Social Media's Mental Disorder Portrayal Epidemic

Recently I've noticed more and more mental health disorders being brought up in mainstream media, some in forms of characters, art, or even TikToks. At first glance, this seems like a great thing - a stone to pave the way for a more inclusive and diverse future, but the more I delve into this phenomenon, the less beneficial it seems, and the more I am aware of its harmful side.

What prompted this essay was a recent discovery of a now-deleted Twitter page called: Tales from the DSM. They are a group of artists who draw mental health disorders in the form of personified caricatures. It may seem harmless at first, but portraying these disorders in a stereotypical way could perpetuate misinformation and harm people who are experiencing these mental health disorders. This is different from artists like Toby Allen, who draws mental illnesses in the form of monsters as a way of releasing his own anxiety. I have done a deeper dive on Tales of the DSM, and found that the team, hiding behind their twitter profile, have been actively encouraging these harmful stereotypes and ableist discrimination by the means of their twitter posts.

Nevertheless, my first experience of mental health disorder representation in pop culture was a positive one. It was the Percy Jackson series by Rick Riodan. Percy, the main character, struggles with both ADHD and dyslexia. But instead of those issues being weaknesses for Percy, they are strengths that help him defeat monsters. Like the Percy Jackson series, more and more books are including mentally diverse characters, and this does a great job at helping fight discrimination against these disorders. These characters tell people struggling with mental health that their disorder isn't something to be ashamed about. But as the Percy Jackson books grew in popularity, more and more people are claiming that they have ADHD and dyslexia to be more like their favourite hero, which lead to the next point I would like to explore: TikTok, and The Fake-Illness Sensation.

I was scrolling through TikTok one day, and I stumbled upon an interesting page called Tics and Roses run by an influencer, Emerald Dackley, who apparently has Tourette's syndrome. She's exposed by her own sister, for faking her disorder. Why she did this was probably to gain more views, or clout, and to market her yarn dying business to a wider audience. Not just her, but many other influencers are claiming that they suffer from mental illnesses. This is extremely harmful as it trivialises those who are legitimately dealing with those issues. It could make things more difficult for individuals to get the help they need by diverting resources and attention, since medical facilities might discriminate against them and refuse to treat them, thinking that they are faking.

On the flip side, a growing amount of social media influencers have come out with their own real experiences with mental illnesses in the past. Because of this more people will understand that mental health issues aren't all that uncommon, and social-media discrimination would become less prevalent. According to the WHO, one in four people will face mental health challenges in their lifetime.

In conclusion, while the popularisation of mental illness in mass media helps spread awareness and decrease the stigma associated with certain issues, it could also perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and do more harm than good when it comes to cyberbullying and discrimination. But as the same as every other issue, this one is also multifaceted. All we can do is try our best to preserve the positive aspects, and minimise the negative aspects.