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MENTAL DISORDERS: A GLAMOROUS ATTRACTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

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Through the last decade, efforts have been invested in spreading awareness related to mental health in general. Those efforts aimed particularly at reducing the stigma and discrimination against people with mental health disorders. The key message disseminated was that mental illnesses should be regarded as a common illness and that any accompanying discrimination or exclusion can affect people in a way that may be worse than the disorder itself. A mental illness is defined as a condition that causes serious disorder in one's thoughts or feelings. It is well agreed that mental health is to be dealt with cautiously and followed upon by a professional. As successful as they may have been, such campaigns failed to assess one vibrant factor that has become vital: the role of the media. This paper aims at examining particularly the role social media; it emphasizes the fact that such openness in mental health issues can be misleading and in some cases manipulative, thus leading to more complex disorders in some cases. This work will present two case studies illustrating the glamorization of some mental health diseases on social media and how the youth might be misled into wrong practices in that respect. It will also detail the results of focus groups conducted at the Counseling Center of the University of Balamand which will project the point of view of university students on that issue.

Keywords: Mental disorders, Social media, Tribal marketing, Subliminal messages, Digital marketing.

Literature Review

A previous study published in the journal "Dissenting Voices", conducted by Emily Tanner, has shown that social media has, in fact, played a significant role in glamorizing mental health disorders. In her article, Tanner states that there is a " disturbing sub-culture on Instagram in which young people are sharing messages which promote dangerous (even deadly) behaviors". The author goes on by saying that some individuals whom she has investigated online for romanticizing mental health disorders have shared images which idealize suicide and depression (Tanner, 2015). Other pictures included those depicting extremely skinny bodies under the notion of "thinspo", an abbreviation for the internet slang "thin-spiration". This trend aims to encourage individuals to take part in extreme and often dangerous diet plans which involve self-starving and self-induced vomiting. Tanner then claims that such images "collectively

serve to promote debilitating mental health issues and almost certainly encourage young people who have not yet engaged in these behaviors to try them as a means to cope with issues in their own lives". Moreover, in an article titled "Social Media Is Redefining Depression", published by The Atlantic, Anne-Sophie Bine states that such a phenomenon is "hardly unusual" and that "the depression many teenagers, like those on Tumblr, say they have is one that's linked to a notion of "beautiful" suffering". The writer goes on by describing the life of Laura U., a 16-year-old victim of social media's glamorization of depression and suicide. Laura witnessed numerous gloomy black-and-white images which often contained sentences such as "So it's okay for you to hurt me, but I can't hurt myself?" or "I want to die a lovely death," that romanticize suicide and self-harm. Bine also added that adolescent psychiatry expert, Dr. Stan Kutcher, believes that the idea of glamorized depression has become a trend scattered on social media. He states that "the pendulum has been swung from let no body talk about it to let everybody blab about it", describing how mental health issues are being trivialized on such platforms. Furthermore, in a recent book by James Ball entitled "Post Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World", the author cleverly describes the art of news-making and truth-stretching, particularly in politics and the way it evolved over the last few years. Focusing on social media in chapter five of the book, he defines and discusses the effect of the 'filter bubble': "...our friends tend to have fairly similar political views to our own, and so we are likely to share stories we would agree with. If we get most - or even a sizable chunk - of our news from our Facebook feed, we can be left with the impression that almost everyone agrees with us." He continues, "sharing a post that your bubble will agree with offers affirmation through likes. That desire to share only a particular set of our views creates a feedback effect and can push polarization even further. When these effects combine with people who have joined pages supporting political parties or candidates, they become still stronger: the bubble is self-reinforcing". Although the book tackles the rise of politics, media, and online infrastructure that has devalued truth, it does, in fact, apply to many other disciplines, particularly to the discipline of mental health.

Background

A mental illness is defined to be a condition that causes serious disorder in one's thoughts or feelings. It is well agreed that mental health is to be dealt with cautiously and followed upon by a professional. Through the last decade, efforts have been directed to raise awareness related to mental health disorders, their diversity, symptoms, treatments, and ways to cope with them. The main aim was to reduce the stigma and cross the barrier of what has long been regarded as a social taboo. The key message disseminated was that mental illnesses are to be regarded as any other treatable illness. People with mental health disorders should be supported and well-integrated in society for them to become more productive. They should neither be discriminated against nor excluded as such exclusion might result in complications that are, in many cases, more serious than any of their disorders. Naturally, mental health awareness campaigns resorted to media platforms in order to optimize outreach and widen their projections. The role of the media in marketing products, as well as spreading awareness, has developed to become essential over the last decades. Solid scientific techniques are being adopted to stimulate all five senses in order to convince the mind about a particular product/thought. Nevertheless, the media doesn't always send the correct message; back in the 50s, media played a prime role in the glamorization of smoking. The images of smokers at the time portrayed the class of a lady and the intellect and/or strength of a man.
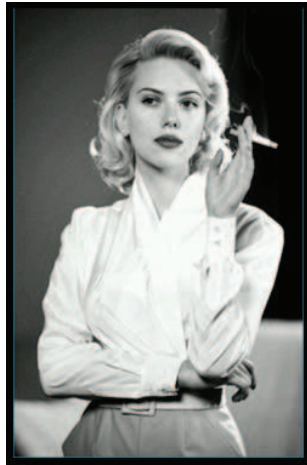
Figure 1. Portraying the class of a woman   **Figure 2.** Portraying the strength of a man

Additionally, the media may sometimes use very dangerous techniques in the objective of convincing individuals about a particular product/thought. Such techniques include subliminal messages in which ideas are transmitted below the threshold of consciousness of individuals, manipulating their thoughts without them being aware of it. Subliminal advertising was first used back in 1957 when the sentences "Eat Popcorn" and "Drink Coca-Cola" were added in a movie. However, these sentences were only inserted in a single frame, meaning that the sentences were only seen for almost one second. This tool aimed at promoting the brand of Coca-Cola and resulted in a remarkable increase in sales at the time (Love, 2011). Nowadays, digital marketing has developed to dominate all media platforms. Yet again, all problems and threats have been reserved. A study conducted by the United Nations concluded that "the cultural implications of subliminal indoctrination are a major threat to human rights throughout the world" (BBC, 2009). Moreover, there is little effective control over digital marketing, as reported by the WHO-Europe. Children are often exposed to powerful and targeted online marketing via digital platforms (WHO, 2016). It is believed that, as successful as the mental health awareness movements may have been, they have failed to assess the role of social media being a vibrant factor in such campaigns. We now experience an escalating role of an unmonitored and unplanned marketing movement that may be classified under "tribal marketing", one of the strongest techniques achieved through the initiation of a dialogue among users who share similar interests. This, in turn, creates a "tribe" in which users communicate and agree over a product/thought, automatically promoting it. This movement, being natural and spontaneous, creates a trend that many people can relate to. However, tribal marketing is seen as the most influential movement and may as well be the most dangerous.

Rationale

This study aims at investigating the role of social media in glamorizing mental health disorders and promoting such psychological burdens as desirable and necessary. Since there are few studies conducted internationally concerning this topic, this research may serve as a platform for wider and more diverse studies which can yield substantial analyses to further delve into the radical role of social media in romanticizing mental health disorders. At the national level, it may also spread awareness among educators who are in direct contact with youth, which is the subject of this study.

Significance

The issue of mental health glamorization has ultimately manifested itself as detrimental and manipulative on a social, emotional, and even physiological level. With the rise and spark of social media sweeping across nations worldwide, numbers on problems such as eating disorders, self-harm and depression have skyrocketed. Statistics over the last decade clearly declare a need for assessment as well as an urge for an academically based resolution addressing the unmonitored glamorization of some mental health disorders on social media.

The Glamorization of Mental Disorders on Social Media

We've reached a point in time in which we, as human beings, are capable of realizing a problem, acting upon it, and actually making a change. Raising awareness on the importance of mental health has never been more effective. More and more victims and mental health professionals are speaking up. However, social media platforms are not only being used to raise awareness on the issue but also to change the issue's image completely. Nowadays, anorexia nervosa, self-harm, depression, anxiety disorders, and many other mental health disorders are being glamorized, romanticized, and consequently promoted through many social media platforms, especially websites and blogs. Websites that promote anorexia, for example, are called "pro-ana" websites in which publishers post shocking photos, extreme diet plans, and unhealthy techniques in order to drastically lose weight. Members of the pro-anorexia websites were found to share impractical dieting tips and ways to burn calories using unconventional methods. (Tanner, 2015). Figure 3 is a section taken from a pro-ana website (http://anabootcamp.weebly.com/commandments.html):
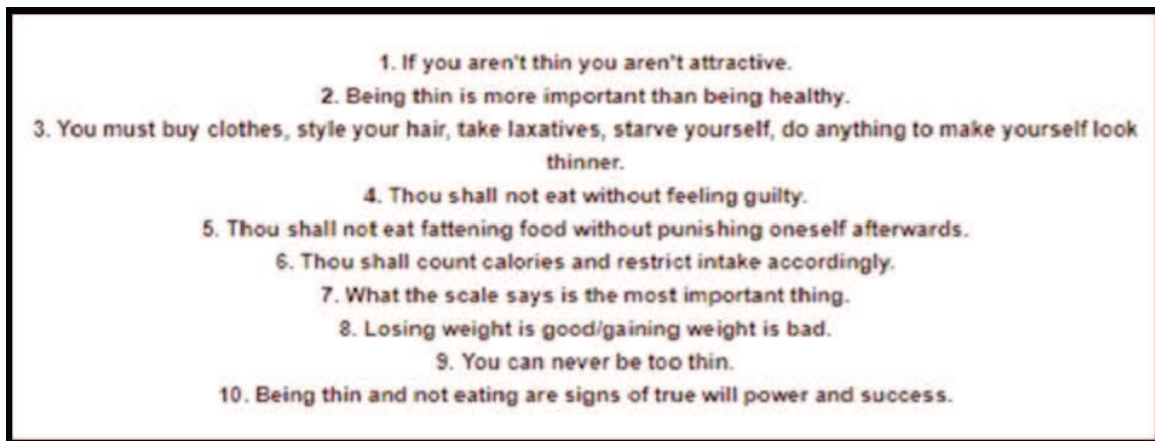

1. If you aren't thin you aren't attractive.
2. Being thin is more important than being healthy.
3. You must buy clothes, style your hair, take laxatives, starve yourself, do anything to make yourself look thinner.
4. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty.
5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing oneself afterwards.
6. Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly.
7. What the scale says is the most important thing.
8. Losing weight is good/gaining weight is bad.
9. You can never be too thin.
10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true will power and success.

Figure 3. "Pro-Ana Commandments" as seen on a pro-ana website

Being anorexic is now foreseen as being in control, anxiety disorders are being portrayed as cute, and depression is seen to reflect intellect and depth. The problem is snowballing, and since there is little control over what is being posted, such ideas have created tribes that share and promote a fake image of some very serious and delicate mental health issues. The following samples are pictures that circulate casually on social media platforms:

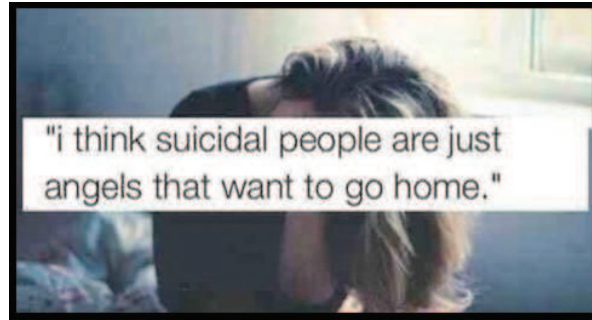**Figure 4.** Portraying an eating disorder as a way of being in control

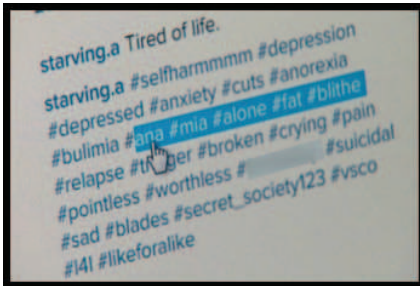**Figure 5.** Romanticizing suicide

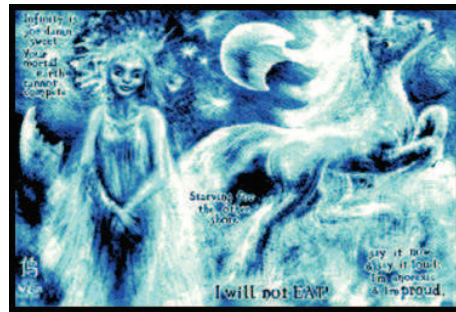**Figure 6.** An example of keywords (hashtags) to attract users

Figure 7. The Anorexia Fairy saying, "I'm anorexic and proud"

Moreover, celebrities are also enhancing this unplanned movement. Although people have always been inspired by their idols, the current outreach is remarkably wider. Selena Gomez, a singer and actress with over one hundred million followers on Instagram, is the executive producer of the famous series *13 Reasons Why*. This series has been claimed to address the topic of suicide in a " dangerous and irresponsible manner" (Andrews, 2017). *13 Reasons Why* has also been classified as extremely dangerous for teenagers for it is seen to glamorize depression and promote suicidal acts (Acuna, 2017). Another celebrity who casually, intentionally or otherwise, promotes depression is Lana Del Rey, a singer who has a follower count of ten million on Instagram. She is known to promote depression through some of her lyrics and music videos, leading a number of her followers and fans to regard the illness as one that is appealing. On the other hand, the engagement tools on social media and the dynamics are full of subliminal messages. For example, figure 8 is a post on Tumblr stating "I am not good with people"; the hidden message is a declaration of social anxiety, which as shown has initiated near five thousand interactions promoting the post and therefore sending a positive feedback to the person who posted it, hence enhancing his or her statement as likable and desirable, further glamorizing the disorder.
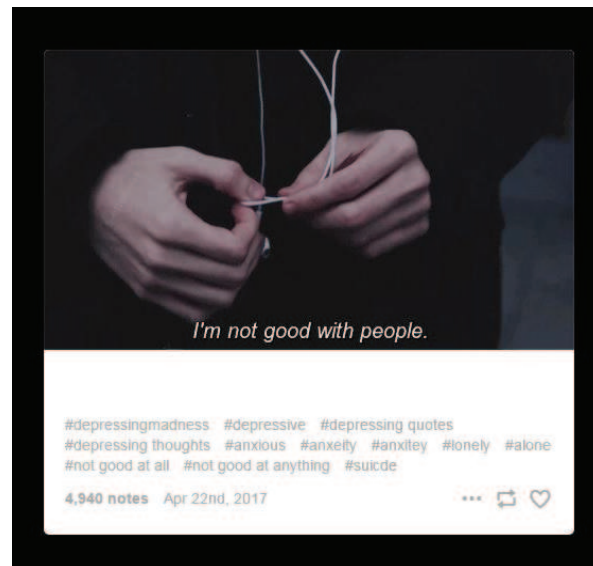
Figure 8. A declaration of social anxiety

Statistics show that, over the last decade, there was a 70% increase in self-harm in 10 to 14-year-olds in a period of two years (selfharm.co.uk). The number of teens who reported a Major Depressive Episode increased by 37% and the number of girls treated as inpatients after cutting themselves has increased by 285% (Schrobsdorff,2016) (Campbell,2016). Such numbers declare a need for assessment as well as an urge for an academically based resolution addressing the unmonitored glamorization of some mental health disorders on social media. This issue caught the attention of the Counseling Center (UOB) and it was decided to know more about the problem from the perspective of youth. The aim is to design a regional, student-based, and efficient awareness campaign addressing the glamorization of mental health disorders on social media.

Methodology

The counseling center at the University of Balamand aims to act as a support unit for the student body and to provide services that address their social, educational, and emotional development needs (UOB, 2001)**.** Realizing the sensitivity of the service, over the last seven years, the center has adopted an alternative approach to student counseling through the development of a strategic plan aiming to optimize student outreach. The core of the plan was to shift to an active action in student counseling rather than passive support and reactive service. The center, therefore, aimed to address issues of common interest to the community and reach out to students as a group to initiate guidance and support on selected topics (Jadayel & Iaaly, 2013). Consequently, special attention was given to student learning, academic achievement, and general well-being during university years. Over the past year, the counseling center initiated dialogue with a number of students in order to learn more about the problem of glamorization of mental health disorders on social media from the perspective of youth. The center focused on interacting with students who lived such an experience in order to raise awareness related to the topic.

Focus Groups

Four focus groups were conducted in a meeting room at the building of student activities. A pleasant and relaxed environment was set in order to assure reliable input from participants. The focus groups that

averaged ten students per group were managed by the assistant dean of student affairs in the presence of the student counselor. Participants were chosen for their interest in the topic and activity on social media. Moreover, it was made sure to integrate participants from different age groups (15-22 years old) and different disciplines in order to have a more diverse and dynamic flow of discussions. The discussion was conducted to project the students' general experience with social media and whether they or someone they know has been affected by social media's glamorization of mental health disorders. Each focus group began with a five-minute introduction emphasizing the confidentiality of the participants' personal information and contributions. Participants were clearly informed that their input was favorable for the research since they are native digital citizens and most experienced when it comes to social media usage. The first phase (15 minutes) was a series of open-ended questions concerning the students' exposure to social media and their views on digital marketing as well as information about the types of mental health disorders that they commonly encounter on social media platforms. The second phase (15 minutes) was directed to personal experiences related to the topic and general recommendations in order to raise awareness about the problem. During the third phase (15 minutes) of each focus group, participants were asked to share their impressions about some images glamorizing self-harm, eating disorders and other issues. As a closure, each group session ended with a five-minute wrap-up summarizing all the discussions and opening the floor for further input or recommendations from the participants. All discussions were video recorded in order to maintain integrity. The video recordings were then transcribed by the liaison officer of the counseling center who was also present in all focus groups.

Case Studies

Two case studies were conducted in the form of written interviews. Participants answered a prepared list of questions that was sent to them. Introductory questions referred to personal information about the participant, his/her family status, and social and economic profile. The core of the interview revolved around the experience they went through, the age at which they were affected and the role of social media in promoting their mental health illness. Finally, the interview closes with recommendations and a message from the participant to teenagers. Participants were promised full confidentiality and were assured that all the given input is for academic research purposes.

Analysis

Focus Group Discussions

The focus groups discussions revealed an urge for raising awareness to change the promoted image of some mental health disorders. It was also believed that the older generation is not aware of the threats and misconceptions related to mental health as projected by social media.
When asked how active they are and what platforms they use most often, students replied:

- *"Very active."*
- *"I use it every second."*
- *"I am active on every social platform. Instagram, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Facebook…"*

The discussion on social media as a marketing tool and its efficiency in raising awareness revealed the students' opinions on how crucial social media's role is:

- *"It is a must, can't do without it."*
- *"Nobody reads magazines anymore."*
- *"It is the biggest platform for outreach."*
- *"We get all information on social media."*

- *"It is very efficient when it comes to raising awareness, especially when there is celebrity endorsement."*
- *"It is impossible to raise awareness about any topic without social media. It is bad for the image of the campaign."*

During the conversation about mental health and its image on social media, students appeared to be fairly familiar and casually exposed to the topic on the media specifically. They mentioned a sense of glamorization towards particular mental health issues, while others went unnoticed. To quote:

- *"Social media is romanticizing depression; you stop seeing it as a mental illness but a way of life."*
- *"You always find pictures of well-dressed and attractive people who are in good shape alongside a depressing quote which appeals to the eye."*
- *"Anorexia is being glamorized."*
- *"Anxiety is very well spread as a joke on social media. It has become a trend."*
- *"Anxiety isn't necessarily being glamorized, but it is certainly being portrayed as cute."*

When asked if any of the students were ever affected by social media's portrayal of mental disorders, two participants felt comfortable enough to share their own experiences. They said:

- *"When I was younger, I used to look at pictures of thigh gaps and collar bones and wanted them. I used to cry over my body. I thought anorexia was nice. I wanted to be anorexic."*
- *"Depression was appealing to me. I exaggerated the thing on Tumblr, saved many pictures and started sketching depressing drawings. It took a few months before I sought help and got diagnosed and treated for depression."*

Participants were then exposed to two series of pictures; Category A presented artistic images portraying several mental health issues, while Category B presented the mental illness itself realistically. The participants' reaction to the pictures was different in each category. They thought that the pictures of Category A were appealing. They spent time admiring them and commenting on how poetic and artistic they were; hence confirming that many mental health disorders are being glamorized. However, their reaction to the pictures of Category B declared fear and reservation.

Category A:

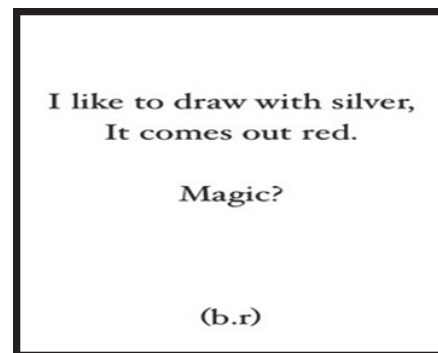**Figure 9.** A post on Tumblr portraying blades artistically

Figure 10. Another post romanticizing self-harm

The participants commented on the figures 9 and 10 respectively:

- *"Very artistic", "Aesthetic."*
- *"Very poetic but gross"*

Category B:

Figure 11. A Post Showing Actual Self-harm

When exposed to figure 11, participants commented:

- *"It's all fun and games until someone really wants to kill him/herself"*
- *"When it's that serious, it's disgusting."*

Finally, the students recommended addressing the issue at a very early age. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of personal communication in all matters related to mental health, to quote:

- *"People should communicate their feelings and worries, those who have friends are very lucky because they can communicate."*
- *"At school, they warn us about the biological implications of overusing the tablet, but they never mention anything about its effect on one's emotional status… They should."*

Case Studies

The following case studies tell the stories of two Lebanese young adults who faced mental health issues in their teen years. Both case studies assured that social media aggravated their problem.

Case study 1: Major Depressive Disorder

A nineteen-year-old coming from a socially and economically stable family was clinically diagnosed with depression at the age of fifteen. He describes his experience as follows:

"I was scared to talk about it, since talking about one's feelings was seen as a taboo. It was socially unacceptable. I resorted to the internet in order to try and find something I could relate to. At the time, I was in a state of profound emotional vulnerability. I was very prone to get dragged by any extreme form of mental or physical abuse, which is exactly what happened. I found lots of pictures, specifically drawings which depicted mainly depression and self-harm. And that's how I was driven to suicidal thoughts. The pictures were all driving me to believe that I was

alone and that I didn't belong socially. The seemingly deep and poetic imagery on social media definitely contributed to aggravating my mental health problem. I don't remember being aware of how much I was affected by social media or that it actually was a direct factor to my problem. But, I'm lucky to have had the courage to speak up and seek help. My message to those who are affected and to those who are at risk of being affected is to seek help, talk to a professional, and never leave toxic thoughts to yourself."

Case study 2: Anorexia Nervosa

A twenty-three-year-old coming from a socially and economically stable family was clinically diagnosed with an eating disorder at the age of twenty. She fought anorexia over the course of three years and has decided to share her story on Instagram (where she is known as @pointalalynn). She describes her experience as follows:

"All I wanted to lose was two kilos, to be a bit skinnier. In order to do that, I started digging into the world of diets and fitness. I followed a number of diet accounts on social media and understood what a calorie was. I learned about calorie counts, and how to decrease my calorie intake in order to lose weight. The cycle continued and never stopped until my health became at risk. Social media played a big role in showing the wrong images of the female body. It was very clear that the ideal woman had a perfect body structured in a specific way. I reached a point at which I used to take all of the fruits from the fridge in order to weigh each one on the kitchen scale to find out which one has the least amount of calories and take that one to eat. When you have an eating disorder, it's like you are restricting your whole life to numbers that you think might cause you harm, whereas they are actually what keeps you alive. I felt strong, perfect and secure until I lost control. The obsessive need for control controlled me in every way. Anorexia is a mental disorder that is so much deeper than wanting to be extremely thin. After two years of these habits, I was capable of admitting to myself that I am in fact anorexic. I eventually sought help and recovered within a year and a half. One of the most important things that the psychologist had taught me was The Voice. When I was struggling with anorexia, there was a never-ending dialogue that was constantly beating me. The Voice kept on telling me to count every bite and calories it contained before I ate it. It kept on telling me to exercise excessively to keep on burning fat. The psychologist taught me to distance myself from that voice; she made me understand that it is not me talking, but the eating disorder. I invite everybody to visit my Instagram account where I talk about my experience more thoroughly. My message to you is: Life has a lot of meaning besides being skinny and losing weight. Anorexia is not a physical disorder, it is a mental disorder. The anorexic behavior appears way before you become skinny. If you don't recognize it, admit it, and seek help, it will only get harder. From my experience, recovery is hard but possible, and worth every tear."

Conclusion

The world of social media has evolved rapidly, projecting on all generations simultaneously. Parents and educators nowadays do not have the experience of living with the constant influences of social media to pass on to the younger generations. The older generation, including many professionals in the field of mental health, has minimal information on the related threats existing on social media platforms. The study, therefore, reveals an urge to raise awareness and address the issue academically, keeping in mind a multi-strategy approach to target the various age groups. Awareness on the issue should primarily and solely focus on dealing with the changes, challenges, and threats of social media. Many teenagers and young adults now see mental disorders as relatable, normal and desirable, while people actually diagnosed with any mental health disorder might get a false impression that what they are experiencing is normal

and common. The interactive methodology adopted emphasized repeatedly the importance of personal communication in all matters related to mental health disorders, confirming again the vitality of human relations in the digital age. Moreover, it is realized that personal impressions and ideas will never be controlled on social media. The glamorization of mental health disorders, among others, is somewhat irreversible; and most probably still evolving. Thus, this work implies that we might be stepping into a new era in which mental health issues, imposed by the media, are being redefined and, therefore, should be addressed.

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