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Cultural Perception and Commodification of Mental Illness in Women
Oil paint on canvas

For this piece, I was most inspired by my research on the modern-day perception of mentally ill women, mainly on social media sites such as Tumblr. During my research, I found myself down a rabbit hole of Tumblr posts attempting to glamorize mental illness, with stills from sad movie scenes and over-dramatic captions that simplify these disorders to an extreme degree. I knew for this piece I wanted to portray this through a satirical lens somehow, while still conveying a sense of emotion around the topic, hence why I included the very sardonic caption: "when ur sad and depressed but its ok cause ur hot." I chose the medium of an oil painting as it has quickly become my primary medium, and I believed it would be the best way to encapsulate my idea of a "social-media post." I wanted to invoke a discomposed feeling into the viewer by having them make direct eye contact with my subject. The more I developed my artwork, the more I wanted to portray the romanticized social media aspect of modern-day mental illness perception, and I wanted to poke fun at that idea. Similarly, because I wanted my subject to feel small compared to her surroundings, I included four "surreal-looking" large pills meant to represent medication prescribed for various mental disorders. While this may represent the perception and commodification of mental illness to women from the mid-2010s to now, how will that change over time? Will there always be this non serious, glamorized outlook, or will we begin to handle the topic of mental illness with the gravity it deserves?

Mental Illness in Women and Its Perception

Overtime

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OS46

Writer's Note: Trigger warning for discussions surrounding mental illness and in particular the topic of eating disorders.

In July of 2020 I came across a video of a teenage girl trying on an outfit "haul", a video where one is showing off the clothes they have just bought. I didn't immediately pick up anything strange in the video, but the more I watched the more confused I got. Rather than just showing off the outfits, it seemed this young girl – who was showing her entire body aside from her face – was attempting to show how thin she was. I wondered if I was the only one who thought this, until I opened the comments. Tens of thousands of comments stated that this video was "thinspo" (or thin-inspiration). Several commenters made the point that the girl in the video was "body checking," showing off how thin she was to the audience, with several comments mentioning how harmful this was. "This is body checking," "You're just doing this to show off how thin you are," and "I'm not eating tomorrow" populated the comment section, some calling the girl out while others buying into her mindset. I had made my way onto pro-anorexia tiktok. A platform targeting a group of teenagers (mostly female identifying) to encourage one another to develop eating disorders to achieve an unrealistic standard of beauty. This platform had been in existence even before Tiktok[1]; it began on Tumblr[2]. Something so accessible as social media has become a vessel for exploiting and twisting mental illness and it appeared to me, a young woman, to target my exact demographic. Western society's perception of mental illness in women has significantly evolved in the last three centuries; "hysteria" was a popular diagnosis for women in the 19th century, followed by a rise in institutionalizing women in the 20th century, to the present day commodification of mental illness within mainstream media targeted towards young women.

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[1] A 15-second video-sharing software that allows users to make and share videos on any subject.
[2] A microblogging and social networking service based created in 2007

When did corporations or those in power start to market mental illness to women through their personal social media accounts? How has the advertising industry, celebrity culture, and social media influencers negatively influenced how young women view their bodies? Secondly, has women's role within the conversation surrounding mental illness changed over time, or has it always been commodified?

While some may claim that men have it harder in regards to mental health and the acceptance of such – due to society's perception of emotions being taboo for men and unmasculine – this could not be farther from the truth. Statistically, on average, women deal with more mental health struggles than men, according to Sarah Rosenfield, a professor of sociology at Rutgers University. "Overall, females suffer more from internalizing symptoms, including depression and anxiety, which turn problematic feelings inward against the self," (Rosenfield, 2006) she states in *Gender, Race, and The Self in Mental Health in Crime*. Essentially, women will experience more symptoms but are generally more inclined to internalize these symptoms, leaving the illness untreated and unrecognized. This internalization can be attributed to the patriarchal social roles placed on men and women; women are already perceived as emotional and dramatic, and anything feminine is inferior, so internalizing symptoms would give them more social capital as it makes them appear more masculine. Women learned to internalize symptoms to give them more control, for they would not be considered weak due to their emotions. Rosenfield similarly states, "Socialization explanations emphasize that children internalize messages that equate masculinity with dominance and independence, and femininity with weakness and dependency. Boys are taught to be assertive, dominant, and aggressive, but girls are raised to be nurturing and caring" (Rosenfield, 2006). Thus gender norms can be cited as the actual cause of the gender disproportion in mental health. Women are more likely to take on caretaking roles, despite knowing that it's

socially inferior; therefore, established gender roles lead to a negative attitude to mental illness, and this could potentially lead to issues regarding self-care and caring for others. So now that it is understood that women generally suffer more, it is pertinent to look at how society perceived and reacted to women with mental illness and/or disorders over the last couple of centuries.

As our understanding of psychology began to broaden in the 19th century, so did the recognition of mentally ill women. The term "hysteria" has been consistently associated with women since the 5th century BC, and even was derived from the Greek word for "womb." In the 19th century, psychologists Sigmund Freud and Marcel Breuer released a journal entitled "History of Studies of Hysteria." The first case study was of Anna O. (real name Bertha Pappenheim) and her growing hysteria after her father was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Pappenheim experienced rigid paralysis in the arms and legs, inexplicable disturbances in her vision, total aphasia[3], and extreme temper tantrums. In a journal entitled "Hysteria, Psychoanalysis, and feminism: The Case of Anna O," the author Dianne Hunter, a professor at Trinity College, makes the case that Pappenheim's condition occurred due to her being a woman during this period, stating, "Pappenheim's hysteria arose from sources in her life history typical of her time. It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century for the potential of daughters to be sacrificed while sons were educated and privileged; it was also in keeping with prevailing customs for young women to be called upon to nurse aging and ill parents." (Hunter, 1983) Pappenheim, a notably bright woman, had to sacrifice her life aspirations for the sake of her family and her role as a woman, thus leading to mental illness.

Pappenheim never had a chance at escaping this fate or making an actual life for herself. Her father's death sentence was just as much as hers, and her condition was not taken seriously by

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[3] Damage to a specific region of the brain that affects language expression and causes a language impairment

those examining her. Hunter also makes the case that "Although Breuer recognized Bertha's grief for her father's death as a cause of her symptoms, he overlooked the hostility, anger, guilt, and frustrated sexuality apparent to psychoanalysts. Even a non psychoanalytic reading of the case indicates that Pappenheim found her existence lonely and tedious." (Hunter, 1983) The author cites Pappenheime's close friends and family for these accounts of her story. Because she was a woman, her mental illness was not taken seriously by Freud and Breuer, who were there to examine her and figure out how to "cure" her. This is a prime example of the exploitation experienced by women in this time regarding mental disorders and illnesses. Unfortunately, Pappenheim was exploited and used to further the psychological field without being given a proper conclusion or any sense of recovery from her condition.

Another example of this phenomenon of mentally ill women not being taken seriously is found in the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper", by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a feminist writer who herself was ignored by those in the medical feild, notably by a young neurologist named S. Weir Mitchell. After her experience of being ignored by medical professionals, she wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper," a fictional story of a young wife who becomes increasingly manic throughout the story. Her husband, a physician, does not believe she has anything more than "temporary nervous depression," which worsens throughout the story. The story ends with the woman crawling on top of her husband's unconscious body, as she slowly descends into mania. In a journal article by Jane F. Thraikill, a professor at Johns Hopkins University, entitled "Doctoring The Yellow Wallpaper," the author claims that "'The Yellow Wallpaper' has since become a case study of the psychical consequences of the masculine refusal to listen to a woman's words, a refusal that critics link to the more general proscription of female self-expression–literary and otherwise–within a patriarchal culture." (Thraikill, 2002) The narrator's experience is another example of a woman

not being heard regarding mental health during this time. There was an overwhelming perception of women during the time that women were overdramatic, and I believe it is due to the housewife archetype. According to the Tsongas Industrial History Center, during the time of the industrial revolution "Women were not paid for work in the home. With the availability of manufactured goods, a woman's role as producer within the home was reduced. The household, and the women who made it a home, took on new meaning. The new role of women was to transform the home into a haven for the men who faced daily pressures and dangers in the workplace." (Taylor, N.D.) Because women, "the inferior sex," were already seen as more emotional than men, it is not hard to see why they were not believed and the severity of their mental health was disregarded.

With the turn of the 20th century, mental illness and disorders became more widely validated among women. However, instead of being offered access to actual treatment, such as access to medication or therapy, the societal response was to shut them away from society. With the rise of the feminist movement and women joining the job market, there was a clear rise in acknowledgement of mental disorders and illness among women. Asylums were a common tactic for treating mental illness, with numbers of institutionalized individuals rising until the 1950s. According to a journal article entitled "Gender and Mental Illness," by Joan Busfield, a clinically trained psychologist as well as a proffesser at The University of Essex, by the 1970s, women were the predominant sex receiving diagnoses for mental disorders in the United Kingdom; similarly, they had higher rates of admission into psychiatric units and hospitals. (Busfield, 1982) Busfield states, "the higher admission rates for women are a phenomenon of the 20th, but not the 19th, century. During the 19th century men had higher admission and residence rates" (Busfield, 1982), showing that this high admission rate for women was a new concept. This trend shows a clear trajectory for validating mental illness in women, but not necessarily accepting it. "The Effect of

Sex Role Differences on the Social Control of Mental Illness*" by William Tudor claims this phenomenon was due to the increase of women in the job market. Newer technology allowed for less physical labor and strength required for many labor-heavy jobs, thus the job market saw a rise in women during the 1970s for these trade heavy jobs. (Tudor, 1977) This implies that the closer the proximity to men (regarding power/rights), and the more valuable they were to society, the more seriously female issues were taken into account. While there was a generally changed attitude regarding mental illness between the 19th and 20th centuries, the subject was still considered taboo to most. That would drastically change at the turn of the 21st century.

Today's societal treatment of mentally ill women has worsened, but it is all the more visible. A prime example of this is the mistreatment of female celebrities like Britney Spears, a young American popstar. Since Britney Spears' rise to fame in the 90s, the paparazzi has never left her alone. This relentless following left Spears exasperated and fueled her public perception of being "insane." Britney Spears' mental breakdown in 2007 quickly became a topic of national discussion after it occured. Tabloids used Spears' suffering as front-page fodder for months after the notorious head shaving incident occurred. Titles like "Inside Britney's Meltdown!" and "Britney Shears" plastered grocery store checkouts and dentist office waiting rooms for months. Jen Peros, the former *Us Weekly* editor, stated that "Her story hit at a time when print magazines were hunting for the story of the week…" and "...when you found a celebrity — I hate to say it — spiraling or acting abnormally, that was the story. And we knew it would sell magazines." (Jacobs 2021) Spears was in need of help, but the only response given to her by the public was one of disregard and malice. In an article from *The New York Times* entitled "'Sorry, Britney': Media Is Criticized for Past Coverage, and Some Own Up," claims "*US Weekly* was one of the magazines that poured resources into relentlessly covering Spears. In a March 2007 cover story that read like

a play-by-play natural disaster and its aftermath, the magazine interviewed a diner at a sushi restaurant that Spears's mother visited, a clubgoer at a karaoke party Spears dropped in on, and cited an anonymous source in Antigua, where Spears briefly checked into a rehab clinic." (Jacobs, 2021) Why were we so enthralled with the public demise of one of the previously most beloved female celebrities? A similar phenomenon occurred with Amanda Bynes and Lindsay Lohan's public meltdowns and breakdowns. While neither of these women was diagnosed with a mental illness, their uncontrolled drug use gave the perception that they were, and their treatment by the public was reflected as such. *The Washington Post's* expose from 2018 on Amanda Bynes's return to the public eye, entitled "Amanda Bynes: 'Be really, really careful because you could lose it all and ruin your entire life like I did,'" explains how the intense pressure put on her as a woman in the industry not only encouraged an eating disorder but also fueled her drug use to cope with the demands placed upon her at 16-years-old. They included a quote from Bynes' 2018 *Paper Magazine* cover article stating,"'It definitely isn't fun when people diagnose you with what they think you are,' Bynes told *Paper*, blaming her behavior solely on drugs. "I know that my behavior was so strange that people were just trying to grasp at straws for what was wrong.'" (Chiu, 2018) The stigma associated with mental illness, misconnected erratic behavior, and drug use with a mental disorder exemplifies how society views mental illness. How did that translate to the mainstream consumer? Did this view appeal differently to women who were not as much in the public eye?

Sites like Tumblr, Instagram, and Pinterest have grown in popularity over the last decade, and because of that, users and advertisers have been able to commodify and aestheticize mental illness for a young, predominantly female audience. While the public mistreatment of mentally ill female celebrities populated a cultural zeitgeist, a much more nefarious outlook on mental illness

grew in the depths of newly established social media sites. This phenomenon was most present on Tumblr in particular, a social media primarily dedicated to blog

posts. The glamorization and aestheticization of mental illness began to occur early in the history of social media platforms. Specific communities began to associate mental illnesses, typically depression and anxiety, as something desirable, for it gave users an edge – something broken and interesting about them. These communities were typically associated with the "soft-grunge" aesthetic - a modernized 90s style with a hint of goth - and they listened to artists like The neighborhood, Lana Del Rey,

and the Arctic Monkeys due to their depressing lyrics and dark aesthetics. Lana Del Rey, in

particular, was incredibly popular at this time and her music heavily glamorized depression and suicidal ideas. Lines like "Your soul is haunting me and telling me that everything is fine, but I wish I was dead" from her song "Dark Paradise," or "Darling, darling doesn't have a problem lying to herself cause her liquor's top shelf" from "Carmen" – a song about a depressed alcoholic who is convincing those around her she's

happy – are examples of songs that tumblr users used to aestheticize mental illness.

According to an article entitled "Tumblr's Obsession with the Glamorization of Mental Illness," by *Thread Magazine*, "Many people used Tumblr as an outlet to find people they could talk and relate to. It turned toxic when depression and anxiety started to be seen as something "cool," making depression seem as if it was this tragically beautiful thing. Since Tumblr's

demographic gears more toward teenagers to young adults, these posts can leave a lasting impression." (Szmik, 2020) Many of these Tumblr blog posts include an overdramatized caption relating something aesthetically pleasing to depression or anxiety. This was characterized on the app even after this period in 2014, with shows such as "13 Reasons Why" capturing the mainstream depressed-teen audience. Somehow, Tumblr made mental illness "trendy" and something desirable and appealing to a young teenage, primarily female, audience. (Szmik, 2020) What is even worse than the trendiness of these illnesses is that they are not even portraying what the illness truly is, simply what it is depicted to be. This ostracizes people with these actual illnesses as it makes them look extreme compared to the glamorized perception. As mentioned above, a part of the Tumblr community was growing dedicated to eating disorders and providing the inspiration behind getting/keeping an eating disorder. These blogs actively target young women and other young teens to convince them to either develop an eating disorder or make another form of mental illness appeal to them. The Tumblr demographic has also made its way over to more mainstream apps, such as Tiktok and Instagram. Social media has its positives, as it can connect a large group of people that would have otherwise not been able to get in touch, but the internet also removes a lot of nuance from important conversations. When you only have so many characters per post you are left with vapid tumbler posts and nonsensical Instagram edits that glamorize suicide or depression because there's a need for mental illness representation in popular culture. Mental illness should not be construed as a negative thing, but yet almost every person alive today has grown up seeing mental illness as a negative thing. ow, for better or worse,that view has begun to change. A 2018 article from a *Feminism in India*, entitled "Why Has Social Media Made It 'Cool' To Have Mental Illnesses*"* states that "According to social media, having an eating disorder now portrays your strength, anxiety is necessary for achievement, and of course, depression shows maturity and a

sort of 'tragic broken-ness'." (Why Has Social Media.., 2018) Social media has become a vessel for society to commodify and capitalize on mental illness, and I think that this twisted form of capitalism ultimately has become the root of mental illness being "trendy." Mental illness will continue to be trendy in the media if it allows people to profit. Corporations monetized mental illness when it came to the breakdowns of female celebrities through social media and now through targeted pro-mental health advocacy. Misogyny and the role of women will always be a factor in how we view mental illness as it affects the way we see a person, and this will continue until we actively do something to change that.

Throughout modern western history, society's perspective of mental illness in women has evolved, ranging from the earliest examples of "hysteria" to the monetization of mental illness within mainstream media. In the 19th century ignoring mental illness in women was a dangerous norm that was exemplified through the case of Anna O. and "The Yellow Wallpaper." With the turn of the 20th century mental illness diagnoses for women were on the rise, as well as the rise in women who were institutionalized for said mental illnesses. This peaked around the 1950s but continued into the 1970s. When the new millenium rolled around, so did a new approach to mental illness and the commodification of such grew. This was no better shown than in the stigma and the obsession surrounding mentally ill female celebrities, as well as the rise of tumblr and the romanization and aestheticization of mental illness specifically targeted at young women.

Looking forward, with mental health advocacy still on the rise it won't be surprising to see mental health become less taboo. In an article entitled "Is Mental Health Still a Taboo Subject?" by *Pyschreg*, it states that "Although mental health is still something of a taboo subject for many people, more and more progress is being made. Mental health is in the public consciousness more than ever before, and compared to even 10 years ago there have been huge improvements in

opening up the topic." We can work towards a future where mental illness isn't stigmatized as something negative, and there is ample access to mental health resources for everyone. As a young woman, I feel I have to be constantly vigilant in what I absorb online, in case I fall into the trap of false mental illness awareness, and that's why this is so important to me. How many girls my age have lost their lives because of how society and social media views and treats mental health? We, as consumers, have started to look back at how we treated Britney Spears and how that was wrong, but have we truly stopped doing it to each other?

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