

Perspectives of Mental Health Professionals on Self-Diagnosis and Romanticization of Mental Illnesses

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Abstract. In today's interconnected world, many individuals worldwide have become susceptible to the influences of the rising trends of self-diagnosis and the romanticization of mental illnesses, primarily facilitated by online platforms. This study explored the viewpoints of mental health professionals on the trends of self-diagnosis and romanticization of mental illnesses, including concerns about the accuracy of self-diagnoses, the impact of romanticization on individuals, and potential interventions to mitigate the issues. This research narrows its focus on the first-hand experiences and insights shared by mental health professionals, precisely five (5) psychologists, and five (5) guidance counselors in General Santos City and Davao City, shedding light on how these trends significantly shape individuals' perceptions of mental health. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, results from semi-structured interviews highlighted the harmful impacts of these trends. Additionally, the findings suggest a need for increased awareness and education surrounding mental health, as well as collaborative efforts to counter the negative consequences of self-diagnosis and romanticization of mental illnesses.

Keywords: Self-Diagnosis; Romanticization; Mental illnesses; Mental health professionals; Phenomenology

1.0 Introduction

Mental health professionals have made countless attempts to eradicate the stigma against mental health. Various studies and articles highlighted the importance of empowering people's awareness of mental health (Nabors et al., 2014; Salerno, 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2013, pp. 9-13). These efforts are gradually reaching fruition, evidenced by how society acknowledges their importance. However, as mental health awareness spreads, the trend of romanticizing the issues attached to it also prevails (Dunn, 2017; Jadayel et al., 2015; Lee & Vidamaly, 2021; Oumeddour Chiraz, 2021; Schipper, 2022; Shrestha, 2018). The intentions of campaigning for the normalization of mental health have shifted from the fight against being stigmatized to resisting the trend of being sensationalized.

To sensationalize a subject, one must present information in a way that arouses interest and excitement from the public. In mental health, sensationalization manifests in the alarming rise of the dangerous trend of romanticizing mental illnesses. It is more apparent throughout different social media platforms wherein people describe mental health issues in a way that makes an individual believe that they would be "special" or "quirky" when labeled as someone suffering from a supposed mental illness (Jadayel et al., 2015). This perspective also normalizes mental illnesses as attractive and desirable rather than admitting that it is a real problem that affects people's lives in many ways (Marquardt, 2020, as cited in Cuason, 2022). Romanticizing mental illnesses is dangerous because it downplays people with real mental health issues, making it even more difficult for them to

reach out for help. The phenomenon gives mental health professionals a more complicated job of distinguishing genuinely suffering patients from those who treat mental illness as a unique personality trait.

Furthermore, one of the most significant issues generated by the romanticization of mental illnesses is self-diagnosis, which refers to identifying or diagnosing oneself without consulting a mental health expert. People frequently use Google to research symptoms they are experiencing to determine their illnesses (Thatcher, 2021). Self-diagnosis is one of the factors that can mentally and emotionally harm people due to being purely exposed to social media. Most people in this generation resort to self-diagnosis applications or websites rather than seeing a mental health professional (Jutel & Lupton, 2015). Self-diagnosis is currently ubiquitous, with people preferring to diagnose themselves using the Internet as a source of mental health information (Gass, 2016). In consequence, people take professional mental health care for granted, and the extent of the reach of its services, including proper psychological assessments, accurate diagnosis, and effective treatment plans, becomes limited. Misinformation and misrepresentation block access to mental health care. These are the biggest obstacles to positive, accurate, and realistic mental health promotion (Allison et al., 2020). The misrepresentation of mental illnesses through its glamorization is also taken advantage of by social media influencers who exploit this for financial benefits as they wear and market merchandise with words such as "My anxieties have anxieties," "MENTAL," or "OCD," treating these serious mental health issues as aesthetics (Zhang, 2019). In a local setting, although there are scarcities to notable studies about the issues mentioned above, the researchers have observed that young people are tolerant of romanticizing mental illnesses. On the researchers' university campus, several students wear merchandise with the term "Antisocial Club," and they are also easily influenced by media representation. Relative to this, the trend of romanticizing mental illnesses as desirable with a faded flower aesthetic, and as a result, self-diagnosis follows. In the Philippines, several mental health groups are starting to remind the public of the dangers of self-diagnosis, especially since the previous pandemic has made it more difficult for people to ask for professional help (Ganancial, 2020). According to a study, Filipinos, one of the most active social media users in the world, have a higher chance for Filipinos to be more prone to self-diagnosis (Asian Journal News, 2021). Thus, this practice may become a catalyst for forming new misconceptions about mental health in the Philippines.

In recent years, there has been a decline in the stigma toward mental health because people have the autonomy to seek help by visiting a mental health professional. Consequently, due to the prevalence of mental health concerns in this generation and the widespread discussion and romanticization of mental health concerns on social media and other platforms, it has become routine for people to experience mental illnesses - a mental health hazard for this generation. People choose to self-diagnose, and their reasons vary from attention-seeking tendencies to wanting to be labeled as different or unique. With its transition from being stigmatized to sensationalized, the danger of self-diagnosis and romanticizing mental illnesses puts people's mental well-being and holistic health at risk. For those who need serious treatment, their authenticity and credibility are threatened by those who try to attach mental illnesses to normalcy; suppose there is no action towards this dangerous trend. In that case, there will be more misinformed people who will engage in glamorizing mental illnesses, which should be discussed with the utmost concern as it may mean the difference between life and death for people who are genuinely suffering from mental health problems. Thus, this paper aims to explore the perspectives of mental health professionals towards the rising trend of self-diagnosis and romanticization of mental illnesses and identify the challenges or experiences they face, along with the possible factors that fuel this trend and its consequences.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study used a qualitative type of research. In contrast to a quantitative research design, the qualitative study focused on exploring real-world problems by gathering non-numerical data, such as perceptions and experiences, from its participants (Brannan et al., 2022). Specifically, the study employed phenomenological inquiry. A phenomenological approach is a type of qualitative research that focuses on extracting the participants' lived experiences within a certain context (Neubauer et al., 2019). Phenomenology is suitable for this study since its objective was to determine the perspectives of mental health professionals on self-diagnosis and the romanticization of mental illnesses.

2.2 Research Locale

The researchers conducted the study in two selected cities, General Santos City and Davao City. The two locales were chosen because they are where the participants are staying or working. Also, their psychological clinics or guidance centers are situated there. The medium of conducting interviews was a combination of onsite and online for the convenience of the participants.

2.3 Research Participants

The researchers used the purposive sampling technique to determine the participants. Purposive sampling selects a sample from a population based on common characteristics and whether each participant fits the criteria set by the researchers (Nikolopoulou, 2022). In this study, the researchers invited ten (10) mental health professionals to the participants. The researchers established a set of criteria for the participants through an informal pre-survey which was conducted among different schools, universities, psychological clinics, and hospitals that had employed mental health professionals. The participants included five (5) practicing psychologists with three (3) or more years of work experience as counselors or therapists, and five (5) practicing registered guidance counselors with three (3) or more years of work experience as counselors or therapists.

2.4 Research Instrument

The researchers gathered the necessary data using a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire containing open-ended questions. A semi-structured interview is a data collection method that follows a predetermined set of questions on a thematic framework (Berler & Magaldi, 2020; Ignacio, 2023). The questionnaire was verified and thoroughly checked by the validators for relevancy and to ensure that the content of the questions could answer the problem statement.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

This qualitative study followed a data-gathering procedure suggested by Ignacio (2023). The process included visiting the research locale, formulating an interview guide validated by research experts, and conducting one-on-one interviews with ten mental health professionals. The participants' responses were analyzed using Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke's thematic analysis.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

To guarantee the participants' privacy, the researchers made sure to protect the respondent's data with utmost confidentiality. The researchers did not collect any personal data from the participants that were not necessary for the study. Only personal information that was needed for the study was collected by the researchers.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Perspectives of Mental Health Professionals on Self-Diagnosis

There are nine themes that emerged from the experiences of Mental Health Professionals on self-diagnosis, namely: difficulty accessing mental health services, client's lack of knowledge, unreliable sources of diagnosis, irresponsible information dissemination, social media triggers, internalizing diagnoses, ineffective self-help methods, harmful impacts of self-diagnosis, and preventive measures.

Theme 1: Difficulty Accessing Mental Health Services

The first theme describes the experiences of mental health professionals on self-diagnosis in difficulty assessing mental health services. Barriers and treatment gaps in mental health care exist, which is why self-diagnosis also exists. People, particularly those in poverty and with limited awareness of mental health issues, often struggle to access high-quality mental health services. These individuals in need of mental health care are often the ones who face the most significant challenges in gaining access to the necessary services (Tuliao, 2013). It can also be noted that there is a stark difference between the availability, affordability, and accessibility of mental health services between the Philippines, and other countries such as the UK (Department of Health & Lea, 2014; Lally et al., 2019). In summary, those in poverty and with limited awareness of mental health issues find it particularly difficult to access high-quality mental health services, creating substantial challenges for individuals in need of care.

Theme 2: Client's Lack of Knowledge

For the second theme, participants highlighted how many people lack a fundamental understanding of mental health, ranging from the roles of different mental health professionals to the significance of psychological terms. According to Antonio and Rivera (2017), there is a lack of mental health awareness from the public, specifically in the Philippines. This lack of knowledge is observed in people's inability to exercise sensitivity and regard to the references for people with mental illnesses and other psychological terms. In contrast, one study showed that its respondents refused to disclose their mental health concerns due to societal and self-stigma (Flett et al., 2013). Although the lack of awareness may be unintentional as shown from the participants' perspectives, or intentional based on the mentioned study, there is still a clear and existing ignorance and lack of objective analysis from today's generation which can contribute to misguided self-diagnosis.

Theme 3: Unreliable Sources of Diagnosis

The third theme delves into the experiences of mental health professionals regarding self-diagnosis, highlighting the issue of unreliable sources for diagnosing mental health conditions. According to the participants, as they observed today, people are into self-diagnosing themselves with no credible basis of diagnosis and basing diagnosis on the internet. As per Sharma (2019), the inclination of this generation to rely on internet-guided self-diagnosis underscores the importance of exercising caution when utilizing platforms like Google or other online resources for self-diagnosis. On the other hand, even though there may be several reliable sources of mental health information provided by official government websites, it still takes responsible checking and research to ensure the accuracy of the information that they provide (The Jed Foundation, 2023). Unfortunately, most people who self-diagnose are not one to cross-check the sources that they are using for their diagnoses. Such practices can lead to harm and strain the doctor-patient relationship.

Theme 4: Irresponsible Information Dissemination

The fourth theme showcases how irresponsible mental health advocates, inaccurate programs, and social media influencers who are spreading misinformation due to lack of proper regulations can erode trust in mental health professionals and drive people toward self-diagnosis. Studies show that many self-proclaimed professionals, experts, and influencers in TikTok, Facebook, and other internet fora are often painted as trustworthy by people who seek mental health assistance online despite a lack of credibility (Brady et al., 2016; Farrell, 2018; Farnood, 2019). Indeed, there may be credible organizations or government agencies that can provide accurate mental health information which proves that there are responsible mental health advocates (The Jed Foundation, 2023), these can easily be wielded in an irresponsible manner by others who lack accountability. Unfortunately, many people pioneering the dissemination of information online are often not evidence-based; hence, this results in discrepancies in mental health information and reduces the opportunities for potential clients to relate to authorized and credible professionals.

Theme 5: Social Media Influence

The fifth theme sheds light on how the constant exposure to self-harm and mental health issues on social media platforms can trigger individuals to engage in self-diagnosis. Studies show that there is a significant amount of social media content that unintentionally or intentionally glamorizes mental illnesses (Clark, 2023; Jadayel et al., 2017; Schipper, 2022). According to Shrestha (2018), many Tumblr users are also actively posting disturbing depictions of depression and self-harm-related content aesthetically as if they are being promoted. On a positive note, Farnood (2017) stated that due to the accessibility of the internet, most healthcare and mental health professionals have adapted to utilize this medium, especially through social media. However, social media is often misused. Hence, the alarmingly high number of posts that contain the type of content on social media, as mentioned by Shrestha (2018), makes it more likely that people who encounter them will be triggered to self-diagnose.

Theme 6: Internalizing Diagnoses

This theme describes how some individuals who self-diagnose may exaggerate or mimic symptoms, insisting on their diagnoses even if they lack validity. In one study conducted on high school students, its results showed that the students who have mental illnesses have high levels of self-stigma (Flett et al., 2013). Self-stigma can be compared to the individuals described in this theme, wherein both are rooted in an ingrained set of negative beliefs about oneself. Another study conducted by Hughes (2019) determined several attitudes that young adults

have toward mental illnesses. One of the prevalent attitudes found was that the respondents were lying about their mental illnesses - a mirror to those who also exaggerate and mimic symptoms. It can be concluded that these acts of internalizing diagnoses are attempts to make sense of the negative emotions that these people are experiencing.

Theme 7: Ineffective Self-Help Methods

The seventh theme depicts one aftermath of self-diagnosis, which is how individuals often turn to unreliable self-help methods and materials that may be ineffective. Zoppi (2020) points out that due to the stigma of self-diagnosis, unreliable self-help resources on social media, including mental health groups, often label individuals with mental health issues as "crazy." This discourages people from seeking professional help, which is why they are relying on Google or any other sources that can help them. In contrast, there are some mental health professionals who prefer to have patients access the internet for information since this can equip them with the information needed to make wise decisions or other safe self-help methods that are easily available (Hamzehgardeshi et al., 2014). However, the bottom line is that these self-help alternatives underscore the challenges posed by the stigma around mental health and the questionable role of self-help resources in the absence of professional guidance.

Theme 8: Harmful Impacts of Self-Diagnosis

Concernedly, the eighth theme magnifies how self-diagnosis can lead to serious negative consequences, including vulnerability, self-harm, medication dependence, and worsened mental health. Mishra (2020) voiced concerns with the rising number of cases of self-harm posts online, all for the sake of painting a tragically beautiful picture of mental illness. In contrast, several studies have also stated that online platforms are beneficial for spreading positive mental health awareness as these can serve as a safe space, provide a sense of community, or safe interventions for those who are suffering from mental illnesses (Aschbrenner et al., 2016; Aschbrenner et al., 2020; Belousov et al., 2017). Nevertheless, the benefits outweigh the harmful impacts that online self-diagnosis brings. Trends like self-diagnosis damage the perception of people towards mental illnesses as they transition from a state of being stigmatized to becoming sensationalized. This can result in a more susceptible emotional and mental state, especially for the younger generation of the present day (Yang, 2022).

Theme 9: Preventive Measures

The ninth theme enumerates different methods to help prevent self-diagnosis of mental health issues, especially in the Philippines. In today's global society, the emphasis on prevention and promoting mental health awareness is crucial, not just in the Philippines but worldwide. The participants of this study and Brady et al (2016) share a common idea which states that online modalities could be used to prevent the trend of self-diagnosis. These methods, however, can also be easily utilized inaccurately as seen in the example of online symptom checkers or tests for mental illnesses (Gass, 2016). All the same, with the pervasive accessibility of social media, this focus is increasingly relevant. The approach to mental health has evolved to prioritize prevention, with the goal of early intervention in mental health issues (Gupta et al., 2022). The adage "prevention is better than cure" underscores the significance of proactive measures in addressing mental health concerns.

3.2 Perspectives of Mental Health Professionals on Romanticization of Mental Illnesses

The second topic that will be discussed is the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses. There are six themes under this topic: misinformation as a factor, reasons for trend engagement, characteristics of trend followers, professionals' positive insights, professionals' negative insights, and suggested mitigation strategies.

Theme 1: Misinformation as a Factor

The first theme describes the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses as misinformation as a factor. According to the participants, most people lack awareness about the terminologies, are misinformed about mental health groups, and are misconstruing mental health. Recent research highlights the pressing need to address and reduce young people's stigmatizing and romanticizing issues towards mental illness, and misinformation has a significant impact on how people perceive mental health, especially those who are ignorant about mental health concerns. This emphasizes the importance of

considering individual and online community factors when addressing this concern (Tate, 2020). Additionally, because of the growing world of social media platforms, there are a lot of negative mental health issues and concerns because of social media, and it is also the vehicle of misinformation (Dizikes, 2020). In contrast, one study says it challenges the common notion of social networks such as social media and the internet saturated with misinformation by providing a more nuanced perspective to individuals (Cai et al., 2021). It goes beyond emphasizing negative consequences, conducting a comprehensive analysis that contributes valuable insights to enrich people's understanding and guide the world of misinformation for better network order. In summary, it highlights the impact on mental health perceptions, urging action to combat stigmatization. Different views emphasize the importance of addressing misinformation's impact on mental health perceptions comprehensively.

Theme 2: Reasons for Trend Engagement

The second theme that describes the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses is the reason for trend engagement. According to the participants, most individuals are engaged in bandwagon effect, peer influence, and contagious relatability about mental health issues. Constantinides and Herrando (2021) assert that emotional contagion or the idea that those around them can impact an individual's emotions may cause many mental health conditions to continue to spread among peers. The observation made by Inquirer (2023) aligns social media's portrayal of mental illness as a "beautiful tragedy" with the emotional contagion concept. This connection emphasizes the potential impact of emotional expressions and narratives on shaping online discourse. This contrast underscores the interplay between conscious engagement motivations and the unintentional emotional influence that unfolds within social media trends. The experiences of mental health professionals on their clients regarding the romanticization of mental illnesses are thought-provoking and highlight a critical issue today the concept of "emotional contagion," as stated above, resonates with the concerns raised by the participants.

Theme 3: Characteristics of Trend Followers

The third theme describes the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses and the characteristics of trend followers. According to the participants, most people's characteristics are self-mutilation, group suicide promotion for social media fame, attention-seeking, validation-seeking, self-fulfillment, and a sense of euphoria are examples of complex human characteristics related to the trend. During the pandemic, as per Ruhl (2023), most people who are engaged in this trend have a characteristic of self-serving bias, which means that people are claiming and seeking validation, and the nature of communication underwent significant changes and limitations due to the lockdowns necessitated by the ongoing outbreaks. As a result, there has been a notable shift in the help-seeking behavior of individuals for mental health services. In contrast to self-serving bias, this cognitive bias shields self-esteem by attributing positive events to personal traits and blaming external factors for failures. While it boosts confidence, seeking professional help is crucial before attributing experiences to mental illnesses (MSEd, 2023). It is crucial to note that although this bias boosts confidence and self-esteem, seeking professional help is essential before attributing various experiences to different mental illnesses. These findings raise crucial questions about motivations for behaviors, particularly those related to social media, and how physical, social, and emotional isolation have affected individuals' approach to seeking attention and mental health services.

Theme 4: Professionals' Positive Insights

The fourth theme describes the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses and the professionals' positive insights. According to the participants, they discussed the need to raise awareness and grounds for discussion to reduce the tendency to romanticize mental health issues. Mental health awareness is crucial for everyone. Islam and Rakib (2020) stated that mental health awareness is essential to implement and discuss in every university and that it is important to seek help from mental health providers such as guidance counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists to lessen the impact of romanticizing mental illnesses for them to get help. In contrast to the positive impact of mental health awareness, a significant challenge arises as people often prioritize raising awareness without translating it into meaningful action (Carrier, 2023). While awareness initiatives highlight mental health issues, the statement underscores the necessity of moving beyond awareness to concrete plans and actionable steps for a more effective impact. In

summary, it highlights the urgency of promoting mental health awareness and seeking professional help, both of which are vital in addressing the challenges posed by the romanticization of mental illnesses.

Theme 5: Professionals' Negative Insights

The fifth theme describes the experiences of mental health professionals on the romanticization of mental illnesses and the negative insights from the professionals. According to the participants, they discussed that romanticizing is unhealthy. Because of modern culture, people are into romanticizing mental illnesses, and their effects can cause harm to people, especially to those who are genuinely suffering and struggling with mental illnesses (Becker, 2017). Additionally, romanticizing can be harmful because it cannot add beauty to our personality (Mishra, 2020). In contrast to the idea that romanticizing mental illnesses is unhealthy, there are instances like the Netflix series "Thirteen Reasons Why" that faced criticism for glamorizing suicide and sexual assault. Similarly, some TikTok creators portray the HBO Max show "Euphoria" aesthetically (Writer & Writer, 2021b). This contrasts with the perspective that romanticizing such serious topics may harm individuals and society. In summary, it emphasizes the significance of realizing the harmful effects of romanticization and stresses how dangerous these tendencies can be to people who are experiencing mental health problems.

Theme 6: Suggested Mitigation Strategies

The final theme delves into the perspectives of mental health professionals regarding the romanticization of mental illnesses. It highlights the mitigation strategies suggested by them in response to the rising trend of romanticizing mental diseases. The strategies discussed by the participants are to avoid romanticizing and to psychoeducate the public. According to Arora et al. (2020), psychoeducation has gained significance today as a means to educate the public about mental health. According to Burnett (2018), it does not guarantee a significant impact on the actual problems and concerns surrounding mental health. Many individuals are aware of the pros and cons of the issues of mental health, but they are not aware of the actions that they are showing concerning mental health. Raising awareness and psychoeducating the public is good, yet they often take little or no action to address these concerns. In summary, it emphasizes the need to avoid romanticizing and promoting psychoeducation regarding the concern about mental health, and this underscores the importance of translating awareness into tangible actions, as individuals often fall short of taking meaningful steps despite being informed about mental health issues.

4.0 Conclusion

This study has determined several critical themes and insights related to the phenomenon of self-diagnosis of mental health issues in the Philippines. The key findings include possible factors that lead to self-diagnosis, such as difficulty accessing mental health services, the client's lack of knowledge, unreliable sources of diagnosis, irresponsible information dissemination, and social media triggers. A few effects have also been identified, such as people internalizing diagnoses, ineffective self-help methods, and the physically, emotionally, and mentally harmful impacts of self-diagnosis. Furthermore, participants suggested implementing strict regulations for mental health events and professionals, careful information dissemination, school-based mental health programs, improving online educational modalities, and providing accurate mental health information in social media as a few preventive measures for the trend of self-diagnosis. These strategies and methods can be used to improve the quality of mental health information which can help develop a more well-informed community on the seriousness of mental health issues, so that people will become more involved in mental health programs. Additionally, this study has also revealed intricate dynamics surrounding the trend of romanticizing mental illnesses. The key findings include having misinformation as a factor for causing the romanticization of mental illness and the reasons for trend engagement that are generally fueled by emotional contagion. Characteristics of trend followers were also identified, with the need for validation and attention-seeking behaviors being the ones frequently mentioned. As for professional insights, the participants have expressed both positive and negative sides. On a positive note, a few participants believe that this trend creates an opportunity for more discussion. However, most of them see romanticizing mental illnesses as delusional and unhealthy. To help combat the trend, the participants suggested mitigation strategies such as psycho educating, revising policies, and producing more counselors.

These findings provide valuable insights into the factors contributing to the trends of self-diagnosis and romanticization of mental illnesses in the Philippines and the potential harms associated with these trends. In

addition, Heider's (1960) Self-Serving Bias Theory was present in the trends of self-diagnosis and romanticization of mental illnesses as it was the primary effect of the rising trend of social media that most individuals are claiming different symptoms, behaviors, and mental health conditions. In addition, self-serving bias theory is subjected to ambiguous situations, people tend to use external factors to justify their flaws.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm the equal contribution in each part of this work. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of this work.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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