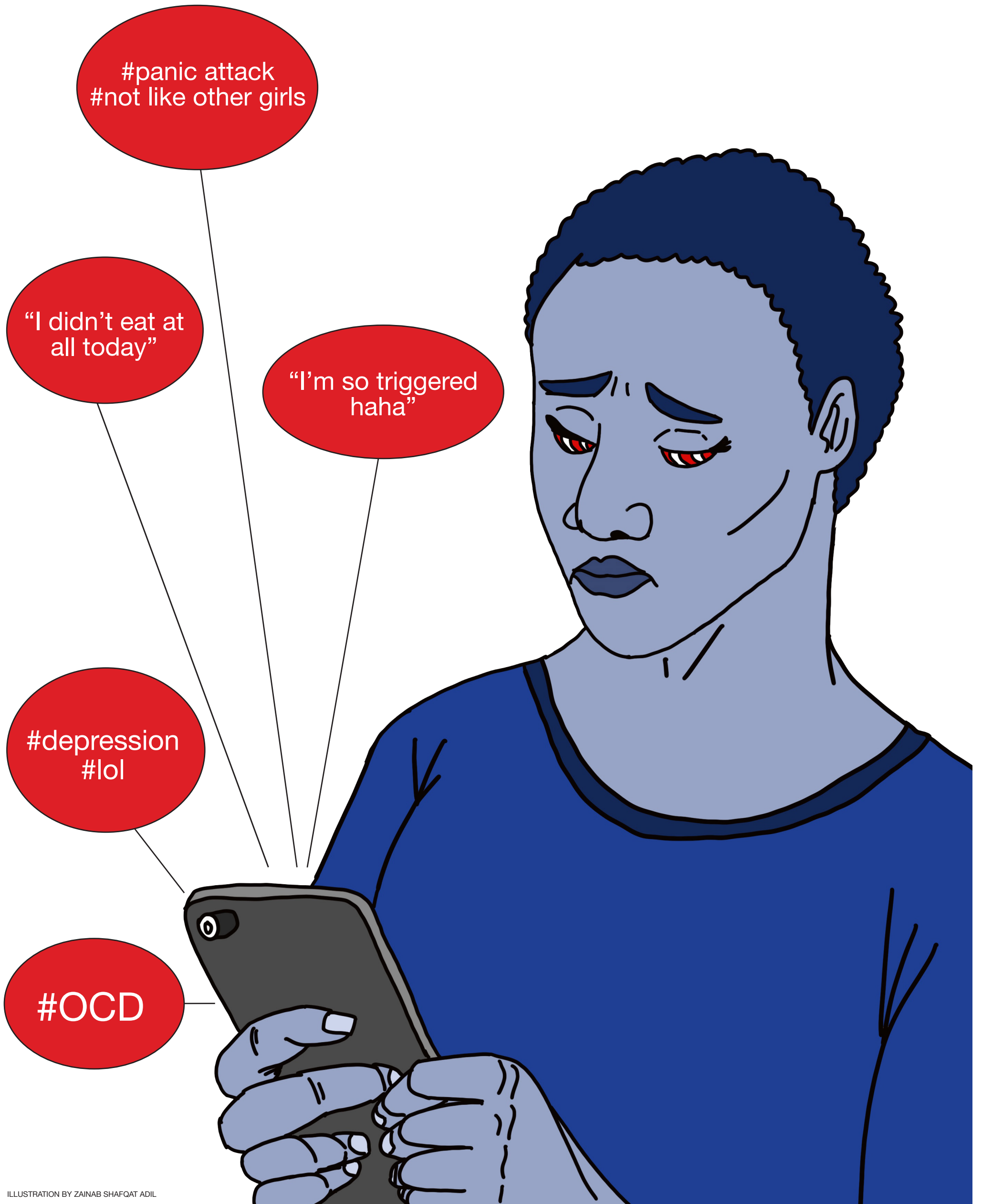


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