

# Understandings of Mental Illness Communicated by Social Media Makeup Trends: A Case Study Using Instagram and TikTok

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## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the massive rise of social media platforms. Perhaps most notably, this decade has included the emergence of platforms with photo and video-based content such as Instagram and TikTok. With this has come the rise of social media trends; one such trend involves attempting to use makeup to represent the experience of mental illness. Social media is massively popular and influential. This, along with the well-studied connection between art (which makeup is) and understandings of mental illness, makes analyzing messages viewers take away from social media makeup trends depicting mental illness significant. This essay utilizes over a hundred submissions of makeup trends on both Instagram and TikTok, a majority of which claim to represent depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder, as a case study through which to explore answers to the following research question: *what understandings of mental illness are communicated by social media makeup trends?* I analyze these makeup portrayals and considers the messages constructed by and within them to determine what they communicate to viewers about mental illness (whether consciously or not). To do so, I examine several elements of these makeup looks, including the colours, images, and words employed.

This essay argues that through makeup looks posted on social media, young women represent mental illness as a source of suffering involving a loss of control and fractured self-identity where they struggle to be recognized due to their invisible illness. As such, they attempt to make what is invisible, visible to others. In doing so, many suggest a particular involvement of the brain which reinforces a medical model of mental illness. I begin the essay by providing background information regarding key demographics and the popularity of both Instagram and TikTok before explaining these particular social media makeup trends in further detail. Next, I analyze the social media posts to provide evidence to answer the research question and provide evidence of the claims above. I conclude by discussing the significance of the messages embedded within the trends.

### The Rise of Instagram and TikTok

Although they have users of all ages, Instagram and TikTok are primarily sites of youth culture. Users are predominantly under the age of 24 (Wang & Zuo, 5). In the United States, 70% of teenagers 13-17 use social media several times a day; this is a third of an increase from 2012 (Abi-Jaoude, 136). In Ontario, Canada, the number of teenagers who use social media for over five hours a day grew from 11% in 2013 to 20% in 2017 (Abi-Jaoude, 136). Created in the United States in 2010, Instagram is primarily a photo, but also video, based social platform (Wiederhold, 567). Each day, it has over 500 million active users; each month, this amounts to one billion active users (Wiederhold, 567). Meanwhile, since TikTok's creation in China in 2016, it has emerged as a

leading social media platform, amassing over 800 million global users (Kennedy, 1070). TikTok's content is solely video-based; they can be three seconds to five minutes long (though each is typically under a minute) and are often accompanied by music. Although both social media platforms had already grown immensely, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified this process given the boredom individuals faced while living in lockdown. The platforms were considered the "perfect medium[s] for the splintered attention spans of lockdown" (Kennedy, 1070).

### Social Media Makeup Trends

Social media trends quickly, and massively, popularize and spread throughout the internet whereby users complete certain actions, such as dancing to a particular popular song or participating in a certain challenge. In social media trends that endeavour to visually represent mental illness through the use of makeup, individuals attempt to demonstrate what it is like to experience specific mental illnesses. The majority depict depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorders. On Instagram in 2017 and 2018, the "#InsideOutChallenge" trend quickly popularized whereby hundreds, if not thousands, of users utilized makeup to visually portray the ways in which their mental illness makes them feel. On TikTok, the trend "Turning mental illness into makeup" spread by the dozens in the Fall of 2020 and into early 2021 with the same premise as the #InsideOutChallenge but with short-form videos, rather than photos, given the nature of the platform. In these trends on both Instagram and TikTok, nearly every photo and video was created by young

female-presenting individuals. While this group is a key social media demographic, they are also diagnosed at higher rates than males when it comes to both depression and anxiety (two of the three main mental illnesses being represented in these trends) (Albert, 219). Young women are over twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression than their male counterparts (Albert, 219).

#### Understanding Mental Illness Communicated by Social Media Makeup Trends

Instagram's #InsideOutChallenge and TikTok's "Turning mental illness into makeup" convey a multitude of understandings as they relate to the experience of mental illness. They express that mental illness: is a source of suffering, triggers a loss of control, fractures one's self-identity, and is located in the brain.

#### *Mental Illness as a Source of Suffering*

First and foremost, the social media makeup trends communicate an understanding of mental illness as a source of suffering. In many of the makeup looks, several words commonly appear written on individuals' faces. Some of the words that appear most often include "tired", "sad", "stupid", "unworthy", "scared", "empty", "crazy", "broken", and "disappointment". They are nearly always written in black colouring, which may further represent feelings of suffering as well as darkness, as black colours commonly do. As evidence, a 2016 study which investigated emotional reactions to ten different colours found that black was most associated with heavy, stressful, and difficult emotions (Hanafy & Sanad, 59). Meanwhile, bright colours such as white and yellow were linked to relaxation and freshness (Hanafy & Sanad, 59).

Moreover, most of the social media posts involve very little use of colour and instead overuse black, white, and grey. By doing so, many present the experience of mental illness as incredibly painful and lonely. Additionally, they commonly mimic the look of crying, or having recently cried, by either using the makeup to draw tears under their eyes and on their cheeks, or by using it so as to appear as if they have been crying with dark circles and makeup residue underneath their eyes. By simulating the experience of crying, these makeup looks communicate the idea that mental illness is a source of suffering.

Furthermore, the curators of such posts seem to present themselves as victims who are perceived as unworthy by others, which consequently results in them negatively perceiving themselves. There is not a single makeup look analyzed where the individual smiles or laughs in the pictures or videos posted on social media. This is quite a contrast to typical social media photo and video posts whereby smiling is incredibly commonplace (Vermeulen et al., 6). Thus, the lack of smiling is noteworthy. In these makeup posts, individuals are always blankly, or sadly, staring directly at the camera while smile-less. This relays the idea that being mentally ill is an unhappy, lonely, and upsetting experience in which crying is common. Many further use makeup to mimic real cuts and bruises on their faces. This visually communicates the idea that experiencing mental illness is both mentally and physically painful.

#### *Mental Illness as Triggering a Loss of Control*

In addition to this, several of the social media makeup posts employ images of spirals, specifically dark-coloured spirals, again demonstrating the

dark emotions associated with mental illness. In one TikTok video, a user represents anxiety and includes a white spiral on top of a black background on her chin (@iz.barnes, 2021, March 20). This spiral image sits directly underneath an image of a woman, wearing black, falling down from her forehead towards her chin, as if she is plummeted down into the spiral on her chin (@iz.barnes, 2021, March 20). In a representation of depression, there is an Instagram post whereby the individual has a black spiral painted covering her entire face, on top of a blue background (@theinsideoutchallenge, 2018, April 9). Spirals are often used to represent the life cycle and “symbolize the cyclical yet linear nature of growth and life” (Marshall, 32). However, they can also signify spiralling negatively in a downwards fashion, as well as a sign of spiralling out of control. Through the employment of spirals, these social media makeup trends communicate messages regarding the loss of control initiated by mental illness which may cause an individual to spiral in this downward fashion rather than flourish because they are dragged down by the experience of mental illness.

Alongside the loss of control these posts associated with the experience of mental illness, there are a handful of makeup representations which take this concept one step further. In both Instagram posts and TikTok videos, individuals use their own hands in a manner that looks as if someone else’s hands are controlling them. In other words, they move their face with their hands in a way that resembles another person moving their face. This typically involves a hand moving their chin in another direction, and their head seems to follow. This further conveys the message whereby people with mental illness

experience a loss of control in their own lives and are controlled by someone else who is not mentally ill. That someone else could be a family member, or it could be a member of the medical world including doctors, psychiatrists, or nurses. By telling viewers that those with mental illness lose control over their own lives, they portray a very paternalistic picture whereby the mentally ill are not able to autonomously take care of themselves. This reinforces popular stereotypes, especially among youth culture, of those with mental illness as losing their minds and as too 'crazy' to take control of their own lives.

### *Mental Illness as Fracturing One's Self-Identity*

As part of the sense of suffering shared by these makeup looks, they additionally portray mental illness as fracturing their self-identity which causes them to struggle to be recognized or seen by others. The individuals who engage in these social media trends, whether on Instagram or TikTok, portray themselves as being misunderstood and not taken seriously when it comes to mental illness. As such, they attempt to make what is invisible, visible, as made obvious by the use of makeup to externally represent their internal feelings. This is particularly interesting because makeup, in this context, is being utilized as a medium through which users project their feelings; however, in many other contexts, makeup is used in quite an opposite manner as something that individuals can hide behind.

Many of these makeup looks utilize only one side of their face to represent mental illness through makeup while the other side of their face has their "typical" makeup, or no makeup, to demonstrate the difference between how they feel internally because of their mental illness versus how they

typically present themselves and are perceived by others, the latter half seeming more “normal” and acceptable as opposed to their internal struggles. By splitting themselves in half in this manner, many of the young women in these videos portray themselves as internally dissociating from themselves. Dissociation is when an individual feels disconnected from themselves, their thoughts and feelings (Caputo, 395). In a 2019 study involving a split mirror, which causes the person looking into the mirror to view themselves as split in half vertically, it was found that split mirrors resulted in an increase of dissociation from oneself as compared to typical mirrors (Caputo, 403). A split mirror is “vertically split into two halves; hence, the subject’s reflected face is split into two half-faces” (Caputo, 395). The split that occurred because of the mirrors in this study is the same as the split represented by makeup in these social media posts. Aside from disassociation, the imagery of split faces may be a reference to the notion of “split personalities” which has been a lay description for both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia.

Additionally, a majority utilize lines which resemble cracks or breaks in their faces. This instills an image of mental illness as being associated with brokenness. In many of the photos and videos, makeup is used to simulate a crack in the skin, similar to a crack in glass. This communicates to viewers that an individual with mental illness is broken or damaged as a result of said illness. Moreover, it can instill an image of mental illness as causing an individual to become broken. It seems then that individuals who experience mental illness internalize those feelings of being broken and adopt them into their identity. The cracks may further promote the idea that those with mental



illness are fragile to begin with and may more easily crack and break compared to others who are mentally healthy.

### *Mental Illness as Being Located in the Brain*

Another recurring idea throughout these representations is an emphasis on the role of the brain as it relates to mental illness. A large majority of the social media posts analyzed included a great deal of makeup around the brain area (i.e., the forehead). This is especially the case for posts which claimed to represent what it is like to experience an anxiety disorder. For instance, on Instagram, a user painted a large black thinking bubble covering her entire forehead with white and blue lines all drawn together as if in a big knot (@theinsideoutchallenge, 2018, May 2). This seems to represent loud, convoluted, confusing thoughts that take place in her brain and cause it to malfunction and take over her thoughts. On TikTok too, an individual has makeup on her forehead which almost resembles brain matter with a black background and white writing of words on top of it, including “stupid”, “scared”, and “failure” (@jrilyn, 2020, September 19). Similarly, in a different TikTok video another person draws a large black circle which coats her entire forehead; however, in this one, the representor adds eyes and a face to the circle, resembling some sort of a monster (@iz.barnes, 2021, March 20).

By focusing heavily on the brain, as exemplified by the emphasis on makeup on individuals' forehead, as well as the use of cuts, bruises, and breaks on their faces (as earlier discussed), these social media trends depicting mental illness through makeup reinforce and promote a medical model of mental illness. This medical model perceives mental illness as akin to a

biological disease which leads to problems in the brain (Mechanic, 12). In other words, the model treats mental illness as being like any physical illness, such as cancer or bacterial disease, which all involve a cause, symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment which can effectively “cure” someone (Mechanic, 12). Effectively, the location of mental illness, as per this model, is within the brain. It is significant that these makeup representations promote the medical model of mental illness because that means it accepts a model which can be problematic.

The medical model is commonly accepted by many as the correct lens through which to conceptualize mental illness. However, it is worth questioning because mental illness has no referent, meaning such illnesses have no clear and definitive point of reference through which to be understood. In his famous 1961 book *The Myth of Mental Illness*, psychiatrist Thomas Szasz argued that we have no solid scientific basis for defining or measuring mental illness (Benning, 292). He claimed humans tend to pathologize everyday behaviours, despite not having clear definitions of mental illnesses (Benning, 293). Whereas with a bacterial infection, the bacteria can be isolated and pointed to as being the cause of the disease, there is no equivalent for mental illnesses. Although the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) produced by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) is understood by many as being the so-called dictionary of mental illnesses, it too is worth questioning given the lack of referent for mental illness. Additionally, the DSM is a human-produced document which has undergone various changes through its multiple editions over the years. As an example, homosexuality was listed as a mental illness in

the DSM from 1952 to 1974 (Drescher, 565). Given that disorders change continually, it is clear that in discussing mental illness, we are discussing something which lacks a solid foundation.

Without a clear definition of each mental illness, both individuals diagnosed with mental illnesses and those who interact with them, including the APA, can decide what mental illness is. As an example, there are many overlapping symptoms between illnesses such as depression and anxiety (e.g., sadness, worry, restlessness, exhaustion). How are we able to determine when a person is experiencing one rather than the other? Moreover, comorbidities of mental illness are extremely common so how do we untangle them to understand which symptoms are caused by which illness? Furthermore, although context shapes how individuals behave, the medical model of mental illness ignores the context of a person's life when they are diagnosed. By promoting the medical model, these social media trends further entrench this model into mainstream culture, which may then result in enhanced acceptance and decreased questioning of this model's legitimacy.

### Significance of Examining Makeup Representations of Mental Illness

The impact of art in fostering understandings of mental illness has long been studied. As explored with specific regard to music and mental illness, cultural products can "affect perceptions about what is considered a mental disorder" (Pavez et al., 247). Analyses of representations of illness in art can be an effective tool to learn about stereotypes and conceptions of illnesses in society (Pavez et al., 247). Ultimately, these cultural products, such as music

and song lyrics, or in this essay's case, social media trends whereby individuals attempt to represent mental illness by utilizing makeup, can be used to understand how a certain culture perceives mental illness. Cultural products should be analyzed and utilized to better comprehend what mental illness signifies to a society (Pavez et al., 247). Art is a powerful communicative tool and the artists behind the social media makeup trends are projecting how they have come to understand mental illness through their makeup. Furthermore, not only does art reflect societal beliefs, it additionally curates them and influences how a culture perceives mental illness. The internet, particularly social media, is a feedback loop. This means that representations of mental illness are formed and then re-created repeatedly. The more often the same representation is consumed, the more accepted it becomes in society as uncontroversial, even though mental illness, as aforementioned, lacks a referent.

## Conclusion

This essay has analyzed trending social media posts on both Instagram and TikTok whereby individuals employ makeup so as to visually represent the experience of mental illness. It has examined them to demonstrate the understandings of mental illness that are communicated by social media makeup trends. It concluded that these representations present mental illness as a source of suffering, as triggering a loss of control, as fracturing one's self-identity, and as being located in the brain which promotes the medical model of mental illness. Given the fact there is no referent, our ideas about mental

illness are shaped through representations, such as social media makeup trends on Instagram and TikTok, which become entrenched in mainstream culture. However, these accepted notions are important to question, and often change.

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